

Indian Culture And Heritage

Pakke Paga Hornbill Festival

In News

- **Arunachal Pradesh** has declared the **Pakke Paga Hornbill Festival (PPHF)**—the state’s only conservation festival, as a “state festival”.
- The first ever PPHF was held in 2015, it was started with a number of objectives in mind—to recognise the role played by the resident Nyishi tribe in conserving hornbills in the Pakke Tiger Reserve (PTR), to devise alternative sources of income for a region that relies on hunting and logging, and to tell the rest of the country about the wonders of the PTR and its surrounding areas.
- As part of the festival, visitors are treated to cultural programmes, food stalls, plays, sightseeing, river and village walks, bird-watching, screenings of short films as well as local tribal sports and dances. It has also helped in creating awareness on nature conservation.

Makarvilakku Festival

In News

- Amid the ongoing agitation over the entry of women of menstruating age into the Sabarimala temple following the recent order of the Supreme Court has come the **Makarvilakku festival, the most important event in the two-month-long annual festival season.**
- Makara jyothi is a star that appears in the sky on Makara Samkramam, when the Sun moves from Dhanu rasi (Sagittarius) to Makaram rasi (Capricorn) on the first day of the Malayalam month of Makaram, which is on January 14 (Makara Sankranti) this year.
- In the evening, the sacred ornaments of Lord Ayyappa, who is believed to have lived at Pandalam palace (some 80 km away), would be brought to Sabarimala shrine from the palace in a procession. The erstwhile royal family of Pandalam is the custodian of the ornaments.
- **Makara vilakku is a light lit at Ponnambalamedu**, a plateau across the Sabarimala shrine. **It is believed that Lord Ayyappa asserts himself as the Makarajyothi to bless his devotees.** The light, believed to have celestial origins, is shown three times by the chief priest of Pamba temple. Pamba is the base station of Sabarimala.
- The ritual is performed after the Sirius star appears in the sky. It was performed by the Malaya araya tribals in the past. When the Travancore Devaswom Board took over the administration of the temple in the early 1950s, the tribal community lost that right.
- The TDB expects two to three lakh pilgrims at the hill shrine to witness the most auspicious event in the festival calendar.

World Hindi Day

In News

- World Hindi Day was recently celebrated on 10th January, marking the anniversary of first World Hindi Conference which was held in 1975 by then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi.
- World Hindi Day was first observed on January 10, 2006. Since then, it is celebrated on January 10 every year.

World Hindi Day vis a vis National Hindi Diwas

- National Hindi Diwas is celebrated every year on September 14. On that day in 1949, the constituent assembly adopted Hindi, written in Devanagari script, as the official language of the Union, while the focus of the World Hindi Day is to promote the language at the global stage.
- The first World Hindi Conference was held in Nagpur with Mauritius prime minister Seewoosagur Ramgoolam as the chief guest. Also, persons of Indian origin and non-residential Indians in many countries organise events to commemorate the day to spread the greatness of the language.

Lesser Known Facts About The Hindi Language

- The word Hindi originated from the Persian word Hind, which means the land of the Indus river.
- Hindi is the first language of around 430 million people around the world.
- Apart from India, the language is also spoken in Nepal, Guyana, Trinidad and Tobago, Suriname, Fiji and Mauritius. **Hindi and Nepalese share the same script - Devanagari.**
- In linguistic terms, **Hindi belongs to the Indo-Iranian sub-family of the Indo-European family of language.**
- Hindi has been influenced and enriched by Turkish, Arabic, Persian, English and Dravidian (ancient South India) languages.
- The **earliest form of Hindi was called 'Apabhramsa'**, which was an offspring of Sanskrit. In 400 AD, poet Kalidas wrote Vikramorvashiyam in Apabhramsa.
- Hindi is one of the seven Indian languages that can be used to make web URLs.

Panj Tirath**In News**

- The provincial Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government in northwest **Pakistan has declared the ancient Hindu religious site of Panj Tirath in Peshawar as national heritage.**
- Panj Tirath, which **got its name from the five pools of water present there**, also contains a temple and a lawn with date palm trees. The five pools of the heritage site now come under the ambit of Chacha Yunus Park and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Chamber of Commerce and Industry.
- It is **believed that Pandu, a mythical king in the Mahabharata, belonged to this area** and Hindus used to come to these pools for bathing during the month of Karteek and worship for two days under the trees.
- The **site was damaged during the reign of the Afghan Durrani dynasty in 1747**, however it was restored by local Hindus during the period of Sikh rule in 1834 and worship started again.
- The government also announced a fine of up to Rs 2 million and five years imprisonment for anyone found guilty of damaging the historic site.
- The archaeology directorate asked the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government to clear the site of encroachment and allow archaeologists to carry out much needed preservation work.

World Capital of Architecture**In News**

- The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) has recognised **Rio de Janeiro as the 'World Capital of Architecture' for 2020.**

- This is the first time the heritage body has made such a distinction. It is a new initiative that UNESCO established in November 2018, with the International Union of Architects (UIA) – a non-governmental agency that represents the world's architects.
- Having defeated Paris and Melbourne, Rio was selected to host the 27th edition of the World Congress of the International Union of Architects (UIA) in July 2020, an event that happens every three years. For the 2020 series in Rio, the theme will be "All the worlds. Just one world".
- As the World Capital, Rio will become an international forum for debates about pressing global challenges from the perspectives of culture, cultural heritage, urban planning and architecture.
- The aim is to create new synergies between culture and architecture in an increasingly urban world, in which cities are hubs for ideas, trade, culture, science and social development in particular.
- Connecting culture and architecture is essential to create inclusive, productive and sustainable cities and communities for all.
- The idea is to ensure that these cities are also perceived as open and creative spaces for exchange, invention and innovation.

About UNESCO

- The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization is a specialized agency of the United Nations (UN) based in Paris.
- Its declared purpose is to contribute to peace and security by promoting international collaboration through educational, scientific, and cultural reforms in order to increase universal respect for justice, the rule of law, and human rights along with fundamental freedom proclaimed in the United Nations Charter.
- It runs a number of initiatives to protect city's cultural heritage through architecture. This includes listings of World Heritage Sites, which landmarks areas of importance.
- It is the successor of the League of Nations' International Committee on Intellectual Cooperation.

SANJHI –MUJH MEIN KALAKAR

In News

- Sangeet Natak Akademi (SNA) the National Academy of Music, Dance and Drama has launched the **second phase of the Web Campaign 'SANJHI –MUJH MEIN KALAKAR' an initiative to document and promote the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) and diverse cultural traditions of the country** by direct public-participation.
- The literal meaning of the term **SANJHI is "to share" and "to partner"**, and the cultural traditions of the country has developed and prospered on the notions of harmony.
- The second phase of this campaign, SANJHI –MUJH MEIN KALAKAR, has its main focus area- the folk, traditional, customary, socially events and ritualistic art forms- woven as a cultural fabric around the harvest festival season of January.
- It is celebrated all across the country with different names viz. Makar Sankranti, Pongal, Lohri, Bhogali Bihu, Torgya, Uttarayan, Attukkal Pongal etc.
- It intends to bring forth such forms that are aligned with the domains of intangible cultural heritage as per the Convention of Safeguarding the ICH under UNESCO:
 - Oral traditions and expressions, including language as a vehicle of intangible cultural heritage;
 - Performing arts;

- Social practices, rituals and festive events;
 - Knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe;
 - Traditional craftsmanship
- The Sangeet Natak Akademi (SNA) is the nodal agency of the Ministry of Culture, Govt. of India to coordinate the matters related to Intangible Cultural Heritage and various UNESCO Conventions addressing cultural diversity and promotion and dissemination of multifarious cultural traditions and expressions of the country.

Society

Womaniya on GeM

Syllabus: Role Of Women And Women's Organization

In News

- Government e Marketplace (GeM) has launched **Womaniya on GeM**, an initiative to enable women entrepreneurs and women self-help groups (WSHG) to sell different products on the platform.
- It would enable selling of handicrafts and handloom, jute and coir products, home décor and office furnishings, directly to various government ministries, departments and institutions.
- It seeks to develop women entrepreneurship on the margins of society to **achieve gender-inclusive economic growth**.
- Nearly 80 % women-owned establishments are self-financed and more than 60 % of 8 million units are owned and or led by women entrepreneurs from socially-challenged sections of the society.
- Since women tend to invest up to 90 percent of their earnings back in their families to provide better nutrition, health care and education to their children, economic empowerment of women is a step in the direction of poverty alleviation.
- The Womaniya homepage will inform procurement officers in various government ministries, departments and CPSEs about the drive to promote procurement of common use goods and services from women entrepreneurs.
- The initiative aligns with **government's initiatives for MSMEs, especially to reserve 3 per cent in government procurement from women entrepreneurs**.
- It will **spur hyper-local economic opportunities** for women entrepreneurs and address goals and objectives under United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.
- **Set up in 2016, Government e Marketplace is a 100 per cent government owned company** setup under the aegis of Ministry of Commerce and Industry for procurement of common use goods and services by Government ministries, departments and CPSEs.

Women of India Organic Festival

Syllabus: Role Of Women And Women's Organization

In News

- The Ministry of Women and Child Development organised the three-day 6th **'Women of India Organic Festival'** at **Leisure Valley, Chandigarh**, to celebrate and promote women farmers and entrepreneurs in the organic sector from the remotest parts of India.

- The festival aims to encourage Indian women entrepreneurs and farmers to connect with more buyers and thus, **empower them through financial inclusion, while promoting organic culture in India.**
- Through this festival, the Ministry also aims to educate people about its various initiatives and schemes relating to women and children
- Over 200 women have come from all over India together at Leisure Valley, which has become the **epicentre of an organic extravaganza.** The Festival is showcasing over 1,000 varied organic products, including fabric, wellness, grains, seeds, jewellery, bakery items and a lot more.
- The festival stresses the need for adopting and strengthening organic farming for healthy, wealthy and environment-friendly lifestyle through a well- knit suitable marketing infrastructure with the backing of government, public and private partnership promoting entrepreneurship among women.

Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana- Gramin

Syllabus: Poverty and Developmental Issues

In News

- A study by the Rural Development Ministry shows that the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana- Gramin (PMAY-G) is in doldrums **with over 12 lakh pending houses and land being provided to only 12 per cent of the beneficiaries** even as the March 1 deadline for 1 crore houses fast approaches.
- Of the total 4.72 lakh beneficiaries identified across the country, only 56,694 have been allotted land. States like **Goa, Kerala and West Bengal have drawn a blank** in terms of allotment of land to beneficiaries.
- Among the best performing states in terms of land allotment are Sikkim, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh.
- While Sikkim has a 100 per cent success rate in allotting lands to 15 beneficiaries, Madhya Pradesh has managed to achieve 90 per cent success rate with 4,083 beneficiaries. Uttar Pradesh, by virtue of allotting lands to 784 of 1023 beneficiaries, has a success rate of 77 per cent.

Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana- Gramin

- The Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana- Gramin (PMAY-G) has been devised in line with government's commitment to **provide Housing for All by 2022 in the rural areas.**
- The scheme aims at providing a pucca house with basic amenities to all houseless householder living in kutcha and dilapidated houses by 2022.
- It selects beneficiaries using housing deprivation parameters in the Socio Economic and Caste Census (SECC) 2011 data. The SECC data captures specific deprivation related to housing among households.
- If the house is built in the plains the new sanctioned amount is Rs 1.2 lakh and if it is built in a hilly region then the amount stands as Rs 1.3 lakh. The financial assistance will be directly transferred to the Bank or the Post Account of the beneficiary.
- Along with financial assistance, the beneficiary is also offered 90 days of employment under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act , (MGNREGA) which effectively to approximately Rs 18000. Another Rs 12000 will be offered to construct toilets.

Global Housing Technology Challenge

Syllabus: Poverty and Developmental Issues

In News

- The Housing and Urban Affairs Ministry has recently launched the Global Housing Technology Challenge to make the construction of houses **cost-effective and innovative**.
- The GHTC-India challenge is a well-conceptualised and designed programme to bring out the most innovative, simple, effective and appropriate solutions for making housing available and affordable to the common man.
- Under the challenge, **a grand expo-cum-conference will be organised in March** which will be a unique platform not only for the stakeholders but also for the States/Union Territories and technical institutions.
- Global firms will be invited to India to demonstrate construction techniques for housing that are affordable and take minimum time – as less as three months instead of the conventional three years for construction
- It will **address issues related to the housing shortage in a time-bound manner and focus on the need for emerging, cost-effective & speedy construction technologies**.
- The challenge will also focus on **identifying and mainstreaming proven demonstrable technologies** for lighthouse projects and spotting potential future technologies for incubation and acceleration support through ASHA (Affordable Sustainable Housing Accelerators) — India.
- The idea is to enable a paradigm shift in the country's construction sector and meet the target of building 1.2 crore houses by 2022 under the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana-Urban (PMAY-U).

Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana-Urban

- PMAY (U), was launched by the Prime Minister in 2015 to ensure Housing for all by 2022 through financial assistance. Around 68.5 lakh houses have been approved so far for construction under the PMAY (U) and around 1.5 million houses have been handed over to beneficiaries.
- The PMAY-U mission has four verticals – In-situ Slum Redevelopment (ISSR), Affordable Housing in Partnership (AHP), Beneficiary-led Individual house construction or Enhancement (BLC), and Credit-Linked Subsidy Scheme (CLSS).
- Under the scheme, Economically Weaker Sections and Low Income Group beneficiaries can avail central assistance of up to Rs 2.67 lakh per house as provisioned under the different components of the scheme while benefits to Middle Income Group are restricted to CLSS only.

Constitution, Polity, And Governance**Citizenship Amendment Bill**

Syllabus: Indian Constitution - Historical underpinnings, evolution, features, amendments, significant provisions and basic structure.

In News

- The Citizenship (Amendment) Bill was recently passed in the Lok Sabha. It **amends the Citizenship Act, 1955 by selectively relaxing the eligibility rules for immigrants in getting Indian citizenship.**
- Under the existing Act, an immigrant must have lived in India for 11 of the previous 14 years. The Bill **relaxes this to six years for certain sections of immigrants.** It is for immigrants belonging to six minority religions —Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis, Christians — from Afghanistan, Bangladesh or Pakistan. However, the Act doesn't have a provision for Muslim sects like Shias and Ahmediyas who also face persecution in Pakistan.
- If the bill is passed by in the Parliament, illegal migrants belonging to the said communities from Afghanistan, Bangladesh or Pakistan would not be imprisoned or deported.
- Illegal migrant: According to the Citizenship Act, 1955, an illegal immigrant is one who enters India without a valid passport or with forged documents or a person who stays beyond the visa permit.
- According to legal experts, when the Bill is read together with a Home Ministry notification of September 7, 2015 on The Passport (Entry into India) Amendment Rules, 2015 and with The Foreigners (Amendment) Order, 2015, the cut-off for citizenship becomes December 31, 2014.
- As the Bill makes illegal migrants eligible for citizenship on the basis of religion, it may violate Article 14 of the Constitution which guarantees right to equality. Article 14 guarantees equality to all persons, citizens and foreigners. It only permits laws to differentiate between groups of people if the rationale for doing so serves a reasonable purpose.

Protests

- With states like Tripura and Assam already reeling under chronic illegal migration from Bangladesh, collectively, the region fears that the sad fortune of Tripura where its natives are now reduced to a minority by unabated influx from Bangladesh will be repeated in other states.
- In Arunachal Pradesh, the natives are anxious about the influx of Chakmas and Tibetans. In Meghalaya, the Khasis and Garos, as well as the Nagas of Nagaland, are wary of the Bengali migrants. On the other hand, the Mizos of Mizoram fear an influx of Buddhists Chakmas.
- Resonating the same sentiment, the seven North Eastern states allege that the agenda is to completely annihilate and wipe out the indigenous people of the North East by orchestrating a demographic invasion from across the border
- There is a fear that the move will lead to a **change in the demography and work against the political rights and the cultural and linguistic identity of the indigenous people.**
- It is also argued that the Bill, if made into an Act, will **nullify the updated National Registration of Citizenship (NRC).**
- The National Register of Citizens (NRC) is meant to identify a bona fide citizen. NRC is being currently updated in Assam to detect Bangladeshi nationals who might have entered the State illegally after the midnight of March 24, 1971. The date was decided in the 1985 Assam Accord,

which was signed between the then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and the AASU. The NRC was first published after the 1951 Census in the independent India when parts of Assam went to the East Pakistan, now Bangladesh.

- **Government's defence:** The government defends the bill by claiming that the bill is not just for Assam and the Northeast, but for the entire country. It acts as atonement for mistakes committed during partition and the regularised immigrants would not be settled in Assam alone but be distributed among various states across the country. Further the proposed provision has general application beyond the Assam Accord and is intended to apply to the whole of India
- Given the fact that the North East is already grappling with communal tension, insurgency, social unrest, migration and corruption, regularising the influx of more migrants may once again fuel insurgency to bounce back stronger.

Freedom of Literature Bill

Syllabus: Indian Constitution - Historical underpinnings, evolution, features, amendments, significant provisions and basic structure.

In News

In a Private member Bill that has been introduced in the Lok Sabha by Congress MP Shashi Tharoor has suggested far reaching amendments to various statutes to make it difficult for governments to ban books and to provide safeguards for authors and scholars from arbitrary and exhausting legal battles.

Provisions Of The Bill

- **Introduction:** The Bill puts on the government the onus of explaining why a book needs to be banned and removes the government's right to ban books indefinitely.
- **Purpose of the Bill:** The purpose of the Bill is to amend and remove the existing provisions of the laws, which can be misused to harass authors by vested interests.
- **Changing Existing Laws:** The Bill envisages reading down **Section 295A** of the Indian Penal Code that provides for imprisonment of up to **three years** for deliberate and malicious acts intended to outrage religious feelings or any class by insulting its religion or religious beliefs as well as **Section 298**, which is **similar to 295A** as it criminalises speech critical of religious organisations or religious figures, and therefore a major deterrent to free expression. **For Ex.-** Wendy Doniger's *The Hindus: An Alternative History* was withdrawn from circulation.
- **Amendment in Custom Act:** The most important part of the Bill is the proposal to amend the Customs Act that allows governments to suspend the shipping in of books over an indefinite period (as had happened with the ban on **Salman Rushdie's Satanic Verses**).
- **Changes in IT Act:** It wants to limit the bar on obscenity in the **Information Technology Act** to child pornography.
- **Change in procedure:** In the process of proscribing a book, the Bill proposes a tweak in the form of a **15-day prohibition**. Thereafter, the onus should be on the State government to approach the **High Court** to seek a permanent ban.

Final Analysis

As a private member's Bill, the legislation has hardly any hope of passing, but it reflects the contested terrain of freedom of speech and expression despite constitutional safeguards. Moreover, it is useful in highlighting gaps in the body of law.

10% Quota for Low Income Groups

Syllabus: Indian Constitution - Historical underpinnings, evolution, features, amendments, significant provisions and basic structure.

In News

The Parliament has approved *124th Constitutional Amendment Bill (103rd Amendment Act)* to give 10% reservation to the economically weaker sections (EWS) of society, over and above the 49.5% quota in place for SC, ST and OBCs. (It is a type of horizontal reservation like for PH category not like vertical reservation for SCs/STs)

Background

- **2006 Commission:** The UPA government in 2006 had formed the Commission for Economically Backward Classes under the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment (MoSJE). Maj Gen (Retd) SR Sinho headed the Commission. It had given 14 recommendations, one of the major recommendations was to qualify upper caste members who don't pay income tax as EWS and treat them at par with other backward classes.
- **Other recommendations:** The Commission also recommended that EWS children should be eligible for soft loans for higher education, scholarships, coaching for IAS and PCS exams and subsidized health facilities. Further, they can also be helped in the housing sector with soft loans.

Provisions Of The Bill

- **Aim:** The Bill aims to add **Clause 6 in Articles 15 and 16** of the Constitution to extend reservation in educational institutions and government jobs for EWS. The beneficiaries include EWS from *all religions*.
- **Article 15(6):** The new clause (6) to Article 15 allows the government to carve reservation for the EWS of society in higher educational institutions, including private ones, whether they are aided or not by the State. **Minority educational institutions are exempted.**
- **Article 16(6):** Likewise, the new clause (6) to Article 16 provides for quota for economically deprived sections in the initial appointment in government services.
- **Exclusions:** The person not entitled to EWS reservation include those family having annual income **above Rs 8 Lakh**, persons whose family owns or possesses five acres of agricultural land, residential flat of 1000 square feet and above, residential plot of 10 yards and above in notified municipalities and residential plot of 200 yards and above in areas other than notified municipalities.

Test	To	Determine
	Reasonableness	Of
	Reservation	
<p>To determine whether economic reservation violates basic structure or not, the M Nagraj Case (2006) applied two tests. One is the width test, on the boundaries of the amending power. This would include examination of four issues <i>i.e.</i> quantitative limitations such as violation of the 50% ceiling for all reservations taken together; (ii) exclusion of creamy layer or qualitative exclusion; (iii) compelling reasons such as backwardness of the economically weaker sections for whom this reservation has been made; (iv) that overall administrative efficiency is not obliterated by the new reservation. The second test is called the identity test, under which the Supreme Court will examine whether, after the amendment, there is any alteration in the identity of the Constitution. The amendment cannot change this.</p>		

Arguments In Favour Of The Bill

- **50% limit does not apply:** The Amendment Act does not violate the **Indra Sawhney judgment of 50% ceiling** as it applies only in the case of socially and educationally backward classes, whereas amendment deals with quota for the EWS of society.
- **Implementation of Article 46:** The government has invoked the

Directive Principles of State policy contained in Article 46 to defend its proposal for reservation for the economically weaker sections. Article 46 says that the State shall promote with special care the educational and economic interests of the weaker sections of the people.

- **De-stigmatization:** The people from the SC and ST have supported the amendment in anticipation that it is the beginning of the process of de-stigmatization of reservation.
- **Secular initiative:** The 10% quota for the EWS, (those, not SC, ST or OBC) was the first time in India's history that a government welfare programme specifically included Muslims under its umbrella of recipients.
- **Larger beneficiaries:** The EWS reservation cuts across erstwhile limitations of caste and religion, enabling a policy that serves a larger segment of beneficiaries.

Challenges

- **Overall issues:** It primarily affects the **basic structure of the Constitution**. At the same time the Constitution does not provide for economic reservation.
- **Against SC decision:** Further, the **Indira Sawhney judgment** has capped the reservation limit to 50%, but the new amendment increases reservation to 59%. Moreover, the court has said economically deprived is not a homogenous group and **economic backwardness cannot be the sole criterion** for reservation.
- **Against Article 14:** A total of **59% (49%+10%) quota** would leave other candidates with just 41% government jobs or seats. This may amount to sacrifice of merit and violate Article 14.
- **Lack of compelling necessity:** Similarly, the government has to justify compelling reasons of going beyond the 50% limit. In some states, upper castes number less than 10% and this scheme may be difficult to justify as for 52% backward classes there is just 27% OBC reservation.
- **Not an affirmative action:** Affirmative action was designed for those who have suffered social discrimination, not as a poverty alleviation, employment measure. Thus, the government has overlooked the fact that upper castes neither face social injustice nor are subjected to any form of exploitation.
- **Fluctuating criteria's:** The economic criteria was too fluctuating a basis for providing quota.
- **Limit too high:** The cut off of **Rs 8 lakh** is too high and will not benefit the truly poor families. The National Sample Survey (NSS) of 2011-12 shows that with this annual per capita income criteria, 99% of households will fall under this threshold.

Cabinet Decides To Strengthen North-East Autonomous Councils

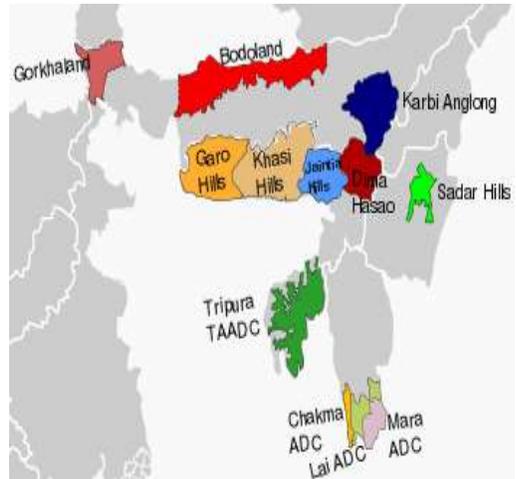
Syllabus: Indian Constitution - Historical underpinnings, evolution, features, amendments, significant provisions and basic structure.

In News

- The Cabinet has approved the landmark amendment to **Article 280** and **Sixth Schedule** of the Constitution. The most important part of these amendments is that these will significantly improve the financial resources and powers of the **10 autonomous districts councils** in **Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Tripura**, fulfilling long-standing aspirations of the tribal population in these northeastern States.
- Till now, the autonomous councils have depended on grants from Central Ministries and the State governments for specific projects.

The Cabinet Decision

- **Transfer of subjects:** The amendment provides for transfer of **additional 30 subjects**, including the departments of Public Works, Forests, Public Health Engineering, Health and Family Welfare, Urban Development and Food and Civil Supply to **Karbi Anglong Autonomous Territorial Council** and **Dima Hasao Autonomous Territorial Council** in Assam.
- **Reservation for women:** As per the proposed amendment, at least **one third** of the seats would be reserved for women in the village and municipal councils in the Sixth Schedule areas of **Assam, Mizoram and Tripura**.
- **Role of FC:** The Finance Commission (FC) would be mandated to recommend devolution of financial resources to the councils.
- **Democracy:** The proposed amendments also provide for elected village municipal councils, ensuring democracy at the grass roots level. Further, the village councils will be empowered to prepare plans for economic development and social justice, including those related to agriculture, land improvement, implementation of land reforms, minor irrigation, water management, animal husbandry, rural electrification, small scale industries and social forestry.
- **Role of SEC:** The **State Election Commissions** would hold elections to the autonomous councils, village and municipal councils in the areas of **Assam, Mizoram and Tripura**.



Benefits

- **Direct impact on tribal:** The amendment would impact a population of about **1 crore tribals** living in **Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram**.
- **Availability of finance:** This will be a game changer, as it will substantially enhance the funds available to these local government institutions for undertaking development works in these tribal areas.

Final Analysis

The move is a step in right direction but the decision such as devolution of financial resources by Finance Commission to ensure more funds to local government institutions can only be successful, if Centre is able to plug loopholes and ensure funds are used for development purposes unlike in the past when autonomous councils in Assam were charged by CBI and NIA for indulging in corruption and terror related activities.

Issue About Sedition Law

Syllabus: Indian Constitution - Historical underpinnings, evolution, features, amendments, significant provisions and basic structure.

In News

- The slapping of sedition charges (**under Section 124A of Indian Penal code**) against noted **Assamese scholar Hiren Gohain** and two others for remarks made against the proposed citizenship law is a textbook case of misuse of the law relating to sedition.

- The sedition charges are also filed against an ex-president of the JNU Student's Union, **Kanhaiya Kumar** and former students for allegedly raising and supporting anti-national slogans.

SC On Sedition Law

- Imminent threat must:** To prevent a heavy handed response to strident political criticism that courts have often pointed out that the essential ingredient of any offence of sedition is an imminent threat to public order. (**Kedarnath v. State of Bihar case, 1962**)
- Actual violence:** SC has also said that unless there is actual incitement to take up arms or resort to violence, even demands that go against the legal or constitutional scheme of things would not amount to sedition.

1891: The British first invoked the charge of sedition against Jogendra Chandra Bose, editor of "Bangobasi", in 1891 for his criticism of the "Age of Consent Bill".

1908: Bal Gangadhar Tilak was held for sedition for criticising hanging of Chapekar brothers and blaming British for taking the country to the brink, instigating revolutionaries.

1921-22: Master Tara Singh, a politician and religious head, was charged with sedition for speeches against the British rule for its involvement in a dispute of Golden Temple.

1922: Mahatma Gandhi was convicted for sedition for his articles published in Young India.

2003: Vishwa Hindu Parishad leader Praveen Togadia was charged with sedition by the Rajasthan government in 2003.

2005: Simranjit Singh Mann, ex-IPS and president of the SAD-Amritsar, was charged with 4 different sedition cases.

2007: Dr Binayak Sen, a paediatrician, was arrested for sedition for allegedly helping carry messages to Maoists in Chhattisgarh. He was sentenced by a trial court in 2010, and was given bail by the SC in 2011. His appeal is pending in the Chhattisgarh High Court.

