UPSC

Contemporary Issues & Current Affairs March 2020
(Study Material)

By Jawwad Kazi

https://t.me/jawwadkazicurrentaffairs

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# Current Affairs

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## Coronavirus Outbreak in India

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<td>Q. Rapid spread of Coronavirus have highlighted some of risks associated with globalization. What measures can be taken to avoid repetition of the same?</td>
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<td>Why is it in news?</td>
<td>Number of people infected with COVID-19 has reached about 25000 as the India entered into the community transmission stage of coronavirus outbreak</td>
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| Current spread of COVID-19 | **Global spread:**  
(1) Global tally of corona cases now stands 2,833,031.  
(2) The pandemic has so far killed more than 195,000 people across the world and infected more than 27 lakh.  
**India:**  
(1) Total number of patients has reached around 25000 as of 25th April 2020.  
(2) COVID-19 has claimed 779 lives in India so far. |
| Origin and Transmission of Coronaviruses | **Origin from camels and bats:** Coronaviruses originate in animals like camels and bats and are zoonotic diseases as it passes from animals to humans occasionally.  
**Source of disease:** The source of a zoonotic disease is called reservoir species.  
**Occurrence of first case:** The first known case of COVID-19 was reported in the Chinese city of Wuhan in December 2019 and was traced to an animal market in the city.  
**WHO on spread of virus:** As per WHO, the disease spreads in humans via exposure to respiratory secretions – the small droplets from the nose or mouth of an infected person – either directly or indirectly.  
**Degree of transmissibility:**  
(1) The basic reproduction number (R_0) is a measure of transmissibility that aims to describe the average number of people a new case will infect.  
(2) For COVID-19, WHO estimates R_0 = 1.4 to 2.5. However, many researchers think this figure is under-estimated. |
| Previous outbreaks of coronaviruses over the world | **Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) 2003**  
(1) SARS Coronavirus was first identified in 2003.  
(2) It first infected humans in Guangdong province of China in 2002  
(3) The epidemic of SARS affected 24 countries and resulted in more than 8000 confirmed cases in 2003.  
(4) Primarily transmits from person to person.  
**Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) 2012**  
(1) MERS was first reported in Saudi Arabia in 2012 and since spread to several other countries.  
(2) It is caused by the MERS CoV (Middle East Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus).  
(3) Most MERS patients develop severe respiratory illness with symptoms of fever, cough and shortness of breath. |
Clinical aspects of COVID-19

- About 30% of people who have gotten this illness have died
- **Affects the URT:** In humans, it affects the upper respiratory tract with varying severity.
- **Wide range of symptoms:**
  1. Respiratory infections ranging from the common cold to bronchiolitis.
  2. Pneumonia, gastroenteritis and neurological disorders can also occur.
  3. Other symptoms headache, chills, sore throat and cough.
- **Incubation period:**
  1. Incubation period is the period between exposure to an infection and the appearance of the first symptoms.
  2. The incubation period for COVID-19 is from 2 to 5 days and symptoms have a range of 3 to 18 days.

Stages of the outbreak

- **Stage 1: Appearance of first few cases**
  1. Stage 1 is the first appearance of the disease through people with a travel history, with everyone contained, their sources traced, and no local spread from those affected.
  2. The number of those infected would be quite low at this stage.
- **Stage 2: Local Transmission**
  1. Stage 2 is local transmission, when those who were infected and have a travel history spread the virus to close friends or family.
  2. At this stage, every person who came in contact with the infected can be traced and isolated.
- **Stage 3: Community Transmission**
  1. It is the phase of community transmission, when infections happen in public and a source for the virus cannot be traced.
  2. At this stage, large geographical lockdowns become important as random members of the community start developing the disease.
- **Stage 4: Epidemic**
  1. Stage 4 is when the disease actually becomes an epidemic in a country, such as it was in China, with large numbers of infections and a growing number of deaths with no end in sight.
  2. It is then considered to be endemic or now prevalent in the region.

Steps taken by Government of India and various state govs.

- **Enforcement of ED Act and DM Act**
  1. On 11 March 2020, the Cabinet Secretary of India, announced that all states and UTs should invoke provisions of Section 2 of the Epidemic Diseases Act, 1897.
  2. On 14 March, the Union Government declared the pandemic as a "notified disaster" under the Disaster Management Act, 2005, enabling states to spend a larger part of funds from the State Disaster Response Fund to fight the virus.
- **Declaration of hotspots:** Ministry of Home Affairs has declared metropolitan cities having large number of COVID-19 patients as hotspots with stricter lockdown measures being followed.
- **Containment zones:** State governments and Municipal Corporations within their respective jurisdictions, have declared certain areas as containment zones with restriction on movement from one zone to another.
- **Setting up of new labs:** State governments are setting up new labs at medical colleges and universities to intensify testing.
### Challenges

- **Inadequate testing capacity:** The testing capacity at various labs both govt and private is inadequate as most of reagents required are in short supply and need to be imported.
- **Scarcity of ventilators and PPE kits:** There is acute of shortage life support systems (ventilator) and Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) kits as these are not in such huge demand at normal times.
- **Loss to the state exchequer:** Economic activities such as manufacturing, sale purchase of immovable property, liquor sales etc. has come to standstill due to lockdown and this has impacted the state government’s exchequer massively.

### Way ahead

- **Curbing spread of the virus:**
  1. Complete lockdown may not prove to be a long-term solution for curbing spread of virus.
  2. Awareness campaigns and proper diagnosis and isolation will only help to effectively minimise further transmission of the infection.
- **Development of vaccine:** Research on development of vaccine as well as the treatment needs to be expedited for prevention and complete treatment of the disease.
- **Rapid testing mechanism:** Rapid testing mechanism with highest levels of accuracy should be developed to intensify testing so that no positive patient remains untraced.
- **Information sharing:** States having patients with coronavirus infection should engage in sharing accurate information about the spread of disease with Union Ministry of Health as well as its attached agencies for better containment of the spread of virus.
- **Public support:** The public will have to adopt better lifestyle practices such as maintaining personal hygiene and following social distancing and support the government in their efforts by cooperating with them.

### Sources

The Hindu, Live Mint, MoHFW site, PIB, Science Direct, Down to Earth
# Essential Commodities Act, 1955

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<th>Syllabus</th>
<th>• GSII: Government policies and interventions for development in various sectors and issues arising out of their design and implementation.</th>
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<tr>
<td>Question</td>
<td>• The 2019-20 Economic survey has recommended that the Essential Commodities Act, 1955, be repealed, because of its ineffectiveness. Comment.</td>
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<td>Context</td>
<td>• Due to the Covid-19 outbreak, the Ministry of Consumer Affairs has brought hand sanitisers and masks (2-ply, 3-ply variety and N95) under the purview of the Essential Commodities Act (EC Act) until June 30.</td>
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</table>
| About the Essential Commodities Act, 1955 | • Under this Act, if the Central government thinks that it is necessary to maintain or increase supplies of any essential commodity or make it available at fair prices, it can regulate or prohibit the production, supply, distribution and sale of that commodity.  
• Some essential commodities listed under the Act are foodstuffs including edible oils & oilseeds, drugs, fertilisers, petroleum and petroleum products, a list that is drawn up after joint consultation between the centre and the states  
• Centre has the power to add or remove any commodity in public interest from this list. Ex: it recently added masks and hand sanitisers.  
• EC Act, in the past, was mostly invoked to control the price rise in food products.  
• When the prices of any of essential commodities rise, the government imposes stock-holding limits to prevent hoarding, confiscates the stocks of violators and imposes punishment.  
• Origin of the Act: It has its origin in a pre-Independence wartime measure “the Defence of India Rules of 1939” which was promulgated to address the problem of wartime shortages and consequent hoarding. |
| Against | • Observations by Economic Survey 2019-20 against the EC Act:  
  (1) **Anachronistic Act:** EC Act was passed in 1955 when the country was preoccupied with famines & food shortage, the transport infrastructure across the country was poor and markets not integrated.  
  (2) So a production shock in one part of the country could lead to hoarding and black marketing which is not the case any more. Shortages in one part of the country can be countered if there is ample supply somewhere else.  
  (3) **Low Conviction Rate and Harassment under the Act:**  
  (a) Raids conducted under the Act have achieved a conviction rate of just 3.8 per cent (2,941 convicted persons in 76,033 raids), as on 16 December 2019.  
  (b) Raids under ECA lead only to harassment of traders, thereby adversely affecting the role of trade in the marketing of the given commodity.  
  (c) **Volatility in Prices:**  
  (d) Interventions under this Act have only led to an increase in volatility of the wholesale and retail prices of commodities, rather than deflating them. |
(e) It cites three instances to prove this — the imposition of stock limits on
dal in 2006, sugar in 2009, and the recent one on onions in September
2019

(f) The Economic Survey 2019-20 argued that it hampered remunerative
prices for farmers and discouraged investment in storage infrastructure.

- **Food processing Industry Harmed:**
  1. Stockholding limits do not distinguish between food processing industries
     and food retail chains which need to hold large stocks for their operations.
  2. Food processing industries especially need to keep stocks for a few months
     at a time so that fluctuating prices don't throw their business out of gear.
  3. But under the Essential Commodities Act, these can become liable at least
     for harassment.
  4. These are corporate entities with large, earmarked storage facilities which
     can be easily identified. So it is easy for inspectors to go after them.
  5. In such a situation, large scale private investments are unlikely to flow
     into food processing and cold storage facilities. This negatively affect
     India’s National Mission on Food Processing.

- **Identifying Actual Hoarders is Not Easy:**
  1. Given that almost all crops are seasonal, ensuring round-the-clock supply
     requires adequate build-up of stocks during the season.
  2. So, it may not always be possible to differentiate between genuine stock
     build-up and speculative hoarding.
  3. Hoarders may not be small traders but their operations are not
     corporatized and they have many avenues to split away and hoard supplies.
  4. The conviction rate under the Act is also abysmally low.
  5. So the hoarders go scot free and genuine players in the food economy are
     harassed.
  6. **Farmer Issues:**
  7. There can be genuine shortages triggered by weather-related disruptions
     in which case prices will move up. So, if prices are always monitored,
     farmers may have no incentive to farm.
  8. It has been an argument that the EC Act is draconian and not suited for
     times when farmers face problems of plenty rather than scarcity.

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<td><strong>COVID-19 Crisis:</strong></td>
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<td>Bringing masks and sanitisers under the EC Act visibly has enhanced the availability of these products to the public, at fair prices.</td>
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<td>Producers have been urged to manufacture these up to full capacity over three shifts.</td>
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<td>The government can take action against hoarders, speculators and those involved in jacking up prices or black-marketing.</td>
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<td>Besides this, quota restrictions on raw material holdings can be relaxed under the ECA Act.</td>
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<td><strong>Invoking the Act makes it harder for retailers to mislead customers:</strong> If they violate the norms, States can take action under the EC Act and the Prevention of Black Marketing and Maintenance of Supplies of Essential Commodities Act (PBMMSEC Act).</td>
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</table>
Saving the Common Man: Without the ECA, with the government able to control prices, the common man would be at the mercy of opportunistic traders and shopkeepers.

Producers need not worry much about the cap on prices, as they partly benefit from lower input prices, with higher volumes making up for the lower price point to some extent.

Way Forward

Overhauling the Act is Necessary:

ECA needs to be drastically overhauled to deal with crisis situations, to remove fears of traders, addressing the stockholding limits which defines hoarding.

To promote investment in the agriculture and horticulture sector, National Mission Food Processing.

Covid Crisis: In the context of a crisis like the current one, the EC Act seems to serve a purpose.

Source: Economic Survey, The Print, thehindubusinessline

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Boosting India's Export

Syllabus

GS 3: Indian Economy

- Indian Economy and issues relating to planning, mobilization of resources.

Question

- India is witnessing a slowdown in exports in recent times. Discuss how India can boost its export with the help of recent government initiatives in this direction.

Why is it in the news?

- The Finance Ministry announced the NIRVIK scheme in the Union Budget 2020-21, in order to provide high insurance cover for exporters.

- The government launched several other schemes recently for the growth and promotion of exports in India.

Background

- In recent times India is witnessing slowdown in exports:

  1. India's exports declined for the fifth month in a row at 1.8% in December 2019 to $27.36 billion.
  2. During April-December 2019-20, exports declined 1.96% to $ 239.29 billion.
  3. During the same period, imports declined 8.9% to $357.39 billion, resulting in a trade deficit of $ 118.10 billion.
  4. Around 19 of the 30 exporting sectors showed a decline in outbound shipment.

- Targets:

  1. India has set target to increase its exports to $1 trillion in the next five years.
  2. India's overall exports, including services, were at $535 billion last year.

Issues/Challenges

- Lack of Credit Availability:

  1. Exporters have long raised the concerns over availability of credit.

- Delay in GST Refunds:
(1) There is lack of liquidity for working capital due to delay in receiving GST refunds under input tax credit.

(2) This has led to a delay in getting clearances at ports.

**Product Quality Issues:**

(1) There are concerns regarding the quality of exported products and lack of sufficient incentives from the government.

(2) India's export growth is largely underpinned by rising global competitiveness. So to make high-quality goods at low cost is vital.

**India not part of major trading blocs:**

(1) Emerging multilateral trading agreements seem to be replacing global negotiations through the WTO.

(2) There are some mega trading blocs such as EU, ASEAN, Trans-Pacific, Trans-Atlantic and now RCEP.

(3) India is not part of these mega-trading blocs above, which may significantly impact India, as for bilateral trade deals, India's record so far has not been encouraging.

(4) India's decision to walk out of the RCEP will make access to a vast, rapidly-growing market difficult for them.

**Lack Of Proper Infrastructure:**

(1) There is inadequate space, both at the seaports and airports for keeping and storing various goods.

(2) Many goods require special facilities that India is still not able to provide.