2009: Tamil Nadu politician Vaiko (V. Gopalasamy) was slapped with sedition charges for his statements against India's sovereignty in a speech on Sri Lanka's war with LTTE.

2010: Noor Mohammad Bhat, a lecturer from Gandhi Memorial College, was arrested for setting an anti-India question paper.

2012: Cartoonist Aseem Trivedi was arrested on sedition charges for his alleged banners and cartoons mocking the Constitution, Parliament and the National Flag. The Bombay HC struck down the charge.

2013: Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen MLA Akbaruddin Owaisi was slapped with sedition charges by the Karimnagar police.

WHAT IS SEDITION 124A. SEDITION
 WHOEVER, BY WORDS, either spoken or written, or by signs, or by visible representation, or otherwise, brings or attempts to bring hatred or contempt, or excites or attempts to excite disaffection towards the government established by law in India, shall be imprisoned for life

EXPLANATION 1. The expression "disaffection" includes disloyalty and all feelings of enmity.
EXPLANATION 2. Comments expressing disapprobation of the measures of government with a view to obtaining their alteration by lawful means, without attempting to excite hatred, do not constitute an offence under this section.
EXPLANATION 3. Comments expressing disapprobation of the administrative or other action of the Government without exciting or attempting to excite hatred, contempt or disaffection, do not constitute an offence under this section.

Misuse Of The Sedition Law

- Misuse of law:** It is being invoked even in cases where there is no incitement to violence or tendency to create public disorder.
- Containing dissent:** In recent years, there have been many instances of state governments seeking to silence political dissent by accusing dissenters of promoting disaffection.
- Vague and broad:** It is also argued that the provision is overbroad i.e., it defines the offence in wide terms threatening the liberty of citizens.
- Colonial law:** The Britain abolished it more than a decade ago and this raises the question, whether a provision introduced by the British to put down the freedom struggle should continue to be law in India.
- Law commission:** Even the Law Commission, in a consultation paper released last year, had called for a reconsideration of the sedition section in the IPC.

Way Forward

- While the provision, which is couched in broad terms, needs a much narrower definition, the right course is to scrap **Section 124A**, a relic of the colonial era, altogether.
- Further, the misuse of the sedition law should attract appropriate penalties for law enforcement agencies coupled with a provision for compensation to the injured party.

Vote On Account

Syllabus: Parliament and State Legislatures- structure, functioning, conduct of business, powers & privileges and issues arising out of these.

In News

- There is a speculation that the NDA government may present a regular full budget instead of a vote on account. The main opposition says that it will oppose the same in Parliament, as it would be violative of parliamentary conventions, procedures and traditions.
- The opposition also says that the parliamentary convention prohibits a government from taking major policy or legal change through Vote on account before the last parliament session.

About Vote on account

A vote on account, also known as Interim Budget, essentially means that the government seeks the approval of Parliament for meeting expenditure for the **first four months** of the fiscal year (April-March) in paying salaries, ongoing programmes in various sectors etc. but, with no changes in the taxation structure, until a new government takes over and presents a full Budget.

Background

- Since 1948, when Finance Minister R K Shanmukham Chetty presented a vote on account and followed it up with Independent India's first regular budget, most governments have followed this convention.
- However, if govt announce a major policy decision on February 1, the NDA-II Government will not be the first to disregard convention. Then Finance Minister P. Chidambaram had, in the vote on account in 2014-15, announced the One Rank One Pension scheme, which Opposition members claimed was an attempt to garner votes from the members of the armed forces.
- The NDA-I also announced several policy decisions that affected not just the poor population, but also farmers & government employees. For example, then Finance Minister Jaswant Singh announced the extension of the Antyodaya Anna Yojana.

Issues

- **Rules silent:** There is nothing in the House rules, which says that the government cannot amend an Act of Parliament during last session of the Parliament before general election. The only factor to be considered is that doing so would go against the established convention.
- **Little time:** The changes in the law is avoided as there is little time to get approvals from Parliament for various grants to ministries and departments and to debate these grant.
- **New government:** More importantly, the reasoning against introducing full budget is that any change in law or taxation is the prerogative of the new government to signal its policy direction.

All India Judicial Services (AIJS)

Syllabus: Structure, organization, and functioning of Judiciary and Related Issues

In News

The vision document titled Strategy for New India @ 75, released by NITI Aayog, amongst other things, proposes creation of an AIJS, akin to the other central services like the IAS and the IPS.

Background

The idea of an AIJS has been deliberated since Independence. In fact, the *First law commission's 14th Report* on 'Reform of Judicial Administration' suggested the need for creating a separate All India service for judicial officers.

Rationale For Creation Of AIJS:

- **Incentivizing:** It will ensure that subordinate court judges are paid salaries and given perks at parity with government bureaucrats, thereby incentivizing the option of the state judiciary as a viable career prospect.
- **Quality:** The quality of judges will improve as the best legal talent across the country would be selected on the basis of merit.
- **Reduce shortage of judges:** The AIJS is also being proposed as a panacea to cure the chronic vacancy crisis plaguing the Indian subordinate judiciary.
- **Streamlined procedure:** An All India service will offers a more streamlined and regularized recruitment process for the vacancies for District judges in the country.
- **Constitutionally permissible:** The **Article 312** of the Constitution permits the Rajya Sabha to create an All India Services. Presently, the appointments to the subordinate judiciary are made under **Articles 233 and 234** of the Constitution. However, the **Article 312** commences with a non-obstante clause, thus will override these provisions. Furthermore, **Entry 70** of the Union List provides Parliament exclusive authority to enact a law creating such an AIJS and all connected matters.
- **Other benefits:** The efficiency and efficacy of judiciary would be increased and the issue of corruption, nepotism *etc.* would be strongly dealt with.

Challenges

- **Shortage of judges may remain:** As the Constitution only permits the appointments of District Judges to such a prospective AIJS, it will not magically remedy the shortage of judges at the subordinate level.
- **Opposition of stakeholders:** The idea of an AIJS has been significantly contentious within the legal fraternity and other concerned stakeholders. The idea has been vehement disagreed by **almost half the High Courts.**
- **Issue of federalism:** Many State see this as an attempt by the central govt to encroach is state's domain. Thus, it will be another ground for conflict between the Union and other federal units.
- **Issue of independence of judiciary:** If the control over State judiciary is transferred to Union government by removing control of High Court as currently provided under **Article 235**, the independence of judiciary would be undermined.
- **Other issues:** The judges appointed by the All India process will need to familiarize themselves with the **local languages, customs and laws of the State.**

Conclusion

Despite the limitations, there is a strong case for the establishment of AIJS as a meritocratic judiciary is the need of the hour, which is possible with a competitive recruitment process.

Collegium Controversy

Syllabus: Structure, organization, and functioning of Judiciary and Related Issues

In News

- A controversy arose after collegium's January 10 resolution that dropped names of two High Court (HC) Chief Justices picked for elevation to the Supreme Court (SC) a month ago and recommended instead two new names (Justice Dinesh Maheshwari and Justice Sanjiv Khanna).

- Further, the appointment Justice Sanjiv Khanna was made by supersession of 32 judges who were senior to him.

Issue About The Recent Controversy

- **Opaqueness:** The instance shows that the Collegium system continues to be opaque, secretive and unaccountable.
- **Issue of nepotism:** The appointments made reek of biases of self selection and in breeding. Sons and nephews of previous judges or senior lawyers tend to be popular choices for judicial roles.
- **Lack of objective criteria:** With collegium's *ad hoc* informal consultations with other judges, which do not significantly investigate criteria such as work, standing, integrity and so on, the collegium remains outside the sphere of legitimate checks and balances.
- **Independence of judiciary:** The controversy seriously undermines the independence of judges and raises unnecessary doubts about the credibility of the SC as the government is only the biggest litigator.
- **Violation of seniority principle:** Although, the seniority convention for higher judicial appointments is not set in stone. But, the **Second Judges' case of 1993**, which led to the formation of a collegium, held that unless there be any strong cogent reason to justify a departure, that order of inter-se seniority amongst Judges of High Courts must be maintained between them while making their appointment to the SC.
- **Lack of justification:** The collegium own previous decision to appoint other persons to the SC was reversed, without any explanation or justification.
- **Lack of reformative step:** Although the SC did not upheld the constitutionality of **National Judicial appointment Commission (NJAC)**, but it failed to introduce important reformatory changes in the functioning of the judiciary and appointment procedure. Thus, it reverted to the old Collegium based appointments mechanism.

Final Analysis

- The lack of a written manual for functioning, the absence of selection criteria, the arbitrary reversal of decisions already taken, the selective publication of records of meetings, all of these point to the fact that the Collegium is not only as opaque as it was, it may perhaps have become worse.
- Thus, this is a time to revisit the Collegium issue, either through a Presidential reference to the SC or a constitutional amendment with appropriate changes in the original NJAC law.

Possible End Of Oral Mentioning In SC

Syllabus: Structure, organization, and functioning of Judiciary and Related Issues

In News

- The Supreme Court (SC) is drafting new guidelines that would help ensure that urgent cases automatically come up before a Bench for hearing within four days of their being filed, obviating the need for lawyers to appear before the Chief Justice of India (CJI) to orally mention their cases for urgent listing.
- Further, if such cases did not come up for hearing, the lawyers concerned could make a mention before the Registrar to have their cases listed.

About Oral mentioning

Oral mentioning is a convention by which lawyers circumvent the long winded filing procedures and make a direct appeal to the CJI, who is the court's administrative head and master of the roster, for early hearing.

Benefit

- **Saving of time:** Earlier, the urgent mentioning before the SC, unnecessarily wasted the precious time of the court.
- **Impact on other cases:** When the CJI takes a call on the spot, *i.e.* whether the case deserves to be heard out of turn. This would mean pushing other cases off the list.
- **Not urgent:** The CJI has also often complained about how cases that were orally represented by a lawyer during mentioning, did not turn out to be urgent.
- **Level playing field:** The convention was also misused by the Senior Advocates by taking advantage of their standing in court to get early dates during oral mentioning. Thus, new rule will create a level playing field for all lawyers by allowing only advocates on record to mention cases.

The Propriety Of New Andhra High Court

Syllabus: Structure, organization, and functioning of Judiciary and Related Issues

In News

- **Retired SC Justice Jasti Chelameswar** has recently called into question the creation of the new High Court of Andhra Pradesh and described it as a flagrant violation of the Constitution.
- The new Andhra Pradesh High Court was constituted through a notification issued by the President and published in the Gazette of India on Dec' 26, 2018 and came into existence on Jan' 1, 2019.

The Rationale

- **Bypassing Parliament:** The Constitution prescribes a certain procedure to be followed in establishing or constituting High Courts. In this case, they have virtually bypassed Parliament.
- **Prior authorization of Parliament:** Constitutionally, the President can notify the creation of a new High Court only after Parliament has authorized him to do so. The Parliament has to fix a date (for creation of new HC) and it can delegate the authority to the President as has been done in all other such cases in the past.

National Voter's Day

Syllabus: Elections and Representation of People's Act and Related Issue

In News

- The 9th National Voters' Day (NVD) was recently celebrated all over the country on **January 25**.
- It is being **celebrated every year since 2011 to mark the Foundation day of Election Commission of India**, which was **established on this day in the year 1950**.
- The main purpose of the NVD celebration is to encourage, facilitate and maximize the enrollment, especially for the new voters.
- Dedicated to the voters of the country, the day is utilized to spread awareness among voters for promoting informed participation in the electoral process.
- **My Vote Matters**, a quarterly magazine was launched on the occasion and the first copy was presented by the Election Commission to the President.
- The National Awards for the Best Electoral Practices were also conferred to officers for outstanding performance in the conduct of elections. In addition, awards were also given to CSOs and Media Houses who have made outstanding contribution in the field of voter awareness and outreach.

I&B Drops Paid News Regulation In Draft Bill

Syllabus: Elections and Representation of People's Act and Related Issue

In News

After yearlong deliberations, the Ministry of Information & Broadcasting has decided to drop regulation against paid news in newspapers and magazines from the proposed **Press and Registration of Books and Periodicals (PRBP) Bill**. At present, there is no law to tackle paid news.

Background

- A Parliamentary panel in August 2015 had asked the Ministry to expeditiously formulate an appropriate policy to make paid news a punishable electoral malpractice and also empowering the Press Council to adjudicate complains of paid news and giving final judgment in the matter.
- The Election Commission of India has certain rules on paid news in place, under which it disqualified Madhya Pradesh minister Narottam Mishra for three years in June 2017.

The Rationale

- **PRBP deals with other matters:** The PRBP is not the right legislation for paid news as the former only related to title verification, registration and circulation verification of newspapers, books and periodicals.
- **Dealt separately:** According to the Ministry, the paid news pertains to “content”, an issue that should be dealt through an amendment in the *Press Council Act*, which is concerned with standards of newspapers and news agencies in India.

About New Press and Registration of Books (PRB) Act

- **New Legislation:** It was in June 2017 that the Ministry decided to scrap the 150 year-old archaic Press and Registration of Books (PRB) Act of 1867 and drafted a fresh Bill to regulate newspapers and publications as well as their registration.
- **Punishment:** It provides that if any publication was found to have indulged in or continued indulging in publishing paid news, the Press Registrar General could suspend the publication for a period of *45 days* after holding an inquiry under the *Press Council Act, 1978*. It further states that if the publication continues to publish paid news even after suspension, the press registrar general can also order cancellation of the registration of the publication.
- **Proviso to the punishment:** However, the publisher will be given an opportunity to present his view in such a case, the provision mentions.

Analysis of Electoral Bond Scheme

Syllabus: Elections and Representation of People's Act and Related Issue

In News

Last year the government introduced an **Electoral Bond Scheme** purportedly with a view to cleansing the prevailing culture of political sponsorship. But many experts have pointed out loophole in the scheme.

Loopholes

- **Major issues:** Firstly, there is no ceiling on party expenditure and the EC (Election Commission) cannot monitor the scheme as the government administers it.



- **Issue of black money:** Further, there is no surety that the money that is being invested in the scheme is not black money as there is *secrecy of the donor*.
- **Issue of foreign influence:** Even foreign money can come under the scheme so *prima facie* there is chance that domestic independence of the government may be lost.
- **Too opaque:** In its present form, the scheme permits not only individuals and body corporates, but also every artificial juridical person, to purchase bonds, issued by the State Bank of India, in denominations of Rs. 1,000; Rs. 10,000; Rs. 1 lakh; Rs. 10 lakh and Rs. 1 crore, during specified periods of the year. Further, it is issued in the form of promissory notes and once a bond is purchased the buyer can donate it to any political party, which can then encash it on demand.
- **Removal of existing ceiling:** The scheme removes an existing condition that had prohibited companies from donating anything *more than 7.5% of their average net profit over the previous three years*. This now means that even loss making entities can make unlimited contributions.
- **Removal of safeguard:** Additionally, the requirement that a corporation ought to have been in existence for at least three years before it could make donations, a system that was meant to stop shell concerns from being created with a view purely to syphoning money into politics has also been removed.
- **Violation of fundamental rights:** Indian Courts have nearly consistently seen that freedom of voting as distinct from the right to vote, as a facet of the right to freedom of expression and as an essential condition of political equality. In the absence of complete knowledge about the identities of those funding the various different parties, it's difficult to exercise Right to Vote.

Rajasthan Government Removes Educational Criteria For Local Bodies Election

Syllabus: Elections and Representation of People's Act and Related Issue

In News

- The Rajasthan government has decided to **scrap minimum educational requirements** for candidates contesting local body elections.
- The previous government had made it mandatory for candidates contesting for the post of Sarpanch to have cleared Class 8 and for those in the fray in Zila Parishad and Panchayat Samiti elections to have passed Class 10.

Positive Impact

- **Restore right to contest:** This is a progressive move and will restore the right to contest, at least in theory, to a large section of the population in the State, where the literacy rate, according to the 2011 Census was *52% for women and 79% for men*.
- **Restoration of state's responsibility:** The earlier rule were ill considered as it penalized the people for failure to meet certain social indicators, when in fact it is the state's responsibility to provide the infrastructure and incentives for school and adult education.
- **Restoration of the purpose of PRI:** Earlier rule

PANCHAYAT POLLS: WHAT STATES SAY

HARYANA

Class X for general candidates Class VIII for women and Dalits. Class V for Dalit women. No criminal conviction, pending electricity bills or loan payments. Toilet at home must.

RAJASTHAN

Class X for zila parishad, panchayat samiti. Class VIII for sarpanch. Class V for scheduled areas. No leprosy patient.

ANDHRA PRADESH

Hearing and speech impaired, leprosy patients cannot contest.

ODISHA

No hearing and speech impaired.

tuberculosis, leprosy patients.

KARNATAKA

Toilet at home must, or must give written undertaking that it would be built within one year.

MAHARASHTRA

Cannot have more than two children. State disqualifies those who defecate in the open.

GUJARAT

Toilet at home must.

CHHATTISGARH

Toilet at home must.

Source: PRS Legislative Research & ENS

also defeated the very purpose of the panchayati raj institutions, to include citizens in multi tier local governance from all sections of society. These requirements had the effect of excluding the marginalized.

- **More choices:** The earlier rule effectively restricted universal franchise by severely limiting the pool from which voters could choose their representatives, as well as denting the gains made by the 33 per cent reservation for women in local bodies.
- **Protection of marginalized:** The earlier rule disproportionately disenfranchised the more marginal sections of society i.e. women, Dalits and poor.

Final Analysis

- Rajasthan government has done well to ensure that the right to represent and choose one’s representatives is no longer circumscribed.
- In a liberal democracy, governments must desist from putting bars on who may contest, except in exceptional circumstances, such as when a candidate is in breach of particular laws. To mandate paternalistically what makes a person a ‘good’ candidate goes against the spirit of the attempt to deepen democracy by taking self-government to the grassroots.

Suggestion Of The Committee To Amend MCC

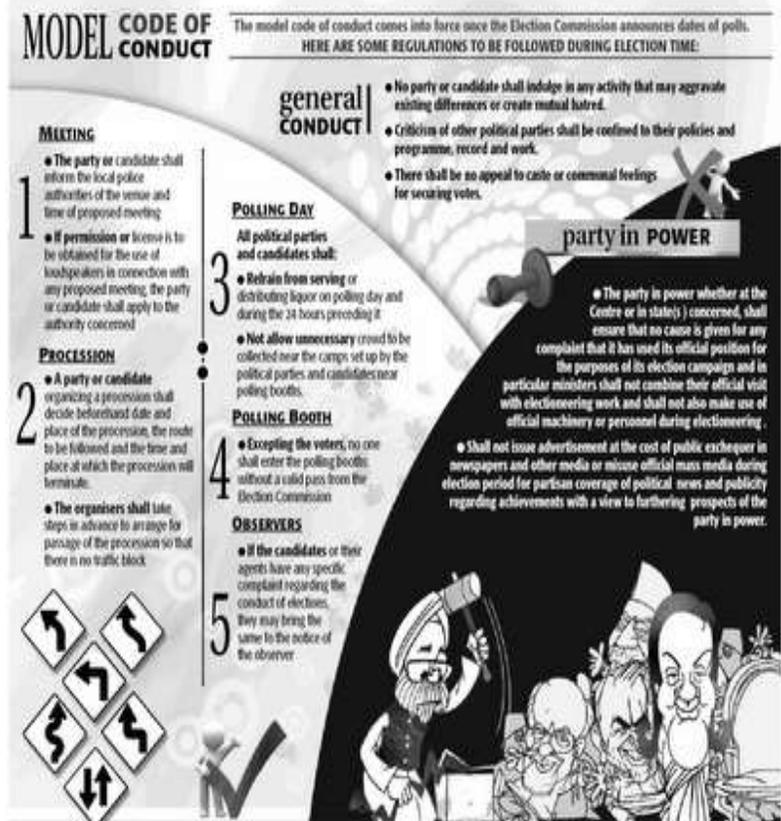
Syllabus: Elections and Representation of People’s Act and Related Issue

In News

- **Umesh Sinha committee** set up by the Election Commission has recommended changes in the Model Code of Conduct (MCC).
- The committee was tasked to revisit the MCC, **Section 126** of the Representation of the People (RP) Act and other related provisions in the wake of rapid expansion in the media.

Other Suggestions Of The Committee

- **Releasing manifesto:** It recommended that political parties should release their manifesto at least 72 hours before voting ends in the first phase of polls. Currently, the provisions are silent on this issue.
- **Election silence:** The panel has also suggested that the provision of ‘election silence’ be extended to cover print and social media, internet, cable channels and online version of print media. **Section 126** of the RP Act, embodies principle of election silence, which prohibits any form of poll campaign in the **last 48 hours** leading up to voting. This section also restrains display of any election



matter by means of cinematograph, television or other similar apparatus.

- **Responsibility of social media:** The social media agencies be asked to label political advertisements to separate them from other content, and maintain an account of expenditure incurred by political parties and candidates for advertising on their platforms. Further, social media platforms should work with the EC to evolve a mechanism by which the latter can flag content violating electoral law and social media sites can take it down as soon as possible.

Issues Concerning CBI’s Working

Syllabus: Constitutional/Statutory/Regulatory/Quasi-Judicial Bodies

In News

- Two days after CBI Director Alok Verma was reinstated by the Supreme Court (SC), the high-powered selection committee headed by Prime Minister removed him from the post over charges of corruption and dereliction of duty. He is the **first CBI chief** to be ousted from the post.
- The SC had earlier held that any transfer of the CBI chief could not be effected without the prior consent of a high-powered selection committee comprising the **PM, LoP and the CJI (or his nominee)**. But the SC said that the issue of Verma’s divestment remains open to be decided by the selection committee.

Issues

- **Non-fulfillment of natural justice:** Questions have been raised about the committee refusing Mr. Verma a personal hearing before divesting him of the powers.
- **Possible political interference:** An important learning from the entire episode is that the bipartisan appointment process for the post with the presence of a high judicial functionary as envisaged by the 2003 amendments may not be enough to thwart political stratagems.

<p>Under a Cloud</p> <p>HERE'S WHY THE SELECTION COMMITTEE SHUNTED OUT VERMA:</p>	<p>PM Modi-headed panel took into account the extremely serious nature of observations made by CVC</p>	<p>Believed that since a detailed investigation, including criminal probe, was necessary in some cases, Verma's continuation as CBI director was not desirable</p>	<p>CVC report found instances of wilful non-production and fabrication of records</p>
	<p>Committee felt that being the head of a sensitive organisation, Verma was not functioning with the integrity expected of him</p>	<p>Committee also took note of Verma's attempts to induct officers of doubtful integrity into CBI</p>	<p>(*As per sources)</p>

- **Issue of reputation:** It has not only dented CBI’s reputation but also eroded the public faith in our premier investigating agency.

Way forward

- The lack of transparency in the decision to remove CBI chief ensured that grave issues such as the autonomy and independence of the CBI and the proper role and powers of the government *vis a vis* the agency, are thrown up without closure or resolution.
- At this critical juncture, it is crucial that the governing class avoids knee-jerk reactions that could irretrievably damage an organisation. Despite misadventures, it has ordained task of combating corruption and malfeasance in high places.
- Rather than tinkering with the powers of the CBI, we need to evolve a much better system of appointments at all levels in the organisation. Like in other spheres, the CBI needs individuals of high integrity rather than more powers or freedom.

Legal Status For SSC

Syllabus: Constitutional/Statutory/Regulatory/Quasi-Judicial Bodies

In News

- A Parliamentary Standing Committee (PSC) has recommended that the Centre accord statutory status to the Staff Selection Commission (SSC), one of the largest recruitment agencies in the country.

Rationale

- **Other bodies enjoy legal/constitutional status:** The Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) and all State Public Service Commissions (SPSC) either have constitutional or legal status. The SSC is the only such organisation that performs similar functions on a much larger scale, but does not enjoy statutory status.
- **Rising workload:** There has been a phenomenal increase in the workload of the SSC, from 9.94 lakh candidates in 2008-09 to over 2 crore in 2016-17. While the workload and responsibilities of the SSC have increased exponentially over the years, it has remained an **'attached body' under the Department of Personnel and Training (DoPT)**.
- **Issue of autonomy:** SSC has to depend entirely on the government for all its needs with no or little autonomy. Thus, according statutory status to the SSC would contribute to greater functional autonomy, faster decision making and efficiency in the overall performance and delivery of results by the SSC in the recruitment process.
- **Suggestion of other committee:** An expert group constituted by the government in 2014, for reviewing the examination system in the SSC, had recommended according statutory status to the Commission.

Proposal For An Independent Regulator For Spot Exchanges

Syllabus: Constitutional/Statutory/Regulatory/Quasi-Judicial Bodies

In News

- The Centre will soon announce a separate regulator for spot exchanges, on the lines of SEBI. Further, the Finance Ministry has been trying to speed up the process of making spot exchanges operational, and the announcement on a new regulator is expected in the Interim Budget 2019-20.
- SEBI was the first choice of the **Ramesh Chand Committee**, but the capital market regulator said that it may not be able to take up the task. Regulating spot exchange has become an issue post the NSEL fiasco.

Aim/Purpose Of New Regulator

- **Greater transparency:** The Centre wants greater transparency in the price discovery of the physical bullion trading market, for which it is imperative to have spot exchanges. Currently, jewellers charge their own rates while buying and selling gold in the spot market, with little regulation. Thus, there is a marked difference between the bullion futures price and the spot price of jewellers.
- **Standardization:** In most cases, the price and purity of bullion vary. But, the spot exchanges can potentially put the entire physical bullion market on an exchange platform.
- **Focussed attention:** The new regulator is likely to have a full scale bureaucratic set up involving experts. It is expected to keep lobby groups such as the World Gold Council and Indian Bullion and

Jewellers Association, which have a direct vested interest in price discovery out of the decision making process.

SC On The Lokpal Act

Syllabus: Constitutional/Statutory/Regulatory/Quasi-Judicial Bodies

In News

Recently, the Supreme Court (SC) has asked the eight-member Search Committee under the Lokpal Act to recommend a panel of names before the end of February 2019. This shortlist has to be sent to the Selection Committee, headed by the Prime Minister.

Background

It has been five years since the Lokpal Act 2013, received the President’s assent on January 1, 2014. Search Committee was formed only on September 27, 2018, after Common Cause, an NGO, filed a contempt petition against the government over the delay in constituting the authority despite a Supreme Court verdict in April 2017.

Lokpal and Lokayuktas Act

- **Composition:** The Lokpal and Lokayuktas Act, 2013 provides for establishing a body to be headed by a Chairperson, who is or has been a Chief Justice of India, or is or has been a judge of the Supreme Court or an eminent person who fulfils eligibility criteria as specified. Of its other members, **not exceeding eight, 50% are to be judicial members**, provided that **not less than 50%** of the members belong to the Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribes, OBCs, minorities and women.
- **Lokayukta at state level:** Every State shall establish a body to be known as the Lokayuktas for the State, if not so established, constituted or appointed, then to be established **within a period of one year** from the date of commencement of this Act.
- **Structure:** Lokpal will have an **Inquiry Wing**, headed by the Director of Inquiry, for the purpose of conducting preliminary inquiry into any offence alleged to have been committed by a public servant punishable under the **Prevention of Corruption Act, 1988**. It will also have a **Prosecution Wing** headed by the Director of Prosecution for the purpose of prosecution of public servants in relation to any complaint by the Lokpal under this Act.
- **Jurisdiction:** The Lokpal Act covers a wide range of public servants *i.e.* from the **Prime Minister** (except the matters related to international relations, external and internal security, public order, atomic energy and space and only if a full Lokpal bench considers the initiation of inquiry in camera and **at least 2/3rd** of the members approve it), ministers and MP, to groups A, B, C and D officers of the central government. Further, the chairperson and members of the Lokpal too come under the definition of public servant.

A long-drawn debate
A short history of the Lokpal Bill from the 1960s to the present

- 1963:** The idea of an Ombudsman first came up in Parliament during a discussion on budget allocation for the Law Ministry
- 1966:** The First Administrative Reforms Commission recommended two independent authorities – one at the Centre and one at the State level – to probe complaints against public functionaries, including MPs
- 1968:** Lokpal Bill introduced in Parliament, but was not passed. Eight attempts were made till 2011 to pass the Bill, but all in vain
- 2002:** The Constitution review commission headed by M.N. Venkatachaliah recommended appointment of the Lokpal and the Lokayuktas. It also recommended that the Prime Minister be kept out of the Lokpal’s ambit
- 2005:** The second ARC recommended that a Lokpal be established without delay
- 2013:** Lokpal Act, 2013, passed in Parliament
- 2016:** Lok Sabha agreed to amend the 2013 Act
- 2017:** The SC on April 27 clarified that the Lokpal appointment process need not be stalled merely due to the absence of the Leader of the Opposition, who is a member of the Lokpal selection committee as per the 2013 Act

Current Challenges

- **Infra issues:** Even after it was formed, the Search Committee has been handicapped because of lack of office space, manpower, infrastructure and a secretariat.
- **Political issues:** The Selection Committee, which includes the **PM, Lok Sabha Speaker, the Leader of the Opposition, the Chief Justice of India and an eminent jurist**, has met in the past without Mallikarjun Kharge, who heads the Congress in the Lok Sabha. He has been skipping meetings, as he is aggrieved that the government has not made him a full member and has roped him in as a 'special invitee'.

Social Justice**National Girl Child Day**

Syllabus: Mechanisms, laws, institutions and Bodies constituted for the protection and betterment of these vulnerable sections

In News

- The Women & Child Development Ministry celebrated the National Girl Child Day (NGCD) on **24th January** in New Delhi. The celebrations also marked the **anniversary of Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP) Scheme**.
- This year's theme of NGCD is "**Empowering Girls for a Brighter Tomorrow**" and was celebrated with the **objective of generating awareness on the issue of declining Child Sex Ratio (CSR) and creating a positive environment around valuing the girl child**.
- A booklet on Innovations under BBBP was also released on the occasion. The Ministry has compiled 38 innovative activities from districts across the country to set an example for other districts. These interventions have been categorized according to five themes, which are Survival, Protection, Education, Participation and Valuing Girls.
- The occasion was also marked by felicitation of the 5 States and 25 Districts under the Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP) scheme for their exemplary performance in three categories - Effective Community Engagement, Enforcement of Pre Conception & Pre Natal Diagnostic Techniques Act (PC&PNDT Act) and Enabling Girl Child Education.

Objectives of National Girl Child Day

It is celebrated to increase the consciousness of the people and offer new opportunities to the girl child in the society.

- To remove all the inequalities faced by the girl child.
- To ensure that girls are accorded the human rights they deserve.
- To work against the diminishing child sex ratio in the country and change people's mind around it.
- To address issues associated to their health, respect, education and nutrition.

Beti Bachao Beti Padhao Scheme

- It was **launched in 2015** and upon observing the improving trend of sex ratio at birth (SRB) in 161 implementing districts it was **launched across the country** covering all the 640 districts **in 2018**.
- It is a **Central Sector Scheme** with 100% financial assistance for District level component and the fund are directly released to the DM's account for smooth operation of the Scheme. It is a **tri-**

ministerial effort of Ministries of Women and Child Development, Health & Family Welfare and Human Resource Development.

- The specific objectives of the scheme include preventing gender biased sex selective elimination; ensuring survival and protection of the girl child and ensuring education and participation of the girl child.

Indian Forest and Tribal Service

Syllabus: Mechanisms, laws, institutions and Bodies constituted for the protection and betterment of these vulnerable sections

In News

- The Union government has proposed **renaming of the Indian Forest Service as Indian Forest and Tribal Service**. The Department of Personnel and Training (DoPT) has initiated an inter-ministerial consultation note to rename the service and also train its cadre to be more receptive towards tribals and forest dwellers.
- The move follows a **directive from the National Commission for Scheduled Tribes (NCST)** to this effect. NCST concluded at a full commission meeting that the Indian Forest Service had long been at loggerheads with tribals, with whom IFS cadre is in close contact.
- The draft recommendation states that **although there are constitutional provisions for the upliftment of Scheduled Tribes in the country, there is no dedicated service to ensure this**.
- Presently, **tribal development activities are being looked after by** officers drawn from the State Civil Services, who work mostly under **Tribal Development Department**. At the higher level of government, there is no dedicated service for the development of STs in the country.
- As a result, the Tribal Ministry has no say in the management of forests, while the Environment Ministry — which is the cadre-controlling ministry for IFS officers — is trying to conserve forests without taking tribals into account
- This has led to an approach where the Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change is trying to conserve the forests with or without tribals whereas the Ministry of Tribal Affairs is aiming at the welfare of tribals without having much say on the management of forests as the primary resource of tribals
- Forest Service officials have always been the first point of government contact for tribals. But there is **little awareness among the service officials on the different problems faced by the tribals**. In fact, tribals often complain of harassment like not being allowed to carry out their headloads of minor forest produce
- The step **will infuse a unity of purpose** by creating a set of officials both at the centre and state levels who are singularly responsible and accountable to the State Governments as well as Government of India for development of tribals as well as conservation of forests.

Project ReWeave

Syllabus: Mechanisms, laws, institutions and Bodies constituted for the protection and betterment of these vulnerable sections

In News

- Microsoft India has announced the launch of a **new e-commerce platform for handloom weavers under its Project ReWeave**, as part of its philanthropic initiative.

- The e-commerce platform **would help connect artisans to the buyers directly enabling them to expand to newer customers and markets**. It will also help weavers to increase their income and earn a sustainable livelihood, while also reviving forgotten Indian art.
- The Indian handloom industry is the second-largest employment provider for the rural population in India, with almost 43 lakh weavers. Project ReWeave also aims to help weavers with working capital support through non-profit organisations.
- This also is a practical solution to motivate the younger generation of weavers to continue with their traditions and not divert into other professions.
- The website hosts signature collections created by weaver communities and showcases traditional designs and products created from natural dyes.
- Microsoft in association with the National Institute of Fashion Technology (NIFT) has also curated a special curriculum in **'CAD and Color for Handloom Weaving'** to provide digital training in handloom design. At a ceremony hosted at NIFT, the first batch of 100 handloom weavers was awarded certificates for successful design course completion
- Digital technology is changing the lives of Indians across every section of society. Working with global technology leaders such as Microsoft has enabled to bring technology to the doorstep of the large weaver communities.
- With the introduction of the new e-commerce platform, digital empowerment centres and the new design curriculum, weavers will be able to build on the rich handloom heritage of India.

WHO's List Of 10 Global Health Threats

Syllabus: Issues relating to development and management of Social Sector/Services relating to Health, Education, Human Resources.

In News

- The World Health Organisation (WHO) has released a list of 10 global health threats which demand attention from WHO and health partners in 2019.
- To address these and other threats, World Health Organization has come up with a new 5-year strategic plan – **the 13th General Programme of Work**.
- This plan focuses on a triple billion target: ensuring 1 billion more people benefit from access to universal health coverage, 1 billion more people are protected from health emergencies and 1 billion more people enjoy better health and well-being.

List of Global Health Threats

Air Pollution And Climate Change

This is the gravest risk, with nine out of 10 people breathing polluted air across the world. Microscopic pollutants in the air can penetrate respiratory and circulatory systems, damaging the lungs, heart and brain, killing 7 million people prematurely every year.

Noncommunicable Diseases

- Noncommunicable diseases, such as diabetes, cancer and heart disease, are collectively responsible for over 70% of all deaths worldwide, or 41 million people. This includes 15 million people dying prematurely, aged between 30 and 69.

- Over 85% of these premature deaths are in low- and middle-income countries. The rise of these diseases has been driven by five major risk factors: tobacco use, physical inactivity, the harmful use of alcohol, unhealthy diets and air pollution.

Global Influenza Pandemic

- The world will face another influenza pandemic – the only thing that is not known is when it will hit and how severe it will be. Global defences are only as effective as the weakest link in any country's health emergency preparedness and response system.

Fragile And Vulnerable Settings

- More than 1.6 billion people (22% of the global population) live in places where protracted crises (through a combination of challenges such as drought, famine, conflict, and population displacement) and weak health services leave them without access to basic care.
- Fragile settings exist in almost all regions of the world, and these are where half of the key targets in the sustainable development goals, including on child and maternal health, remains unmet.

Antimicrobial Resistance

- The development of antibiotics, antivirals and antimalarials are some of modern medicine's greatest successes. Now, time with these drugs is running out. Antimicrobial resistance threatens to send us back to a time when we were unable to easily treat infections such as pneumonia, tuberculosis, gonorrhoea, and salmonellosis.
- WHO is working with these sectors to implement a global action plan to tackle antimicrobial resistance by increasing awareness and knowledge, reducing infection, and encouraging prudent use of antimicrobials.

Ebola And Other High-Threat Pathogens

- WHO's R&D Blueprint identifies diseases and pathogens that have potential to cause a public health emergency but lack effective treatments and vaccines. This watchlist for priority research and development includes Ebola, several other haemorrhagic fevers, Zika, Nipah, Middle East respiratory syndrome coronavirus (MERS-CoV) and Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and disease X, which represents the need to prepare for an unknown pathogen that could cause a serious epidemic.

Weak Primary Health Care

- Primary health care is usually the first point of contact people have with their health care system, and ideally should provide comprehensive, affordable, community-based care throughout life.
- Yet many countries do not have adequate primary health care facilities. This neglect may be a lack of resources in low- or middle-income countries, but possibly also a focus in the past few decades on single disease programmes.

Vaccine Hesitancy

- Vaccine hesitancy – the reluctance or refusal to vaccinate despite the availability of vaccines – threatens to reverse progress made in tackling vaccine-preventable diseases. Vaccination is one of the most cost-effective ways of avoiding disease – it currently prevents 2-3 million deaths a year, and a further 1.5 million could be avoided if global coverage of vaccinations improved.
- Health workers, especially those in communities, remain the most trusted advisor and influencer of vaccination decisions, and they must be supported to provide trusted, credible information on vaccines.

Dengue

- A high number of cases occur in the rainy seasons of countries such as Bangladesh and India. Now, its season in these countries is lengthening significantly (in 2018, Bangladesh saw the highest number of deaths in almost two decades), and the disease is spreading to less tropical and more temperate countries such as Nepal, that have not traditionally seen the disease.
- An estimated 40% of the world is at risk of dengue fever, and there are around 390 million infections a year. WHO's Dengue control strategy aims to reduce deaths by 50% by 2020.

HIV

- The progress made against HIV has been enormous in terms of getting people tested, providing them with antiretrovirals (22 million are on treatment), and providing access to preventive measures such as a pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP, which is when people at risk of HIV take antiretrovirals to prevent infection).
- However, the epidemic continues to rage with nearly a million people every year dying of HIV/AIDS. Today, around 37 million worldwide live with HIV. Reaching people like sex workers, people in prison, men who have sex with men, or transgender people is hugely challenging. Often these groups are excluded from health services.
- WHO will work with countries to support the introduction of self-testing so that more people living with HIV know their status and can receive treatment

Rare Diseases

Syllabus: Issues relating to development and management of Social Sector/Services relating to Health, Education, Human Resources.

In News

- Days after withdrawing the national policy for treatment of rare diseases (NPTRD), the **Union health minister announced a one-time financial assistance for rare diseases** in the Parliament.
- The court had expressed shock at the withdrawal by observing that the government's somersault does not reflect well on the decision making process in the Ministry.
- Following the rebuke, the standing finance committee has approved a proposal for adding a sub-component under the umbrella scheme of Rashtriya Arogya Nidhi (RAN) for provision of one-time financial assistance to those below threshold poverty line for specified rare diseases which require one-time treatment. Further, a 10 member expert committee has been formed to draft a revised policy.
- **RAN provides financial assistance to patients, living below poverty line and who are suffering from major life threatening diseases, to receive medical treatment at any of the super speciality Hospitals/Institutes or other Government hospitals.**

Rare Disease

- **A rare disease is a health condition of low prevalence that affects a small number of people compared with other prevalent diseases in the general population.** It is estimated that globally around 6000 to 8000 rare diseases exist. However, 80% of all rare disease patients are affected by approximately 350 rare diseases.
- Paradoxically, though rare diseases are of low prevalence and individually rare, collectively they affect a considerable proportion of the population in any country, which according to generally accepted international research is – between 6% and 8%.

- WHO defines rare disease as a debilitating lifelong disease or disorder condition with a prevalence of 1 or less, per 1000 population. However, different countries have their own definitions to suit their specific requirements and in context of their own population, health care system and resources.
- In the US, rare diseases are defined as a disease or condition that affects fewer than 200,000 patients in the country (6.4 in 10,000 people). EU defines rare diseases as a life-threatening or chronically debilitating condition affecting no more than 1 in 2,000 people.
- **India, like many other developing countries, currently has no standard definition of rare diseases** and data on prevalence. While there is no registry of rare diseases patients in India, according to government's own estimates, given in the national policy document, there are **between 70-90 million patients, while the cost of treatment may vary from Rs 18-70 lakh.**
- The most common rare diseases recorded in India are Haemophilia, Thalassaemia, sickle-cell anaemia and primary immuno deficiency in children, auto-immune diseases, Lysosomal storage disorders such as Pompe disease, Hirschsprung disease, Gaucher's disease, Cystic Fibrosis, Hemangiomas and certain forms of muscular dystrophies.
- **80% of rare diseases have identified genetic origins and hence disproportionately impact children**, whilst others are the result of infections (bacterial or viral), allergies and environmental causes, or are degenerative and proliferative.

Need For A Policy

- Most of the 300-odd rare diseases for which treatment is available (for the rest are not) are progressive. They **require long-term and specialised treatments/management and not just one-time assistance.**
- Availability and access to medicines are important to reduce morbidity and mortality associated with rare diseases. Despite progress in recent years, **effective or safe treatment is not available for most of the rare diseases.** Where drugs are available, they are **prohibitively expensive, placing immense strain on resources of families, health systems and donor agencies alike.**
- As the number of persons suffering from individual rare diseases is small, they do not constitute a significant market for drug manufacturers to develop and market drugs for them. For this reason, **rare diseases are also called orphan diseases and drugs to treat them are called orphan drugs.**
- Due to the high cost, the government has not been able to provide these drugs for free. It is estimated that for a child weighing 10 kg, the annual cost of treatment for some rare diseases, may vary from Rupees 18 Lakhs to 1 crore 70 lakhs
- **Several countries have through legislation provided incentives to drug manufactures to encourage them to manufacture drugs for rare diseases.** The most powerful incentive for drug manufacturers is the grant of 7 to 10 years of exclusive marketing rights including protection from imports, if a drug gets orphan drug status. This means that pharmaceutical companies can price their drugs without fear of competition.
- In resource constrained settings, it is pertinent to balance competing interests of public health for achieving optimal outcome for the resources allocated.
- This raises questions of fairness and reasonability. However, it also raises issues of ethics and equity of opportunity for patients to benefit, in the interest of patients suffering from rare diseases.
- Hence any policy on treatment of rare diseases will have to strike a balance between access to treatments with health system sustainability.

Kyasanur Forest Disease

Syllabus: Issues relating to development and management of Social Sector/Services relating to Health, Education, Human Resources.

In News

- An outbreak of Kyasanur Forest Disease (KFD), also known as **monkey fever**, has been reported in some villages of **Shivamogga district of Karnataka**.
- Kyasanur forest disease (KFD) is a re-emerging **zoonotic disease endemic in Karnataka**. It is caused by Kyasanur Forest disease virus (KFDV), a member of the virus family Flaviviridae. First identified in 1957 from Kyasanur forest area, the disease derives its name from the forest range where the virus was first isolated.
- The disease can be **transmitted to human by the bite of infected ticks** or via contact with a sick or recently dead monkey. **Human to human transmission has not been reported yet**.
- Hard ticks are the reservoir of KFD virus and once infected, remain so for life. Rodents, shrews, and monkeys are common hosts for KFDV after being bitten by an infected tick.
- Large animals such as goats, cows, and sheep may become infected with KFD but play a limited role in the transmission of the disease.
- After an incubation period of 3-8 days, the symptoms of KFD start with chills, frontal headache, and fever. Other symptoms include severe muscle pain with vomiting and diarrhoea, mental disturbances, etc. Patients may also experience abnormally low blood pressure, low platelet, red blood cell, and white blood cell counts.
- In most cases, patients can recover without complication after 1-2 weeks - but the convalescent period is typically long, lasting for several months. The estimated fatality rate is from 2% to 10% for KFD, as per National health Portal, India.
- **There is no specific treatment for KFD**, however, early medical care and supportive therapy such as maintenance of hydration and management of neurological symptoms is important.
- **A vaccine does exist for KFD and is used in endemic areas**. Additional preventative measures include using insect repellents, wearing protective clothing in areas particularly where ticks are endemic, and avoiding contact with dead monkeys.

Zearalenone In Cereals

Syllabus: Issues relating to development and management of Social Sector/Services relating to Health, Education, Human Resources.

In News

- A Journal of Food Science study has detected zearalenone in wheat, rice, corn and oats from markets in Uttar Pradesh. The study, by researchers from Lucknow's Indian Institute of Toxicology Research (IITR), found the substance in 70 of the 117 samples tested.
- Zearalenone is a fungal toxin infesting cereals such as wheat, maize and barley. It attacks crops while they are growing, but can also develop when cereals are stored without being dried fully.
- The Food Safety and Standards Authority of India does not impose maximum limits for zearalenone, though the European Union (EU) does. Twenty-four of the U.P. samples exceeded the EU regulatory limits of 100-200 mcg/kg of cereals.

- The study also looked at National Sample Survey Office data on Indian diets to calculate how much zearalenone people could be consuming. It found that average daily consumption through wheat and rice was 0.27 and 0.3 mcg/kg of body weight — higher than the EU limit of 0.25 mcg/kg. In highly contaminated samples, exposure could be as high as 16.9 times the EU limit.
- Zearalenone behaves like oestrogen, the female sex hormone, and could cause endocrine disturbances in humans. Its nasty effects in animals, such as pigs, are documented. When fed with mouldy corn, pigs develop inflamed vaginas, infertility and other symptoms. This is why countries like Brazil regulate zearalenone levels in animal feed.
- Fungal toxins are commonly found in food, and can be a public health concern. India regulates the levels of some of these, including aflatoxin, deoxynivalenol, ergot and patulin. The first three infest cereals, while patulin is found in apples. Each of these toxins has been associated with disease outbreaks.
- In zearalenone's case, there is no strong evidence of toxicity in humans so far, though several research groups are investigating. As a result, the IARC classifies it as a Group 3 carcinogen, which means evidence is not sufficient for an evaluation yet.
- It is probably dangerous to humans too, but to be certain, it is important to know how much humans consume, how it is metabolised, and how exposure is correlated with disease.

National Action Plan for Drug Demand Reduction

Syllabus: Issues relating to development and management of Social Sector/Services relating to Health, Education, Human Resources.

In News

- The Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment has drafted a five-year action plan for addressing the problem of drug and substance abuse in the country, dumping a long-pending draft policy on the matter.
- The move comes after the ministry withdrew the draft National Drug Demand Reduction Policy from the Cabinet. It had been pending for more than five-and-half years and was redrafted twice during the period. Instead of the policy, the ministry has now prepared a national action plan.

Provisions Of The Plan

- The objective of the National Action Plan for Drug Demand Reduction (2018-2023) is to create awareness and educate people about the ill-effects of drugs abuse on the individual, family, workplace and the society at large in order to integrate them back into the society,
- It aims to employ a multi-pronged strategy — involving education, de-addiction and rehabilitation of affected individuals and their families — to address the issue.
- The ministry has planned several measures — including coordination with implementing agencies for controlling sale of sedatives, painkillers and muscle relaxant drugs, and checking online sale of drugs by stringent monitoring by cyber cell
- It includes holding awareness generation programmes at schools, colleges, universities, workplaces and for police functionaries, paramilitary forces, law enforcement agencies, judicial officers and Bar council, among others.
- Plans are also afoot for awareness generation through social, print, digital and online media, and engagement of celebrities, besides strengthening the national tollfree helpline for drug prevention.

- It also calls for persuading principals, directors, vice chancellors of educational institutions to ensure that no drugs are sold within/nearby the campus.
- Increasing community participation and public cooperation in the reduction of demand by involving Panchayati Raj institutions, Urban Local Bodies, Nehru Yuva Kendra Sangathan and other local groups like Mahila Mandals, self help groups etc is also planned.
- A steering committee would be constituted under the chairmanship of the secretary, Social Justice Ministry, and with representatives from the Ministries of Health, Human Resource Development, Women and Child Development, Home Affairs, Skill development and Entrepreneurship, among others. The committee will hold quarterly meetings to monitor effective implementation of the NAPDDR.
- It also includes identification of vulnerable areas based on survey, skill development, vocational training and livelihood support of ex-drug addicts through National Backward Classes Finance and other Development Corporations and continuous research on drug use pattern
- The ministry has also asked states and union territories to prepare action plan for ensuring facility of de-addiction centres in each district or as per prevalence of addiction and also establish separate and specialised de-addiction treatment centres.
- They have also been asked to ensure availability of treatment for drug dependents in prisons, juvenile homes and children homes and adopt approaches for education and prevention at all levels including schools and colleges
- India is vulnerable to drug trafficking as it is located between two largest opium producing regions of the world - the Golden Crescent in the west and Golden Triangle in the east. Drug trafficking and abuse pose serious threat to our societies and is matter of serious concern for all of us. It is expected that the National Action Plan with its multi dimensional approach will go a long way in curbing the demand and the overall menace.

International Forum For Advancing Global Collaboration In Homoeopathy

Syllabus: Issues relating to development and management of Social Sector/Services relating to Health, Education, Human Resources.

In News

- The World Integrated Medicine Forum on the regulation of Homoeopathic Medicinal Products with the theme 'Advancing Global Collaboration' was recently inaugurated today by the Ministry of AYUSH.
- The three-day forum was organised by Central Council for Research in Homeopathy (CCRH), with the support of Ministry of AYUSH, Homoeopathic Pharmacopoeia Convention of the United States (HPCUS) and European Coalition on Homeopathic & Anthroposophic Medicinal Products (ECHAMP), Pharmacopoeia Commission of Indian Medicine and Homoeopathy and Central Drugs Standard Control Organization (CDSCO).
- The forum being held for the second time serves as the only truly global platform in which the public and private sector can meet and exchange ideas on how to ensure and increase the availability of safe and effective homoeopathic medicines worldwide.
- More than a billion patients worldwide are demanding safe and effective medicines for their healthcare. As a result, the demand for Homoeopathy is growing. India is the fifth largest investor in scientific research in Homoeopathy in the world.

- There is still a highly disparate situation among countries with regard to the regulations of homoeopathic medicines and this directly affects the availability of these medicines.
- Apart from illustrating how homeopathy can be further regulated and integrated into the healthcare system in countries that have adopted the use of homoeopathy since long, the forum also brought countries to the table where homeopathy has only been recently introduced.
- Forum discussions primarily explored the commonalities as well as differences in regulatory affairs among various countries, discuss strategic regulatory and industry perspectives and possible scenarios in advancing international collaboration, ways to further enhance pharmaceutical quality standards, deliberate on integrating traditional medicine systems in primary healthcare and public health, bring forth the perspectives on setting appropriate requirements on various dimensions of drug approvals including veterinary medicine.

Digital Detox App

Syllabus: Issues relating to development and management of Social Sector/Services relating to Health, Education, Human Resources.

In News

- The **National Institute of Mental Health and Neuro Sciences (NIMHANS)** has come up with a mobile app that helps people reduce their mobile usage.
- Developed by the **Service for Healthy Use of Technology (SHUT) clinic it tracks one's pattern of mobile usage every week and offers self-help strategies.**
- The need for the clinic was felt after studies of internet use and its effect on communities pointed to a disturbing trend. In the four years since it was opened, the clinic has seen a steady increase in the number of patients showing signs of addiction to the internet, social media, gaming and pornography.
- In an increasingly digitised world, where people broadcast every aspect of their lives on social media, the need for validation in the real world has shifted to the virtual space.
- Studies show that there is **little difference in the impact of technology across classes.** Moreover, it has been **inducing increased levels of stress among all age groups** and with addicts preferring to concentrate on their social media and digital lives it **has had quite an effect on family cohesion and bonding.**
- According to the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI), there were 1.18 billion wireless subscribers in the country, as of March 2018 and there are 493 million internet or broadband subscribers in the country.
- A recent study by researchers from the Bocconi University in Italy and University of Pittsburgh in the US found that broadband internet usage led to a 25-minute decrease in sleep. To put this in perspective, research done in 2017 by the RAND Corporation found that decreased sleep results in efficiency losses and estimated that in Germany alone, 209,000 working days were lost as a result.
- The app asks users to specify their addiction-related symptoms, such as sleep disturbance, eye strain, loneliness, boredom, or excess Facebook usage. It also asks if their mobile usage affects their academics, work or interpersonal relationships, and has a feature where the user also has the option of sharing their progress with friends. It is built on the principle that technology de-addiction should be supportive, encouraging and fun.

- A pilot test of the app among 240 college students aged 18-25 found that **75.6% of the app's users changed their mobile use pattern and showed significant reduction in the time spent on technology.**

Grading Index To Assess States On Schooling System

Syllabus: Issues relating to development and management of Social Sector/Services relating to Health, Education, Human Resources.

In News

- The Ministry of Human Resource Development has introduced a **70-point grading index to assess the quality of school education offered by states.**
- The government will use the Index to **assess areas of deficiency in each state's school education system so that targeted interventions can be made at every level** from pedagogy to teacher training to ensure that the school education system is robust at every level.
- 35 states and Union Territories have already confirmed their participation to the Union HRD ministry which is compiling the index.
- The Index will **assess states on a 1,000 point grading system** with 10-20 points per parameter It will grade them on areas like number of existing teacher vacancies, number of direct entry recruitments especially at leadership positions, school infrastructure and so on.
- The government will also set up a separate kitty over and above existing funding mechanisms to help states take up improvement exercises.
- The Niti Aayog which was earlier developing its own School Education Quality Index will be using 33 of the 70 criteria under the index for their own assessments.
- The move is in keeping with the government's overall thrust on quality improvement, teacher training and learning outputs.
- Along with developing the index, the NCERT is helping the HRD ministry set up a Central institute of Assessment to strengthen Continuous and Comprehensive Education and handhold states in ensuring customised teacher training and work on pedagogical improvements.
- Further, the Mission to equip every school with a Digital Board is also on full throttle to provide e learning material in various languages.

Mohan Reddy Committee

Syllabus: Issues relating to development and management of Social Sector/Services relating to Health, Education, Human Resources.

In News

A government committee, headed by IIT-Hyderabad chairman B V R Mohan Reddy to review the status of technical education in the country has submitted its report and the suggestions are being considered by the technical education regulator.

The Current Mess

- Over the last couple of decades primarily in the post-liberalisation phase, India faced the challenge of meeting the fast-growing demand of skilled workforce emanating from various key sectors of the economy.

- In its effort to pave the path to increase the footprint of technical education, the government took the lead by setting up several technical institutions. The policy continued unabated for about two decades, bereft of any meaningful appraisal or evaluation at a suitable juncture, resulting in mushrooming of engineering institutions, thus requiring immediate corrective measures.
- Barring some top-notch institutions like the Indian Institutes of Technologies (IITs), most of these institutions are unable to realistically meet the standards of education currently demanded on the national or international level. This finally leaves the graduates not truly employable or job-ready and therefore without any suitable job at the end to their four-year course.
- In December 2017, it was found that there were no takers for 51 per cent of the 15.5 lakh B.E/B.Tech seats in 3,291 engineering colleges in 2016-17.
- There are glaring gaps in regulation, including alleged corruption, a vicious circle of poor infrastructure, labs and faculty, non-existent linkages with industry and the absence of a technical ecosystem to nurture the classroom. All of this accounts for low employability of graduates.
- Besides, recently in a glaring example depicting how the uncontrolled growth in the numbers of engineering colleges has pushed the borrowers to become defaulters, the Reserve Bank of India in its reports said that the total value of non-performing assets in education sectors has grown around 142 per cent between the period of March 2013 and December 2016 to around Rs 6,336 crores.

Suggestions

- With more than half the engineering seats falling vacant every year it has advised the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE) to **stop setting up new colleges from 2020 and review the creation of new capacity every two years after that.**
- It also suggests that **no additional seats should be approved in traditional engineering areas** such as mechanical, electrical, civil and electronics and that **institutes should be encouraged to convert current capacity in traditional disciplines to emerging new technologies.**
- This recommendation has been justified on the ground that current capacity utilisation in traditional disciplines is just 40% as opposed to 60% seat occupancy in branches such as computer science and engineering, aerospace engineering and mechatronics.
- For the same reason, the committee has urged the AICTE to introduce undergraduate engineering programmes exclusively for artificial intelligence, blockchain, robotics, quantum computing, data sciences, cybersecurity and 3D printing and design.
- It suggested that **concessions should be made for applications already in the pipeline.** These may be pending for want of some minor clearances. So, applications made in the current year and the past two years may be considered for starting institutions if the infrastructure is already in place.
- Sensing the gravity and long-term implications the government intervention in the form of establishing a panel may hopefully act as a stepping stone towards bringing about some long-pending reforms in the domain of technical education in India.