**Other Structural Hurdles:**

(1) Elevated logistics costs

(2) Inflexible/Archaic labour laws

(3) Inverted/distorted duty structure (especially in textiles)

(4) Strong rupee

**Complex Procedures:** Indian exporters face problems of complex procedures and many a times not clear about the terms of the receiving countries.

**There are global uncertainties** given the trade war, Brexit cloud, growing protectionism and now COVID-19.

**Government Initiatives**

**Merchandise Exports from India Scheme (MEIS):**

(1) MEIS was introduced in the Foreign Trade Policy (FTP) for the period 2015-2020.

(2) The MEIS was launched as an incentive scheme for the export of goods and the rewards are given by way of duty credit scrips to exporters.

(3) The incentives under the schemes are calculated as a percentage, which is 2%, 3% or 5% of the realised FOB (free-on-board) value exports.

**Zero Defect and Zero Effect (ZED):**

(1) The objective is to promote Zero Defect and Zero Effect (ZED) manufacturing amongst MSMEs.

(2) Promote adaptation of Quality tools/systems and Energy Efficient manufacturing and enable MSMEs for manufacturing of quality products.

(3) The MSME sector accounts for about 40% of India's total exports.

**NIRVIK Scheme:**

(1) About 90% coverage of the principal and interest of the loan for pre- and post-shipment credit will be provided.
(2) Earlier, the Export Credit Guarantee Corporation (ECGC) used to provide a cover of 60% of the loss to banks.
(3) Its objective is to achieve higher export credit disbursement and to support mainly small exporters.

- **Embedded Taxes to be refunded:**
  (1) To digitally refund duties and taxes levied at the Central, State and local levels, such as electricity duties and VAT to exporters.
  (2) These taxes include value added tax, electricity duties and fuel used for transportation, which are not getting exempted or refunded under any other existing mechanism.
  (3) Institutional mechanisms are being created for developing each district as an export hubs.

- **Export hubs:**
  (1) Institutional mechanisms are being created for developing each district as an export hub, and proposed an allocation of ₹27,300 crore for industry and commerce in 2020-21.

- **Horticulture sector:**
  (1) Focus is to be on “one product one district” for better marketing and export are some of the steps in that direction.

- **Krishi Udan scheme:**
  (1) It will be launched by Ministry of Civil Aviation on international and national routes.
  (2) It will help to boost agricultural exports in both international as well as domestic routes.

- **Kisan Rail:**
  (1) Indian railways will set up Kisan rail through PPP arrangement, for transportation of perishable goods.
  (2) The train will have refrigerated coaches for milk and other perishable produce.

- **Blue Economy:**
  Raising of fish production to 200 lakh tonnes by 2022-23.
  (2) Fishery exports hoped to be raised to Rs 1 lakh crore by 2024-25.
  (3) Sagar Mitras: Youth to be involved in fishery extension through 3477 Sagar Mitras and 500 Fish Farmer Producer Organisations.

### Way ahead

- **To focus on Quality and Competitiveness:**
  (1) Survival in the export markets depend on quality, reliability and competitiveness.
  (2) Indian firms need to upgrade production process/technology and product quality.
  (3) The ZED scheme is a good step in this direction.

- **Infrastructure development:**
  (1) India’s construction sectors need a significant boost – roads, railways, ports, tourism infrastructure etc.
  (2) The logistics cost should significantly reduce to 9%-10% from current 14%.

- **Export Credit, Refunds and Simplifying Procedures:**
  (1) The export credit liquidity needs to be made available for exporters. The NIRVIK scheme is good step in this direction.
(2) To digitally refund the embedded taxes and duties levied at the Central, State and local levels is to be done on priority basis.
(3) India needs to reform its import and export procedures, including goods and services tax (GST) rules.
(4) It needs to ensure quick paperwork and trade clearances and focus on trade facilitation.

Source: The Hindu, LiveMint, PIB, ET.

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**Draft Competition Commission (Amendment) BILL 2020**

**Syllabus**
- GSII: Statutory, regulatory and various quasi-judicial bodies.

**Question**
- Discuss the pros and cons of the recently introduced draft of the Competition Commission (Amendment) Bill 2020.

**Context**
- The Ministry of Corporate Affairs (MCA) has recently introduced a draft Competition Commission (Amendment) Bill, 2020.

**About Competition Commission of India (CCI) and Draft provisions in the Bill of 2020**
- **About CCI:**
  - It is a **statutory and quasi-judicial body**, constituted in March 2009 under the Competition Act, 2002 (which replaced **Monopolies and Restrictive Trade Practices Act, 1969 (MRTP Act)** on the recommendations of Raghavan committee).
  - **Composition:** It consists of a Chairperson and 6 Members, appointed by the Central Government.
  - **Functions:**
    1. Fair and healthy competition in economic activities in the country.
    2. **Give opinion on competition issues**, make the markets work for the benefit and welfare of consumers
    3. Notify organizations that sell to India if it feels they may be negatively influencing competition in India’s domestic market etc.

- **Key Amendments under the Draft Bill, 2020:**
  1. Change in the **regulatory structure of the CCI**
  2. **Constituting a Governing Body** that will exercise general superintendence, direction & management of the affairs of CCI.
  3. **Creating a National Competition Policy**
  4. Statutory provision to invite public comments.
  5. Issuing the penalty guidance
  6. **Updated definition of the word Cartels** from the viewpoint of not only the seller but also the buyer.

**Pros**
- **Changes in the merger review and Cartel enforcement:**
  1. It would bring the Act more in line with U.S. and EU regulations.
  2. Step towards **cross-border harmonization for companies doing business in these jurisdictions**
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Cons</strong></th>
<th><strong>Collective abuse of dominance:</strong> the Draft provision has not added a provision on prohibiting collective abuse of dominance. Collective abuse of dominance takes place when two or more connected firms collude to abuse their collective dominant position in a market.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reinstating Competition Appellate Tribunal (COMPAT):</td>
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<td>(1) In 2017 COMPAT was merged with NCLAT. The draft does not consider reinstating it.</td>
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<td>(2) Reinstating the COMPAT is necessary for effectively addressing the appeals from orders of the Competition Commission of India (CCI) and ensuring efficient resolution of cases.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Clarity on procedure of inquiry by the CCI under Section 26 of the Competition Act, 2002: The CCI’s jurisdiction to pass certain orders has in fact been challenged on various occasions but the Bill has failed to do address this.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Autonomy to DG: DG will be appointed by the CCI and not the Central Government. This may be a step towards merging the DG office with the CCI. However, the challenge would be to protect the functional autonomy of the DG as was intended by the original legislation.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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### Permitting an informant to withdraw a complaint:

1. Currently the Act does not permit the informant or a complainant to withdraw his complaint. An inquiry by the CCI once started can only end after the DG has completed investigation and the CCI has passed an order agreeing or disagreeing with the DG recommendation.
2. The inclusion of a separate provision permitting the informant/complainant to withdraw the information, prior to an order directing an investigation being passed would have given CCI a power which could save precious regulatory resources.

Source: RSTV,

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**5**

## Assisted Reproductive Technology Regulation Bill, 2020

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Syllabus</th>
<th>GSII: Government policies and interventions for development in various sectors.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Question</td>
<td>Discuss the Advantages and Disadvantages of recently approved Assisted Reproductive Technology Regulation Bill, 2020.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Context</td>
<td>The Union Cabinet recently approved the Assisted Reproductive Technology Regulation Bill, 2020 to monitor medical procedures used to assist people to achieve pregnancy.</td>
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<tr>
<td>What is meant by Assisted Reproductive Technology?</td>
<td>ART refers to treatments and procedures that aim to achieve pregnancy, particularly an option for people who have already gone through various infertility treatment options but who still have not achieved pregnancy.</td>
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<td>Some ART options include the following:</td>
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<td>(1) Intrauterine insemination (IUI): placement of a man’s sperm into a woman's uterus using a long, narrow tube.</td>
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<td>(2) In-Vitro Fertilization: During IVF, eggs and sperm from the couple are incubated together in a laboratory to produce an embryo. A health care provider then places the embryo into the woman's uterus.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(3) Third party–assisted ART: It consists of assistance like Sperm Donation, Egg Donation, Surrogates and Gestational Carriers and Embryo Donation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provisions under ART Bill 2020</td>
<td>Objective: To regulate ART clinics with the objective of providing “safe and ethical” reproductive procedures to infertile couples.</td>
</tr>
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<td>Provisions:</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(1) Constitution of a National Board and State Boards: The National Board shall lay down code of conduct to be observed by persons working at clinics, to set the minimum standards of physical infrastructure, laboratory and diagnostic equipment and expert manpower to be employed by clinics and banks.</td>
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<td>The States and Union Territories shall constitute the State Boards and State Authorities within three months of the notification by the Central Government.</td>
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<td>The State Board shall have the responsibility to follow the policies and plans laid by the National Board for clinics and Banks in the State.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Need for the Bill</strong></td>
<td><strong>Pros</strong></td>
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</table>
| • Rising infertility in India, with one in ten affected, social stigma, lengthy and complex adoption processes have increased the demand for ART in India. | • Ensuring Ethical Practices:  
(1) The major benefit of the Act would be that it will regulate the Assisted Reproductive Technology services in the country.  
(2) Consequently, infertile couples will be more ensured/confident of the ethical practices in ARTs. |
| • Among Asian countries, India’s ART market is pegged at third position with reproductive medical tourism becoming a significant activity. | • Protecting Women and the Children from exploitation:  
(1) **Supporting oocyte donor** by an insurance cover, protected from multiple embryo implantation.  
(2) **Oocyte donation involves two women:** the donor and the woman who wishes to be pregnant.  
• The treatment provides an answer for infertile women with ovarian problems, such as primary or premature ovarian failure.  
• Protecting children born through ART by providing all rights equivalent to a Biological Children. |
| • A lack of regulation, standardisation of protocols and inadequate reporting along with the relatively low costs, led to the mushrooming of ART clinics across the country, leading to a plethora of legal, social and ethical issues. | • Regulating ART Banks:  
(1) These supply sperm/semen, oocytes/oocyte donor & surrogate mothers to ART clinics or the patients.  
(2) **Regulation by the National Board and State Boards will ensure employment of skilled manpower and right infrastructure** and streamline the cryopreservation of sperm, oocytes and embryos by the ART Banks. |
| **Database Creation:** Formal registration and an established database of medical institutions and clinics providing ART services, will help in regulation of services like surrogacy and abortion. | • Pre-Genetic Implantation Testing for any possible abnormal chromosomes:  
(1) It will benefit the child born through ART and also avoid any genetic diseases in the population born through these technologies.  
(2) **Reproductive rights and choices of women in India:** Together, the ART Bill; the Surrogacy Bill; the amendment to the Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act; and the older Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques Act present a bouquet of legislation that will have a positive impact on the reproductive rights and choices of women in India. |
| **(3) Database Creation:** Formal registration and an established database of medical institutions and clinics providing ART services, will help in regulation of services like surrogacy and abortion. | (3) **Database Creation:** Formal registration and an established database of medical institutions and clinics providing ART services, will help in regulation of services like surrogacy and abortion. |
| **(4) It provides safeguards to the patients who fall prey to illegal ART centers via stringent punishment provisions.** | (4) It provides safeguards to the patients who fall prey to illegal ART centers via stringent punishment provisions. |
| **(5) Confidentiality and Right to Privacy-** The bill ensures confidentiality of not only protecting the right to privacy of the intending couples, but also. | (5) **Confidentiality and Right to Privacy-** The bill ensures confidentiality of not only protecting the right to privacy of the intending couples, but also. |
Cons

- **Non-Inclusive ART Bill:**
  (1) Allowing ART treatment *for only infertile couples* and putting an age limit *(A man above 50 years and a woman above 45 years are not eligible for ART) on eligible couples* eliminates a whole group of people who may most need the treatment.
  (2) ICMR Guidelines were much more inclusive but have been ignored.

- **Violation of Right to Life (Article 21):**
  (1) In *Devika Biswas vs Union of India case (2016)*, the Supreme Court recognised the right to reproduction as an important component of the ‘right to life’ under Article 21.
  (2) Restricting ART and surrogacy *only to heterosexual relationships within a certain age group* and denying reproductive choices to LGBT, single persons and older couples, *would be a violation of Article 21*.

- **Overlooking Relationships other than heterosexual relationship:**
  (1) Only an ‘infertile couple’ is eligible to avail of ART under the ART Bill with the term ‘couple’ being narrowly defined to mean only a heterosexual relationship of a marriage or a live-in relationship.

- **Important Provisions of ICMR Guidelines of ART Ignored:**
  (1) ICMR Guidelines permitted *single women to benefit from ART* and also provided for ‘minimum physical requirement for ART clinics’, ‘essential qualifications of ART teams’, & ‘ART procedures’.
  (2) But these are missing from both the ART bill as well as the Surrogacy Bill.

- **Less women in the Decision Making Process:** Even though women are the main stakeholders in matters related to their wombs, *male legislators do not include them in the decision-making process*.

Way Forward

- **Need an Integrated Surrogacy and ART Law:** the current ART bill does impinge on surrogacy too, therefore the government must now work on ensuring synchrony in both Bills.

- **Gender Balance in Legislative Houses:** More women in the decision making process allows understanding of necessity of having well thought out, supportive and timely laws.

- **Need a law which is in sync with technology which is advancing by leaps and bounds.** *Delay in regulating technology can lead to a backlash, and the very medical interventions which are supposed to heal can harm.*

Source

PIB, the Hindu, PRS India
## Banking Regulation Act (Amendment) Bill 2020

### Syllabus

**GS 3: Indian Economy**
- Indian Economy and issues relating to planning, mobilization of resources.

### Question
- Government proposed amendments to Banking regulation Act in the wake of the recent Punjab & Maharashtra Cooperative (PMC) Bank crisis. Discuss what other issues the cooperative banks are facing in India.