ASER 2018

Syllabus: Issues relating to development and management of Social Sector/Services relating to Health, Education, Human Resources.

In News

- The Annual Status of Education Report 2018 was recently released by the NGO Pratham.

- It is an annual survey that aims to provide reliable annual estimates of children's schooling status and basic learning levels for each state and rural district in India.
- ASER 2018 reached 596 districts in rural India. A total of 354,944 households and 546,527 children in the age group 3 to 16 were surveyed. As part of the ASER survey, one government school with primary sections is visited in each sampled village. Preference is given to a government upper primary school if one exists in the village.

Highlights Of The Report

- **Overall enrollment (age 6-14):** For more than ten years, since 2007, the enrollment of children for the age group 6 to 14 has been above 95%. The proportion of children who are not enrolled in school has fallen below 3% for the first time and stands at 2.8% in 2018.
- Further, ten years ago in 2008, nationally, more than 20% of girls in the 15 to 16 age group were not enrolled in school. In 2018, this figure has decreased to 13.5%.
- **Reading:** The ASER reading test assesses whether a child can read letters, words, a simple paragraph at Std I level of difficulty, or a 'story' at Std II level of difficulty.
- The percentage of all children in Std III who can read at Std II level has been climbing slowly over the past few years. This figure has increased from 21.6% in 2013 to 27.2% in 2018.
- Slightly more than half of all children enrolled in Std V can read at least a Std II level text. This figure has inched up from 47.9% in 2016 to 50.3% in 2018.
- By Std VIII, the last year of compulsory schooling in India, children are expected not only to have mastered foundational skills but to have proceeded well beyond the basic stage. The data indicates that of all children enrolled in Std VIII in India, about 73% can read at least a Std II level text. This number is unchanged from 2016.
- **Arithmetic:** The ASER arithmetic test assesses whether a child can recognize numbers from 1 to 9, recognize numbers from 10 to 99, do a 2-digit numerical subtraction problem with borrowing, or correctly solve a numerical division problem (3digit by 1-digit).
- Children in Std III who are able to do at least subtraction has not changed much, from 27.6% in 2016 to 28.1% in 2018. For government school children, this figure was 20.3% in 2016 and 20.9% in 2018.
- The proportion of children in Std V across India who are able to do division has inched up slightly, from 26% in 2016 to 27.8% in 2018.
- At the all India level, no major change is seen in students' and teachers' attendance. Average teacher attendance has hovered at around 85% and average student attendance at around 72% for the past several years in both primary and upper primary schools.
- This year, ASER introduced a series of questions on the availability of sports infrastructure in schools. In 2018, about 8 out of 10 schools had a playground available for students, either within the school premises or close by.
- Physical education teachers are scarce in schools across rural India. Only 5.8% of all primary schools and 30.8% of upper primary schools had a physical education teacher available.

Analysis

- The quality of education has a direct bearing on any economy. With some 240 million students or nearly 20% of the Indian population in school, their quality of learning or lack of it assumes significance for the competitiveness of the country and has an impact on the quality of life, efficiency at the workplace, and labour productivity issues.

- The report holds a mirror to a country that is aspiring to be a knowledge power. Like its previous editions, the report raises several worrying questions. It shows that poor learning outcomes remain the achilles' heel of the country's primary and secondary education system.
- This poor learning outcome in India is despite the Right to Education (RTE) Act having been in force since April 2010 making eight years of education compulsory for children and the centre floating schemes such as Padhe Bharat Badhe Bharat, apart from states' efforts.
- A quality deficit, that too for more than a decade, raises questions about the priorities of governments at the central and state levels.
- Last year, the World Bank said Indians born today are likely to be just 44% productive as workers, way below their Asian peers.
- However, a noteworthy aspect about these factoids is that government schools have been the harbinger of change. It's even more heartening that in this respect, states hitherto considered as outliers in educational accomplishment, Uttar Pradesh and Chhattisgarh for example, have not lagged behind the more advanced states like Kerala and Karnataka.

Way Ahead

- As the problem has now been diagnosed and public advocacy has got the momentum, the governments and civil society need to focus on three aspects—**a bigger spending on education, political willingness to improve education and a drastic change in the quality of teacher education.**
- The RTE Act empowering as it is, it needs a supportive framework to cater to learners from different backgrounds who often cannot rely on parental support or coaching.
- The centre should **institute a review mechanism involving all States for both government and private institutions, covering elementary education and middle school.**
- Teachers' efficiency will improve only with **administrative incentives, better pay and a systematic change in the professional development** of this cohort.

India To Participate In PISA 2021

Syllabus: Issues relating to development and management of Social Sector/Services relating to Health, Education, Human Resources.

In News

- India and OECD have signed an agreement to enable India's participation in the **triennial international survey** - Programme for International Students Assessment (PISA) to be held in 2021.
- Schools run by Kendriya Vidyalaya Sangathan (KVS), Navodaya Vidyalaya Samiti (NVS) and schools in the UT of Chandigarh will participate in it.
- Within the country (or specific geography to be covered in case of large countries), PISA covers a sample of 15-year-old students representing all forms of schooling i.e. public, private, private aided etc.
- More than 80 countries, including 44 middle-income countries, have participated in the assessment since the first round of testing in 2000.
- PISA is a **competency-based assessment which, unlike content-based assessment**, measures the extent to which students have acquired key competencies that are essential for full participation

in modern societies. Students are assessed in reading, mathematics, science and collaborative problem-solving.

- Participation in PISA **allows benchmarking performance against a wide range of countries**. PISA uses test items aligned with international benchmarks and the test items are adapted to the local context and language, pilot tested and validated.
- Learnings from participation in PISA will help to introduce competency based examination reforms in the school system and help move away from rote learning. The CBSE and NCERT will be part of the process and activities leading to the actual test.
- The participation would **indicate the health of the education system** and would motivate other schools /states in the subsequent cycles. It will **result in improvement in the learning levels of children, enhance the quality of education in the country and would lead to recognition and acceptability of Indian students** and prepare them for the global economy in the 21st century.

International Relations

Visit to Nepal and Bhutan Using Aadhaar Card

Syllabus: India and its neighbourhood- relations.

In News

- Indians under **15 and over 65 years** travelling to Nepal and Bhutan can use **Aadhaar card as valid travel document**.
- Indians other than those in the two age brackets will not be able to use Aadhaar to travel to the two neighbouring countries.
- Union Home Ministry has tweaked the travel document norms in this regard.

Key Facts

- India has an **open door policy** with Nepal and Bhutan. Indian citizens going to these countries do not need a visa if they have a valid photo identity card.
- **Earlier**, persons over 65 and under 15 could show their PAN card, driving licence, Central Government Health Service (CGHS) card or ration card, **but not the Aadhaar**, to prove their identity and visit the two countries.

Why Open Door Policy With these Countries

- It is due to the recognition of *shared history, culture and deep-rooted interpersonal ties*.
- **Indo-Nepal Treaty of Peace and Friendship 1950** allows free movement of people between these India and Nepal.
- Similarly, **1949 Treaty of Friendship between India and Bhutan** allows both the countries to do so.

Currency Swap Framework for SAARC Countries

Syllabus: India and its neighbourhood- relations.

In News

- The Union Cabinet has given ex-post facto (with retrospective force) approval for amendment to the **'Framework on Currency Swap Arrangement for SAARC Member Countries'**.
- This step resonates with India's Neighbourhood First Policy.

Key Highlights

- The amendment has incorporated a **stand-by facility of \$ 400 million to assist countries** like Sri Lanka and Maldives whose economies faced crisis by borrowing heavily from China.
- This 'Standby Swap' amounting to \$ 400 million will be operated **within the overall size of the Facility of \$ 2 billion.**
- The new facility would enable India to **provide a prompt response** to the current request from SAARC member countries for availing the swap amount exceeding the present limit prescribed under the SAARC Swap Framework.

Framework on Currency Swap Arrangement

- On March 1, 2012, Indian government had approved the Framework on Currency Swap Arrangement for SAARC Member Countries.
- The **aim** of this framework is to **provide a line of funding for short-term foreign exchange requirements** or to **meet balance of payments crises.**
- Under the Facility, RBI offers swaps of varying sizes in USD, Euro or INR to each SAARC member country depending on their two months import requirement and not exceeding US\$ 2 billion in total.
- The swap amount for each country has been defined in the above Facility, subject to a floor of USD 100 Million and a maximum of USD 400 Million.
- Each Drawal will be for three months tenor and upto maximum of two rollovers.

India Lets Pakistan Team Inspect Chenab Projects

Syllabus: India and its neighbourhood- relations.

In News

- A three-member Pakistan delegation visited India for inspection of projects in the Chenab basin.
- The visit is mandated by the **Indus Waters Treaty** to allow both sides to resolve issues related to hydroelectric projects.

Background

- Last year, during an official engagement between India and Pakistan the two sides had discussed ways to strengthen the role of the **Permanent Indus Commission (PIC)** for resolving matters under the 1960 treaty.
- As a result, India has finally agreed to Pakistan' request for inspection of Indian projects in Chenab basin.
- The two countries are currently involved in technical discussions on implementation of various hydroelectric projects including **Pakal Dul** (1,000 MW) and **Lower Kalnai** (48 MW) in the state of Jammu & Kashmir.

Provisions of IWT

- The Treaty was signed by former Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and General Ayub Khan on September 19, 1960, in Karachi.
- It covers the water distribution and sharing rights of six rivers – Beas, Ravi, Sutlej, Indus, Chenab and Jhelum. The agreement was brokered by the World Bank.
- The treaty gave the three "eastern rivers" of Beas, Ravi and Sutlej to India for use of water

without restriction.

- The three "western rivers" of Indus, Chenab and Jhelum were allocated exclusively to Pakistan
- New Delhi is under obligation to let the waters of the western rivers flow, except for certain consumptive use, with **Pakistan getting 80% of the entire water** of the six-river Indus system.
- The Indus Waters Treaty (IWT) reserved for India just remaining 19.48% of the total waters.
- India can construct storage facilities on western rivers of up to 3.6 million acre feet, which it has not done so far.
- The IWT **permits run of the river projects**. The treaty requires India to provide Pakistan **with prior notification, including design information, of any new project**.
- Under the treaty, in case the parties fail to resolve water disputes through bilateral means, the aggrieved party has the option **to invoke the jurisdiction of the ICA or the neutral expert under the auspices of the World Bank**.
- **IWT is considered as the world's most generous water-sharing treaty**. It is the only inter-country water agreement embodying **the doctrine of restricted sovereignty**, which compels the upstream nation to forego major uses of a river system for the benefit of the downstream state.

Macedonia Renamed as the Republic of North Macedonia

Syllabus: Effect of policies and politics of developed and developing countries on India's interests

In News

- The parliamentarians of the Republic of Macedonia voted to change their country's name to the "Republic of North Macedonia".
- This is very significant move given the longstanding dispute between FYR Macedonia and Greece.
- The change of name, if cleared by Greece, would pave the way for the small republic to enter NATO and the European Union.



Dispute between Macedonia and Greece

- Macedonia broke away from the former Yugoslavia in 1991 and declared independence.
- It measures a little over 25,000 sq km, and has a population just over 2 million.
- Neighbouring Greece has objected to its name all through, suggesting it implied the Macedonian republic's territorial aspirations over the northern region of Greece.
- For the Greeks, Macedonia is significant as the cradle of Alexander the Great's empire.
- Insisting that the name apply only to the Greek region, the Greeks have been blocking the Macedonian republic's entry to NATO and EU membership.

Asia Reassurance Initiative Act

Syllabus: Effect of policies and politics of developed and developing countries on India's interests

In News

- U.S. President Donald Trump has signed into law the **Asia Reassurance Initiative Act (ARIA)**.

- This act was passed by the U.S. Senate earlier in December 2018.

Key Highlights

- This act tries to **establish a multifaceted U.S. strategy** in order to increase U.S. security, economic interests, and values in the **Indo-Pacific region**.
- It will authorize **\$1.5 billion in spending** every year for the next five years for a range of U.S. programs in **East and Southeast Asia**.
- ARIA draws attention to U.S. relations with *China, India, the ten member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and Northeast Asian allies Japan and South Korea*.
- The act also addresses **U.S. policy toward North Korea**. It authorizes the **U.S. Secretary of State**, in conjunction with the **Secretary of the Treasury**, to **terminate** U.S. support for any United Nations Security Council resolutions sanctioning North Korea or **to lift** any unilateral U.S. sanctions on North Korea.
- The act reasserts **U.S. support for Taiwan** and calls on the president of the United States to **“encourage the travel of high level United States officials to Taiwan**, in accordance with the Taiwan Travel Act,” which was made law in 2018.
- The act also devotes attention to the **maritime commons in the Asia and the South China Sea**.
- In this regard, it calls on the **United States to support the ASEAN nations** as they adopt a code of conduct in the South China Sea with China.
- The act urges U.S. President to develop a **Diplomatic Strategy**. This strategy should include **joint maritime training and freedom of navigation operations** in the Indo-Pacific region, including the East China Sea and the South China Sea.

Analysis

- ARIA is very broad, covering relations with countries and regions from India to ASEAN, to the Korean peninsula and Japan, and support for issues from democracy to cyber security to maritime security.
- Through this act, USA has sent a clear signal to Asia that the United States will remain an effective, respectful ally and partner in Indo-Pacific region.
- It has shown its commitment to a **“free and open Indo-Pacific region and the rules-based international order**.
- Five-year funding programme would help **U.S’ regional diplomacy** at a time when many South East Asian countries have urged for greater engagement.
- Mentioning of Taiwan, South China Sea can be viewed in the context of the **US’ mounting strategic competition with China**.

Significance For India

- India has been **accorded special importance** under the Act, which reiterates India’s significance in the U.S. strategy in the region.
- The Act notes India as a **Major Defense Partner**, a “unique” status for India, which would ease defense trade and sharing of technology, including “license-free access to a wide range of dual-use technologies”.
- It will also promote **greater coordination** on security policies and strategies and increased military-to-military engagements.

- Although, ARIA welcomes a continued close relationship with India, but it is **mostly symbolic in nature**.
- It **does not initiate notable new projects** with the United States' largest democratic partner.
- The Act also talks about **countering China's coercive economic policies**, but India would be interested in seeing whether this will provide any help to **India's neighbors in escaping China's debt grasp**.

Brexit Deal Rejected

Syllabus: Effect of policies and politics of developed and developing countries on India's interests

In News

- Britain's parliament has **rejected Prime Minister Theresa May's Brexit deal**.
- This has potential to trigger political chaos that could lead to a **disorderly exit** from the EU or **even to a reversal** of the 2016 decision to leave.

Key Highlights

- May's plan for Brexit came up for a vote in parliament recently, and it was roundly defeated with 432 against and only 202 in favor.
- This has been the worst defeat that any government has ever suffered in British history.
- If the government is *unable to get a Brexit bill passed by March 29*, the **UK will leave the EU without a deal in place**, with the promise of even greater chaos.

Why The Deal Has Been Rejected

- The Brexit deal was doomed by **deep opposition from both sides** of the divide over UK's place in the bloc.
- Pro-Brexit lawmakers contended that the current deal **will leave Britain bound indefinitely to EU rules**.
- On the other hand, pro-EU politicians wanted an **even closer economic relationship** with Europe which was not ensured in the current deal.
- The most contentious section of the deal is an insurance policy known as the "**backstop**". The hard Brexiteers insist this provision to be time-limited.
- Backstop is designed to prevent the reintroduction of border controls between the UK's Northern Ireland and EU member Ireland.

Backstop Provision: In Brief

- The backstop plan is essentially a safety net if there is no Brexit trade deal.
- It would avoid a hard border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.
- At present, goods and services are traded between the two jurisdictions on the island of Ireland with few restrictions.
- The UK and Ireland are currently part of the EU single market and customs union, so products do not need to be inspected for customs and standards.
- But, after Brexit, all that could change - the two parts of Ireland could be in different customs and regulatory regimes, which could mean products being checked at the border.

What Happens Next

- There are a number of possible scenarios which includes:
 - **No deal** - The UK could head towards a **'no deal' Brexit**. Without plans in place, border checks could be re-imposed.
 - Some people say that 'no deal' is the best thing for Britain as it means **Britain will be completely free to build new relationships** around the world and would mean the UK **wouldn't have to pay any more money to the EU**.
 - **New deal** - This approach would involve the government going back to EU leaders to renegotiate the current deal.
 - There isn't really very much time left to do this though, unless the government asks for Brexit to be delayed.
- March 29 is the date set in law for Brexit.
- With the rejected deal, the United Kingdom is now ensnared in the deepest political crisis in half a century as it grapples with how, or even whether, to exit the European project that it joined in 1973.

About BREXIT

- In the summer of 2016, through a referendum Britain decided to leave European Union.
- Britain joined the **European Community in 1973**. This was the **second referendum** on Britain's relationship with the European integration project.
- Labour Prime Minister Harold Wilson had the first referendum on Britain's membership in 1975 in which 66% people voted to stay in the European Community.

Ballistic Missile Program In Saudi Arabia

Syllabus: Effect of policies and politics of developed and developing countries on India's interests

In News

- Experts and satellite images suggest that Saudi Arabia appears to be testing and possibly manufacturing ballistic missiles.
- Ballistic missiles can carry nuclear warheads to targets thousands of kilometers (miles) away.

Key Highlights

- The satellite images, which focus on a military base near the town of al-Dawadmi (some 230 kilometers west of Riyadh, the Saudi capital) suggests two launch pads.
- These pads appear oriented to **target Israel and Iran**.
- Satellite images also show what appear to be structures big enough to build and fuel ballistic missiles.

Where Saudi Arabia Gained The Technical Know-How To Build Such A Facility?

- Analysts contend that the Saudi facility closely resembles a design used by China, though it is smaller.
- They contend that Chinese military support to the kingdom would not come as a surprise.
- The Chinese have increasingly sold **armed drones to Saudi Arabia** and other Mideast nations, even as the U.S. blocks sales of its own to allies over proliferation concerns.
- Beijing also sold Riyadh **variants of its Dongfeng ballistic missiles**, the only ones the kingdom was previously believed to have in its arsenal.

Why Saudi Is Keen To Develop Ballistic Missile?

- Iran, which is the rival to the Saudi Arabia in the region, has its own ballistic missile programme.
- Saudis rely heavily on **direct American support**. There is no absolute guarantee that U.S. forces and supporting functions will aid a Saudi attack on Iranian targets.
- Saudi Arabia, meanwhile, has been targeted by ballistic missiles (*possibly supplied by Iran*) fired from neighboring Yemen by the Houthi rebels.

Analysis

- Having such a program could further strain relations with the U.S., the kingdom's longtime security partner.
- That too at a time when ties already are being tested by the **killing of Washington Post columnist Jamal Khashoggi** and the **Saudi-led war in Yemen**.
- It would start an arm race in the middle east leading to further destabilization.
- Neither Saudi Arabia nor China are members of the Missile Technology Control Regime.
- MTCR is aimed at limiting the proliferation of rockets capable of carrying weapons of mass destruction, such as nuclear bombs.

China Passes Law to Make Islam Compatible with Socialism

Syllabus: Effect of policies and politics of developed and developing countries on India's interests

In News

- China has passed a new law that **seeks to Sinicize** (Sinicize - to make Chinese in character or form) **Islam** within the next five years.
- This is the latest move by Beijing to rewrite how religion is practised in the country.
- The Chinese government officials held talks with eight Islamic associations and came to a consensus over the need to "**guide Islam to be compatible with socialism and implement measures to Sinicize the religion.**"

Why This New Law

- Rights groups have accused China of engaging in a campaign of ethnic cleansing.
- Practising Islam has been made forbidden in parts of China.
- Individuals caught praying, fasting, growing a beard or wearing a hijab, a headscarf worn by Muslim women, face the threat of arrest.
- According to the UN, more than one million Uighur Muslims are estimated to be held in internment camps.
- In these camps, they are forced to denounce the religion and pledge allegiance to the officially atheist ruling Communist Party.
- Growing criticism has forced China to Sinicize the Islam whose main purpose is to seek **Islam governance that tallies with Chinese practice**.

Visit of Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Kyrgyz Republic

Syllabus: Effect of policies and politics of developed and developing countries on India's interests

In News

- Foreign Minister of the Kyrgyz Republic, Mr. Chingiz Azamatovich Aidaibekov, visited India on 27-31 January.
- It was his first ever official visit to India.

Why This Visit Is Important

- Kyrgyzstan is putting efforts to *liberalize its economy, create business friendly conditions and attract foreign investment* and India can be a reliable **partner in this regard**.
- This visit is also significant against the backdrop of **newly launched initiative of the India-Central Asia Dialogue** at the level of Foreign Ministers.
- Both the countries are **member of SCO** as well.
- More than **9000 Indian students** are present in various Kyrgyz educational institutions.

India-Central Asia Dialogue

Syllabus: Effect of policies and politics of developed and developing countries on India's interests

In News

- The **First India-Central Asia Dialogue** at the level of Foreign Ministers was held in Samarkand, Uzbekistan on 12-13 January 2019.
- Foreign Ministers of the **Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan** and the First Deputy Foreign Minister of **Kazakhstan** represented their respective countries.
- The Foreign Minister of Afghanistan participated in the Dialogue **as a special invitee** for the Session **dedicated to connectivity issues in the region**.

Key Highlights

- The dialogue was aimed at *increasing cooperation, mutual support, joint solution on relevant issues in order to ensure security, stability and sustainable development*.
- In this context, the participants of the meeting welcomed the successful holding of the **First Working (Consultative) Meeting of the Heads of States of Central Asia**, held on March 15, 2018 in Astana.
- Participating leaders discussed a **wide range of issues**, which included – Terrorism, importance of developing and implementing projects, economic cooperation and ensuring favorable conditions for mutual free trade.
- The Ministers stressed the importance of holding industry-specific business forums and other mutual business events on a regular basis.
- They paid particular attention to the **implementation of joint youth projects** in the field of culture, science and education, sports, including in framework of the implementation of the **UN General Assembly Resolution on Education and religious tolerance**.
- The ministers also confirmed their willingness to cooperate in preparation for the **Eighth Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan (RECCA VIII)** in Tashkent in the second half of 2019.

- **Development Partnership** has been the **central component** of India's engagement with other countries.
- In this context, India has proposed the setting up of the "**India-Central Asia Development Group**" to take forward this development partnership between India and Central Asian countries.
- Indian Minister also invited **Central Asian Countries to participate in Chabahar Port** being developed by India.
- In order to facilitate leading business chambers to engage with each other in a structured manner, India proposed the setting up of the "**India-Central Asia Business Council**".
- **Indian side proposed that** it would like to **offer the model of Amrit pharmacies** (Amrit pharmacies sell generic drugs in India) which could be established in the Central Asian countries for public health.
- The Participants agreed to continue holding the "**India – Central Asia**" Dialogue with participation of Afghanistan at the level of Foreign Ministers on a regular basis and agreed to meet in this format in **New Delhi in 2020**.

*[Please refer the topic “ **Visit of Indian External Affairs Minister to Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan**” from August 2018 issue of CA magazine for analysis on importance of Central Asia for India]*

Currency Swap Agreement with Japan

Syllabus: Effect of policies and politics of developed and developing countries on India's interests

In News

- The Union Cabinet has **approved a proposal for a USD 75-billion bilateral swap** arrangement between India and Japan.
- During his visit to Japan in October 2018, Indian Prime Minister had inked a deal for a bilateral currency swap arrangement.

*[For detail regarding this visit, please refer the topic “**Visit of Indian Prime Minister to Japan**” from October 2018 issue of CA magazine]*

- While India has such arrangements with many Asian nations, this **was among the largest of such deals, valued at \$75 billion**.

Key Highlights

- The swap involves **US Dollar** besides **Japanese Yen** and **Indian Rupee**.
- The Bank of Japan (Japanese central bank) will **accept rupees** and **give dollars** to the RBI and, similarly, the RBI will **take the yen** and **give dollars** to the Bank of Japan to stabilize each other's currency.
- The Japanese Yen is **one of the five currencies** included in the IMF's SDR basket and is counted as **global hard currency**.
- Hence, this agreement seems to be **exchange of reserve currency for non-reserve currency** (rupee).

What is Currency Swap Agreement

- A currency swap between two countries is an **agreement or contract to exchange** currencies (of the two countries or any hard currency) with predetermined terms and conditions.

- In such agreement the central banks of the two countries remain involved.
- In this case, RBI will get a certain amount of yen and the Bank of Japan will get an equivalent amount in Indian rupees. The rate will be decided on the basis of prevailing market rates.
- Later, both of the countries will repay the amount at the same exchange rate. In return, there will be a swap rate to be decided by the two countries. Normally, they will be linked to London inter-bank rate, called Libor.
- In other words, a bilateral currency swap is an **open-ended credit line** from one country to another at a **fixed exchange rate**.
- The country which avails itself of this loan **pays interest to the country** which provides it, at a **benchmark interest rate** such as the Libor (London Inter-bank rate).

Benefits Of This Agreement

- **Stabilisation of rupees** - In recent times, the **rupee has been falling against the dollar** because of its widening current account deficit.
- In this context, swap arrangement with Japan provides considerable comfort to India as Japan is the **second largest holder of dollar reserves** in the world. India can make use of such a loan at rock-bottom interest rates to stabilize the rupee.
- **Ensures Liquidity** - Currency swaps ensure adequate foreign currency during the time of foreign currency scarcity.
- It also helps the involved governments to fulfill supplementary objectives like **promotion of bilateral trade, maintaining the value of foreign exchange reserves** with the central bank and ensuring **financial stability**.

State Visit of President of South Africa to India

Syllabus: Effect of policies and politics of developed and developing countries on India's interests

In News

- President of South Africa, Mr. Cyril Ramaphosa, undertook a State Visit to India on 25-26 January 2019
- He was the **State Guest of Honour** for Republic Day 2019.
- This was the **first visit to India** by President Ramaphosa as Head of State.
- He is the **second President of South Africa after President Nelson Mandela** to be the Chief Guest at the Republic Day.

Key Highlights

- President Ramaphosa and Prime Minister Modi jointly addressed the **India-South Africa Business Forum**, with a focus to grow business ties between the two countries.
- President Ramaphosa also delivered the **inaugural IBSA Gandhi-Mandela Freedom Lecture**.
- A **Three-Year Strategic Programme of Cooperation** (2019-2021) was signed by the two sides. This is aimed at **further enhancing the strategic partnership** between the two countries.
- The Strategic Partnership between India and South Africa was established through the **Red Fort Declaration of March 1997** and the **Tshwane Declaration of October 2006**.
- Both leaders agreed that the **10th Session of the India-South Africa Joint Ministerial Commission** will be held in 2019 in New Delhi led by the Foreign Ministers of both the countries.

- **2 MoUs** were between Research & Information System for Developing Countries (a leading policy research institute of India) based in Delhi with two premier South African think tanks, namely, the Institute for Global Dialogue in Pretoria and South Africa Institute for International Affairs in Johannesburg.
- The three research institutions would carry forward work **under track 1.5**.
- They will also focus on areas to further promote practical cooperation with Africa identified in **Delhi Declaration 2015** at the end of **3rd India Africa Forum Summit**.
- SA welcomed the setting up of the "**Gandhi – Mandela Centre of Specialization for Artisan Skills**" in South Africa with Indian assistance.
- Both sides acknowledged the holding of the **first India-South Africa Business Summit in South Africa in April 2018** and the **Invest in India Business Forum in November 2018**.
- They welcomed the holding of the inaugural meeting of the **Joint Working Group on Trade and Investment (JWGTI)**.
- Indian PM welcomed the participation of the **South African National Defence Force** in the **First Multinational India-Africa Field Training Exercise (IAFTX)**. It will be held in March 2019 at Pune, India.