### Why is it in the news?
- Recently in March 2020, The Finance Minister introduced the Banking Regulation (Amendment) Bill, 2020 in Lok Sabha.
- The Bill seeks to amend the Banking Regulation Act, 1949, with regard to cooperative banks.
- The Act regulates the functioning of banks and provides details on various aspects such as licensing, management, and operations of banks.
- The Union Cabinet had approved amendments to the Banking Regulation Act to empower RBI to have regulatory oversight over cooperative banks.

### Introduction
- **Data on Cooperative banks:**
  1. According to an RBI report, there were 1,500 plus urban cooperative banks as on 31 March 2018.
  2. It has more than 8.6 crore depositors, Rs 5 lakh crore deposits and 1,540 multi-state, urban and other cooperative banks.
- **The Amendments** came in the wake of the recent Punjab & Maharashtra Cooperative (PMC) Bank crisis.
- It will bring 1,540 cooperative banks under the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) regulation.
- **Aim of the Amendments:** To strengthen the financial stability of cooperative banks and boost public confidence in the banking system.
- **Presently:**
  1. Cooperative banks are governed by dual regulations- state cooperative bodies and the RBI.
  2. While financial supervision comes under the ambit of the banking regulator, appointments are mostly looked after by the state bodies.

### Issues with Cooperative banks
- **The Act puts certain restrictions as follows:**
  1. The Act restricts cooperative banks from making loans or advances on the security of its own shares.
  2. It prohibits the grant of unsecured loans or advances to its directors, and to private companies where the bank’s directors or chairman is an interested party.
  3. The Act specifies conditions when unsecured loans or advances may be granted and specifies the manner in which the loans may be reported to RBI.
  4. The new Bill omits these above provision from the Act.
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- **About Location:**
  1. According to the Act, cooperative banks cannot open a new place of business or change the location of the bank without permission from RBI.
  2. The Bill omits this provision

- **On Reserves:**
  1. The Act requires a scheduled cooperative bank to maintain assets with a value not exceeding 40% of its total demand and time liabilities, within India.
  2. The Bill omits this provision.

- **Dual Control and Local Politics:**
  1. The supervision and administration of cooperative banks fall within the purview of both state governments and the RBI.
  2. More often, there is involvement of local politicians in the running of the cooperatives. They also have a say in the appointment of management and board members.

**Key Provisions of the Bill**

- **Exclusions:** The Act does not apply to following cooperative societies:
  1. Primary agricultural credit societies
  2. Cooperative societies whose principal business is long term financing for agricultural development.

- **Issuance of shares and securities by cooperative banks:**
  1. A cooperative bank may issue equity shares, preference shares, or special shares on face value or at a premium to its members or to any other person residing within its area of operation.
  2. It may issue unsecured debentures or bonds or similar securities with maturity of ten or more years to such persons.
  3. Such issuance will be subject to the prior approval of the RBI and any other conditions as may be specified by RBI.
  4. A co-operative bank cannot withdraw or reduce its share capital, except as specified by the RBI.

- **Supersession of Board of Directors:**
  1. The RBI may supersede the Board of Directors of a multi-state cooperatives for up to five years under certain conditions.
  2. The conditions include cases where it is in the public interest for RBI to supersede the board, and to protect depositors.

- **Power to exempt cooperative banks:**
  1. RBI may exempt a cooperative bank or a class of cooperative banks from certain provisions of the Act through notification.
  2. These provisions relate to restrictions of certain types of employment, qualifications of the Board of Directors etc.

- **Other Proposed Amendments:**
  1. Cooperative banks would be regulated under the RBI’s banking guidelines.
  2. Their auditing would be done as per RBI's norms.
  3. Prior permission from the RBI would be required for the appointment of key positions.
  4. The regulator would deal with issues such as loan waivers.

**Source**
The Hindu, PRS, PIB, ET.
# POCSO Act- Child Sex Abuse

**Syllabus Question**

- As per the official data, crime against children are on an increase in recent years. Discuss the child abuse menace with reference to recent amendments to POCSO Act.

**Why is it in the news?**

- The rules enable the implementation of recent amendments to the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act.
- The Union Cabinet had approved amendments in the POCSO Act and included death penalty for sexual assault on minors.
- The amendments in the POCSO Act provide for fines and imprisonment to curb child pornography.

**More in the news/ New Rules**

- **Following are the new additions in the rules:**
  1. Provision of mandatory police verification of staff in schools and care homes.
  2. Procedures to report sexual abuse material (pornography).
  3. Imparting age-appropriate child rights education among others.

- **For crackdown on child pornography:**
  1. Any person who has received any pornographic material involving a child or any information related to such pornographic material being stored, circulated, possessed, transmitted, facilitated, propagated or displayed, shall report the contents to the special juvenile police unit (SJPU) or police, or the cybercrime portal.

- **Direction to states:**
  1. The state governments have been asked to formulate a child protection policy based on the principle of “zero-tolerance” to violence against children.

- **Orientation Programmes:**
  1. Both the central and every state government shall provide periodic training including sensitisation workshops and refresher courses to all persons coming in contact with the children.
  2. To sensitise them about child safety and protection and educate them regarding their responsibility under the Act.

- **Educating Children:**
  1. The Centre and state governments have been asked to prepare age-appropriate educational material and curriculum for children.
  2. It will work towards informing them about various aspects of personal safety, including:
  3. Measures to protect their physical and virtual identity
  4. To safeguard their emotional and mental wellbeing
  5. Prevention and protection from sexual offences and reporting mechanisms
### Institutions under check:
1. Any institution housing children or coming in regular contact with children, must ensure a police verification and background check on periodic basis of every staff.
2. These institutions include schools, creches, sports academies or any other facility for children.

### Statistics
- As per the NCRB data, cases for crime against children increased from 1,06,958 in 2016 to 1,29,032 in 2017.
- Most of the abusers are people known to the victims, like parents, relatives and schoolteachers.

### The POCSO Act
- Enacted in 2012 to provide a robust legal framework for the protection of children from offences of sexual assault, sexual harassment and pornography.
- The Act safeguards the interests of children at every stage of the judicial process.
- The Act defines a child as any person below the age of 18 years.
- The Act incorporates child friendly procedures for reporting, recording of evidence, investigation and trial of offences.

### Issues/Problems
- **Low conviction rate:**
  1. In the past six months, from January to June 2019, around 24,000 cases were lodged and only 900 had completed trial and disposed of.
  2. Out of these cases, 11,981 were still being investigated while chargesheets had been filed in 12,231 cases.
- **Silence due to fear and social stigma:**
  1. Despite one in every two children being a victim of child sexual abuse, there continues to be a huge silence.
  2. Victims and their families live with a social taboo; they live in fear and predators move around freely.
  3. The fear of attracting social stigma can result in families trying to cover up the most horrific treatment of children.
- **Improper response from the community:**
  1. Addressing child sexual abuse is a challenge all over the world. But in India, shortcomings in both state and community responses add to the problem.
  2. Victims who do come forward to make a complaint often suffer as a result. They face shaming and blaming more often.
- **Lack of Monitoring:**
  1. A major problem in India is the lack of effective monitoring of residential care facilities, orphanages and other children’s institutions.
- **Overburden on judges:**
  1. The conviction rate under POCSO act which is less than 20%. one of the reason is we don’t have the judicial infrastructure for the POCSO Act.
  2. The judge in the designated POCSO court is also dealing with other responsibilities and cases.

### Recent Amendments to POCSO Act
- **Punishment:**
  1. The Bill increases the minimum punishment from seven years to ten years.
  2. If a person commits penetrative sexual assault on a child below the age of 16 years, the punishment will be imprisonment between 20 years to life, with a fine.
### Aggravated penetrative sexual assault:
1. The Bill increases the minimum punishment from ten years to 20 years, and the maximum punishment to death penalty.
2. The Bill adds two more grounds to the definition of aggravated penetrative sexual assault:
   - Assault resulting in death of child
   - Assault committed during a natural calamity, or in any similar situations of violence.

### Way Ahead

#### Effective Implementation:
1. The new amendments and rules are comprehensive in nature, but the effective implementation on ground will only have an impact.

#### Support to victims:
All victims should be provided with the support they need for full physical and psychological recovery and social reintegration

#### Speedy Justice and Increase in conviction rate:
1. The investigation of trial of sexual offences have to be made time bound.
2. Establish “child courts” to handle cases of child abuse as provided for under central government schemes.
3. The dedicated Judges specially for the purpose of CSA cases needs to be appointed who will not be engaged in other cases.

#### Monitoring:
1. There should be a committee to look and monitor the most vulnerable places from where most cases are coming.
2. Accordingly, there should be awareness and spread of education.

#### Change in Mindset:
1. Law is important, and it is like a tool, like a weapon. But when you don’t have the courage and the mind to use it, it’s of no use as the society is not prepared to use the weapon.
2. The mindset has to change.

### Source
The Hindu, Firstpost, BBC, WHO.
## Sir Creek Dispute

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<th>Syllabus</th>
<th>GS 2 International Relations: India and its neighbourhood</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Question</td>
<td>Q. What is the Sir Creek Dispute? Describe its strategic and economic significance for India.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Why is it in news?
- At the third edition of WION’s global summit held in Dubai, former Pakistan Minister Kasuri recalled the plan for the Sir Creek Pact.
- The summit organized by WION, India’s first International News Channel, had the theme “Navigating and negotiating global imperatives”.
- It brought together policy-makers and global thought leaders for dialogues that offered insights on the way forward.
- The 2020 Global Summit served as a platform for global leaders to have a dialogue on a common global agenda.

### Introduction
- **Sir Creek**
  1. Sir Creek is a 96-km strip of water disputed between India and Pakistan in the Rann of Kutch marshlands.
  2. Originally named Ban Ganga, Sir Creek is named after a British representative.
  3. The Creek opens up in the Arabian Sea and roughly divides the Kutch region of Gujarat from the Sindh Province of Pakistan.
- **What is a creek?**
  1. Creek is narrow, shelter waterways, especially an inlet in a shoreline or channel in a Marshlands.
  2. It is water body which is smaller than a river but similar in appearance.

### What is the dispute?
- **Demarcation of boundaries:** The dispute is mainly on 3 issues viz.
  - The actual demarcation "from the mouth of Sir Creek to the top of Sir Creek".
  - The actual demarcation "from the top of Sir Creek eastward to a point on the line designated on the Western Terminus".
  - Demarcation of maritime boundary between India and Pakistan in Arabian Sea.
- **Pakistan’s stand:**
  - Pakistan claims the entire Sir Creek based on a 1914 agreement signed between the government of Sindh and rulers of Kutch.
  - As per the Pakistan views, boundary lies to the eastern flank of creek (i.e. creek part of Pakistan) and shows the agreement signed in 1914 between Government of Sindh and Rao Maharaj of Kutch to buttress its point.
- **Indian stand:**
  - India claims that the boundary lies mid-channel, as was depicted in a map in 1925 and implemented with pillars placed to mark the boundary.
  - India also used the same document and 'Thalweg doctrine' to claim that boundary lies in between the creek.
  - Thalweg doctrine says that, boundary line must be midway through a navigable channel.
India also shows the 1914 document which says that, the creek is navigable during high tides and says that, pillars which were installed in 1924 were along the midcourse.

**Effect on EEZ:** If one country agrees to the other’s traditional position, then the former will end up losing a vast amount of Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) rich with gas and mineral deposits.

**How has the dispute evolved over the time?**

- **Till 1954:** The borders around Sir Creek were virtually open and there was a free movement of people and material from both sides.
- **After 1954:** India and Pakistan started rigid stances on borders and a controversy evolved around Sir Creek.
- **Till 1968:** India and Pakistan were competing with each other to provide historical evidence that it belonged to them.
- **Post War Tribunal:**
  1. After the 1965 war, British Prime Minister Harold Wilson successfully persuaded both countries to end hostilities and set up a tribunal to resolve the dispute.
  2. Since 1969, 12 rounds of talks have been held over the issue of Sir Creek, but both sides have denied reaching any solution.
  3. United Nations Convention on Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) was the way for the solution.
- **1999 Atlantique Incident:**
  1. This disputed region is known for the Atlantique Incident which occurred in August 1999.
  2. The Indian IAF’s MiG-21FL fighters shot down the Pakistan Navy’s reconnaissance plane the Breguet Atlantique which was carrying 16 naval officers on board, for an alleged airspace violation of Indian airspace on August 10, 1999.
  3. The incident occurred just a month after the Kargil War, creating a tense atmosphere between India and Pakistan.

**Why has the issue not settled yet?**

- **1914 Agreement:**
  - According to India, 1914 agreement was signed between Sindh and Kutch.
  - They have become parts of two sovereign states, India and Pakistan, and thus their maritime boundary now needed to be settled as per international norms, mainly the Thalweg Doctrine.
- **1925 resolution:** Another resolution of the erstwhile Bombay Government adopted in 1925 did install mid-channel pillars in Sir Creek.
- **Pakistan’s opinion:** Pakistan does not agree with India since an acceptance of these provisions would lead to redrawing of the maritime boundary in the area, re-delineation of the Exclusive Economic Zone and other fishing areas in the Arabian Sea.
- **Issue of terrain:**
  - Application of international laws also would be difficult in terrain that constantly change shape.
  - In marshy areas like the Rann, landmasses emerge and slip back into water.
  - The joint survey held by India and Pakistan held in 2007 claimed Sir Creek had shifted nearly 1.5 km eastwards.
| International laws and conventions on maritime boundaries | **UNCLOS**: A country has special rights to EEZ under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea that includes exploration and use of resources there including via deep sea mining, in which there have been exciting new breakthroughs.  
**Thalweg doctrine**:  
(1) Thalweg is the line of the greatest depth of the channel or watercourse.  
(2) The Thalweg Doctrine defines the border between two states separated by a watercourse or flowing body of water as lying along the Thalweg. |
| Significance of the creek for India | **Strategic location**: Sir Creek occupies a strategic location on the India’s western frontier.  
**Economic**:  
(1) The dispute is mainly because of the fishing resources as it’s considered to be one of the largest fishing grounds in Asia  
(2) It is also said to be rich in hydrocarbons and shale gas having immense economic potential. |
| Challenges | **Plight of fisherman**: Many fishermen in a bid to catch fish, get caught by the other country’s forces and remain in jail for many years.  
**Terrorist activities**: The disputed area and its vicinity is used by terrorists to travel to India and conduct terrorist activities. e.g. the 26/11 Mumbai attacks.  
**Smuggling**: The creek being navigable could be used as a route for trafficking of drugs and other illicit articles. |
| Way ahead | **Designating the creek as maritime sensitive zone**:  
(1) Both countries could designate the area a maritime sensitive zone.  
(2) In this way, environment protection offers a significant opportunity for bilateral cooperation between the two countries.  
**Arbitration tribunal under UNCLOS**: India and Pakistan both can look forward for constitution of an arbitration tribunal under Article 287 (c) of the UN 1982 Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). |
| Sources | Indian Express, The Diplomat, Live Mint, IDSA, WION News. |
## US-Taliban Peace Deal

### Syllabus

**GS 2 International Relations:** India and its neighbourhood relations; Effect of policies of developed and developing countries on India

### Question

Q. The US-Taliban pact may not be the lasting solution to bring peace in Afghanistan and the adjoining region. Comment.

### Why is it in news?

- The US and Taliban have signed an agreement for “Bringing Peace to Afghanistan”, recently which will enable the US and NATO to withdraw troops in the next 14 months. India was represented by Ambassador to Qatar.

### Introduction

- **Parties to the pact:**
  1. The pact is between the “Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban and the US”.
  2. The U.S. has committed to getting UN Security Council endorsement for the deal with an entity that it does not recognise.

- **Joint declaration:**
  1. A three-page joint declaration between the Afghan government (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan) and the US was issued in Kabul.
  2. The joint declaration is a symbolic commitment to the Afghanistan government that the US is not abandoning it.
  3. The Taliban have got what they wanted: troops withdrawal, removal of sanctions, release of prisoners.

- **Who are Talibans?**
  1. The Taliban is a Sunni fundamentalist organisation that is involved in Afghan politics.
  2. It is also a military group that is involved in an insurgency against the currently elected government in Afghanistan.
  3. The Taliban controlled almost three-quarters of the country from 1996 to 2001 and was notorious for their strict implementation of the Sharia or Islamic law there.
  4. The period saw widespread abuse of human rights, especially targeted against women.

### Key features of the deal

- **Troops Withdrawal:** The US will draw down to 8,600 troops in 135 days and the NATO or coalition troop numbers will also be brought down, proportionately and simultaneously. And all troops will be out within 14 months.

- **Taliban Commitment:** The main counter-terrorism commitment by the Taliban is that Taliban will not allow any of its members, other individuals or groups, including al-Qaeda, to use the soil of Afghanistan to threaten the security of the United States and its allies.

- **Removal of sanctions:** UN sanctions on Taliban leaders to be removed by three months and US sanctions by August 27. The sanctions will be out before much progress is expected in the intra-Afghan dialogue.
**Release of prisoners**: The US-Taliban pact says up to 5,000 imprisoned Taliban and up to 1,000 prisoners from “the other side” held by Taliban “will be released” by March 10.

**India’s stand on the issue**

- **Afghan lead process**: India has always been supportive of the inclusive peace process, specifically Afghan-owned, Afghan-led and Afghan-controlled process.
- **On intra-Afghan dialogue**: The participation of the Afghan government’s delegation during the Doha agreement as well as the upcoming intra-Afghan peace negotiations would be following the path desired by India.
- **Peace in Afghanistan**: The deal has reiterated India’s commitment to Afghanistan’s pursuit of “sustainable peace and reconciliation”.
- **Acceptance of Doha Agreement**: The Government of India has accepted the Doha Agreement (2020)

**India and Taliban**

- **IC-814 Hijack**: India holds bitter memories from the IC-814 hijack in 1999, when it had to release terrorists — including Maulana Masood Azhar who founded Jaish-e-Mohammed that went on to carry out terror attacks on Parliament (2001), in Pathankot (2016) and in Pulwama (2019).
- **India’s engagement against Taliban**: The Taliban perceived India as a hostile country, as India had supported the anti-Taliban force Northern Alliance in the 1990s.
- **No recognition to Taliban regime**: India never gave diplomatic and official recognition to the Taliban when it was in power during 1996-2001.

**Impact on India**

- **Favour to Pakistan military**: As a result of the deal, Pakistan military (through its ally Taliban) will become dominant players in Afghanistan’s power circles, which is not in line with Indian interests.
- **No mention of India in the pact**: The Taliban did not name India among the countries that supported the peace process, but specially thanked Pakistan for the support, work and assistance provided.
- **Silence on anti-India terror groups**: Despite the fact that the pact mentions al-Qaeda, it is silent on other terrorist groups such as Lashkar-e-Toiba or Jaish-e-Mohammed.

**Challenges**

- **Side-lining Afghan Government**: The primary issue with the U.S-Taliban engagement is that it deliberately excluded the Afghan government because the insurgents do not see the government as legitimate rulers.
- **Handing powers to Taliban**: This appears to sideline the Intra-Afghan dialogue, and India’s support for the election process for leadership in Afghanistan.
- **One-sided Deal**: The deal is more concerned with the Taliban demands, while the actual terms of the ‘peace deal’ are yet to be negotiated between the Taliban and the Afghan side.
- **Weak central govt**: The process could be complicated by a weak central government, afflicted by ethnic, sectarian, and tribal differences.
- **Imposition of Sharia law**: Taliban has the ultimate goal of imposing Sharia in their respective regions which is in conflict with the aspirations of the people of Afghanistan.

**Way forward**

- **Isolation of battlefield**: To resolve conflict within Afghanistan, the battlefield needs to be isolated i.e. external support to the terrorist activities needs to be abandoned.
**Reforms in Afghan govt:**
- State’s failure to meet the expectations of the general public often leads to militancy.
- Thus, administrative reforms within Afghanistan government are the need of the hour.

**Capacity building:** India should continue infrastructural development in the nation and hold conversations with Taliban too, if situation escalates.

**Training the Afghan forces:** India should continue to provide military aid and weapons to Afghanistan’s Army to contain terrorism and safeguard Indian interests in the region.

**Sources**
The Hindu, Indian Express, The Diplomat, ORF, Al Jazeera.

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**10**

**India-Myanmar Relations**

**Syllabus**
- **GS 2 International Relations:** India and its neighbourhood relations; India’s Act East Policy

**Question**
Q. Enhancing economic partnership with Myanmar needs to be a priority in India’s Act East Policy which will benefit India in enhancing ties with Southeast Asia. Critically analyse.

**Why is it in news?**
- The action averted a threat to the ambitious Kaladan multi-modal project.

**Evolution of Indo-Myanmar ties**
- **1948:** India established diplomatic ties with Myanmar in 1948 after it gained independence.
- **Military coup of 1962:** The ties however deteriorated after the overthrow of Democracy in Myanmar in 1962 as India condemned the military coup. Incidentally, this was the period when Myanmar went into the Chinese fold.
- **1980s:** The relations further worsened during late 1980s when Myanmar witnessed pro-democracy movements that were suppressed by the military junta causing a mass influx of Burmese refugees into India.
- **Look East Policy and afterwards:** Indo-Myanmar relations witnessed a turnaround during 1990s when India mooted the Look East Policy with Myanmar emerging as key to this foreign policy posture by India.

**Areas of co-operation**
- **Trade and Economy:**
  - Bilateral trade has witnessed a 7.53% growth in 2018-19 and current trade figures stand at US $ 1.7 Billion.
  - India’s imports from Myanmar saw a decline of 18.47%, India’s export to Myanmar witnessed 24.74% growth during the same period.
  - India is the fifth largest trading partner of Myanmar.
- **Capacity development:**
India has already extended $2 billion in soft loans. It has offered to help Myanmar developmental assistance in the areas it wants rather than be prescriptive.

India is also providing assistance in setting up institutions for higher learning and research such as the Myanmar Institute of Information Technology, Advanced Centre for Agricultural Research and Education, Myanmar-India Centre for Enhancement of IT Skills etc.

- **Multilateral Partnership:**
  - **BIMSTEC:** Myanmar became a member of BIMSTEC in December 1997. Myanmar is a signatory to the BIMSTEC Free Trade Agreement. The 13th BIMSTEC Ministerial Meeting was held in Myanmar in January 2011.
  - **Mekong Ganga Cooperation:**
    - Myanmar has been a member of the Mekong Ganga Cooperation (MGC) since its inception in November 2000.
    - MGC is an initiative by six countries – India and five ASEAN countries namely, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam – for cooperation in the fields of tourism, education, culture, transport and communication.
    - The chairmanship of MGC is assumed by member countries in alphabetical order.

- **Defence:**
- **Culture:**
  - India and Myanmar share close cultural ties and a sense of deep kinship, given India's Buddhist heritage.
  - India is undertaking some key initiatives in the restoration of the Ananda Temple in Bagan and the repair and conservation of a large number of damaged pagodas.
  - India has also completed work on restoring and renovating two historic temples in Bodh Gaya built by Myanmar rulers King Mindon and King Baygyidaw.

- **Indian diaspora:**
  - There are varying estimates of 1.5-2.0 million people of Indian origin living and working in various parts of Myanmar.
  - A large number of the Indian community (nearly 150,000) live in Bago (Zeyawaddy and Kuayktaga) and Tanintharyi Region and Mon State, primarily engaged in farming.

### Significance of Myanmar for India

- **Geopolitics:** Myanmar strategic location gives India a upper hand over China in terms of geopolitical scenario.
- **Market for Indian goods:** Myanmar with a population of around 60 million can serve as a huge market for Indian exports with added advantages such as low cost of logistics due to transportation through land borders.
- **Security in North East:**
  1. Cooperation with Myanmar is crucial for controlling insurgency in North Eastern states.
  2. Besides, the porous borders provide fertile grounds for organized crime that is human trafficking, drugs peddling and smuggling of arms and ammunition.
**Gateway to S-E Asia**: Myanmar is the only ASEAN member that shares its borders with India and thus provides opportunity for deepening ties with south-east Asian nations under the Look East and Act East policies.

**Challenges**

- **Low trade volume**: Bilateral trade between India and Myanmar is still abysmally low primarily due to the slack movement of infrastructure projects.
- **Security along the border**: Internal Security is a major concern for India as the Indo-Myanmar border is porous and lightly policed which is exploited by terrorist outfits and insurgent groups from North Eastern part of India e.g. supply of trained cadres, arms trafficking etc.
- **Widening trust deficit**: Delay in implementation of various projects along the Indo-Myanmar border has led to widened trust deficit between India and Myanmar.
- **Rohingya issue**: About 40000 Rohingya refugees are currently staying in India whose deportation is still a issue between India and Myanmar.
- **China factor**: China’s growing influence in the region is a potential threat to Indian interests in Myanmar as India has found it difficult to counter Chinese influence in Myanmar.

**Way ahead**

- **Efficient border management**: Both the countries should engage constructively in efficient border management and regulation to check the misuse of open border by internal and external forces.
- **Connectivity to S-E Asia**: Myanmar is India’s gateway to Southeast Asia and could be the required impetus to realize India’s Act East Policy.
- **Speeding up of stalled projects**: India needs to give priority to long pending infrastructure projects which will help in a great way to further strengthen ties between the two countries.
- **Leveraging trade opportunities**:
  1. Myanmar itself is an emerging consumer market of 60 million people who have demands for products ranging from personal care to beverages to smart phones.
  2. India should leverage these export opportunities.

**Sources**
The Hindu, The Diplomat, Live Mint, IDSA, ORF, Indian Express
# Quantum Technology

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<td><strong>Question</strong></td>
<td>Q. What is Quantum Technology? Discuss its significance for India’s strategic and economic development.</td>
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<td><strong>Why is it in news?</strong></td>
<td>The government in the Budget 2020 has announced a National Mission on Quantum Technologies &amp; Applications (NM-QTA) with a total budget outlay of Rs 8000 Crore for a period of five years to be implemented by the Department of Science &amp; Technology (DST).</td>
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<td><strong>What is Quantum Technology?</strong></td>
<td>Quantum technology is a class of technology that works by using the principles of quantum mechanics (the physics of sub-atomic particles), including quantum entanglement and quantum superposition.</td>
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| **What is Quantum Mechanics?** | **Quantum Mechanics:**
(1) It is a fundamental theory in physics which describes nature at the smallest – including atomic and subatomic – scales.
(2) At the scale of atoms and electrons, many of the equations of classical mechanics, which describe how things move at everyday sizes and speeds, cease to be useful.
(3) In classical mechanics, objects exist in a specific place at a specific time.
(4) However, in quantum mechanics, objects instead exist in a haze of probability; they have a certain chance of being at point A, another chance of being at point B and so on. |
| **What is quantum entanglement?** | (1) Quantum entanglement is when two atoms are connected, or entangled, despite being separated.
(2) If you change the properties of one of them, the other changes instantly. |
| **What is quantum superposition?** | (1) Quantum superposition is the theory that sub-atomic particles exist in multiple states simultaneously.
(2) It proposed that particles at sub atomic level possess properties which does not obey the conventional principles of classical physics. |
| **National Mission on Quantum Technology and Applications** | **Objective:** The new mission will oversee the development of quantum technologies for communications, computing, materials development and cryptography.
(1) It will coordinate the work of scientists, industry leaders and government departments
(2) **Implementing authority:** The move will be implemented by the Department of Science & Technology (DST).
(3) **Focus area:** The areas of focus for the Mission will be in fundamental science, translation, technology development, human and infrastructural resource generation, innovation and start-ups to address issues concerning national priorities. |
Advantages

- **Secure Communication:**
  1. Quantum entanglement can be used in enhancing the security of communication through quantum protected cipher keys.
  2. We can use entangled atoms to detect whether someone has interfered with the transmission of data.
- **Nanomaterials:** Quantum technology can be used as a tool to develop nanomaterials having exceptional properties at the atomic and sub-atomic level.
- **Disaster Management:** Mathematical Models developed using Quantum Computing can almost perfectly give a clear picture of upcoming natural calamities.
- **Pharmaceutical:** Quantum technology can greatly help in synthesis of new drug molecule which currently takes almost a decade for manual synthesis by scientists in conventional labs.
- **Quantum computers:**
  1. The practical application of Quantum superposition is most obvious in quantum computers.
  2. While digital computers store data as bits (the ones and zeros of binary), quantum computers use qubits that exist as a one, zero or both at the same time.
  3. This superposition state creates a practically infinite range of possibilities, allowing for incredibly fast simultaneous and parallel calculations.