India – South Africa: In Brief

- India and South Africa enjoy a close and multifaceted **strategic partnership since 1997**, which is underpinned by historic, cultural and economic linkages.
- Several high-level visits have been exchanged in the recent past, including visit of Prime Minister for the BRICS Summit in Johannesburg.
- About **1.5 million Indian Origin People** live in South Africa and form an enduring link.
- Over 150 Indian companies have invested in South Africa employing over 20,000 locals.
- India is among the top five trading partners of South Africa. The **bilateral trade has increased to US \$ 10.65 billion** in 2018-19 from US \$ 9.38 billion in 2017-18.
- Both countries have close cooperation in the areas of vocational training, capacity building etc.
- South Africa was also a **partner country** at the **Vibrant Gujarat 2019** where we also had for the first time an '**Africa Day**.'
- Both countries share a common vision on a range of global issues and closely **cooperate in various multilateral fora**: UN, BRICS, G-20, Commonwealth, IORA and the IBSA.

State Visit of Prime Minister of Norway to India

Syllabus: Effect of policies and politics of developed and developing countries on India's interests

In News

- Prime Minister of Norway, Ms. Erna Solberg paid a State visit to India from 7-9 January, 2019.
- India and Norway enjoy close and multifaceted ties. Economic and technical cooperation are important facets of our bilateral relation.
- More than 100 Norwegian companies have invested in India in areas such as ship-building, petroleum related services, hydropower, clean energy and IT services.

Key Highlights

- The two sides signed **Terms of Reference for the establishment of the Dialogue on Trade and Investment**.
- This would give impetus to business cooperation and encourage participation of Norwegian companies in the flagship programmes of India.
- Both sides have signed the **MoU on India-Norway Ocean Dialogue** and the **establishment of the Joint Task Force** on Blue Economy under aegis of the MoU.
- It will promote multi-sectoral cooperation in various aspects of Blue Economy including sustainable use of the oceans, food security, energy sources, mineral exploration.
- The two leaders applauded the commendable achievements in **maternal and child health care** through the **Norway-India Partnership Initiative (NIPI)** and desired to expand its scope.
- The two sides agreed for collaboration and joint research in climate change. In this context, India invited Norway to participate in the International Solar Alliance.

Pravasi Bharatiya Divas 2019

Syllabus: Indian diaspora.

In News

- 15th Pravasi Bharatiya Divas was celebrated from 21-23 January, 2019 at Varanasi.
- This is the first time that the event was held in Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh.
- 14th PBD was held during 7–9 January 2017 at Bengaluru, Karnataka.

Key Highlights

- The theme 15th Pravasi Bharatiya Divas - '**Role of Indian Diaspora in building New India**'.
- The **Prime Minister of Mauritius**, Mr. Pravind Jugnauth, was the **Chief Guest** of PBD 2019.
- **Mr. Himanshu Gulati**, Member of Parliament of Norway, was the **Special Guest** while **Mr. Kanwaljit Singh Bakshi**, Member of Parliament of New Zealand was the **Guest of Honor** at the 15th edition of PBD.
- The event was jointly organised by the Union Ministry of External Affairs in association with the Uttar Pradesh government.

Why Change of Date

- Each year PBD was celebrated during 7-9 January.
- However, in reverence to the **sentiments of the larger diaspora to participate in Kumbh Mela and Republic Day celebrations**, the 15th PBD Convention was organised from 21 to 23 January 2019 instead of 9th January.

About Pravasi Bharatiya Diwas

- The decision to celebrate Pravasi Bharatiya Diwas (PBD) was taken by the former Indian Prime Minister, late Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee.
- The 1st PBD was celebrated on 9th January, 2003 in New Delhi.
- **January 9** was chosen as the day to celebrate PBD as it was on this day in 1915 that Mahatma Gandhi, had returned to India from South Africa.
- PBD now celebrated **once in every two years**, provides a platform to the overseas Indian community to engage with the government and reconnect with their roots.

- During the Convention, Pravasi Bharatiya Samman is conferred on the selected overseas Indians for their significant contributions to various fields both in India and abroad.
- These conventions provide a platform to the overseas Indian community to engage with the government and people of the land of their ancestors for mutually beneficial activities.
- These conventions are also very useful in networking among the overseas Indian community residing in various parts of the world and enable them to share their experiences in various fields.

Pravasi Dividend Pension Scheme

Syllabus: Indian diaspora.

In News

- The Kerala government has approved a dividend pension scheme for its diaspora returnees.
- Under the scheme, regular pension will be given to Non Resident Keralites on a one-time payment of Rs 5 lakh.
- The one-time payment of Rs 5 lakh will be deposited with KIIFB (Kerala Infrastructure Investment Fund Board) for financing infrastructure projects.
- Apart from sparing the state government the **financial burden** of the pension plan, the scheme **targets to channelise these NRI deposits** for developmental projects through the KIIFB and other agencies.

Pravasi Teerth Darshan Yojana

Syllabus: Indian diaspora.

In News

- Prime Minister Narendra Modi recently launched the Pravasi Teerth Darshan Yojana under which a group of Indian diaspora will be taken on a government-sponsored tour of religious places in India twice a year.
- They will be taken to religious places of all major religions in India and the government will bear all the expenses including the airfare from their country of residence.
- All people of Indian-origin aged 45 to 65 can apply and a group will be selected out of them with first preference given to people from 'Girmitiya countries' such as Mauritius, Fiji, Suriname, Guyana, Trinidad and Tobago, and Jamaica.

Girmitiyas

- Girmitiyas or Jahajis are descendants of indentured Indian labourers brought to Fiji, Mauritius, South Africa, East Africa, the Malay Peninsula, Caribbean and South America (Trinidad and Tobago, Guyana and Suriname) to work on sugarcane plantations for the prosperity of the European settlers and save the Fijians from having to work on these plantations and thus to preserve their culture.
- Agreement is the term that has been coined into "Girmit", referring to the "Agreement" of the British Government with the Indian labourers.
- The term Girmitiya was coined by Mahatma Gandhi.

Bill to Remove Pakistan as Major non-NATO Ally

Syllabus: Bilateral, regional and global groupings and agreements.

In News

US lawmaker has introduced legislation in Congress to terminate the designation of Pakistan as a major non-NATO ally.

Key Highlights

- The bill states that for future redesignation, the US President needs to certify to the Congress that Pakistan continues to conduct military operations that are contributing to significantly disrupting the Haqqani Network in the country.
- It also seeks certification from the Congress that Pakistan has taken steps in this regard.
- Also, according to the bill, the US congress will need to certify that Pakistan is actively coordinating with the Government of Afghanistan to restrict the movement of militants, along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border.

About NATO

- Formed in 1949 with the signing of the **Washington Treaty**, NATO is a security alliance of 29 countries from North America and Europe.
- Montenegro is the 29th country to join the alliance in 2017.
- NATO's fundamental goal is to safeguard the Allies' freedom and security by political and military means.
- In addition to its traditional role in the territorial defense of Allied nations, NATO leads the UN-mandated International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan and has ongoing missions in the Balkans and the Mediterranean.
- **Major non-NATO ally (MNNA)** is a designation given by the United States government to close allies that have strategic working relationships with the US Armed Forces. These are not members of the NATO.
- Although this designation does not automatically include a mutual defence pact with US, it provides a variety of military and financial advantages otherwise unavailable to no-NATO countries.

Guatemala Withdraws From The CICIG Agreement With The United Nations

Syllabus: Bilateral, regional and global groupings and agreements.

In News

- The government of Guatemala has unilaterally terminated the **2006 Agreement with the UN** establishing the **International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG)**.
- Under the agreement, the mandate of the Commission was scheduled to end on 3 September 2019.

Reason For This Step

- The government of Guatemalan has accused the CICIG of polarising the country and putting its security at risk.
- It further accused the CICIG of violating human rights and being allied with criminal structures and "terrorists".

- However, many analysts believe that the step has been taken as the commission was investigating Guatemala's business and political elite, including current President Jimmy Morales and his family.

About CICIG

- The CICIG was formed in 2006 upon the request of the Guatemalan government to combat high rates of impunity for crimes.
- It was ratified by the country's legislative branch in 2007 following a massive police scandal.
- The commission's 2015 corruption investigation in the administration of Otto Perez Molina led to the resignation of the former president, who is currently facing criminal charges.

Henley Passport Index

Syllabus: Important International institutions, agencies and fora- their structure, mandate.

In News

- The Henley Passport Index 2019 has been released by Henley & Partners' Group.
- **India** has jumped two positions from 81st in 2018 to **79th in 2019**.

Highlights

- This year's index highlights the general spread of open-door policies, which is a bright spot in an increasingly isolationist world.
- Japan has **retained its top spot** as the world's most travel-friendly passport. It is due to the document's hassle free access to 190 countries.
- **Top five countries** in the index are – Japan (1), Singapore and South Korea (2), France and Germany (3), Denmark, Finland, Italy, Sweden (4), Luxembourg and Spain (5).
- **Bottom five countries** are - Eritrea (99), Yemen (100), Pakistan (102), Somalia, Syria (103) and Afghanistan, Iraq (104).
- China jumped almost 20 places in just two years, from 85th in 2017 to **69th this year**.

Why Indian Passport Ranks Low In The Index

- **General restrictions** by other countries owing to **large Indian population with a history of immigration**.
- **Reciprocity** is also one of the reason as India places visa restrictions on Americans and other European countries.
- **Unfriendly neighbourhood** also forces India to close its doors for the purpose of internal security.
- One should keep in mind that poor rank in the index **does not mean economic backwardness or reputation**. It is simply reflective of the **visa policies adopted by other countries towards that particular country**.

About Henley Passport Index:

- The Henley Passport Index is the measure of global access. Besides providing a simple ranking of passports, it also provides an in-depth picture of travel freedom.
- It also helps us find the answers of questions such as:
 - Which countries one can access with which type of visa,
 - How one's passport has changed over the last 14 years

- How one passport compares to other passports,
- Which additional passports would improve your mobility.
- It is the only passport index that is based on International Air Transport Authority (IATA) data. The index includes 199 different passports and 227 different travel destinations.
- It is updated in real time throughout the year, as and when visa policy changes come into effect.

Future of Consumption in Fast-Growth Consumer Market – India

Syllabus: Important International institutions, agencies and fora- their structure, mandate.

In News

- **World Economic Forum (WEF)** has released a report titled '**Future of Consumption in Fast-Growth Consumer Market – India**'.
- It lays out seven critical predictions on a vision for consumption in India in 2030 and lays out a call-to-action for multi-stakeholder collaborations to build an inclusive future for India.

Key Highlights Of The Report

- The vision for the future of consumption in India is **anchored in the growth of the upper-middle income and high income segments**.
- This segment will grow from being **one in four households today**, to **one in two households by 2030**.
- India is expected to emerge as the **third-largest consumer market**, just behind the US and China by 2030.
- Consumer spending in India is expected to grow from 1.5 trillion US dollar at present to six trillion US dollar by 2030.
- Rising income in India will transform the nature of economy. It will ensure a transition from **bottom of the pyramid economy** (refers to the poorest two-thirds of the economic human pyramid) to **middle class-led economy**.
- The growth in the middle class will lift approximately 25 million households out of poverty.
- **Drivers of future consumption in India** - Income growth, Steady and dispersed urbanization, Favourable demographics, Technology and innovation, Evolving consumer attitudes.
- The future consumption growth is expected to come mainly from **rich and densely populated cities** and the thousands of **developed rural towns across** the country.
- However, to ensure a positive future of consumption for all India **will have to overcome many critical challenges**.
- These **challenges include** - *socio-economic inclusion of rural India, skills development and employment of the future workforce, and creating a healthy and sustainable future for its citizens.*

Way Forward To Unlock The Potential

- Unlock consumption through inclusion – voice, video, vernacular and “mobile-first” opportunities
- Innovate for India
- Build transparent, uniform customer experiences
- Embrace partnerships to adapt to value migration
- Ensure agile and entrepreneurial decision-making

Peculiar Structural Strengths of Indian Economy:

- **Domestic consumption driven economy** - Nearly 60% of India's GDP is driven by domestic private consumption, as compared to 40% in China.
- **Healthy savings** - India's households have maintained a high savings share of their income at 22%
- **Working age majority** - With a median age of 28 years, It will continue to remain young up to 2030 with a median age of 31 years

Commonwealth Secretariat Arbitrary Tribunal

Syllabus: Important International institutions, agencies and fora- their structure, mandate.

In News

- **Justice A.K. Sikri**, the Supreme Court judge, has **turned down** an offer from the government to **nominate him to the Commonwealth Secretariat Arbitrary Tribunal (CSAT)**.
- Currently, Justice Sikri is the **second senior-most judge** after the Chief Justice of India.
- The job required attending two to three hearing per year and came without emoluments.

About CSAT

- The **London based CSAT** was established to meet the requirements of the **Agreed Memorandum on the Commonwealth Secretariat (1964)**.
- In keeping with the requirements of the Agreed Memorandum, every contract entered into by or on behalf of the Commonwealth Secretariat contains a provision for any dispute arising out of any such contract to be submitted to the CSAT for settlement.
- The statute of the CSAT was adopted first by Commonwealth governments in 1995.
- It requires the **eight-member CSAT** to comprise Commonwealth nationals of **"high moral character"** who had held **"high judicial office** in a Commonwealth country" or jurists of recognised competence **with not less than 10 years' experience**.
- Their **tenure is four years** with room for one additional term.
- The judgment of the Tribunal is **final and binding** on the parties and is **not subject to appeal**.

Global Solar Council

Syllabus: Important International institutions, agencies and fora- their structure, mandate.

In News

- **Shri Pranav R Mehta**, has taken over as the **president of Global Solar Council (GSC)** from January 1, 2019.
- Earlier, he was the chairman of **National Solar Energy Federation**.

About Global Solar Council

- The Global Solar Council (GSC) was launched in December 2015, following the historic United Nations Climate Change Conference (**UN COP 21**).
- It is an international non-profit association of the national, regional and international associations in solar energy and the world's leading corporations.

- It is headquartered in **Washington D.C. USA**.
- It offers programs in regulatory policy, trade policy, new market opening and jobs & skills training.

About National Solar Energy Federation

- **National Solar Energy Federation of India (NSEFI)** is an umbrella organization of all solar energy stakeholders of India.
- NSEFI Covers all activities: Solar PV, solar thermal (Both Small and big) off-grid, Rooftop solar etc.
- It continuously works towards an avowed **goal of Making Solar Energy Affordable for all**.

First-Ever World Braille Day

Syllabus: Important International institutions, agencies and fora- their structure, mandate.

In News

- The United Nations has observed the **first official** World Braille Day on January 4, 2019.
- Approximately 1.3 billion people are living with some form of distance or near vision impairment. Hence, this step was taken to **raise awareness of the importance of Braille**.
- Braille provides a **tactical representation of alphabetic and numerical symbols** so blind and partially-sighted people are able to read the same books and periodicals printed as are available in standard text form.
- **Six dots** represent each letter, number, even musical and mathematical symbols, to allow the communication of important written information to ensure competency, independence and equality.
- During the general assembly held in November 2018, it was decided to observe world Braille Day on January 4 every year.
- January 4 is the **birthday of Louis Braille** who is credited for inventing the Braille script.

International Year of the Periodic Table

Syllabus: Important International institutions, agencies and fora- their structure, mandate.

In News

- The United Nations has announced **2019 as the International Year of the Periodic Table of the Chemical Elements**.
- The rationale behind this step is to celebrate **150th anniversary** of the first publication of the periodic table.
- UNESCO would organize events to celebrate this occasion.

Key Facts

- The periodic table was first designed by the Russian scientist **Dmitri Ivanovich Mendeleev**.
- Periodic table organizes all chemical elements by the **number of protons** in a given atom and other properties. First such table was **published in 1869**.
- Mendeleev's genius lies in the acknowledgement that at the time, not all the elements were known yet, so he left gaps in the table for undiscovered elements. At that time, only **63 elements had** been identified.
- The discovery of some of these elements in the following years confirmed Mendeleev's predictions.

- **Fifty five elements** have been discovered since Mendeleev's first scheme.
- They were all incorporated to the existing classification according to their atomic mass, having the properties foreseen by the uncomplete table.
- **Element 101** was named **mendelevium to honour Mendeleev's contributions**.
- With the addition of **nihonium, moscovium, tennessine and oganesson**, the periodic table is now complete.

Previous Efforts

- As early as 1789, **Antoine Lavoisier** established a list of 33 elements and tried to classify them according to their properties.
- Scientists like **Alexandre-Émile Béguyer de Chancourtois, John Newlands** and **Julius Lothar Meyer** each proposed a different way to arrange the elements.
- A helix, chart, cylinder and even a spiral were proposed to visualise the arrangement of the elements, but none seemed to be a perfect fit.

About UNESCO

- UNESCO is the **United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization**.
- It is a **specialized agency** of UN.
- It seeks to build peace through international cooperation in Education, the Sciences and Culture.
- It is headquartered at Paris, France.

National Statistical Commission

Syllabus: Important International institutions, agencies and fora- their structure, mandate.

In News

The two remaining non-government members of the National Statistical Commission (NSC) have quit the organization.

Key Highlights

- P C Mohanan, who was serving as chairman of NSC, and Delhi School of Economics professor JV Meenakshi has resigned from NSC.
- They resigned over lack involvement in key decisions.
- These decisions included the recently-released gross domestic product (GDP) back series, launch of the new economic census and delay in publishing the employment-unemployment report for 2016-17 despite its approval.
- With this, the NSC has only **two members left**, Niti Aayog CEO **Amitabh Kant** and chief statistician, **Pravin Srivastava**.

About National Statistical Commission

- The Government of India through a resolution in June 2005 set up the National Statistical Commission (NSC).
- The setting up of the NSC followed the decision of the Cabinet to accept the **recommendations of the Rangarajan Commission**, which reviewed the Indian Statistical System in 2001.
- It is mandated to evolve policies, priorities and standards in statistical matters.

- The NSC has **four Members** besides a Chairperson, each having specialization and experience in specified statistical fields.

Global Talent Competitiveness Index 2019

Syllabus: Important International institutions, agencies and fora- their structure, mandate.

In News

- The **Global Talent Competitive Index (GTCI) 2019** has been released by **INSEAD business school** in partnership with Tata Communications and Adecco Group. The report has been released on the **first day of the World Economic Forum (WEF) Annual Meeting**.
- Theme of this year's report - "**Entrepreneurial Talent and Global Competitiveness**".
- It measures levels of competitiveness by **looking at 68 variables** such as ease of hiring, gender earnings gap, and prevalence of training in firms. The 2019 index covers 125 national economies and 114 cities (respectively 119 and 90 in 2018) across all groups of income and levels of development.

Key Highlights

- The report reveals that **Switzerland, Singapore and the United States** continue to lead the world in talent competitiveness.
- This year's report has a **special focus on entrepreneurial talent** - how it is being encouraged, nurtured and developed throughout the world and how this affects the relative competitiveness of different economies.
- According to report, the **talent gap** between higher and lower-income countries **has increased** over the last five years, while noting that countries in Asia, Latin America and Africa are seeing a **progressive erosion of their talent base**.
- **Top 5 countries** in the index are – Switzerland (81.82), Singapore (77.27), United States of America (76.64), Norway (74.67), Denmark (73.85).
- **Top 5 cities** in the index are - Washington, DC (United States), Copenhagen (Denmark), Oslo (Norway), Vienna (Austria), Zurich (Switzerland).
- The report reveals that **cities rather than countries are developing stronger roles as talent hubs and will be crucial to reshaping the global talent scene**. This growing importance of cities is due to their greater flexibility and ability to adapt to new trends and patterns – as nimble economic units where policy can be changed more swiftly.

India Specific Observation

- India has been ranked at **80th (81st in 2018) in the index**.
- According to the report, India's biggest challenge is to **improve its ability to attract (ranked at 95th) and retain talent (ranked at 96th)**.
- The report stressed upon the need to address India's **poor level of Internal Openness (116th)** -- in particular with respect to **weak gender equality and low tolerances** towards minorities and immigrants and its disappointing showing in lifestyle (112th) indicators.
- Among **BRICS** countries, India remain the laggard of this grouping while China with a rank of 45th tops the grouping.
- However, India performed better than its lower-income peers when it comes to growing talent (48th) and access to growth opportunities (41st).

About the GTCI Index

- The index was launched for the first time 2019. It is an annual benchmarking report that measures the ability of countries to compete for talent.
- The report covers 125 economies and 114 cities.

Arab Economic and Social Development Summit

Syllabus: Important International institutions, agencies and fora- their structure, mandate.

In News

- The **fourth Arab Economic and Social Development Summit** was held in Beirut in the Lebanese capital.
- Arab leaders have **agreed a 29-item economic agenda** in addition to **encouraging the safe return of Syrian refugees** to their homeland.
- It is a **summit of Arab League**, held at the **level of Head of States** to address **issues of economic and social development** among member-states.
- Previous summits – 2009 (Kuwait), 2011 (Sharm El-Sheikh), Riyadh (2013), 2015 (Tunis, Cancelled).

Key Highlights

- The 20 countries taking part in the summit issued a joint statement called the **Beirut Declaration**.
- It called for the **establishment of an Arab free trade zone**. It also urged the **international community to support countries** hosting refugees and displaced people.
- A key contribution during the summit was the launch of a **\$200m technology investment fund** across the region by Kuwait's foreign minister.
- The **next summit** will be held in **Mauritania in 2023**.

Controversy

- The summit, though attended by representatives from 20 Arab nations, was soured by the **absence of most Arab heads of state**.
- It was divided over several issues, including the **absence of Syrian delegates**, and a **boycott by Libya**.
- The summit had also been marred by divisions among Lebanese politicians and regional leaders **over the reinstatement of Syria** into the 22-country Arab League.

About Arab League

- The League of Arab States, or Arab League, is a voluntary association of countries whose peoples are mainly Arabic speaking or where Arabic is an official language.
- It has 22 members including Palestine, which the League regards as an independent state.
- The idea of the Arab League was mooted in 1942 by the British, who wanted to rally Arab countries against the Axis powers.
- However, the league did not take **off until March 1945**, just before the end of the Second World War.
- The aim of the league is to strengthen and coordinate the political, cultural, economic, and social programs of its members and to mediate disputes among them or between them and third parties.

The Global Risks Report 2019

Syllabus: Important International institutions, agencies and fora- their structure, mandate.

In News

- The **14th edition of the Global Risks Report**, prepared by the World Economic Forum with the support of Marsh & McLennan Companies and other partners has been released.
- It examines the evolving macro-level risk landscape and highlights major threats that may disrupt the world in 2019 and over the next decade.

Key Findings

- The report has highlighted **five key areas** that demand immediate intervention — **economic vulnerabilities, geopolitical tensions, societal and political strains, environmental fragilities, and technological instabilities.**
- Top-five risks in **terms of impact** are **weapons of mass destruction; failure of climate-change mitigation and adaptation; extreme weather events, water crises; and major natural disasters.**
- Top five risks in **terms of Likelihood** are **Extreme weather condition, Failure of climate change mitigation and adaption, Natural disaster, Data theft or fraud, Cyber attacks.**

Economic Growth and Development

Angel Tax

Syllabus: Indian Economy and Issues relating to mobilization of resources

In News

Recently, the government has eased the procedural norms for exemption of tax on start-ups (angel tax) in response to protests from the industry.

About The New Rules

- **Conditions for tax waiver:** The new rules provide for a tax-waiver, if the aggregate paid up share capital and share premium of a start up after an offering of shares does not exceed Rs. 10 crore, if the angel investor has filed income tax returns of at least Rs 50 lakh for the year preceding the year in which the investment was made, and if the investor has a net worth of at least Rs 2 crore.
- **DIPP and CBDT to approve:** The other relief is in the form of the dismantling of the bureaucratic layer, the inter-ministerial board, which used to vet the credentials of these firms. Hereafter, the Department of Industrial Policy and Promotion (DIPP) will directly route the applications to the Central Board of Direct Taxes, which will have 45 days to decide if investors in the start-up are eligible for a tax waiver.

Final Analysis

- The latest move may at best partly assuage some of the concerns of start-ups and investors. It is this share premium that has been a major bone of contention between angel investors and the tax department. Entrepreneurs argue and rightly so, that start-ups need a good amount of capital at the early stage, which angel investors provide at a premium.
- Moreover, it would surely help if Indian policymakers look around and assess what makes a country like Israel, now known as the 'Start-up Nation', a magnet for investors such as Bill Gates and Warren Buffet. That has a lot to do with the enabling role of the government which has provided not just fiscal incentives as in some other countries, but also ensured a positive investment climate.
- Leaning on new age entrepreneurs to boost tax collections can at best be a near term view, but a failure to smoothen the path for start-ups runs the risk of discouraging potential entrepreneurs and their ability to create jobs, boost revenues and innovation in an economy which needs all these in large measure.

(Also see topic 'Tax on Angel investment' in December 2018 issue)

SC Upholds Constitutional Validity Of IBC

Syllabus: Indian Economy and Issues relating to mobilization of resources

In News

- A bench of **Justices R F Nariman and Navin Sinha**, upheld the Constitutional validity of the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code (IBC) and found that since its enactment, approximately **3,300 cases have been disposed** of by the Adjudicating Authority based on out of court settlements between corporate debtors and creditors, which themselves involved claims amounting to over Rs. 1,20,390 crore.
- Summing up, the court also noted that enactment of the Code is proving to be largely successful. The defaulter's paradise is lost and in its place, the economy's rightful position has been regained.

- **Validity of NCLT and NCLAT:** Further, the apex court also dismissed the contention that the appointments made to the National Company Law Tribunal and National Company Law Appellate Tribunal (NCLAT) were contrary to its earlier judgments and the Companies Act. The judgment also directed the government to establish Circuit Benches of NCLAT within a period of six months.
- **Partially strikes down Section 29A:** However, the judgment, partially reads down Section 29A, which disqualifies certain kinds of persons from submitting a resolution plan. The court said the very purpose of Section 29A is to ensure that the persons responsible for insolvency of the corporate debtor do not participate in the resolution process. But the SC interpreted clause (j) of Section 29A to hold that the mere fact that somebody happens to be a relative of an ineligible person cannot be good enough to oust such person from becoming a resolution applicant, if he is otherwise qualified.
- **Upheld relaxation for MSMEs:** The court upheld certain relaxations given to micro, small and medium enterprises (MSME) under Section 29A of the Code as MSME form the bedrock of our economy and stringent restrictions through the IBC would adversely affect them. Further, instead of resolving crisis, it would lead to the untimely liquidation of MSMEs.

Final Analysis

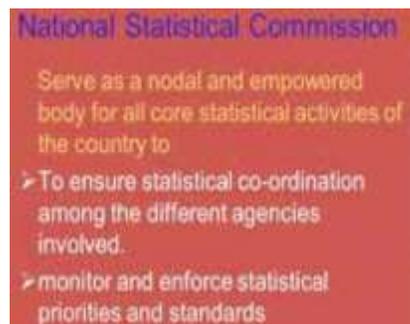
- While the code is still work in progress, the early evidence shows that of about **1,500 cases** admitted until end December 2018, only 79 ended in an approval of the resolution plans and liquidation in a little over **300 cases**.
- The major worry, is the failure in many cases to stick to the prescribed timeline of **180 to 270 days** to firm up a resolution plan with elaborate hearings at NCLT benches. Such delay goes against the very *raison d'être* of the law which is to ensure a swift resolution or closure and thus lower the risk for banks and the government arising from a rising pile of bad debts.
- Over time, the NCLT may be better tuned with capacity building and training of professionals. It will also be helpful as the Court has directed the government to set up **circuit benches** within **six months**.

Two Statistician Quit Panel For Delay In Releasing Post Note Ban Jobs Report

Syllabus: Indian Economy and Issues relating to employment.

In News

- Protesting against the withholding of the National Sample Survey Organisation's (NSSO) first Annual Survey on Employment and Unemployment for the year 2017-18, the Acting Chairperson of the National Statistical Commission (NSC) along with other colleague resigned.
- Earlier, the NSSO undertook employment/unemployment surveys once in five years. The last survey was released in 2011-12. This report was expected to reflect job losses in the wake of demonetisation.

**About NSC**

- **Introduction:** NSC is an autonomous body constituted in 2006 and tasked to monitor and review the functioning of the country's statistical systems.
- **Composition:** The Commission consists of a part time Chairperson, four part time Members, an ex-officio Member and a secretary. The Chief Statistician of India who is the Head of the National

Statistical Office is the Secretary of the Commission and the Chief Executive Officer of the NITI Aayog is the ex-officio Member of the commission.

- **Procedure for releasing report:** The normal convention is that NSSO presents the findings to the NSC and once approved, the report is released within the next few days.