Challenges

- **Lack of Infrastructure:** India lacks the presence of dedicated labs to conduct experiments in quantum mechanics.
- **Lack of manpower:** There is acute shortage of highly skilled professionals in India to conduct experiments related to Quantum technology since the experiments are complex.
- **Modern warfare:**
  1. Quantum technology will bring new challenges in terms of warfare and conflict strategies.
  2. In that case, India’s current security plans may have to be reworked to develop integrated war-theatre strategies taking into account the issues arising due to use of quantum technologies.
- **Security concerns:** The current security infrastructure of IT and other secure communication network may not be able to handle the security risks associated with the application of quantum technology.

Way forward

- **Private funding in R&D:** Private firms and philanthropic funding will be favourable to give impetus to the quantum technology as government resources might not be sufficient to carry out research projects.
- **Global co-operation:** India should move ahead and partner with countries conducting complex projects to build a strong scientific community of like-minded countries.
- **Strong regulatory framework:** A strong regulatory framework needs to be established before the technology comes into to check the probable misuse of quantum technology by elements as organizations having interest against the security and integrity of the country.
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| Question | Recently, government approved the automated facial recognition system (AFRS). Trace the possible benefits and risks associated with AFRS. |

| Why is it in the news? | The Union Home Ministry has approved the automated facial recognition system (AFRS). |
|                       | The purpose is to identify unrecognised bodies, missing children & criminals. |

| More in the news | The approval has been accorded for implementation of AFRS by the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB). |
|                  | AFRS will use police records and will be accessible only to law enforcement agencies. |

| Introduction | **What is Facial recognition technology and How it works?** |
|             | (1) AFRS uses a database of photos, such as mugshots and driver's license photos to identify people in security photos and videos. |
|             | (2) It uses biometrics to map facial features and help verify identity through key features of the face. |
|             | (3) The most key feature is the geometry of a face such as the distance between a person's forehead to their chin, the distance between person's eyes etc. |
|             | (4) This then creates what is called a "facial signature." |
|             | (5) It is a mathematical formula that is then compared to a database of known faces. |
|             | **Applications of AFRS:** |
|             | (1) It is used everywhere from airports, venues, shopping centers and by law enforcement. |

| Benefits of AFRS | **It is increasingly being used for following:** |
|                 | (1) Facial authentication could help you unlock your phone |
|                 | (2) Validating your identity |
|                 | (3) Face detection could help count the number of people in traffic |
|                 | (4) Auto-tagging digital photos to find missing persons |
|                 | (5) Targeted advertising |
|                 | **For Law Enforcement:** |
|                 | (1) It will facilitate better identification of criminals, unidentified dead bodies and missing children. |
Telangana will use facial recognition software in local elections soon, the first such use of the technology in the country.

AFRS software will be used to verify voters in 10 polling stations to reduce impersonation cases.

- As per the official statement, the technology is needed to bolster a severely under-policed country, and to stop criminals.

### Issues/Challenges

- **Not Infallible:**
  1. Facial recognition is not fool-proof, and there have been instances of misidentification.
  2. As per a research by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the facial recognition algorithms consistently misidentify faces.
  3. Misidentifying someone can lead to wrongful convictions and may impinge on a core democratic right to vote.

- **Concerns about Privacy:**
  1. AFRS's indiscriminate and large-scale recording, storing and analysing of our images undermines the privacy.
  2. The people under scanner can no longer do anything in public without the state knowing about it.

- **Fear of Surveillance:**
  1. Facial recognition technology brings monitoring to new levels.
  2. It can be very damaging to our society by being abused by law enforcement for things like constant surveillance of the public.
  3. China's reported use of facial recognition technologies for surveillance in Xinjiang is an example of how it is problematic.
  4. The technology of control is symptomatic of the state's mistrust of its citizens.

- **Impact on Democratic Political Culture:**
  1. Blanket surveillance can deter individuals from attending public events.
  2. It can stifle participation in political protests and campaigns for change and can discourage the dissent.
  3. This goes against the right to freedom of assembly, association and expression.

- **The already vulnerable groups can be targeted:**
  1. The technology can be deployed selectively, for example to identify migrants and refugees.
  2. The use of handheld mobile devices with a facial recognition app by police forces raises the spectre of enhanced racial profiling.
  3. As per the multiple studies, accuracy rates of facial recognition algorithms are particularly low in the case of minorities, women and children.

- **Lack of safeguards:**
  1. India currently does not have a data protection law. The Personal Data Protection Bill 2018 is yet to come into force.
  2. In the absence of a law, enforcement agencies will have a high degree of discretion.

### Globally

- **Globally**, the backlash against the technology is growing.
- **San Francisco and Oakland** in the United States have banned the use of facial recognition.
The Unique Academy

European Union is considering a similar move in public areas for up to five years.

London however adopted the technology and will use real time facial recognition systems to police the city.

Way ahead

- **Safeguards:** AFRS’s deployment for security and law enforcement should come with strong safeguards against misuse.
- **Surveillance should be restricted** to the pursuit of serious crime instead of enabling the unjustified interference into our liberty and rights.
- **Strict Regulation instead of banning it:**
  1. Instead of simply banning an entire category of technologies with so many possible applications, policymakers should employ precision regulation.
  2. Without proper regulation of these systems, we risk creating a police state.
- **Debate and Scrutiny:**
  1. There is a desperate need of a more prominent conversation on its impact on our rights and civil liberties.
  2. It should be put through strict Parliamentary scrutiny and oversight in addition with the data protection bill.

Source: The Hindu, Forbes, Indian Express.

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**Arms (Amendment) Bill, 2019**

**Syllabus**

GS 2: Governance Issues related to law and order.

**Question**

Q. What are the salient features of the Arms (Amendment) Bill, 2019? Suggest remedies to address the menace of illicit weapons in India.

**Why is it in news?**

- Recently the Arms (Amendment) Bill, 2019 was passed by Rajya Sabha to amend the six decades old Arms Act 1959.

**Introduction**

- **The Arms Act, 1959**
  - To regulate the use of weapons, laying down licensing procedures and punishments.
  - The Act **bans** the manufacture, sale, use, transfer, conversion, testing or proofing of firearms **without a license**.
  - It also **prohibits the shortening** of firearm barrel or conversion of imitation firearms into firearms without a license.

**Salient features of the bill vis-à-vis Arms Act 1959**

- **Ban on firearms:**
  - The Arms Act 1959 bans manufacture, sale, use, transfer, conversion, testing or proofing of firearms without a license.
  - The Bill prohibits obtaining or procuring un-licensed firearms, and the conversion of one category of firearms to another without a license.

- **Reduction in number of firearms:**
  - Bill reduces the number of permitted firearms from three to one including licenses given on inheritance or heirloom basis.
1-year time: There is a time period of one year to deposit the excess firearms with the officer-in-charge of the nearest police station or with a licensed firearm dealer as specified.

Increase in punishment: The Bill increases the punishment to between seven years and life imprisonment, along with a fine.

Tracking of firearms: The bill empowers the central government to make rules to track firearms and ammunition from manufacturer to purchaser to detect, investigate, and analyse illicit manufacturing and trafficking.

Increase in duration of validity: The bill increases the duration of validity of fire arms license from existing three years to five years.

New offences added under the act

- Forcefully taking a firearm from police or armed forces:
- Several instances of snatching firearms from security forces had happened in the recent past in the country.
- Snatching firearms will be punishable with imprisonment between 10 years and life imprisonment, along with fine.
- Using firearms in celebratory gunfire: Using firearms in a celebratory gunfire which endangers human life or personal safety of others, punishable with imprisonment of up to two years, or fine of up to one lakh rupees, or both.
- Possession of firearms by organised crime syndicate:
- An organised crime syndicate refers to two or more persons committing organised crime.
- Possession of firearms or ammunition by a member of a syndicate, in violation of the Act, will be punishable with imprisonment between 10 years and life, along with a fine.
- Dealing in unlicensed firearms: Dealing in un-licensed firearms (including its manufacture or sale), converting a firearm without license, or importing or exporting firearms without license will also be punishable with imprisonment between 10 years and life.
- Illicit trafficking: It is punishable with imprisonment between 10 years and life, along with a fine.

Present status of fire arms in India

- Number of gun licences:
- According to an estimate, India has a total of around 35 lakh gun licences.
- In Militancy-hit Jammu and Kashmir, 3.7 lakh people possess arms licences.
- Case of Punjab:
- Punjab witnessed pro Khalistan militancy in 1980s and 1990s, has around 3.6 lakh active gun licences,
- Most of licences were issued during the two decades of strife to fight with the terrorists.
- Use in suicides: India stands at third position in number of suicides committed with guns most of which are licensed.

Criticisms

- Ancestral weapons: Rajpoot community has objected to the one weapon rule inserted by the act as many of the royal families possess more than one weapon inherited from their ancestors.
- Numbers of crimes committed using licensed weapons: Number of offences committed with licensed weapons are very low as compared to illicit weapons and thus it is being criticized that curbing licensed weapons will not result lesser crimes.
Way ahead

- **Curbing illicit weapons:** Curbing the manufacturing and trafficking of illicit weapons should be checked and a massive country wide operation needs to be launched to close down illicit arms manufacturing units operating in the remote places.
- **Proper implementation of the new act:**
  - Implementation of the amended act is responsibility of the police forces.
  - Proper implementation using national database and periodic reassessment of licensing procedures will be crucial to enforce the provisions of this act.
- **Allowing state amendments:** State governments should be allowed to introduce amendments to the act in consideration with historical significance of the ancestral weapons and law and order condition of that region.
- **Expediting setting up of NDAL:**
  - A portal is being developed that would house the *National Database on Arms License (NDAL)* and Arms License Issuance System (ALIS).
  - Setting up of this portal should be given top priority in order to access information on arms licenses issued, license holders and the ammunitions.

Source: Indian Express, PRS, RSTV, PIB

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**14**

**Importance of Tribunals**

| Syllabus | GS 3: Governance, Constitution:
|          | *Separation of powers, redressed mechanisms and institutions.* |
| Question | *Critically analyze the recent controversy regarding the Tribunals rules and Supreme court judgment regarding these rules.* |
| Why is it in the news? | *The Finance Ministry has framed new rules that have prescribed uniform norms for the appointment and service conditions of members to various tribunals.*
|          | *The rules are called "Tribunal, Appellate Tribunal and other Authorities (Qualifications, Experience and other Conditions of Service of Members) Rules 2020"* |
| About Tribunals | *Why Tribunals?*
|          | (1) The concept of tribunals came into existence with an objective of to provide specialised and speedy justice.
|          | (2) This cannot be delivered by the judicial system due to the overburden of cases/appeals and technicalities in procedure.
|          | *Constitutional Provisions:*
|          | (1) Article 323A and 323B providing for constitution of tribunals dealing with administrative matters and other issues.
|          | (2) Tribunals are to be organized and established in such a manner that they do not violate the integrity of the judicial system.
|          | (3) Tribunals are organised as a part of civil and criminal court system under the supremacy of the Supreme Court of India.* |
Some Characteristics of Administrative Tribunals (Article 323A):
(1) They have some features of the ordinary courts but not all.
(2) Administrative tribunals are independent and not subject to any administrative interference in the discharge of judicial or quasi-judicial functions.
(3) These tribunals are bound to abide by the principle of natural justice.

Tribunals for other matters (Article 323B):
(1) These tribunals are empowered to adjudicate any dispute or complaint with respect to the matters specified under clause (2) of Article 323B.
(2) Some of the matters given under clause (2) are:
(3) Levy, assessment, collection and enforcement of any tax
(4) Foreign exchange and export
(5) Industrial and labour disputes
(6) Production, procurement, supply and distribution of foodstuffs
(7) Rent and its regulation and control and tenancy issues etc.

Recent Developments
- The appointment of the Judges of Tribunal was regulated by the Tribunal, Appellate Tribunal and other Authorities (Qualifications, Experience and other Conditions of Service of Members) Rules, 1963.
- Government replaced these rules in 2017 to incorporate changes in the qualification, selection, salary, appointment and other aspects of the appointment of judges to the ITAT and AAR.
- The 2017 rules were challenged in the Supreme Court.
- The Supreme Court quashed the 2017 rules as unconstitutional for being violative of principles of independency of the judiciary.
- The Court directed the Central Government to formulate new rules.
- New Rules: The Tribunal, Appellate Tribunal and other Authorities (Qualifications, Experience and other Conditions of Service of Members) Rules, 2020 notified by the Central Government.
- The reframed rules, notified by the Ministry of Finance alleged to suffer from the same vices.

The Issue
- In 2017:
  (1) The power to prescribe eligibility criteria, removal, selection process, tenure and other service conditions were sub-delegated to the rule-making powers of the Central government.
- Supreme Court’s Arguments:
  (1) The search-cum-selection-committee is an attempt to keep the judiciary away from the process of selection and appointments.
  (2) The executive is a litigating party in most of the litigation and hence cannot be allowed to be a dominant participant in tribunal appointments.
  (3) The tenure of three years for members will “preclude cultivation of adjudicatory experience and is thus injurious to the efficiency of the Tribunals”.
- Selection Committees Composition:
  (1) In the 2017 rules, the selection committee for all other tribunals, except NCLAT, was made up either entirely from personnel within or nominated by the Central government.
(2) The selection committee for NCLAT consisted of two judges and two secretaries to the Government of India.
(3) All other committees except for NCALT, comprised only one judge and three secretaries to the Government of India.
(4) Now, in the 2020 rules, by default, all committees consist of a judge, the president/chairman/chairperson of the tribunal concerned and two secretaries to the Government of India.

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<tr>
<th>More about Tribunals</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Advantages of Administrative Tribunals:</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Flexibility:</strong> As against the stringent and inflexible procedures of the ordinary court, the administrative tribunals have a quite informal and easy-going procedure.</td>
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<td><strong>Speedy Justice:</strong> With the not so complex procedures, it is easy to decide the matters quickly and efficiently.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Less Expensive:</strong> The Administrative Tribunals take less time to solve the cases as compared to the ordinary courts.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Quality Justice:</strong> The administrative tribunals are considered best and the most effective method in present time.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Relieving Courts:</strong> The system of administrative adjudication has lowered down the burden of the cases on the ordinary courts.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Drawbacks of Administrative Tribunals:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Against the Rule of Law:</strong> The equality before law is subjugated as the tribunals provide separate laws and procedures for certain matters.</td>
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<td><strong>Lack of specified procedure:</strong> As these adjudicatory bodies do not have any rigid set of rules and procedures, there is a chance of violation of the principle of natural justice.</td>
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<td><strong>Scope of Arbitrariness:</strong> The civil and criminal courts work on a uniform code of procedure as prescribed under CPC and CrPC. But the administrative tribunals have no such stringent procedure.</td>
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<td><strong>Absence of legal expertise:</strong> It is not necessary that the members of the administrative tribunals must belong to a legal background.</td>
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<th>Final word on Rules</th>
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<tr>
<td>Requisite changes should be made to the rules so as to make them compliant with the constitutional provisions and the guidelines issued by the Supreme Court.</td>
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Source: The Hindu, PRS, Financial Express, Ipleaders.
### New law in U.P. to recover costs for damaging property

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Why in news?</th>
<th>U.P govt. notified a stringent new law to recover compensation from those who damage public &amp; private property during protests and riots.</th>
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<tr>
<td>More in news</td>
<td>Uttar Pradesh Recovery of Damage to Public and Private Property Ordinance, 2020 provisions:</td>
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<td>(1) The owner of any private property or the head of the office concerned in respect of public property may file claims for compensation within three months of any incident that causes any damage during public protests, bandhs or riots.</td>
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<td>(2) The claim can cite as respondents those who “exhorted” or “instigated” or “committed” acts that caused the damage, as well as those named by the police.</td>
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<td>(3) That causing the damage, as well as those named by the police.</td>
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<td>(4) Every order or award passed by the Claims Tribunal would be “final” and no appeal would be “maintainable” before any court. Also, no civil court will have the jurisdiction to entertain any question regarding the claims.</td>
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<td>(5) Chairperson of the Claims Tribunal: a retired district judge, while its members would be of the rank of additional commissioner.</td>
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<td>(6) Claims Tribunal would have the power to attach the property of the respondents and publicise their names, addresses and photographs to warn the public against purchasing the property.</td>
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<td>(7) The Claims Tribunal shall have all the powers of a civil court for the purpose of taking evidence on oath and enforcing the attendance of witnesses and compelling the discovery and production of documents and material objects.</td>
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<td>(8) The claims would cover not only damage to public and private property but also the costs borne by the police and the administration in taking preventive measures.</td>
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<td>(9) The liability would be fixed on the alleged perpetrators as well as those accused of instigating or exhorting them.</td>
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**Sources** The Hindu

### Lok Sabha passes Appropriation Bill

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<th>Why in news?</th>
<th>The Lok Sabha passed the Appropriation Bill 2020-21 that empowers the government to draw over Rs. 110 lakh crore from the Consolidated Fund of India for its working, as well as for the implementation of its programmes and schemes.</th>
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<tr>
<td>More in news</td>
<td>About Appropriation Bill:</td>
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<td>(1) According to Article 114 of the Constitution, no amount can be withdrawn from the consolidated fund of India without the authorisation from Parliament or legislatures of the states.</td>
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<td>(2) Due to this, the Parliament, as well as the state Assemblies need to pass appropriation bills as a part of the Budget exercise to be able to withdraw</td>
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money from the consolidated fund of Union or state to spend it on various public expenditure programmes and to run day-to-day affairs of government.

(3) The Appropriation Bill, after it is passed by Lok Sabha is sent to the Rajya Sabha as an Appropriation Bill and is certified by the Speaker as a Money Bill.

(4) Since 2016, Appropriation Bills in India include an automatic repeal clause as a result of which the Act is repealed after its purpose is met.

(5) The Consolidated Fund of India, which was created under Article 266 of the Indian Constitution, includes the revenues received by the government and expenses made by it.

Sources: The Hindu

Bill on Central status to 3 Sanskrit deemed universities passed

Why in news?

• A Bill to grant the status of Central universities to three deemed Sanskrit universities was passed by the Rajya Sabha recently. Several Opposition MPs raised concern that the other five classical Indian languages are being neglected.

More in news

• Central Sanskrit Universities Bill, 2020
  1. The Central Sanskrit Universities Bill, 2020, was passed by the Lok Sabha in December 2019.
  2. It’s title was amended in the Rajya Sabha to change the year.
  3. The amended Bill will now be sent back to the Lok Sabha.
  4. It gives Central status to the Rashtriya Sanskrit Sansthan and Shri Lal Bahadur Shastri Rashtriya Sanskrit Vidyapeeth in Delhi and the Rashtriya Sanskrit Vidyapeeth in Tirupati.

Sources: The Hindu

Panels on homoeopathy, Indian system

Why in news?

• Two Bills to set up national commissions for the Indian system of medicine and homoeopathy were passed by the Rajya Sabha recently, with the government assuring the House that similar legislation for yoga and naturopathy would be brought as well.

• The National Commission for Indian System of Medicine Bill, 2019 and the National Commission for Homoeopathy Bill, 2019 had been introduced in the Rajya Sabha in January 2019, after which they were sent to the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Health and Family Welfare.

More in news

• National Commission for Indian System of Medicine Bill, 2019
  1. It seeks to repeal the Indian Medicine Central Council Act, 1970.
  2. Key features of the Bill include:
     - Constitution of the National Commission for Indian System of Medicine
     - Establishing State Medical Councils for Indian System of Medicine at the state level.
     - Autonomous boards under the supervision of the NCISM.
     - Advisory Council for Indian System of Medicine
     - A uniform National Eligibility-cum-Entrance Test for admission to undergraduate education.

• National Commission for Homoeopathy Bill, 2019
  1. It seeks to repeal the Homoeopathy Central Council Act, 1973.
  2. Key features of the Bill include:
Judiciary

No larger Bench for Article 370 case

|-------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| More in news | ● Conflict between two Judgments:  
(1) The Bench had heard arguments and reserved its decision on whether there was a “direct conflict” between the judgments of 1959 and 1970 on the nature and extent of Article 370.  
(2) Order of the Bench concluded that there was no conflict between the 1959 and 1970 judgments.  
(3) **1959 Judgement**: Prem Nath Kaul versus State of Jammu and Kashmir, indicated that Article 370 was applicable only till the Jammu and Kashmir Constitution was enacted on January 26, 1957. After that, no further changes could be made to the relationship between India and Jammu and Kashmir.  
(4) **1970 Judgment**: Some petitioners argued that Sampath Prakash versus State of Jammu and Kashmir judgment had ignored the 1959 verdict by concluding that Article 370 was permanent in nature and a “perennial source of power” for the Centre to govern its relationship with J&K.  
(5) **Explanation by Court**:  
➢ The court explained that the “Constitution Bench in the Prem Nath Kaul case did not discuss the continuation or cessation of the operation of Article 370 after the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly of the State.  
➢ This was not an issue in question before the court, unlike in the Sampat Prakash case, where the contention was specifically made before, and refuted by, the court”.  
➢ Finally, the order concluded that the court saw no reason to read into the Prem Nath Kaul case an interpretation that resulted in it being in conflict with its subsequent judgments. |

| Sources | The Hindu |

Supreme Court Advocates-on-Record Association (SCAORA)

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<th>Why in news?</th>
<th>● The Supreme Court Advocates-on-Record Association (SCAORA) resolved to express its solidarity with the victims of the Delhi communal violence and assured them of 24X7 legal assistance.</th>
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<tr>
<td>More in news</td>
<td>● About SCAORA</td>
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| Sources | The Hindu |
The SCAORA is a powerful body of lawyers who practise in the top court, came into existence in 1985.

Petitions in the SC can only be filed through its members.

Supreme Court upholds 2018 order on land acquisition

Why in news?

- 5-judge SC Constitution Bench recently held that land acquisition proceedings under 1894 Act will not be deemed to have lapsed under Section 24(2) of the Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act, 2013 (RFCTLARR Act), if the authorities have tendered the compensation by deposit in the Treasury.

More in news

- More in the Judgement:
  1. It held that landowners, who had refused to accept compensation or who sought reference for higher compensation, cannot claim that the acquisition proceedings had lapsed under Section 24(2) of the 2013 Act.
  2. Section 24 (2) concerns with land acquisition compensation awards made five years “prior or more” to the coming of existence of the 2013 Act, which replaced the 1894 law.
  3. RFCTLARR Act, 2013 mentioned that, if the physical possession has not been taken “or” the compensation is not paid, the acquisition proceeding is “deemed to have lapsed”.
  4. Govt., would have to initiate fresh acquisition proceedings under the new Act, which provides for fair compensation.
  5. There was no obligation that the amount should be deposited in the court in order to sustain the land acquisition proceedings under the 2013 Act.
  6. Further, the court held that a land acquisition proceeding under Section 24(2) would only lapse if the authorities have neither taken physical possession nor paid the compensation due to the landowner for five or more years prior to January 1, 2014.
  7. For this, an “or” in the Section was “interpreted” as an “and”.

- About RFCTLARR Act, 2013: It regulates land acquisition & lays down the procedure and rules for granting compensation, rehabilitation and resettlement to the affected persons in India.

- The Act is applicable when Govt. acquires land:
  1. For its own use, hold and control, including land for Public sector undertakings, for immediate & declared use by private companies for public purpose, with ultimate purpose to transfer it for the use of private companies for stated public purpose.
  2. Purpose of LARR 2011 includes PPP projects, but excludes land acquired for state/national highways.
  3. The provisions of the Act does not apply to acquisitions under 16 existing legislations including the Special Economic Zones Act, 2005, the Atomic Energy Act, 1962, the Railways Act, 1989.

Role of L-G and elected govt. intertwined, rules Madras HC
The Madras High Court held that the role of Puducherry’s Lieutenant Governor and that of an elected government in the Union Territory were intertwined as per law, and therefore they were expected to act in unison and not in division.

It also held that the State legislatures were a creation of the Constitution, whereas the Union Territory legislatures were created under a law such as the Government of Union Territories Act, 1963.

About Lt. Governor:
1. Lieutenant-Governor is the head of a Union Territory and currently present in UT’s of Delhi, Puducherry, Andaman & Nicobar Island, Jammu & Kashmir and Ladakh.
2. The LG, like the Governor, acts a titular head of Union Territory. But, the powers of an LG are wider than that of a Governor.
3. This is because, a Governor of a state has to act solely on the aid and advice of the Council of Ministers, whereas, the LG does not need the approval of the Council of Ministers on every matter.
4. In case of Delhi, the government exercises no power in the domain of land, law, and police. The LG has complete discretion to decide upon any of these matters.

Forcible dispossession of a person’s property is a human rights violation’

The Supreme Court has reiterated that forcible dispossession of a person of his private property without due process of law is a violation of human rights.

Background:
1. The verdict came on the acquisition of a few acres in Sikkim by the State’s Agriculture department in 1980 for building the Progeny Orchard Regional Centre.
2. The land was recorded in two names — 1.29 acres in the name of the Maharaja of Sikkim and 7.07 acres in the name of Man Bahadur Basnett, who was the father of the original appellant in this case.
3. The judgment found that “in this case, the appellant could not have been forcibly dispossessed of her property without any legal sanction.

Judgement:
1. The court stressed that right to property is both a human right and a constitutional right — the latter under Article 300A of the Constitution.
2. It is accepted in every jurisprudence and by different political thinkers that some amount of property right is an indispensable safeguard against tyranny and economic oppression of the government.
3. Property itself is the seed bed which must be conserved if other constitutional values are to flourish.

Article 300A:
1. It states that no person shall be deprived of his property save by the authority of law.
2. Therefore, the article protects an individual from interference by the State and dispossess a person of the property unless it is in accordance with the procedure established by law.
(3) Though compensation is not expressly mentioned in the Article, in K.T Plantation Pvt. Ltd. Vs. State of Karnataka, 2011 the SC held that public purpose was a precondition for deprivation of a person of his property under Article 300A of the Constitution and the right to claim compensation was also inbuilt in that Article.