Final Analysis

- Such move denies citizens access to reliable data and thereby assessing the government's performance.
- There is a need for better data collection techniques, transparency, collaboration with people and capacity building of data collecting organization such as NSSO.

The Code on Wages Bill, 2017

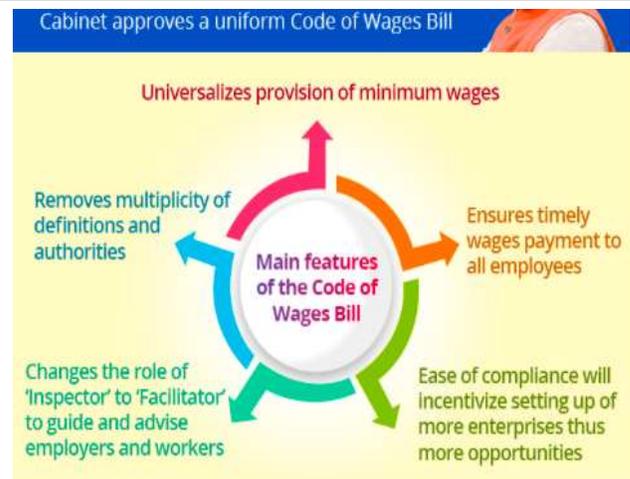
Syllabus: Indian Economy and Issues relating to employment.

In News

This Bill was tabled in Lok Sabha in August 2017 and subsequently referred to the Standing Committee. It will provide for minimum wage applicable to all employments covering organised as well as unorganised sectors.

Provisions Of The Bill

- **Consolidation of laws:** The Code on Wages will amalgamate the the four central labour laws relating to wages *i.e.* The Payment of Wages Act, 1936, The Minimum Wages Act, 1948, The Payment of Bonus Act, 1965 and The Equal Remuneration Act, 1976.
- **Consultation for fixing minimum wage:** The Bill provides for consultation with states before fixation of National Minimum Wage by the Central government.
- **National minimum wage:** A concept of statutory National Minimum Wage for different geographical areas has been introduced. It will ensure that no State Government fixes the minimum wage below the National Minimum Wages for that particular area as notified by the Central Government. Further, the overtime rate will be at least twice the normal rate of wages of the employee.
- **Revision of wages:** Minimum wages must be revised by the central or state governments at an interval of five years.
- **Facilitator instead of inspector:** The Bill uses the term 'facilitator' instead of 'inspector' and the Clause 51 defines the role of the facilitator, who may supply information and advice to employers and workers concerning the most effective means of complying with the provisions of the Code and inspect the establishment based on inspection scheme, as would be notified by the government.
- **Advisory board:** The central government and state governments will constitute the Central Advisory Board and State Advisory Boards respectively. These boards will consist of: (i) employers, (ii) employees in equal number as the employers, and (iii) independent persons (not exceeding one third of the total members of the board). They will advise the central or state



governments on issues such as setting and revision of minimum wages and increasing employment opportunities for women, among others.

- **Penalty provisions:** The Bill also provides for the maximum penalty of Rs 10 lakh instead of Rs 50,000 for employers who pay less than the amount due to employees.

Amendment in Trade Unions Act

Syllabus: Indian Economy and Issues relating to employment.

In News

- The Centre proposes to amend the Trade Unions Act, 1926, to facilitate recognition of trade unions at the Central and State level.
- But most of the trade unions vehemently opposed the proposed amendments, saying the government was trying to interfere in and cripple, their functioning.

Provisions Of The Amendment

- **Purpose:** The amendment aim to ensure that the nomination of workers' representatives in tripartite bodies by the government will become more transparent and it reduces litigation and industrial unrest.
- **Responsibility of trade union:** Trade unions, which are recognised under the amended law would be accountable in maintaining industrial harmony.
- **Role of government:** The Central or State government may make rules for: (i) the recognition of such Central or State Trade Unions and (ii) the authority to decide disputes arising out of such recognition and the manner of deciding such disputes.

One Family One Job scheme

Syllabus: Indian Economy and Issues relating to employment.

In News

- Sikkim has recently launched the 'One Family One Job' scheme which **entitles one government job for every family in the state.**
- At a Rojgar Mela (employment fair) over 12,000 unemployed youths were handed out appointment letters. However, the letters were awarded only to members of those families which do not have a government job at present.
- As of now, the state government has over 1 lakh regularised employees on its rolls from a population of just 6.4 lakh.
- The task of providing employment was entrusted to the Department of Personnel. It was also announced that over 25,000 already employed but unregularised government employees would also be subsequently regularised within 2019 according to their seniority.
- Sikkim has become the **first state in the country to carry out such an exclusive programme** for the people who would now be entitled to state government employee benefits.
- It is the only state that earmarks 70 per cent of its revenues towards salaries for state government employees and it is also the **only state in the country that gives the highest salaries to state government employees.**

Reservation For Pahari Community

Syllabus: Indian Economy and Issues relating to employment.

In News

- Jammu & Kashmir's Governor S P Malik, has given his assent to the Jammu & Kashmir Reservation (amendment) Bill, 2014, providing reservation to people belonging to Pahari community, clan or tribe having a distinct cultural, ethnic and linguistic identity.
- **Pahari is a linguistic group, comprising both Muslims and Hindus, and is mainly located in Poonch, Rajouri, Kupwara and Baramulla districts.**
- Because of the remoteness and inaccessibility of the areas of their residence, the Pahari community has **historically faced considerable economic distress leading to overall socio-economic backwardness.**
- The welfare legislation is aimed at providing job opportunities to the Pahari people residing in backward areas of the state. This was a long pending demand of the people belonging to this group and will go a long way in improving their status and educational and job opportunities.
- The amendment provides for addition of a separate category of the persons belonging to Pahari community among the Socially and Educationally Backward classes (other than Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes) and **envisages 5% reservation without disturbing the reservation already granted to other communities.**

Jan Shikshan Sansthan

Syllabus: Indian Economy and Issues relating to employment.

In News

- In a bid to **boost skill training and entrepreneurship** in the remotest corners of the country, comprehensive reforms have been proposed for Jan Shikshan Sansthan (JSS), to further strengthen the skills ecosystem benefiting those in the underprivileged sections of society.
- JSSs are established to provide vocational training to non-literate, neo-literate, as well as school drop outs by identifying skills in the region of their establishment.
- JSSs can play an important role in **bridging information asymmetry between skill training and market opportunities** thereby giving an impetus to the creation of a workforce equipped in technology-driven skills, including in areas like health & wellness, tourism, e-commerce, retail and trade.
- Formerly under the Ministry of Human Resources Development, JSS has been **transferred to the Ministry of Skill Development & Entrepreneurship in 2018** marking an important step towards the convergence of all skilling activities under the aegis of one ministry.
- JSS guidelines have been reformed keeping in mind the diverse stakeholders engaged in running these institutions and **will bring in greater flexibility, transparency and uniformity.** The launch of these strategic guidelines is an attempt by the MSDE to re-energize and reinvigorate the JSSs. Key highlights of the guidelines are:
 - Alignment of JSS course and curriculum to National Skill Qualification Framework (NSQF) to standardize training
 - Decentralization of powers for JSSs- giving more accountability and independence to district administration

- Identify and promote traditional skills in the district through skilling / upskilling
- Evidence based assessment system
- Easy Online certification
- Linking JSS to PFMS (Public Finance Management system) maintaining transparency and accountability of the ecosystem
- Creating livelihood linkages
- Training of Trainers to develop the capacity through NSTIs (National Skills Training Institutes)
- A skilled society is an essential precondition for achieving social and economic advancement for any country. The re-energised JSS form a unique position for themselves and the convergence under Skill India will help bring in a mindset shift amongst the rural youth, to make vocational education and technical training as a preferred career choice

Interim Budget Highlights

Syllabus: Government Budgeting

In News

(a) New Schemes/Projects/Boards

- **Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi (PM-KISAN):** It has been announced to extend direct income support at the rate of Rs. 6,000 per year to farmer families, having cultivable land upto 2 hectares. Further, this amount will be transferred to the bank accounts of around 12 crore Small and Marginal farmer families in three equal installments of Rs. 2,000 each.
- **Pradhan Mantri Shram-Yogi Maandhan:** This new Scheme has been launched to provide pensionary benefits to at least 10 crore labourers and workers in the unorganised sector. The government claims that within next five years it would be one of the largest pension schemes of the world. It aim to provide Rs. 3000 per month after 60 years of age with an affordable contribution of only Rs. 100/55 per month.
- **AIIMS:** Currently, 14 of the 21 AIIMS operating or being established in the country. The budget announced setting up of a new (the 22nd AIIMS) in Haryana.
- **Welfare board:** Welfare Development Board to frame special strategies for the benefit of the hard to reach De-notified, Nomadic and Semi-Nomadic communities will be set up under the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment.



- **Artificial intelligence:** The Finance Minister also announced that a National Artificial Intelligence Portal will also be developed soon as a part of the National Programme on Artificial Intelligence.
- **Renaming:** The Department of Industrial Policy and Promotion will now be renamed as the Department for Promotion of Industries and Internal Trade.

(b) Tax Provisions

- **Tax relief:** Individual taxpayers having taxable annual income up to Rs. 5 lakhs will not be required to pay any income tax. Further, the persons having gross income up to Rs. 6.50 lakhs are not required to pay any income tax if they make investments in provident funds, specified savings and insurance *etc.*
- **Deductions:** Standard Deduction is being raised from the current Rs. 40,000 to Rs.50,000. Exemption on levy of income tax on notional rent on a second self-occupied house is also been proposed. Currently, income tax on notional rent is payable if one has more than one self-occupied house.

(c) Fiscal Situation

- **Tax base growth:** There has been a growth of 18% in Direct Tax Collections in 2017-18 and increase in tax base by as many as 1.06 crore people filing income tax returns for the first time in FY 2017-18, mainly on account of demonetization.
- **Expenditure:** In all the total expenditure is to increase from Rs. 24,57,235 crore in 2018-19 to Rs.27,84,200 crore in 2019-20 BE. A rise of Rs. 3,26,965 crore or approximately 13.30%. The fiscal deficit of year 2019-20 is estimated to be 3.4% of GDP. The government maintained that it will stick to the glide path towards target of 3% of fiscal deficit to be achieved by 2020-21.
- **Disinvestment target for the budget year:** 80,000 crore.

(d) Agriculture:

- **KCC:** The budget also announced 2% interest subvention to the farmers pursuing the activities of animal husbandry and fisheries, who avail loan through Kisan Credit Card. Further, in case of timely repayment of loan, they will also get an additional 3% interest subvention.
- **Gokul Mission:** Under Rashtriya Gokul Mission the budget announced setting up of Rashtriya Kamdhenu Aayog to upscale sustainable genetic upgradation of cow resources and to enhance production and productivity of cows. The Aayog will also look after effective implementation of laws and welfare schemes for cows.

(e) Allocation For Major Schemes And Sector

- **MGNREGA:** The budget allocated Rs. 60,000 crores for MGNREGA.
- **PMGSY:** Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana (PMGSY) has been allocated Rs. 19,000 crore.
- **ICDS:** Allocation for Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) increased to Rs. 27,584 crore.
- **Defence:** The Finance Minister also announced that for the first time, the Country's Defence Budget will be of over Rs. 3 lakh crore.
- **Railways:** Capital support from the budget for Indian Railways is proposed at Rs. 64,587 crore. The Railways overall capital expenditure programme is of Rs. 1,58,658 crore.

(f) Industrial Sector

- **MSME:** 2% interest subvention on an incremental loan of Rs 1 crore for GST registered SMEs and atleast 3% of the 25% sourcing for the Government undertakings will be from women owned SMEs.



(f) Ten Dimensions of Vision for India of 2030

- To build physical as well as social infrastructure and to provide ease of living.
- To create a **Digital India**, digitize government processes with leaders from youth.
- Making India pollution free by leading transport revolution with electric vehicles and focus on renewables.
- Expanding rural industrialisation using modern digital technologies to generate massive employment.
- Clean rivers, safe drinking water to all Indians and efficient use of water through micro-irrigation.
- Besides scaling up of **Sagarmala**, coastline and ocean waters powering India’s development and growth.
- Aim at our space programme – **Gaganyaan**, India becoming the launch-pad of satellites for the World and placing an Indian astronaut into space by 2022.
- Making India self-sufficient in food, exporting to the world to meet their food needs and producing food in the most organic way.
- A healthy India via **Ayushman Bharat** with women having equal rights and concern for their safety and empowerment.
- Transforming India into a **Minimum Government Maximum Governance nation** with proactive and responsible bureaucracy.

Recent Tweaks In GST

Syllabus: Government Budgeting

In News

The GST Council in its 32nd meeting took slew of decisions aimed at reducing the tax and compliance burden on small and medium enterprises, including increasing the threshold limit below which companies are exempt from GST, extending the Composition Scheme to small service providers and allowing small companies to file annual returns.

Details Regarding The Council Decision

- **Exemption limit for GST:** The Council raised the annual turnover limit under which companies would be exempt from GST to Rs. 40 lakh for most States and Rs. 20 lakh for the North Eastern and hill states, from the earlier limit of Rs. 20 lakh and Rs. 10 lakh, respectively.
- **Eligibility for composition scheme:** The Council had decided to extend the Composition Scheme to small service providers with an annual turnover of up to Rs 50 lakh at a tax rate of 6%. Moreover, the companies opting for the Composition Scheme would be allowed to file annual returns and pay taxes quarterly from April 1. The Composition Scheme currently allows companies with an annual turnover of up to Rs. 1 crore to opt for it and file returns on a quarterly basis at a nominal rate of 1%. So far, only manufacturers and traders were eligible for this scheme.

- **Kerala cess:** GST Council also decided to allow Kerala to levy a cess of up to 1% for up to two years on intra State supplies to help finance the disaster relief efforts following recent floods in state.

GST Appellate Tribunal

Syllabus: Government Budgeting

In News

- The Union Cabinet approved the creation of a National Bench of the Goods and Services Tax Appellate Tribunal (GSTAT), which would serve as the forum of second appeals to do with the applicability of GST and will also be the first common forum of dispute resolution between the Centre and the States.
- The first appeal against the orders of adjudicating authority shall lie before the appellate authority of the states.
- The National Bench of the Appellate Tribunal, to be situated in New Delhi, and will be presided over by its president. It will consist of a technical member from the Centre and a representative of the States.



Provisions In This Regard

- **Chapter XVIII** of the CGST Act provides for an appeal and review mechanism for dispute resolution under the GST regime.
- **Section 109** of this chapter empowers Centre to constitute, on the recommendation of the GST Council, an appellate tribunal for hearing appeals against orders passed by the Appellate Authority.

Final Analysis

- Being a common forum, GST Appellate Tribunal (national bench) will ensure that there is **uniformity** in redressal of disputes arising under GST and therefore, in implementation of GST across the country.
- Further, the appellate authority is also being seen crucial for being a **forum for higher appeal** for disputes under the indirect tax regime and will also help in resolving the confusion created by contradictory rulings given by **Appellate Authority for Advance Rulings (AAAR)** on the same or similar issues in different states. The industry had been demanding a centralised appellate authority that could reconcile the contradictory verdicts of different AAARs.
- The tax experts also believe that its formation will help prevent any unwarranted delays in future.

Centre's Debt-To-GDP Falls But Of State's Rises

Syllabus: Government Budgeting

In News

- According to the **Status Paper on Government Debt** for 2017-18, the Centre's total debt as a percentage of GDP reduced to **46.5% in 2017-18 from 47.5%** as of March 31, 2014. The total debt of the States, however, has been rising over this period, **to 24% in 2017-18**, and is estimated to be **24.3% in 2018-19**.
- In absolute terms, the Centre's total debt increased from **Rs. 56,69,429 crore** at the end of March 2014 to **Rs. 82,35,178 crore** in 2017-18, representing a 45% increase. The total debt of the States

increased from **Rs. 24,71,270 crore** to **Rs. 40,22,090 crore** over the same period, an increase of almost 63%.

Analysis

- **Overall trend:** While the Centre is moving in the right direction in terms of meeting the N.K. Singh Committee recommendations on Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management (FRBM), the States are moving in the opposite direction.
- **Steps by Centre:** The Central debt has been within control because the government has been trying to stick by and large to the fiscal deficit parameters.
- **Risk of debt trap:** The increase in the debt stock at the State level is worrying because they don't have the wherewithal to service the debt if it goes beyond a certain point. They could then start getting into a debt trap situation.
- **UDAY bonds:** Outstanding liabilities of States have increased sharply during 2015-16 and 2016-17, following the issuance of UDAY bonds in these two years, which was reflected in an increase in liability GDP ratio from 21.7% at end March 2015 to 23.4% at end March 2016 and further to 23.8% at end March 2017.
- **Suggested reform:** The report says that the state governments as a group have exhibited a tendency to hold large cash surpluses/investments in Cash Balance Investment Account on a consistent basis while at the same time resorting to market borrowings to finance their Gross Fiscal Deficit (GFD). This indicates scope for reducing the quantum of market borrowings by State governments in case they bring down their cash surpluses (parked as investment in treasury bills of the Central government).

Recommendation of NK Singh Committee

The N.K. Singh headed FRBM Review Committee report had recommended the ratio to be **40% for the Centre** and **20% for the States**, respectively, **by 2023**. It said that the 60% consolidated Central and State debt limit was consistent with international best practices, and was an essential parameter to attract a better rating from the credit ratings agencies.

WTO Members Pushing For New E-Commerce Rules

Syllabus: Changes in industrial policy & their effects on industrial growth.

In News

- Impatient with a lack of World Trade Organization rules on the explosive growth of E-Commerce, 76 members, including the United States, China, the European Union and Japan agreed to start negotiating a new framework. Recently, China, also signalled conditional support for the E-Commerce initiative but said it should also take into account the needs of developing countries.
- E-commerce, has become a huge component of the global economy. A WTO report put the total value of e-commerce in 2016 at **\$27.7 trillion**, of which nearly \$24 trillion was business to business transactions.
- The **WTO's 164 members** failed to consolidate



some 25 separate E-Commerce proposals at a conference at **Buenos Aires** in December, 2018 including a call to set up a **Central e-commerce negotiating forum**.

Opposite Views

- **India’s stand:** India did not join the initiative as it believe that the WTO should finish off the stalled but development oriented ‘**Doha Round**’ of talks before moving into new areas.
- **Developed Countries view:** The global trade rulebook is rapidly becoming outdated and needs to keep up or become obsolete. A recent study also found that **70 regional trade agreements** already include provisions or chapters on e-commerce.

India As Second Largest Steel Producer

Syllabus: Changes in industrial policy & their effects on industrial growth.

Rank	Country	2018 (Mt)	% chg
1	China	928.3	6.6
2	India	106.5	4.9
3	Japan	104.3	-0.3
4	US	86.7	6.2
5	S Korea	72.5	2.0
6	Russia*	71.7	0.3
7	Germany*	42.4	-2.0
8	Turkey	37.3	-0.6
9	Brazil	34.7	1.1
10	Iran*	25.0	17.7

In News

- According to World Steel Association (worldsteel) India has replaced Japan as world's second largest steel producing country, while China is the largest producer of crude steel accounting for more than 51 per cent of production,.
- India's crude steel production in 2018 was at 106.5 MT, up by 4.9 per cent from 101.5 MT in 2017. While, Japan produced 104.3 MT in 2018, down 0.3 per cent compared to 2017.
- Others in the **top 10 steel producing countries** include the United States at the 4th position as the country produced 86.7 MT of crude steel in 2018, South Korea (72.5 MT, 5th place), Russia (71.7 MT, 6th), Germany (42.4 MT, 7th), Turkey (37.3 MT, 8th), Brazil (34.7 MT, 9th) and Iran (25 MT, 10th).
- World Steel Association (worldsteel) is one of the industry associations in the world. Its members represent around **85 per cent of the world's steel production**, including over 160 steel producers with 9 of the 10 largest steel companies, national and regional steel industry associations and steel research institutes.

NITI Aayog for Liberalising Mineral Mining Policy

Syllabus: Infrastructure: Energy, Ports, Roads, Airports, Railways etc.

In News

- The government is considering liberalising the exploration and licensing regime for mineral exploration in India to attract big ticket private investment in the sector.
- Despite being among the top five globally in industrial minerals, India’s import is seven times of its domestic production and there is immense scope to expand exploration.

The Plan

- **Aim of the Mission:** The plan includes an Explore in India mission, much on the lines of Skill India, Start-up India and Make in India, for the mining sector to reduce imports and tap India’s huge mineral wealth.
- **Aayog’s proposal:** Niti Aayog has floated the idea for the mining sector with an aim to double the area explored in the country to 20% from 10%, which in turn is expected to create employment for 15 million people by 2022-23 against 10 million currently employed, both directly and indirectly.
- **Changes in the Policy:** Aayog has also suggested changes in the exploration and licensing policy to create a level playing field between private sector companies and PSUs with respect to mining

concessions besides rationalising tax structure to facilitating investments in the sector to boost its growth from the current 3% in 2017-18 to an average growth of 8.5% during 2018-23.

- **Issue of taxes:** The taxes, royalties and levies amounting to over 65% in India are high compared to global standards, the Aayog has proposed that taxes, royalties and other levies should be capped at a maximum of 40% of the sale value as per global practice to make mining competitive and attractive to foreign direct investment. This, in turn, will help in both export promotion as well as import substitution.
- **Regulator:** The Aayog has also suggested that the government reduce rail freight charges for all minerals besides setting up a National Mineral Regulatory Authority.
- **Other proposal:** Government should allocate reserved areas through auction route after development of the reserves for bulk minerals like iron ore, bauxite and others. Moreover, the mining companies should be allowed the freedom to co-mine other minerals found in the same mining area.

Power Sector NPAs

Syllabus: Infrastructure: Energy, Ports, Roads, Airports, Railways etc.

In News

The cases of as many as 34 financially stressed power projects, with a capacity of **40 GW** and with bank exposure of over **Rs. 1.8 lakh crore**, are reportedly headed to the National Company Law Tribunal (NCLT) for resolution under the Bankruptcy Code.

Reason For NPAs In Power Sector

- **Unviable power tariff:** Political failure in terms of unviable rate is one of the major reason for weak finances of state utilities and underlies the power sector's problems.
- **Other reasons:** The other 3 main reasons for stressed power assets are- missing fuel linkage, absence of power purchase agreements (PPAs) & inability of private promoters to increase equity stakes.

Suggestions

- There is a need for transparency in state power utility finances and regular disclosure of quarterly results. Concurrently, the main reasons for stressed assets need to be identified and prompt follow-through action taken.
- The Union power minister move to mandate prepaid meters for power connections, to address rampant revenue leakage is a welcome initiative.
- In tandem, asset reconstruction companies, including agencies like the Power Finance Corporation, need to be purposefully roped in to finance operations and maintenance at the stressed plants.
- Thus, the above steps need to be implemented these for sustainable resolution of insolvency in power. Mere sale of assets will achieve little.

Resolving The Issue Of Shortage Of Coal

Syllabus: Infrastructure: Energy, Ports, Roads, Airports, Railways etc.

In News

Despite India sitting on **300 billion tonnes** of coal reserves, it has been facing perennially shortage of coal due to various issues.

Implication Of Coal Shortage

- **Increase in import:** Due to the issue of coal shortage the import of coal has grown from 21.7 million tonnes in 2006 to 131.3 million tonnes in 2014.
- **Foreign exchange outgo:** Import of coal substantially leads to large foreign exchange outgo that further adds to balance of payment crisis.
- **Inventory with power plant:** The thermal power plants now have an average inventory of coal for not more than 20 days.
- **Load shedding:** There is also a classical case of inventory mismanagement by both Coal India and the power plants. This has also lead to load shedding by the discoms.

Solutions

- There is a need to find the cause for poor coal production such as, those relating to land acquisition, environment, forest clearances, connectivity of the coal bearing areas and shortage of railway rakes to transport coal. Such issues need to be resolved on priority basis.
- Further, planning for ramping up coal production be undertaken in consultation with stakeholders that includes those involved in mining of coal at the ground level. The states, too, need to be involved.
- There is also a need for **prediction of demand swings**. This would help both coal producers and consumers to react faster and recalibrate their actions appropriately.
- Further, as suggested by the **NITI Aayog** there is also a need for splitting up of Coal India subsidiaries into independent companies for improving efficiency.

Guwahati To Get International Flights Under UDAN Scheme

Syllabus: Infrastructure: Energy, Ports, Roads, Airports, Railways etc.

In News

- With the Centre finalising bids for the Guwahati-Dhaka and Guwahati-Bangkok routes, Assam's capital is likely to be the first city to be connected internationally under the Ude Desh ka Aam Nagarik (UDAN) scheme.
- Under the UDAN scheme for affordable international connectivity, Assam government is likely to provide a subsidy of Rs 2,370 and Rs 4,400 for a certain number of seats on the flights operating on the Guwahati-Dhaka and Guwahati-Bangkok routes, respectively.
- Assam government has also proposed subsidised international connectivity under UDAN scheme from Guwahati to six destinations *i.e.* Singapore, Dhaka, Yangon, Kathmandu, Kuala Lumpur and Bangkok.

About International UDAN Scheme

- Under international version of the UDAN scheme, the subsidy will come from the States and not the Central government.
- Moreover, in contrast to the domestic UDAN scheme, no airline company will be given any exclusivity over any route.

Issue Of Fishery Subsidies At WTO

Syllabus: Issues related to direct and indirect farm subsidies and minimum support prices

In News

- India and China have demanded protection of livelihood of small fisherfolk at the World Trade Organization (WTO) but the US has cautioned against allowing developing countries to continue with their sops as negotiations on curbing fishery subsidies picked up pace.
- At the Ministerial Conference of WTO in Buenos Aires in December 2018, members agreed to work towards adopting an agreement on disciplines that prohibit subsidies that contribute to overcapacity and overfishing and eliminate subsidies that contribute to illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing by the next Ministerial Conference in 2019.

Analysis of country positions on WTO fisheries subsidies negotiations

Champions	On the right tracks	Needs to do much better	Bad
NEW ZEALAND	BRAZIL	CHINA	INDIA → Blocked the negotiation. Opposed everything, including language on subsidies provided to IUU fishing.
NORWAY	SENEGAL	RUSSIA	
EUROPEAN UNION	THAILAND	USA	
ICELAND	JAPAN	KOREA	
PAKISTAN	INDONESIA	BANGLADESH	
CANADA		GUATEMALA	
African, Caribbean and Pacific Group of States (ACP)		SRI LANKA	
Least-Developed Countries (LDCs)		PHILIPPINES	
Latin American Country group (LAC)			
ARGENTINA, COSTA RICA, COLOMBIA, PANAMA, PERU, URUGUAY			

Rival Contentions

- **USA contention:** The US, in its representation, said **14 of the top 25 marine catch producers** in the world were developing countries and one least-developed country. Thus, there is a need to carefully think about providing exemptions to developing countries from provisions to discipline how much subsidies they provide their fisheries sector.
- **Problem of over fishing:** The discussions on curbing fishery subsidies is led by an informal grouping of members called **‘Friends of Fish’** (including Argentina, Australia, Chile, Colombia, New Zealand, Norway, Iceland, Pakistan, Peru and the US) which argues that subsidies to the fisheries sector estimated at \$14-20.5 billion annually have led to over capacity and over fishing.
- **India’s contention:** While India emphasised that a WTO agreement should consider needs of marginal fisherfolk. India provides minimal subsidies to fisherfolk who depend on the sector for sustenance.
- **Very less subsidies:** India also stress that it provides minimal subsidies to its fishers and should therefore be not subject to caps on subsidies. China, which too qualify for special dispensation extended to developing countries, gives subsidies to its fishers several times more than India.

KALIA Scheme

Syllabus: Issues related to direct and indirect farm subsidies and minimum support prices

In News

Among a number of farmer specific schemes, announced or planned, across the country, the **Odisha government** has come up with a support scheme whose primary targets are small farmers, cultivators and landless agricultural labourers.

About The Scheme

- **Introduction:** Called Krushak Assistance for Livelihood and Income Augmentation (KALIA), the scheme involves payments to encourage cultivation and associated activities.
- **Aim:** Under the scheme, Rs 10,180 crore will be spent over three years until 2020-21 in providing financial assistance to cultivators and landless agricultural labourers.
- **Assistance:** All farmers will be provided Rs 10,000 per family as assistance for cultivation. Each family will get Rs 5,000 separately in the kharif and rabi seasons, for five cropping seasons between 2018-19 and 2021-22.
- **Other features:** The KALIA scheme includes a life insurance cover of Rs 2 lakh and additional personal accident coverage of the same amount for 57 lakh households. Crop loans up to Rs 50,000 are interest-free.