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<th>The Hindu</th>
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**Supreme Court refers appeal against posters to larger Bench**

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<th>Why in news?</th>
<th>A Vacation Bench of the Supreme Court did not stay Allahabad High Court order to the district and police authorities in Lucknow to “forthwith” remove roadside banners displaying the personal details of persons accused of “vandalism” during the anti-Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA) protests in December 2019.</th>
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| More in news | Allahabad High Court Order:  
(1) It held that the wayside posters were a violation of individual privacy, a fundamental right which globally “underpins human dignity and key values of a democracy”.  
(2) It had ordered the Lucknow District Magistrate and police chief to remove the posters without delay and file a compliance report on March 16.  

**Supreme Court’s Remarks:**  
(1) The State’s action was not “covered in law”.  
(2) There was a difference between videographing a person’s unsocial or riotous behaviour as evidence and the State displaying personal details and photographs of citizens.  
(3) The posters had come up even before the 30-day deadline to pay the compensation was over.  

**Questions Before the Bench:**  
(1) Did the State have a right to display faces of accused in the public domain and give rise to a presumption that they were guilty for all time to come.  
(2) Wrongdoers have to be brought to book. But can the State go two stages beyond and start displaying their faces on posters?”  
(3) The right to privacy of individuals featured in the posters. |
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<th>The Hindu</th>
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**SC strips Manipur Minister of his office**

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<th>Why in news?</th>
<th>In an extraordinary display of its constitutional powers under article 142, the Supreme Court recently stripped a Manipur Cabinet Minister, who is facing disqualification proceedings for defection, of his office and banned him from entering the Assembly with immediate effect.</th>
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</table>

| More in news | About Article 142:  
(1) The Supreme Court in the exercise of its jurisdiction may pass such decree or make such order as is necessary for doing complete justice in any cause or matter pending before it, and any decree so passed or orders so made shall be enforceable throughout the territory of India in such manner as may be prescribed by or under any law made by Parliament and, until provision in that behalf is so made, in such manner as the President may by order prescribe. |
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48 Contemporary Issues & Current Affairs March - 2020 (Study Material)
(2) Subject to the provisions of any law made in this behalf by Parliament, the Supreme Court shall, as respects the whole of the territory of India, have all and every power to make any order for the purpose of securing the attendance of any person, the discovery or production of any documents, or the investigation or punishment of any contempt of itself.

(3) The Article has been used in many Cases like: Ayodhya Verdict, Bhopal Gas Tragedy Verdict, cleansing of the Taj Mahal etc.

Sources: The Hindu

Constitutional and Statutory Bodies

**Delimitation panel for J&K, northeastern States set up**

| Why in news? | • Law Ministry issued an order to set up a Delimitation Commission for the Union Territory (UT) of Jammu and Kashmir and the northeastern States of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur & Nagaland. |
| More in news | • About the Delimitation Commission
(1) **Head of the Commission**: Former Supreme Court judge Ranjana Prakash Desai
(2) **Ex-officio Member of Commission**: Election Commissioner Sushil Chandra
(3) **Other Members**: Election Commissioners of the concerned States and UTs will also be members.
(4) **Purpose of the Commission**: The exercise to readjust the division of each State and the UTs into territorial constituencies for the purpose of elections to the Lok Sabha and to the State Legislative Assemblies on the basis of the 2001 Census figures was last completed on November 26, 2008.
(5) However, this exercise was postponed in Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur and Nagaland on apprehension of threat to peace and public order.
(6) The Delimitation Commission in India is a powerful body, whose orders have the force of law and cannot be called in question before any court. |
| Sources | The Hindu |

Miscellaneous

**EC not for state funding of polls**

| Why in news? | • The Election Commission has informed the Government that it is not in favour of state funding of elections. The commission is of the view that it would not be able to prohibit or check candidates’ expenditure over and above the state’s provision. |
| More in news | • Indrajit Gupta Committee in 1998 on State Funding of Elections 1998: (1) **Level Playing Field**: Panel had suggested that state funding would ensure a level playing field for poorer political parties and argued that such a move would be in public interest. |
| Sources | The Hindu |
(2) Political Parties should **compulsory submit their annual accounts to the income tax department**.
(3) Complete account of the **election expenditure should be filed by the parties to EC**
(4) **Limitations:** The committee had recommended some limitations, saying that state funds should only be given to recognised national and State parties and that funding should be given in kind, including free facilities provided to these parties and their candidates.
(5) The panel admitted that only **partial funding may be possible**.

### Telugu speakers top south Indian population in Assam

**Why in news?**
- The number of **Telugu speaking people in Assam** is almost twice that of the combined number of those who speak **three other major south India languages** – Malayalam, Tamil and Kannada in that order, linguistic data from the 2011 census presented in the Assembly has revealed.

**More in news**
- Other details:
  1. **Hindi speakers are the third largest** linguistic group behind the Assamese and Bengali people. The Hindi speakers, comprising 6.73% of the population, had 21 lakh people. They outnumbered the Bodo speakers by 6.85 lakh.
  2. People belonging to 116 linguistic groups, 32 OBCs, 29 Scheduled Tribes and 16 Scheduled Castes live in the State.
  3. The **Assamese speakers accounting for 48%** of the State’s population led the linguistic list with 1.51 crore people, followed by the **Bengali speakers with 90.24 lakh people (38% of the total population of 3.1 crore)**.
  4. The Telugus led the table with 26,630 people, followed by 5,768 Malayalis, 5,229 Tamils and 2,597 Kannadigas.

**Sources**
- The Hindu

### ‘EC moots linking Aadhaar with voter ID’

**Why in news?**
- The Law Ministry has informed the Lok Sabha that it has a proposal from the Election Commission (EC) to **link Aadhaar with the Election Photo Identity Card (EPIC) to prepare an error-free electoral roll**.

**More in news**
- Benefits of the Linkage as per Lok Sabha:
  1. To ensure preparation of an error-free electoral roll
  2. To prevent duplication of entries.
  3. It may allow migrant labour and workers to vote even if they are away from their homes at the time of elections.

**Sources**
- The Hindu

### India among least-free democracies, says study

**Why in news?**
- India has become one of the **world’s least free democracies**, according to a global survey, which warned that “the Indian government’s alarming departures from democratic norms under Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s BJP could blur the values-based distinction between Beijing and New Delhi”.

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The Unique Academy

Name of Report: **Freedom in the World 2020**

**Released by:** Freedom House, a U.S.-based watchdog, which has been tracking global political and civil liberties for almost half a century.

**Findings Regarding India:**

1. It ranks India at the 83rd position, along with Timor-Leste and Senegal.
2. This is near the bottom of the pile among the countries categorised as “Free”, with only Tunisia receiving a lower score.
3. India’s score fell by four points to 71, the worst decline among the world’s 25 largest democracies this year.

**Scores:**

- India scored 34 out of 40 points in the political rights category, but only 37 out of 60 in the civil liberties category, for a total score of 71, a drop from last year’s score of 75.
- The report treats “Indian Kashmir” as a separate territory, which saw its total score drop precipitously from 49 to 28 this year, moving it from a status of “Partly Free” to “Not Free”.

**Signs of Declining Freedom:**

1. The annulment of autonomy and the subsequent shutdown of Kashmir, the National Register of Citizens and the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, as well as the crackdown on mass protests have been listed as the main signs of declining freedom in the report.
2. The report slammed the Internet blackout in Kashmir, terming it the longest shutdown ever imposed by a democracy.
3. It said freedom of expression was under threat in India, with journalists, academics and others facing harassment and intimidation when addressing politically sensitive topics.

**Sources**

The Hindu

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**LPG scheme closed, but only 3 States have gone kerosene-free**

**Why in news?**

- Only 3 States and 5 Union Territories have become kerosene-free, though the government last September met the target of eight crore LPG connections under the Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana, as per Parliamentary Committee on Petroleum.

**More in news**

- Other Details in the Report:
  1. Only three States — Haryana, Punjab and Andhra Pradesh — and the Union Territories of Delhi, Chandigarh, Daman & Diu, Dadar & Nagar Haveli, Andaman & Nicobar Island & Puducherry have become kerosene-free.
  2. It points to the gap between the continuing use of kerosene and the claim of 97% LPG coverage nationwide.
  3. The allocation for the scheme has been cut down by 58% from ₹2,724 crore during 2019-20 to ₹1,118 crore during 2020-21.
  4. The Petroleum Ministry informed the committee that the government had met the target on Sept 7, 2019, and 96.9% coverage had been achieved nationwide, except in Jammu and Kashmir.
  5. The Ministry said the scheme was no longer running, and the present allocation was meant to meet the arrears in the reimbursement of expenditure.
Suggestions from the Committee:

1. There are poor households in the general category in urban and semi-urban localities that also need to be covered.
2. The scheme should be extended to poor households in urban and semi-urban slum areas, and achieve a higher LPG coverage of the population by providing connections to households that do not have LPG.
3. At the same time, the committee said, large segments of people in various States still depended on kerosene for cooking and household lighting.
4. The Ministry has justified the low number of ‘kerosene-free’ States and Union Territories, saying their consent is critical.
5. Karnataka, Telangana, Haryana, Nagaland, Bihar, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Maharashtra, Goa, Andhra Pradesh, Chandigarh and Puducherry have gone for a voluntary cut.

Sources: The Hindu

NCLAT Bench to be opened in Chennai

Why in news?

- A Bench of the National Company Law Appellate Tribunal (NCLAT) is being constituted in Chennai to handle matters from the southern States.
- The government has notified the constitution of the Chennai Bench, which will come into effect on March 18.
- The Bench would hear appeals against the orders of the Benches of the National Company Law Tribunal having jurisdiction of Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Lakshadweep and Puducherry.

More in news

- About NCLAT:
  1. The National Company Law Appellate Tribunal (NCLAT) is a tribunal which was formed by the Central Government of India under Section 410 of the Companies Act, 2013.
  2. It is responsible for hearing appeals from the orders of National Company Law Tribunal(s) (NCLT), starting on 1 June 2016.
  3. The tribunal also hears appeals from orders issued by the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Board of India under Section 202 and Section 211 of IBC.
  4. It also hears appeals from any direction issued, decision made, or order passed by the Competition Commission of India (CCI).

Sources: The Hindu

Ranjan Gogoi nominated to Rajya Sabha

Why in news?

- President Ram Nath Kovind recently nominated former Chief Justice of India (CJI) Ranjan Gogoi to the Rajya Sabha.
- In exercise of the powers conferred by sub-clause (a) of clause (1) of Article 80 of the Constitution of India, read with clause (3) of that article, President is pleased to nominate Shri Ranjan Gogoi to Council of States to fill the vacancy caused due to the retirement of one of the nominated members, the Home Ministry said in its notification.

More in news

- Article 80:
  1. The Council of States shall consist of twelve members to be nominated by the President in accordance with the provisions of clause.
not more than two hundred and thirty eight representatives of the States and of the Union territories

(2) The members to be nominated by the President under sub clause (a) of clause (1) shall consist of persons having special knowledge or practical experience in respect of such matters as the following, namely: Literature, science, art and social service

Sources The Hindu

Over 40% govt. schools don’t have power, playgrounds

Why in news?

● Almost half the government schools in the country do not have any electricity or playgrounds, according to a report on the 2020-2021 demand for grants for school education submitted by the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Human Resource Development (HRD).

More in news

● More in the Report:
  (1) Budgetary allocations saw a 27% cut from proposals made by the School Education department.
  (2) Despite proposals for ₹82,570 crore, only ₹59,845 crore was allocated.
  (3) Noting similar 27% reductions for the central and centrally sponsored schemes as well, the panel recommended that these core schemes get additional funds at the revised estimates stage.
  (4) The panel “expressed dismay” at the stark deficits in government school infrastructure, citing the latest survey data.
  (5) Only 56% of schools have electricity, with the lowest rates in Manipur and Madhya Pradesh, where less than 20% have access to power.
  (6) Less than 57% of schools have playgrounds, including less than 30% of schools in Odisha and Jammu and Kashmir, according to the Unified District Information System for Education (UDISE) 2017-18 survey.

Sources The Hindu

Donations to national parties by unknown sources

Why in news?

● As much as 67% of donations to national parties in 2018-19 came from “unknown sources,” an increase from 53% in the previous financial year, said a report released recently by “Association for Democratic Reforms”.

More in news

● More in the Report
  (1) Electoral bonds accounted for 78% of the ₹2,512.98-crore income from unknown sources.
  (2) While parties are required to give details of all donations above ₹20,000, donations under ₹20,000 and those through electoral bonds remain anonymous.
  (3) The total income of the parties was ₹3,749.37 crore, of which ₹951.66 crore was from known donors.
  (4) Suggestion: Since a very large percentage of the income of political parties cannot be traced to the original donor, full details of all donors should be made available for public scrutiny under the RTI [Right to Information Act].

● About Association for Democratic Reforms:
  (1) ADR is an Indian non-partisan, non-governmental organization which works in the area of electoral and political reforms.
(2) Along with National Election Watch (NEW), ADR is striving to bring transparency and accountability in Indian politics and reducing the influence of money and muscle power in elections.

(3) ADR came into existence in 1999 when a group of Professors filed a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) with the Delhi High Court regarding the disclosure of the criminal, financial and educational background of the candidates contesting elections.

Sources: The Hindu

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2

Environment

Eurasian otter found in Chilika Lake

Why in news?

- Researchers conducting a study in Odisha’s Chilika Lake have found the presence of fishing cat, smooth-coated otter & Eurasian otter.
- Project was a collaborative effort between: The Fishing Cat Project, Chilika Development Authority, Wild Orissa, Mahavir Pakshi Suraksha Samity and Chilika Wildlife Division, Forest Department of Odisha.