Farm Loan Waiver

Syllabus: Storage, transport and marketing of agricultural produce and issues and related constraints

In News

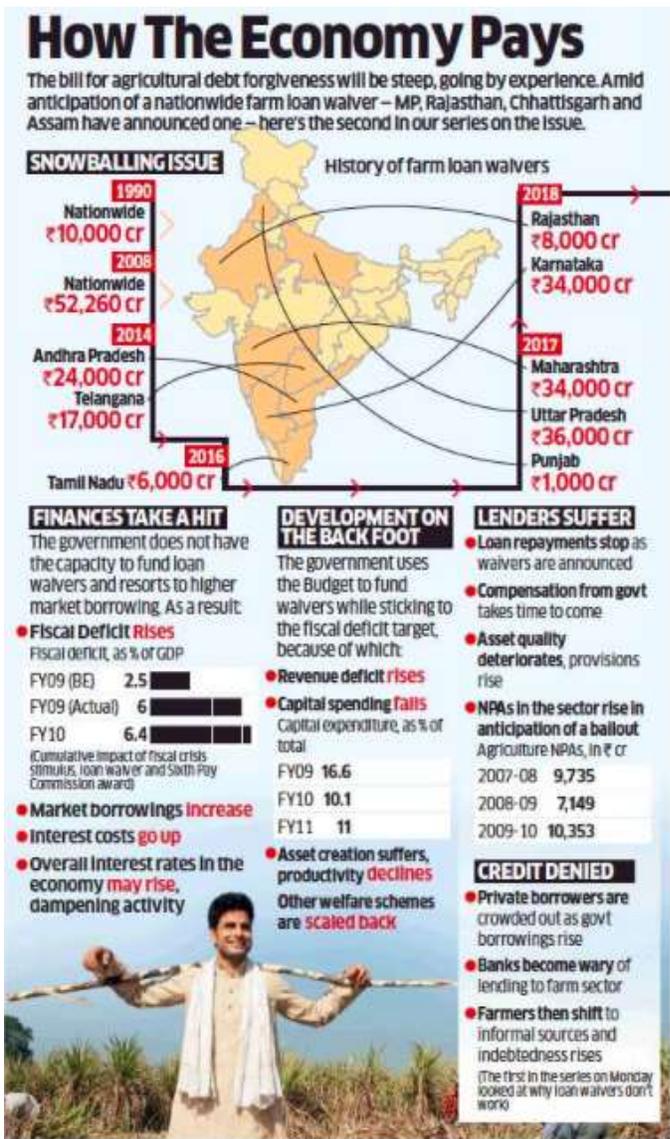
- After the recent Assembly elections, the new governments in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh announced farm loan waivers, a key promise. Last year, Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu announced waivers as farmers were in distress.
- According to the **NABARD survey (2016-17)**, 52.5% of agricultural households are indebted and the non-institutional credit still hovers around 40%.

Reason For Farm Loan Waiver

- **Overall issue:** The rising pressure of population on land and agriculture, besides sluggishness in the shifting of workforce away from agriculture, has adversely affected small and marginal farmers.
- **Suicide among farmers:** Rising costs, drop in income and increasing incidence of indebtedness among small and marginal farmers manifested in a spate of suicides over the years.

Negative Impact

- **Does not benefit all farmers:** The number of farmers who avail themselves of institutional loans are very limited. Thus, even after loan waivers not even half the farmers are benefiting. In some of the States, *not even*



25% of farmers get loans from institutional sources.

- **Bad loans:** The loan waivers disrupt the credit cycle that leads to very high bad loan ratio, which cripples the fiscal health.
- **Reduced credit flow:** Increased default of farm loans further reduces flow of credit to farmers, making them more reliant on informal sources.
- **Investment in agriculture falls:** With loan waivers, capital investment takes a back seat, leading to fall in asset creation (irrigation, markets, power, etc) that is crucial for sustainability of the agriculture sector.
- **Reduced Capex:** Farm loan waivers will adversely impact the combined state government fiscal deficit and capital expenditure *i.e.* spending on projects. Thus, during periods of fiscal adjustment due to farm loan waivers, capex may become a soft target for deficit control.
- **Misuse of loan waiver:** NITI Aayog study has also highlighted the fact that in some States, about three-fourths of the farm loans were being used for consumption instead of meeting agricultural needs.
- **Vicious cycle:** There are also apprehensions of a rise in loan defaults spreading to other states as expectations rise for such a waiver there as well.

Conclusion

Loan waiver is only a **stop-gap arrangement**. Until policies are not tweaked in favour of farmers to address their risks related to production, weather-disaster, price, credit and market, the loan waiver will become a periodical instrument for temporary relief. Thus, there is a need for long term solution to this problem.

Agriculture Export Policy

Syllabus: Storage, transport and marketing of agricultural produce and issues and related constraints

In News

The Union Cabinet has approved the Agriculture Export Policy, 2018. India's share in global exports of agriculture products rose to 2.2% in 2016 from 1% a few years ago. It is currently ranked ninth among exporters globally.

Feature Of The Policy

- **Export target:** The new trade policy for agriculture aims to double India's farm exports to more than \$60 billion by 2022.
- **Removal of export restriction:** The government has also decided to remove export restrictions on most organic and processed agricultural products, barring commodities other than those identified as essential from the food security perspective such as onions.
- **Monitoring framework:** The Policy has also approved a proposal to establish a monitoring framework to oversee the implementation of the agriculture export policy. **Monitoring of prices:** The government will also keep a check on the movement of price and supply sensitive commodities through periodic reviews on a case-to-case basis.
- **Diversifying:** The policy seeks to diversify the country's export basket and destinations, by boosting high value and value added agricultural exports, including perishables.
- **Branding:** Better branding would be undertaken under the policy to promote exports.

- **Focus area:** The emphasis would also be on promoting export of novel, indigenous, organic, ethnic, traditional and non-traditional agri products.
- **Infrastructure:** The government would seek to provide infrastructure and logistics support to exporters. On the infrastructure front, the government would identify ports that will handle agri exports. There will also be focus on clusterbased models and efforts would be made to attract private investments into production and processing.
- **APMC:** The States would be urged to amend their Agricultural Produce Market Committee Acts and remove mandi taxes applicable on export-oriented goods.
- **Institutional mechanism:** The Policy also plans to provide an institutional mechanism that would pursue market access, tackle barriers and deal with sanitary and phytosanitary issues that come up from time to time.
- **Nodal Ministry:** With the Ministry of Commerce as the nodal department, it will have representation from various line Ministries/Departments, agencies and State governments concerned.

Impact

- **Doubling income:** The policy is in line with the government's promise to double farmers' income by 2022.
- **Benefit farmers:** The new policy measures such as support for infrastructure and logistics, focus on clusters and greater involvement of state governments will open new avenues for investment, apart from ensuring remunerative rates for farmers.
- **Predictibility:** Till date, India's agriculture exports were more opportunistic or accidental in nature without proper policy backup. With the new policy measures, there will be better predictability for exports of agri and agri-based produces.

Way Forward

Agri export policy must be in sync with the domestic agriculture policy. While increase in the minimum support price of agri commodities is very much required but it also need to consider that it makes India's agri export less competitive in the global marketplace.

Technology

Indian Science Congress

Syllabus: Science and Technology- developments and their applications and effects in everyday life

In News

- **106th edition of Indian Science Congress (ISC)-2019** was held from 3rd to 7th January in Jalandhar, Punjab.
- ISC with its **theme of FUTURE INDIA – Science and Technology** helped showcase what is being done, what can be done and what would define the future of Science and Technology in India.
- A **Children's Science Congress** targeting 10-17 years of children for carrying forward innovation and research in science to the next level was held.
- A two-day **Science Communicators' Meet** was also held where the main aim was to brainstorm ways of dissemination of scientific information and inculcation of scientific attitude among masses.
- A **Women's Science Congress to showcase the contribution of women in science, technology and society** was also held.

- A time capsule with items representing today's technology and India's scientific prowess was buried to be opened after 100 years.

- The first meeting of the Congress was held from January 15-17, 1914 at the premises of the Asiatic Society, Calcutta, with the Honourable Justice Sir Asutosh Mukherjee, the then Vice-Chancellor of the Calcutta University, as President.
- The science congress owes its origin to the foresight and initiative of two **British Chemists, namely, Professor J. L. Simonsen and Professor P.S. MacMahon.**

Samwad with Students

Syllabus: Science and Technology- developments and their applications and effects in everyday life

In News

- As part of the enhanced outreach programme of Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO), a new platform named **Samwad with Students (SwS)** has been launched recently in Bengaluru.
- Through this initiative, ISRO **aims to constantly engage youngsters across India to capture their scientific temperament and draw inspiration and motivation from young India.**
- The new conversation mission will inspire students cutting across schools and colleges.
- The agency will organise guided tours of students thrice in a year, especially during summer and Christmas holidays.
- The students will be taken to ISRO facilities in Thiruvananthapuram and Bengaluru and the launch centre at Sriharikota.
- They will also be taken to space laboratories and will be allowed to make small satellites.
- The programme will be implemented in two months' time, from coming summer holiday.
- It will be open for Class IX to Class XII students from across the country.

Three Mission Centres Inaugurated At IIT Madras

Syllabus: Science and Technology- developments and their applications and effects in everyday life

In News

- The Department of Science and Technology (DST) has established three mission centres at the Indian Institute of Technology Madras (IIT-M).
- The centres were aimed at research and development in the field of solar and water treatment.
- The three centres are:
 1. DST -IITM Solar Energy Harnessing Centre aims to promote **R&D related to silicon solar cells.**
 2. DST- IITM Centre for Sustainable Treatment, Reuse and Management for Efficient, Affordable and Synergistic Solutions for Water (Water-IC for SUTRAM of EASY WATER) – It aims to on various issues related to waste water management.
 3. DST-IITM-KGDS Test-bed on Solar Thermal Desalination Solutions in Narippaiyur, Ramanathapuram District, Tamil Nadu. It aims to **deliver customised technological solutions to address prevalent water challenges** in the arid coastal village located on the shores of the Bay of Bengal.

DNA Technology Regulation Bill

Syllabus: Awareness in the fields of bio-tech.

In News

- The Lok Sabha has passed the **DNA Technology (Use and Application) Regulation Bill**.
- The bill allows **regulated use of DNA technology** to establish the identity of certain defined categories of persons, including offenders, suspects, and under trials.

About DNA

- Deoxyribonucleic Acid (DNA) is a set of instructions found in a cell. These instructions are used for the growth and development of an organism.
- The DNA of a person is unique, and variation in the sequence of DNA can be used to **match individuals and identify them**. DNA technology, therefore allows for accurate establishment of an individual's identity.
- In addition, DNA-based technology helps in **identification of victims** in the event of terrorist attacks or natural disasters such as earthquakes.
- For example, DNA technology has been used to identify victims of terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre in 2001, and disasters such as the Asian tsunami in 2004.
- Further, DNA profiling can be used in civil matters, such as **parentage related disputes**.

Highlights Of The Bill

- The Bill regulates DNA testing for identification of persons, in respect of matters listed in the Schedule.
- This **includes offences** under the Indian Penal Code, 1860, as well as offences under other laws such as the Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1956, the Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act, 1971, the Protection of Civil Rights Act, 1955, and the Motor Vehicles Act, 1988.
- The Schedule also allows for **DNA testing in certain civil matters**. This includes matters such as *parentage disputes, issues related to pedigree, immigration or emigration, assisted reproductive technologies, transplantation of human organs, and for the establishment of individual identity*.
- The central government will **establish a National DNA Data Bank and Regional DNA Data Banks for each state, or two or more states**, as it may deem necessary.
- Every DNA Data Bank is required to maintain the following indices based on DNA testing conducted by a DNA laboratory: (i) crime scene index, (ii) suspects' or undertrials' index, (iii) offenders' index, (iv) missing persons' index, and (v) unknown deceased persons' index.
- All DNA laboratories will share DNA data prepared by them with the National and Regional DNA Data Banks.
- The Bill provides for a **DNA Regulatory Board, which will supervise DNA Data Banks and DNA laboratories**. The **Secretary in the Department of Biotechnology**, will be the **ex-officio Chairperson** of the Board.
- The Board will **make recommendations** to the central government **on privacy protection** in relation to the use and analysis of DNA samples.
- The Board is required to ensure that all information relating to DNA profiles with Data Banks, DNA laboratories, and other persons are kept confidential.
- In case of a person arrested for an offence which carries punishment upto seven years, the authorities are required to obtain his written consent.

- If consent is not given, the authorities may approach a Magistrate who may order the taking of bodily substances from the individual.
- If the offence carries a punishment of more than seven years of imprisonment or death, consent is not required.
- The **penalty for various offences** is imprisonment up to three years and fine of up to one lakh rupees.
- Further, the penalty for intentional tampering or destruction of biological evidence is imprisonment up to five years as well as fine of up to two lakh rupees.

Grey Areas/Concerns

- DNA testing carried out in medical or research laboratories can be used to identify an individual. **It is unclear if the Bill intends to regulate such laboratories.**
- The Bill requires consent of the individual when DNA profiling is used in criminal investigations and identifying missing persons. However, **consent requirements have not been specified in case of DNA profiling for civil matters.**
- It is unclear whether DNA profiles for civil matters will also be stored in the Data Banks. **Storage of these profiles in the Data Banks may violate the right to privacy.**
- The Bill specifies the process by which DNA profiles may be removed from the Data Banks. However, **the Bill does not require DNA laboratories to remove DNA profiles.**
- The Bill **does not provide any mechanism for redressal of grievances in cases where the DNA profile is not removed from the data banks by the Director of the National DNA Data Bank.**
- The Law Commission in its report on the draft Bill of 2017 stated that **only the portion of the DNA which provides information on identity** will be used for profiling. However, this is not specified in the Bill.

Microsat-R

Syllabus: Awareness in the fields of Space

In News

- ISRO's Polar Satellite Launch Vehicle (PSLV-C44) successfully injected **Microsat-R**, and Kalamsat-V2 satellites into their designated orbits.
- Microsat-R is a **military imaging satellite** which was successfully injected into the intended orbit that is much lower than any of its civil Earth observation spacecraft.
- Weighing only 1.26kg, Kalamsat-V2 is the **lightest satellite** to be ever built and launched into orbit.
- It is also the first to be built by a **private Indian firm** and **launched by Isro.**
- PSLV-C44 mission is unique as **it is for the first time ISRO has used the last stage of the rocket (i.e 4th stage) as a platform to perform experiments in space.**
- Kalamsat-V2, a **student payload**, is the first to use PS4 (the fourth stage) as an orbital platform.
- This new low cost technology **will help students to conduct several inspiring experiments in space by attaching their instruments to the last stage of the rocket.**
- The other experiment with the launcher PSLV-C44 vehicle was a new third variant having two strap-on boosters.
- Called the PSLV-DL, D standing for demonstration, it ranges between the older two variants.

UNNATI Programme

Syllabus: Awareness in the fields of Space

In News

- ISRO has come up with a **capacity building programme UNNATI** (UNISpace Nanosatellite Assembly & Training by ISRO), **on nanosatellite development**.
- It is an initiative to commemorate the **50th anniversary of the first United Nations conference on the exploration and peaceful uses of outer space** (UNISPACE-50).
- **U R Rao Satellite Centre (URSC)** being the lead centre of ISRO for satellite building has designed the basic structure of this programme with equal emphasis on theoretical and practical exposure.
- It is planned to be conducted for 3 years by URSC in 3 batches.
- The primary objectives of the programme are:
 - To offer a simplified and increased exposure to satellite fabrication technologies, as part of the UNISPACE initiative.
 - To provide a theoretical course on satellite technology.
 - To provide an intensive course on nanosatellite realisation, covering mission aspects, design, fabrication, assembly, integration & testing.
 - To provide hands-on training to assemble, integrate and test a low cost, modular nanosatellite.

Young Scientist Programme

Syllabus: Awareness in the fields of Space

In News

- **ISRO** has announced the Young Scientist Programme. It has been designed for the young minds to *encourage scientific talent and increase the scientific pool in the country*.
- The initiative is conceptualised on the lines of a similar programme run by NASA.
- ISRO will select over 100 students from across India and give them practical experience of how satellites are built under the programme.
- Mostly class 8 students - three each from 29 states and seven Union territories will be selected for the one month programme.
- Six incubation centres will be established in various parts of the country - North, South, East, West, Centre and North-East, and the **first such centre** has been established in **Agartala in Tripura**.
- The students will be able to use these centres for R&D purposes and will be encouraged to develop scientific payloads that can be launched by ISRO.

Paper Sensor To Detect Freshness Of Milk

Syllabus: Indigenization of technology and developing new technology.

In News

- Scientists at Indian **Institute of Technology, Guwahati, have developed a simple paper kit that can test freshness of milk** and tell how well it has been pasteurized.
- Aided with a smart phone app, the kit can help ensure that milk is consumed before it turns too sour.

Why We Need Such Sensors

- Milk being a widely consumed food, its safety is of prime concern to consumers. More so because it is **highly perishable and prone to action of enzymes and micro organisms inherently present in it.**
- Although pasteurization, freezing and preservation using additives are widely used to prevent spoilage, perishability of milk is still a concern.
- There is no easy way to know if milk is fresh or stale or how effective is pasteurization.
- Tests used in dairies and dairy industries are time consuming and need sophisticated equipment like spectrophotometers. The new detection kit can make testing easy and fast.

How This Sensor Works

- **A milk enzyme, Alkaline Phosphatase or ALP, is considered an indicator of milk quality** because its presence even after pasteurization indicates presence of microbes that may not have been rendered inactive with pasteurization.
- Paper discs were soaked in 4-carboxybenzene diazonium solution and then chemically treated to expose-COOH groups on the diazonium.
- The -COOH groups then attach to NH₂ groups on anti-ALP probe molecules. Thus the anti-ALP probes are fixed on paper.
- **When a drop of milk is poured on the tiny paper disc, the ALP in milk reacts with probes, resulting in change of colour.**
- The colour change on paper discs is then photographed by a smart phone camera and images processed to obtain corresponding colour values.
- These values are then compared with standard data stored in the phone. Thus not only the presence of ALP could be detected but the amount of it in milk could also be measured.
- The team also confirmed that colour is due only to ALP and not due to interference of vitamins, other proteins and minerals in the milk.
- The sensor works in both qualitative and quantitative modes. No separate reader is required for qualitative analysis as it works like just like pregnancy test strips.
- Fabrication in the laboratory at present costs around Rs. 80 to Rs 125 per kit and could come down when mass manufactured.
- The kit **could come handy in milk bars, large kitchens and at milk collection centres where freshness of milk is a concern.**
- It can find other applications too. Since ALP is also tested in various body fluids, the kit can also be utilized in clinics.

Environment and Biodiversity**India Submits Sixth National Report To The Convention Of Biological Diversity (CBD)****In News**

- India has submitted the sixth national report (NR6) to Convention on Biodiversity.
- The report provides an update of progress in achievement of 12 National Biodiversity Targets (NBT) developed under the Convention process in line with the 20 global Aichi biodiversity targets.

Key Highlights Of The Report

- India is among the first five countries in the world, the first in Asia and the first among the biodiversity rich mega diverse countries to have submitted such report.
- According to the report, India has exceeded/overachieved two NBTs, and it is on track to achieve eight NBTs.
- In respect of the remaining two NBTs, India is striving to meet the targets by the stipulated time of 2020.
- With well over 20 percent of its total geographical area under biodiversity conservation, India has exceeded the terrestrial component of **17 percent of Aichi target 11**, and 20 percent of corresponding NBT relating to **areas under biodiversity management**.
- Similarly, India has also made noteworthy achievement towards NBT relating to **access and benefit sharing (ABS)** by operationalising the Nagoya Protocol on ABS.
- India has done well on **raising awareness about biodiversity**, which is an important thrust area in several programmes of the Government.
- India is a megadiverse country harbouring nearly 7-8% of globally recorded species while supporting 18% of the global human population on a mere 2.4% of the world's land area.
- In this context, India's quest for inclusive economic development while maintaining integrity of its natural capital is being pursued through various programmes and strategies.
- Measures have been adopted for sustainable management of agriculture, fisheries and forests, with a view to provide food and nutritional security to all without destroying the natural resource base while ensuring intergenerational environmental equity.
- Programmes are in place to maintain genetic diversity of cultivated plants, farms livestock and their wild relatives, towards minimising genetic erosion and safeguarding their genetic diversity.
- Mechanisms and enabling environment are being created for recognising and protecting the vast heritage of coded and oral traditional knowledge relating to biodiversity for larger human welfare while safeguarding the interests and rights of the local communities as creators and holders of this knowledge.

About CBD

- CBD, known informally as the Biodiversity Convention, is a multilateral treaty.
- The Convention has three main goals including: **the conservation of biological diversity (or biodiversity); the sustainable use of its components; and the fair and equitable sharing of benefits arising from genetic resources.**

National Biodiversity Targets of India

1. **Biodiversity awareness** - By 2020, a significant proportion of the country's population, especially the youth, is aware of the values of biodiversity and the steps they can take to conserve and use it sustainably
2. **Biodiversity Valuation and Poverty Alleviation** - By 2020, values of biodiversity are integrated in national and state planning processes, development programmes and poverty alleviation strategies.
3. **Safeguarding Natural Habitats** - Strategies for reducing rate of degradation, fragmentation and loss of all natural habitats are finalized and actions put in place by 2020 for environmental amelioration and human well-being.

4. **Managing Invasive Species** - By 2020, invasive alien species and pathways are identified and strategies to manage them developed so that populations of prioritized invasive alien species are managed.
5. **Sustainable Landscape** - By 2020, measures are adopted for sustainable management of agriculture, forestry and fisheries
6. **Protected Areas** - Ecologically representative areas are conserved effectively and equitably, based on protected area designation and management and other area-based conservation measures and are integrated into the wider landscapes and seascapes, covering over 20% of the geographic area of the country, by 2020
7. **Maintaining Genetic Diversity** - By 2020, genetic diversity of cultivated plants, farm livestock, and their wild relatives, including other socio-economically as well as culturally valuable species, is maintained, and strategies have been developed and implemented for minimizing genetic erosion and safeguarding their genetic diversity.
8. **Ecosystem Services** - By 2020, ecosystem services, especially those relating to water, human health, livelihoods and well-being, are enumerated and measures to safeguard them are identified, taking into account the needs of women and local communities, particularly the poor and vulnerable sections.
9. **Access and Benefit Sharing** - By 2015, Access to Genetic Resources and the Fair and Equitable Sharing of Benefits Arising from their Utilization as per the Nagoya Protocol are operational, consistent with national legislations.
10. **Inclusive Governance** - By 2020, an effective, participatory and updated national biodiversity action plan is made operational at different levels of governance
11. **Protecting Traditional Knowledge** - By 2020, national initiatives using communities' traditional knowledge relating to biodiversity are strengthened, with the view to protecting this knowledge in accordance with national legislations and international obligations.
12. **Resource Mobilization** - By 2020, opportunities to increase the availability of financial, human and technical resources to facilitate effective implementation of the Strategic Plan for Biodiversity 2011–2020 and the national targets are identified and the Strategy for Resource Mobilization is adopted.

Climate Change Performance Index 2019

In News

- Climate Change Performance Index (CCPI) 2019 has been released.
- CCPI is an annual publication by Germanwatch, NewClimate Institute and Climate Action Network Europe. It evaluates the climate protection performance of 60 countries.

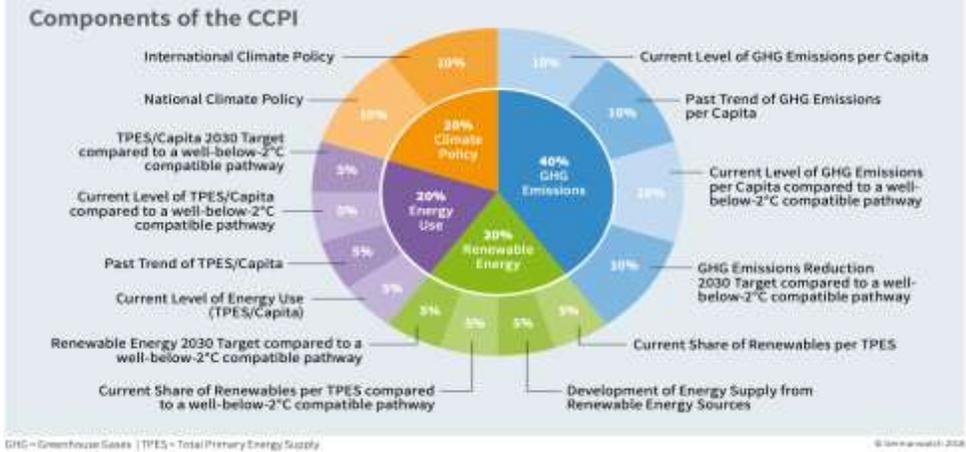
Key Highlights

- **Morocco** has been named the **second best performing country after Sweden** in the **Climate Change Performance Index (CCPI)**.
- The North African country significantly increased the share of renewables over the past five years and increased new renewable energy capacity.
- **Sweden is in top position, followed by Morocco and Lithuania in the CCPI 2019.**
- The bottoms five in the list are Saudi Arabia, U.S., Iran, South Korea and Taiwan.

- With the connection of the world's largest solar plant to the grid, Morocco is on track for achieving its target of 42% installed renewable energy capacities by 2020.

India Specific Observation

- India ranks 11th in this year's CCPI, improving its standing by three places compared to the previous edition.
- Most notably India **improved its performance in the Renewable Energy category**, joining the group of medium performers.
- Comparatively low levels of per capita GHG emissions and a relatively ambitious mitigation target for 2030 give India an overall high rating in the emissions category.



Agricultural Project with FAO

In News

The government has launched a **Global Environment Facility (GEF) assisted project** namely, **“Green – Ag: Transforming Indian Agriculture for global environment benefits and the conservation of critical biodiversity and forest landscapes”** in collaboration with the **Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO)**.

Key Highlights

- The project has been launched in **high-conservation-value landscapes** of five States namely (i) **Madhya Pradesh**: Chambal Landscape, (ii) **Mizoram**: Dampa Landscape, (iii) **Odisha**: Similipal Landscape, (iv) **Rajasthan**: Desert National Park Landscape and v) **Uttarakhand**: Corbett-Rajaji Landscape.
- The project seeks to mainstream biodiversity, climate change and sustainable land management objectives and practices into Indian agriculture.
- The overall objective of the project is to catalyze transformative change of India's agricultural sector to support achievement of national and global environmental benefits and conservation of critical biodiversity and forest landscapes.
- The project will support harmonization between India's agricultural and environmental sector priorities and investments.

About GEF

- The Global Environment Facility was established on the eve of the **1992 Rio Earth Summit** to help tackle most pressing environmental problems.
- Since then, the GEF has provided over **\$17.9 billion in grants** and **mobilized an additional \$93.2 billion in co-financing** for more than 4500 projects in 170 countries.
- GEF funds are available to developing countries and countries with economies in transition to

meet the objectives of the international environmental conventions and agreements.

- GEF support is provided to government agencies, civil society organizations, private sector companies, research institutions, among the broad diversity of potential partners, to implement projects and programs in recipient countries.

About FAO:

- The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) is specialized agency of the United Nations that leads international efforts to defeat hunger.
- It is headquartered at Rome, Italy.

Government Launches National Clean Air Programme**In News**

- Union Environment Minister has launched the **National Clean Air Programme (NCAP)** to combat air pollution in a **comprehensive and time-bound manner**.
- The programme's objective is to put in place mitigation actions for prevention, control and abatement of air pollution.

Key Highlights

- The tentative national level target of 20%–30% reduction of PM2.5 and PM10 concentration by 2024 is proposed under the NCAP taking 2017 as the base year for the comparison of concentration.
- The programme will **augment the air quality-monitoring network** across the country and will strengthen the awareness and capacity building activities.
- The NCAP will **be a mid-term, five-year action plan with 2019 as the first year**.
- However, many studies indicate that significant outcome in terms of air pollution initiatives are visible only in the long-term.
- Hence, the programme may be further extended to a longer time horizon after a mid-term review of the outcomes.
- **The approach for NCAP includes collaborative, multi-scale and cross-sectoral coordination** between the relevant central ministries, state governments and local bodies.
- Dovetailing of the existing policies and programmes including the National Action Plan on Climate Change (NAPCC) and other initiatives of Government of India in reference to climate change will be done while execution of NCAP.
- There will be **use of the Smart Cities program** to launch the NCAP in the 43 smart cities falling in the list of the 102 non-attainment cities.
- The NCAP is **envisaged to be dynamic and will continue to evolve** based on the additional scientific and technical information as they emerge.
- **City specific action plans** are being formulated for 102 non-attainment cities identified for implementing mitigation actions under NCAP.
- **Institutional Framework** at Centre and State Level comprising of Apex Committee at the Ministry of Environment Forest and Climate Change in the Centre and at Chief Secretary Level in the States are to be constituted.

- Other features of NCAP include, *increasing number of monitoring stations in the country including rural monitoring stations, technology support, emphasis on awareness and capacity building initiatives, setting up of certification agencies for monitoring equipment, source apportionment studies, emphasis on enforcement, specific sectoral interventions etc.*

Today cities occupy just 3% of the land, but contribute to 82% of GDP and responsible for 78% of Carbon dioxide emissions; cities though are engines of growth and equity but they have to be sustainable and it is in this context that NCAP being a very inclusive program holds special relevance.

Parliamentary Panel On Western Ghats

In News

- The **Committee on Government Assurances** in the Rajya Sabha had submitted its report.
- The panel examined **issues regarding the categorisation of Western Ghats parts as Ecologically Sensitive Areas (ESAs)** as per the recommendations of two different committees led by Madhav Gadgil and K. Kasturirangan.

The Committee on Government Assurances keeps track of assurances given by Ministers on the floor of the Upper House while replying to queries from parliamentarians.

Key Highlights

- Over 56,000 km of **ecologically sensitive areas in the Western Ghats** could not be earmarked as ‘no-go’ zones for polluting activities due to State governments’ ‘insensitivity’.
- Large-scale de-forestation, mining and construction activities were continuing unabated, hurting the ecology of the Western Ghats.
- **Floods a warning - The recent catastrophic monsoon floods in Kerala and parts of Karnataka should serve as alarm bells for administrations** in the six States of Goa, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka that have failed to mark ecologically sensitive areas in the Western Ghats.
- The Committee is of the view **that implementation of recommendations of Kasturirangan report** is only possible with active support of local population.
- It also requires intrinsic consultation with the State Government at micro level to achieve the desired objectives of saving the Western Ghats.

WHAT THE REPORTS SAY



KASTURIRANGAN	GADGIL
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Identified 37% (approx.) of the Western Ghats as ecologically sensitive area ➤ New building and construction projects of below 20,000 square meter, township and area development projects as well as other projects/activities will be allowed in ESA ➤ Ban of mining, quarrying, sand mining and thermal power plants brought under red category industries in ESAs ➤ Hydro power has been recommended to be allowed in the ESA subject to stringent conditions. Wind energy is permitted in the ESAs subject to applicable regulations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ The WGEEP divided the Western Ghats region into three ecologically sensitive zones (ESZ). In ESZ-1, there will be a ban on the use of private forest land for non-forest purpose or agricultural activity allowing extension of village settlements ➤ ESZ-2 allows renovation and extension of existing structures ➤ In ESZ 1 and 2, introduction of organic farming and banning pesticides over a period of time ➤ Approval of Grama Sabhas for projects and is against mega- hydel projects, thermal projects, mining and quarrying in ESZ

India Demands Removal Of Rosewood From CITES**In News**

India has proposed to **remove rosewood (*Dalbergia sissoo*)** from Appendix II of Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (**CITES**).

Key Highlights

- The species is currently part of **Appendix II of CITES** that has species not necessarily threatened with extinction, but in which trade must be controlled to avoid utilisation incompatible with their survival.
- However, India does not want that for rosewood. The species grows at a very fast rate and has the capacity to become naturalised outside its native range, even it is invasive in some parts of world.
- India sent the proposal **ahead of the 18th Conference of Parties (COP) of CITES, which will be held in Colombo from May 23 to June 3.**
- Apart from *Dalbergia sissoo*, India has also proposed to transfer **small clawed otters (*Aonyx cinereus*), smooth coated otters (*Lutrogale perspicillata*), Indian Star Tortoise (*Geochelone elegans*)** from Appendix II to Appendix I, thereby giving more protection to the species.
- The proposal also includes inclusion of *Gekko gecko* and Wedgefish (*Rhinidae*) in Appendix II of CITES. It says that *Gekko gecko* is traded highly for Chinese traditional medicine.
- Regulation of trade in the species is required to ensure that the harvest of specimens from the wild is not reducing the wild population to a level at which its survival might be threatened by continued harvesting or other influences.

CITES works by subjecting international trade in specimens of selected species to certain controls. All import, export, re-exports and introduction from the sea of species covered by the convention has to be authorized through a licensing system. CITES is legally binding on the Parties, however, it does not take the place of national laws.

It has **three appendices**. **Appendix I** has species threatened with extinction. Trade in specimens of these species is permitted only in exceptional circumstances. **Appendix III** contains species that are protected in at least one country, which has asked other CITES parties for assistance in controlling trade.

Ban On Plastic**In News**

India won Global acclaim for its “**Beat Plastic Pollution**” resolve declared on World Environment Day last year. Under this resolve, it pledged to eliminate single-use plastic by 2022.

Issue

- ✓ **The Plastic Waste Management Rules, 2016** are clear that producers, importers and brand owners must **adopt a collect-back system** for the plastic they introduce into the environment.
- ✓ Although the rules were notified in the same year, not much has been done to take the process forward.
- ✓ At the very least, local bodies should consult manufacturers or importers to assess the problem.
- ✓ Delaying such a measure has created the anomalous situation of small producers of plastics facing the ban, while **more organised entities** covered by the Extended Producer Responsibility clause **continue with business as usual**.

- ✓ Such enforcement failure is not an argument in favour of relaxing the prohibition on flimsy plastics that are typically used for under 15 minutes, but to recover thousands of tonnes of waste that end up in dumping sites.
- ✓ There is little doubt that plastics play a major role in several industries, notably in the automotive, pharmaceutical, health care and construction sectors.
- ✓ But it is the **fast moving consumer goods sector** that uses large volumes of packaging, posing a higher order challenge.

National Wildlife Board Clears ONGC Trishna Gas Project

In News

The National Wildlife Board has given its approval for the **Trishna Gas project** of ONGC which falls in the **Trishna Wildlife Sanctuary in the Gomati district of Tripura**.

Trishna Gas Project

- ONGC has discovered 10-12 gas bearing wells in the Trishna Wildlife sanctuary. The gas extracted from these wells would be supplied to the North Eastern Electric Power Corporation Ltd (NEEPCO) owned 100 MW gas-based thermal power project at Monarchak in Sonamura subdivision of Sipahijala district of Tripura.
- **Trishna Wildlife Sanctuary:** The Trishna Wildlife Sanctuary **is located in Tripura**. It was established in 1988. The vegetations in the sanctuary fall under four broad categories of tropical semi-evergreen forest, the east Himalayan lower Bhanar sal, Moist mixed deciduous forest and the Savanah woodland.

- **National Wildlife Board:** National Board for Wild Life is a statutory organization constituted under the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972. It is an apex body to review all wildlife-related matters and approves projects in and around national parks and sanctuaries.
- The National Board for Wild Life is chaired by the Prime Minister, Union Minister of Environment, Forest and Climate Change is the vice-chairman of the Board and the members include 15 non-government members, 19 ex-officio members and 10 government officials such as secretaries.

Odisha Takes Its First Step Towards Promoting Turtle Tourism

In News

- Odisha's Puri beach witnessed its first **turtle festival** on January 13, 2019.
- The aim of this festival was to promote eco-tourism, which in turn could help conserve Olive Ridley turtle.
- While Odisha has half of the world's Olive Ridley turtle population, 90 per cent of India's turtle population lives in the state. Despite that no actions have been taken for their conservation.
- **The Olive ridley turtles are the smallest and most abundant** of all sea turtles found in the world, inhabiting warm waters of the Pacific, Atlantic and Indian oceans and is categorized as **'Vulnerable'** by IUCN.
- The Olive ridley is the most numerous among the sea turtles found in India and is well **known for its arribadas, or annual mass nestings** when thousands of turtles migrate to the breeding ground to nest simultaneously.

Why The Need For Turtle Tourism?

- Turtles and tourism go together in Australia, Coast Rica, Mexico, Sri Lanka and other countries, where tourists visit beaches to see the turtles by paying hefty amounts. But, Odisha is yet to attract tourists for this.
- Four years back, the state government had announced an eco-tourism project in the rookeries of turtles, but it never took off. States like Goa and Kerala have already launched programmes to woo tourists by keeping few sea turtles in some pens near beaches.

Hawaiian Tree Snail**In News**

- Hawaiian tree snail has become the first species to be declared **officially extinct in 2019**.
- Climate change and invasive predators have taken a heavy toll on native animals and insects in the Hawaiian Islands
- The passing of **George**, a member of the ***Achatinella apexfulva* species** and a tree **snail** who fed on tree fungus, algae and bacteria, epitomizes the decline of biodiversity on the Hawaiian islands
- **Snails like George** used to be ubiquitous throughout the Hawaiian islands. In fact, the *Achatinella apexfulva* was the very first snail species to be written about by non-native scientists.

Bhitarkanika Now Has More Estuarine Crocodiles**In News**

The population of the saltwater or estuarine crocodile (*Crocodylus porosus*) has increased in the water bodies of Odisha's Bhitarkanika National Park and its nearby areas in Kendrapara district, with forest officials counting 1,742 individuals in this year's annual reptile census.

Findings

- During the two day-long crocodile census, it was sighted 619 hatchlings, 347 yearlings, 273 juveniles, 178 sub-adults (six-eight feet long) and 325 adults (more than 8 feet long).
- The increase in population was primarily due to the far-sighted measures of the government. "In 1975, the Union Ministry of Forest and Environment, in collaboration with the United Nations Development Programme, had started a crocodile breeding and rearing project in **Dangamala within the Bhitarkanika Park**.
- *Nine years back, the Guinness Book of World Records recorded a 23-foot-long saltwater crocodile in Bhitarkanika as the largest crocodile in the world.*

The three species of crocodilians—saltwater, Mugger and Gharial— breeding programmes had been started in 1975 in 34 places in West Bengal, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and other states in India and Nepal. But the saltwater crocodile conservation programme in Bhitarkanika is the most successful one, as in 1975, Bhitarkanika was the home of only 96 crocodiles

Clean Ganga Fund**In News**

- The officials and partners of National Mission for Clean Ganga (NMCG) came together on one platform, to make personal donations to the Clean Ganga Fund on a voluntary basis.

- The Clean Ganga Fund was established as a Trust under the Indian Trusts Act with the Union Finance Minister heading the Board. DG, NMCG acts as the CEO of the Clean Ganga Fund.
- Domestic donors to the CGF are eligible for **100% income tax exemption** under Section 80 G (1) (i) of the Income Tax Act 1961.
- Contributions to CGF also fall **within the purview of CSR activity** as defined in Schedule VII to the Companies Act, 2013.

Project for Sustainable Catchment Forest Management Assures

In News

- The Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) -supported Project for Sustainable Catchment Forest Management (SCATFORM) was officially **inaugurated in Tripura**.
- The objective of the Project is to manage and enhance forest area ecosystems in the project area thereby contributing to environmental conservation and sustainable socio-economic development in Tripura.
- It will be done by sustainable forest ecosystem management, biodiversity conservation, livelihood improvement support and strengthening institutional capacity.

Key Highlights

- Through this project, JICA focuses to **improve the quality of forests** in Tripura and to **conserve the ecosystem** through participatory and collaborative management.
- The Project will work towards enhancing forest ecosystems through catchment protection approach, thereby improving the quality of forest and lives of forest-dependent communities in the state.
- One of the unique approaches of this project is **co-financing by the State Government**.
- The **Tripura Forest Department (TFD)** is the Executing Agency of the Project.
- The Project will be implemented mainly in upper catchments where forest degradation and soil erosion are severe and livelihood improvement needs are high.
- The activities will include promotion of bamboo plantation, agroforestry based livelihood, eco-tourism development, development of value addition for bamboo and other **Non-Timber Forest Product (NTFP)** in order to create alternative livelihood opportunities for local communities.
- Also, JICA aims to collaborate for the **enhancement of the bamboo industry** through the Project under the idea of "**Japan-India Act East Forum**".
- This forum's objective is to expand the cooperation between Japan and India in the North Eastern Region (NER).

New Global Alliance To Help End Plastic Waste

In News

Alliance to End Plastic Waste (AEPW), comprising about 30 companies, aims to invest \$1.5 billion over the next five years in fight against plastic pollution.

Highlights of the Alliance:

- The aim is to develop solutions to mitigate plastic pollution and promote a circular economy by utilising used plastics.

- Designed as a non profit organization, the Alliance includes companies from across North and South America, Europe, Asia, Southeast Asia, Africa as well as the Middle East are part of the Alliance.
- Member companies include those that make, use, sell, process, collect and recycle plastics, ~~as well as chemical and plastic manufacturers, consumer goods companies, retailers, converters, and waste management companies,~~ also called the plastics value chain. **From India, Reliance Industries will advance efforts towards a sustainable future.**

Small Woodbrown butterfly

In News

- After a span of 120 long years, researchers at the Sikkim University in Gangtok have rediscovered the Small **Woodbrown butterfly species from Bakhim in Khanchendzonga National Park.**
- This finding has opened the possibility of occurrence of more species of butterflies in the region which is one of the 36 biodiversity hotspots of the world.

Key Highlights

- The **Small Woodbrown butterfly, scientifically known as *Lethe nicetella*** is named after its brown-coloured wings patched with white round spots.
- **It is amongst the smallest members of the genus *Lethe*, with wings that are up to 50 millimeters long.**
- The species is **endemic to the eastern Himalayas** and occurs in forests lying between elevations of 1,800-2,800 metres.
- Across the world, **species of *Lethe* are found in Sunda Islands, Japan, Siberia, Himalayas and peninsular India.**
- Of the 41 species of *Lethe* that are found in India, 32 species are reported from Sikkim alone.

Importance Of The Butterfly Species

- Butterflies are important components of the natural ecosystem. They help to pollinate flowers—a process which is necessary for plants to produce viable seeds.
- Also, some species of butterflies feed on plants, some on animal dung, and very few on smaller insects like aphids, making them important links of Nature's food chain.
- Butterflies are also used as indicator species—that is, species whose abundance and physical traits are used by scientists to study forest or ecosystem health.

The South Asian Nitrogen Hub

In News

The UK Government announces its commitment to fund a major international research programme to tackle the challenge that nitrogen pollution poses for the environment, food security, human health and the economy in South Asia.

Key Highlights

- **The South Asian Nitrogen Hub**, a partnership led by the **UK's Centre for Ecology & Hydrology.**
- 50 organisations from across the UK and South Asia have collaborated with funding from UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) under its **Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF).**

- Nitrogen is a naturally occurring element that is a component of all proteins and essential for all life - humans, animals and plants. Unreactive nitrogen gas (N₂) makes up 78 per cent of the air we breathe.

Why Focus On Nitrogen

- Public debate about planetary health tends to focus on carbon.
- But nitrogen is also critically important as it is connected to air pollution, biodiversity loss, the pollution of rivers and seas, ozone depletion, health, economy and livelihoods.
- Nitrogen pollution is caused, for example, by emissions from chemical fertilizers, livestock manure, and burning fossil fuels.
- Previous efforts have addressed only specific aspects of the problem, while the Hub will bring these together in a more coherent approach.
- Nitrogen pollution presents **significant barriers to achieving United Nations Sustainable Development Goals** on: Zero Hunger, Climate Action, Good Health & Well-being, Clean Water & Sanitation, Affordable & Clean Energy, Life Below Water, Life on Land, No Poverty, Responsible Consumption & Production, and Decent Work & Economic Growth.

Impact of Nitrogen Pollution

- **Nitrogen pollution comes in many forms, with multiple impacts - for humans, animals and plant life.**
- Gases such as ammonia (NH₃) and nitrogen dioxide (NO₂) contribute to poor air quality and can aggravate respiratory and heart conditions, leading to millions of premature deaths across the world.
- Similarly, nitrous oxide (N₂O) is a **greenhouse gas** that depletes the ozone layer.
- Nitrate from chemical fertilizers, manure and industry pollutes rivers and seas, posing a health risk for humans, fish, coral and plant life.
- Atmospheric nitrogen pollution stimulates growth of certain plants at the expense of more sensitive species with a high conservation value.
- There is a significant risk to global biodiversity hotspots such as the Himalayan foothills.
- The Indo-Gangetic Plain (IGP) has the highest ammonia (NH₃) concentrations in the world, arising mainly from livestock excreta and urea fertilizer used in agriculture.

Golden Langur Breeding Project In Assam

In News

- Assam has announced the success of Golden Langur Conservation Breeding Programme in State.
- The golden langur conservation project was undertaken at the **Assam State Zoo in Guwahati** during the 2011-12 fiscal.

About the Programme

- The zoo authorities had shifted **a pair of golden langurs — Bolin and Lovely** — from the display enclosure to the isolated which resulted into birth of female infant.
- Villagers surrounding an area, which is a contiguous forest patch having Manas National Park on the west and Royal Manas National Park of Bhutan on the north, have extended their support for the creation of Golden Langur Habitat Conservation.

- Golden langur, which are on the list of **25 most endangered primates** of the world, have finally got a secure landscape of their own.
- Apart from a 60 square mile area in northwestern Assam, small populations of Golden Langur are found in Bhutan and Tripura.

India Cannot Handle More Tigers

In News

While conservation efforts are aimed at increasing the tiger count in India, global experts and officials in the government suggest that India must also prepare for a new challenge — of reaching the limits of its management capacity.

Issue:

- With dwindling core forest as well as the shrinking of tiger corridors (strips of land that allow tigers to move unfettered across diverse habitat), there were several challenges — alongside the traditional challenges of poaching and man-animal conflict — to India's success at tiger conservation.
- Recent attempts at translocating tigers to unpopulated reserves, such as Satkosia in Orissa, have ended badly, with one of the tigers dying.

Officially, India had 2,226 tigers as of 2014. An ongoing census is expected to reveal an update to these numbers.

However, according to head of the Global Tiger Forum, India's current capacity to host tigers ranged from 2,500-3,000 tigers.

E-waste

In News

Around 50 million tonnes of electronic waste, or e-waste, is being thrown away each year, according to a new joint United Nations report.

Highlights of the Report:

- To highlight the rising challenge posed by mountains of discarded electronics worldwide, seven UN entities came together to launch the report at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland.
- The joint report, entitled, "**A New Circular Vision for Electronics – Time for a Global Reboot**", calls for a new vision for e-waste based on the "circular economy" concept.
- A **regenerative system created by circular economy** can minimize waste and energy leakage.
- **Despite growing e-waste, "A New Circular Vision" points to the importance of technologies from the so-called Internet of Things** – a network of devices that contain electronics and the connectivity that allows them to exchange data – through to cloud computing advances, which can all result in smarter recycling and tracking of e-waste.
- The report supports the work of **the E-waste Coalition, which includes** *the International Labour Organization (ILO); International Telecommunication Union (ITU); United Nations Environment Programme (UN Environment); United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO); United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR); United Nations University (UNU) and Secretariats of the Basel and Stockholm Conventions.*

An Era of Deep Fakes

Syllabus: Role of media and social networking sites in internal security challenges,

In News

With increasing advances in artificial Intelligence (AI) technologies and machine learning, a new **era of 'deep fakes' has emerged.**

What Is Deep Fake

- Deep fake technology **employs AI based image blending methods** to seemingly **create real fakes and deceptive videos.**
- This makes differentiating fake from real even more cumbersome and complex.
- Fake celebrity footages, propaganda videos or revenge porn are all outcomes of the deep fake technology.

What Are The Dangers Associated

- People of interest may be targeted for **public trolling** or for **gaining cheap revenge.**
- General public can be targeted for **garnering false public support**, and to achieve **cyber propaganda.**
- It has potential to **heavily influence elections** or trigger disinformation campaigns.
- Another use of deep fakes could be in **illegally unlocking smart devices** due to face detection technologies getting imbibed in these machines.

Way Forward

- Use of **live face detection methods** in order to unlock smart devices
- Closely looking at the background activities and liveliness (A real video would generate more metadata)
- **Watermarking or use of digital hologram** in the original video
- **Raising awareness of civil society** and make them more prepared and resilient to disinformation campaigns.

Exclusive Satellite to Help in Securing Pakistan, Bangladesh Borders

Syllabus: Security challenges and their management in border areas

In News

- Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) will launch a satellite exclusively for the home ministry
- It is aimed to help it further strengthen its frontiers with Pakistan and Bangladesh.

Key Highlights

- The move is part of recommendations made by a task force on the **use of space technology in improving border management.**
- Report has identified *island development, border security, communication and navigation, Geographic Information System (GIS) and operations planning system, and border infrastructure development* as the **areas for use of space technology.**
- To execute the project in a time bound manner, a short, medium and long-term plan has been proposed for implementation in five years.

- **In short term**, immediate needs of border guarding forces will be met by procurement of high resolution imagery and hiring of bandwidth for communications.
- **In mid-term**, one satellite is being launched by the ISRO for exclusive use of the MHA.
- **Over the long term**, the MHA will develop ground segment and network infrastructure to share satellite resources by user agencies, develop a central archival facility for storing various imagery resources and dissemination of the same to user agencies.
- **The Border Security Force (BSF)** has been designated as **lead agency** for implementation of ground segment and network infrastructure, including establishment of archival facility.

Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2018

Syllabus: Linkages of organized crime with terrorism

In News

- UN Office on Drugs and Crimes (UNODC) has released Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2018.
- The 2018 Report is the **fourth** of its kind mandated by the General Assembly through the **2010 United Nations Global Plan of Action to Combat Trafficking in Persons**.
- The report draws on information from 142 countries, examining trafficking trends and patterns.

Key Highlights Of The Report

- Human trafficking has taken "horrific dimensions", with sexual exploitation of victims the main driver.
- **Children** now account for **30 %** of those being trafficked, and far more girls are detected than boys.
- Armed groups and terrorists are use human trafficking **to spread fear and gain victims to offer as incentives to recruit new fighters**. This can be seen from increased numbers of child soldiers, forced labour and sexual slavery.
- The global trend has shown a **steady increase** in **number of reported victims** since 2010.
- As an origin area for trafficking to the rest of the world, **victims from South Asia** have been detected in more than 40 countries around the world.
- **Asia and the Americas** are the regions which have seen the **largest increase in the numbers of victims detected**.
- It may be **either due to improved methods** of detecting, recording and reporting data on trafficking – **or a real increase** in the number of victims.
- **Trafficking for sexual exploitation** is the most prevalent form in **European countries**.
- **In sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East**, **forced labour** is the main factor driving the illicit trade.
- Women and girls **make up most trafficking victims worldwide**: almost three-quarters of them are trafficked for sexual exploitation, and **35 per cent** (women and girls) are trafficked for forced labour.
- **A new form of crime** has been cited in the report that includes the phenomenon of girls and young women in refugee camps in the Middle East being "**married off**" **without their consent** and subjected to sexual exploitation in neighbouring countries.
- There remain a **significant gap in knowledge** with many countries in sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia and some parts of East Asia still lacking sufficient capacity to record and share data on trafficking in persons.

Ways Suggested To Combat Trafficking

- **Enhanced national capacity** to detect victims through strengthened institutional efforts to combat trafficking including legislative reforms
- Coordination among national actors
- Special law enforcement capacities and improved victim protection efforts
- Specific focus of the international community in **developing standards for data collection**

About UNODC

- UNODC is a global leader in the fight against illicit drugs and international crime.
- It was established in **1997** through a merger between the **United Nations Drug Control Programme and the Centre for International Crime Prevention.**
- It is headquartered in Vienna.
- UNODC's work is based on **three major areas: health, justice and public safety.**
- UNODC helps member countries in different areas such as - *Organized crime and trafficking, Corruption, Crime prevention and criminal justice reform, Drug abuse prevention and health, Money Laundering and Terrorism prevention.*

Circumstances leading to trafficking:

- Armed conflict
- Mass displacement
- Weak rule of law
- Socio-economic hardship
- Social fragmentation and family breakdown
- Difficulty to speak out because of fear, lack of trust or shame.

Women Into Military Police in Non-Combat Roles

Syllabus: Various Security forces and agencies and their mandate

In News

- The Centre has decided to induct **women into the personnel below officer rank role** in the **military police.**
- This is the first time women will be inducted into a **non-combat role** in the military police.
- Currently, women are allowed in select areas such as *medical, legal, educational, signals and engineering wings of the Army.*

Key Highlights

- The women will be inducted in graded manner to **eventually comprise 20 per cent** of total Corps of Military Police.
- Role:
 - Investigate offences like rape, molestation and thefts.
 - Conduct military operations in cases where the Army needs help from the police.
 - Help in controlling refugee influx, especially crowds of women and children.

- Assist the civilian police and the administration during evacuation operations in villages near the border
- Frisk female suspects during cordon and search operations, and will oversee ceremonies, police discipline and prisoner of war camps

About Military Police

The role of the military police includes policing cantonments and army establishments, preventing a breach of rules and regulations by soldiers, maintaining movement of soldiers as well as logistics during peace and war, handling prisoners of war and extending aid to civil police whenever required.

Status in India

- The **Indian Air Force**, last year, had **inducted three women as fighter pilots**.
- A decision on having women as fighter pilots will be taken **after evaluating performance of the three women** -- *Avani Chaturvedi, Bhawana Kanth and Mohana Singh* who are now part of IAF's fighter squadron.
- The **Indian Navy** is currently deliberating on a policy on having women onboard the ships.
- The **Navy allows women in various other segments** including in legal, logistics, naval architecture and engineering departments.
- In **Indian Army**, women got the nod for induction into a **non-combat role** in the military police.

Women in Combat Role: A Debate

Arguments opposing the combat role

- **Physical Ability** - The standards of physical fitness have been set to suit men, and women attempting to reach them will over-stretch themselves and will suffer high injury rates.
- **Additional Burden** - integration of women through regulatory and disciplinary costs associated may not make it a worthwhile move.
- **Military readiness** - Pregnancy can affect the deployability of a unit when the unit has a disproportionate number of women or is understaffed.
- **Abuse by Enemy** - Both male and female prisoners are at risk of torture and rape, but misogynistic societies may be more willing to abuse woman prisoners.
- **Possible insubordination** – In India, most of the jawans are from rural origin, may not be ready to accept a woman as their officer.

Arguments in Support:

- **Ability vs Gender** - As long as an applicant is qualified for a position, one's gender is arbitrary.
- **Military Readiness** - Women, who choose to become active combat soldiers, are unlikely to shirk their duty by becoming pregnant after a call-up.
- **Changing Traditions** - Cultures change over time and the masculine subculture can evolve too. Many previously masculine professions have been successfully opened to women over the past century.
- **Wider base** - Having a wider personnel base allows militaries to have the best and most diplomatic soldiers working to end conflict quickly.

Conclusion:

- Many countries including Germany, Australia, Canada, the US, Britain, Denmark, Finland,

France, Norway, Sweden and Israel have allowed women in combat roles.

- India can certainly gain from their experience although there is a variance in the cultural milieu.
- There are a plethora of challenges that need to be tackled through a trial-and-error method to evolve a planned induction.

NIC Command & Control Centre Inaugurated

In News

- Indian government has inaugurated **National Informatics Center's Command & Control Centre (CCC)** and **Centre of Excellence in Artificial Intelligence (CoE in AI)** by NIC, at National Informatics Centre (NIC).
- Currently, NIC offers Data Centre and Cloud services to the Government and hosts over 10,000 e-Governance applications.
- **CCC** has been set up as a specialized facility with a nationwide view of ICT infrastructure for effective monitoring and management of the performance & availability of all these critical services.
- **CoE in AI** by NIC has been established with the motto of '**Inclusive AI**' for responsive governance, to work towards improving Govt. service delivery to citizens.
- It will be a platform for innovative new solutions in AI space, a gateway to test and develop solutions for projects undertaken by NIC at central and state level.
- **NIC was established in 1976** and works under the **Department of Electronics & Information Technology of Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology**.
- It acts as a premier science and technology organisation of the Government of India in informatics services and information and communication technology (ICT) applications.