More in news

- Fishing Cat:
  1. It is a medium-sized wild cat, found in very few places in South and Southeast Asia.
  2. Since 2016, it is listed as Vulnerable on the IUCN Red List.
  3. Its population is threatened by the destruction of wetlands & have declined severely over the last decade.
  4. The fishing cat lives foremost in the vicinity of wetlands, along rivers, streams, oxbow lakes, in swamps, and mangroves.
  5. The fishing cat is the state animal of West Bengal.
  6. Wild cat species usually hunt on the ground. But the fishing cat hunts in water.
  7. It has specialised features like partially webbed feet and water-resistant fur that helps it to thrive in wetlands.
  8. The flat-headed cat of south-east Asia is the only other feline that shares similar features. This makes them unique among all 39 extant cat species.

- Smooth-coated otter:
  1. The smooth-coated otter (Lutrogale perspicillata) is an otter species occurring in most of the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia, with a disjunct population in Iraq.
  2. As its name indicates, the fur of this species is smoother and shorter than that of other otter species.
  3. IUCN Conservation Status: Vulnerable
  4. Both species (fishing cat and smooth coated otter) are supposed to enjoy conservation measures of the highest accord in India according to the country’s laws, much like the tiger and elephant.
**Eurasian otter:**

1. It is a semiaquatic mammal native to Eurasia. In India, it is distributed in the Himalayan foothills, southern Western Ghats and the central Indian landscape.
2. Eurasian otter has a diet mainly of fish & is strongly territorial.
3. IUCN: Near Threatened
4. Despite being a widely-spread and common species globally, very little is known of the species distribution and abundance in India and especially along the eastern coast.

**Sources**

The Hindu

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**India is host to 457 migratory fauna, shows latest CMS list**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Why in news?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- With new additions to the wildlife list put out by the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species (CMS), scientists say that the total number of migratory fauna from India comes to 457 species.</td>
</tr>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>More in news</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Background</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Zoological Survey of India (ZSI) had for the first time compiled the list of migratory species of India under the CMS before the Conference of Parties (COP 13) held in Gujarat recently.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. COP13 focussed on transboundary species &amp; corridor conservation.</td>
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<td>3. Birds comprise 83% (380 species) out of 457 species (earlier 451).</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Six species added later: Asian elephant, great Indian bustard, Bengal florican, oceanic white-tip shark, urial &amp; smooth hammerhead shark.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- India’s Role:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Globally, more than 650 species are listed under the CMS appendices &amp; India, with over 450 species, plays a very important role in their conservation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- About the Migratory Fauna added in CMS:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Bird Species:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1) Before COP 13, the number of migratory bird species stood at 378 and now it has reached 380.</td>
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<td>(2) Bird family Muscicapidae has the highest number of migratory birds.</td>
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<tr>
<td>(3) The next highest group is raptors or birds of prey, such as eagles, owls, vultures and kites.</td>
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<tr>
<td>(4) India has three flyways (flight paths used by birds): the Central Asian flyway, East Asian flyway &amp; East Asian–Australasian flyway.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Migratory mammal species:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1) Estimate of 44 migratory mammal species in India has risen to 46 after COP 13. Asian elephant was added to Appendix I &amp; the urial to Appendix II. Largest group of mammals is bats, followed by dolphins with nine migratory species of dolphins listed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Migratory Fish species:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1) Before COP 13, the ZSI had compiled 22 species, including 12 sharks and 10 ray fish. The oceanic white-tip shark and smooth hammerhead shark were added. The total number of migratory fish species from India under CMS now stands at 24.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Migratory Reptile species:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Water crisis looms large in Himalayan regions, study finds

Why in news? ● Eight towns in the Himalayan region of Bangladesh, Nepal, India and Pakistan were nearly 20%-70% deficient in their water supply, says a survey that appears in the latest edition of the journal Water Policy.

More in news ● About the Survey:
  (1) Survey appears in the latest edition of the journal Water Policy.
  (2) Researchers surveyed 13 towns across these countries to understand the challenges of the urban denizens of these regions.
  (3) Key Factors: Unplanned urbanisation and climate change are the key factors responsible for the state of affairs.
● Findings of the Survey:
  (1) The places surveyed are extremely dependent on springs (ranging between 50% and 100%) for their water, and three-fourths were in urban areas.
  (2) Under current trends, the demand-supply gap may double by 2050, the researchers warn.
  (3) Communities were coping through short-term strategies such as groundwater extraction, which is proving to be unsustainable.
  (4) A holistic water management approach that includes springshed management and planned adaptation is therefore paramount.
  (5) Across the region, the encroachment and degradation of natural waterbodies (springs, ponds, lakes, canals, and rivers) and the growing disappearance of traditional water systems (stone spouts, wells, and local water tanks) are evident.
  (6) Although only 3% of the total Hindu Kush Himalayan population lives in larger cities and 8% in smaller towns, projections show that over 50% of the population will be living in cities by 2050, placing “tremendous stress” on water availability.
  (7) Rural areas have typically garnered much of the attention in terms of development and issues surrounding urban environments have been “sidelined”.

Sources The Hindu

Black carbon levels spike at Himalayan glaciers

Why in news? ● Black carbon concentrations near the Gangotri glacier rose 400 times in summer due to forest fires and stubble burning from agricultural waste, and triggered glacial melt, says a study by scientists at the Wadia Institute of Himalayan Geology (WIHG).

More in news ● Findings in the Study:
  (1) Black carbon concentration: The team of scientists from WIHG, measured variations of black carbon concentration at Chirbasa, near the Gangotri glacier in the Indian Himalaya, located at an altitude of 3,600 metres, during the year 2016.
  (2) The monthly mean concentration of EBC (equivalent black carbon) was found to be minimum in August and maximum in the month of May.
<p>| | |</p>
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| (3) | The observed **seasonal mean concentrations of EBC** indicated a pristine glacial source and an absence of EBC sources in the locality.  
(4) | Black carbon results from the **incomplete combustion of fossil fuels and biomass**.  
(5) | The fine particles **absorb light and about a million times more energy than carbon dioxide**.  
(6) | It is said to be the **second largest contributor to climate change after CO2**.  
(7) | But unlike CO2, **which can stay in the atmosphere for years together**, black carbon is short-lived and remains in the atmosphere only for days to weeks, before it descends as rain or snow.  
(8) | **Second largest emitter**: The concentration varied from a minimum of 0.01g/cubic metre in winter to 4.62g/cubic metre during summer.  
(9) | **India is the second largest emitter of black carbon in the world**, with emissions expected to increase dramatically in the coming decades, with the Indo Gangetic plains said to be the largest contributor— as per April 2019 study in the journal *Atmospheric Research*.  

**Sources**  
*The Hindu*

### Apex body on river linking in pipeline

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<th>Why in news?</th>
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<td></td>
<td>The Central government is working on the establishment of an exclusive body to implement projects for linking rivers, To be called the National Interlinking of Rivers Authority (NIRA).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**More in news**

- Interlinking of Rivers:  
  (1) The subject of establishment of the Authority was discussed at the last meeting of the Special Committee on Inter-Linking of Rivers (ILR).  
  (2) As of now, 6 ILR projects: Ken-Betwa, Damanganga-Pinjal, Par-Tapi-Narmada, Manas-Sankosh-Teesta-Ganga, Mahanadi-Godavari & Godavari-Cauvery (Grand Anicut) — have been under examination of the authorities.  
  (3) With regard to the peninsular rivers, the Centre has chosen to focus on the Godavari-Cauvery link than the earlier proposal to link the Mahanadi-Godavari-Krishna-Pennar-Cauvery rivers.  
- About National Interlinking of Rivers Authority (NIRA):  
  (1) **Projects**: The proposed body is expected to take up both inter-State and intra-State projects.  
  (2) **Funds**: It will also make arrangements for generating up funds, internally and externally.  
  (3) Once approved, the projects will be pursued as **national projects, wherein the Centre will absorb 90% of the cost** and the States concerned the rest.  

**Sources**  
*The Hindu*

### Punjab CM orders panel to look into Sukhna Lake issue

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<th>Why in news?</th>
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<td>Asserting that his government would take all legislative and judicial remedies to protect the interests of the people, Punjab CM ordered the constitution of a committee to evolve a comprehensive strategy in the light of the High Court order relating to the demolition in the Chandigarh’s Sukhna Lake area.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**More in news**

- About Sukhna Lake:
(1) Sukhna Lake in Chandigarh, India, is a reservoir at the foothills (Shivalik hills) of the Himalayas.
(2) This 3 km² rainfed lake was created in 1958 by damming the Sukhna Choe, a seasonal stream coming down from the Shivalik Hills.
(3) Originally the seasonal flow entered the lake directly causing heavy siltation.

Sources: The Hindu

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**E-waste recycling has doubled, says Centre**

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Why in news?</th>
<th>The Centre said it doubled the electronic waste (e-waste) it recycled in 2018-19 over 2017-18, according to a response to a question in the Rajya Sabha.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| More in news |● Other Details:  
1. In 2017, the Centre passed the **E-Waste Management Rules**, which require companies to **collect a certain percentage of e-waste generated from their goods once they have reached their “end-of-life”**.  
2. In FY 2017-2018, 7,08,445 tonnes of waste was generated, of which 69,414 tonnes were recycled, compared to 1,64,663 tonnes of recycled waste from 7,71,215 tonnes in FY 2018-2019— meaning a 10% recycling rate in 2017-18 rising to a little over 20% in 2018-19.  
● E-Waste Management Rule:  
1. It includes CFLs or Compact Fluorescent Lamps as well as other lamps with mercury, and similar equipment.  
2. The Rules for the first time, bring producers under the ambit of the Extended Producer Responsibility or EPR, together with the targets.  
3. Producers have been made accountable for e-waste collection and for e-waste exchange as well.  
4. Compact Fluorescent Lamp (CFL) and other mercury-containing lamps have been brought under the purview of the rules.  
5. Local bodies with a population of one lakh or above are supposed to establish solid waste processing facilities within 2 years.  
6. Census towns below a lakh would be given three years to establish solid waste processing facilities  
7. Old and discarded dump sites would have to be shut-down or bio-remedied within five years.  
8. The rules on solid waste management have been amended after 16 years.  
9. Garbage management is the responsibility of municipal bodies, they would have rights to charge user fees and levy spot fines for littering and non-segregation.  
10. A transition period of two to five years would be in place beyond which fines would be imposed as per the country’s Environment Minister. |
| Sources | The Hindu |

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**ESZ reduction worries environmentalists**

| Why in news? | Stiff resistance to the proposal to reduce the regulated buffer zone around protected areas has failed to move the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEF&CC).  
It has gone ahead and given the green signal to reduce the Eco-Sensitive Zone (ESZ) of the Bannerghatta National Park (BNP) by around 100 sq. km. |
| Sources | The Hindu |
About Bannerghatta National Park:
(1) It is located near Bangalore, Karnataka, was founded in 1970 and declared as a national park in 1974.
(2) In 2002 a portion of the park, became a biological reserve, the Bannerghatta Biological Park.
(3) It is a popular tourist destination with a zoo, a pet corner, an animal rescue centre, a butterfly enclosure, an aquarium, a snake house and a safari park.
(4) The park is part of a wildlife corridor for elephants which connects the BR Hills and the Sathyamangalam forest.
(5) The park is contiguous with Talli reserve forest in the southeast and Bilikal forest in the south.
(6) The Suvarnamukhi stream runs through the national park.

New environment law cuts time for hearings

Why in news?
A set of key updates to India’s Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) Act, the law that governs how the threat posed by large infrastructure projects to the environment ought to be evaluated, proposes to reduce the time given to people to air objections.

More in news
Provisions in the New EIA Notification
(1) The draft EIA notification proposes to be an update to the EIA of 2006, which specifies a “minimum of 30 days” for people to respond.
(2) The current version of the update, which will likely become law in 60 days, gives a “minimum of 20 days” of notice period.
(3) It also requires that the public-hearing process be wrapped up in 40 days, as opposed to the existing norm of 45 days.
(4) Under the process, an organisation has to submit a detailed plan explaining the nature, need, and remedial measures, if their proposed project could significantly impact a region.
(5) A committee constituted by the Union Environment Ministry then decides on whether the project should be cleared.

Environment Impact Assessment (EIA):
(1) The Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF) uses Environmental Impact Assessment Notification 2006 as a major tool for minimizing the adverse impact of rapid industrialization on the environment and for reversing those trends which may lead to climate change in the long run.
(2) EIA 2006 was issued on 14th September 2006, in supersession of EIA 1994, except in respect of things done or omitted to be done before such supersession.
(3) The Notification is issued under relevant provisions of the Environment (Protection) Act, 1986.

Sources
The Hindu
SC approves Kerala slotting projects in orange category

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Why in news?</th>
<th>● Supreme Court has declined to interfere in an appeal filed by the Kerala chapter of the Confederation of Real Estate Developers Association of India (CREDAI) against National Green Tribunal’s rejection of its contention that the inclusion of constructions between 2,000 sq.m &amp; 20,000 sq.m in the ‘orange category’ by Kerala State Pollution Control Board was arbitrary.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>More in news</td>
<td>● Background</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1) Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) slotted industrial activities into the red, orange, green and white categories, based on the pollution index, in March 2016.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(2) State Pollution Control Board in 2017, brought flats, apartments and commercial buildings, spanning over 2,000 sq.m, but less than 20,000 sq.m under orange category.</td>
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<td>(3) CREDAI successfully challenged SPCB’s circular before the Appellate Authority on the ground that residential constructions did not fall in the category of industry.</td>
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<td>(4) SPCB had argued that it was authorised to impose stringent conditions to prevent environmental degradation and pollution.</td>
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<td>(5) The circular of SPCB did not find favour with Appellate Authority.</td>
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<td>(6) The SPCB then appealed before the NGT, which set aside the Appellate Authority’s decision and held that these stringent conditions were required on account of higher groundwater level and contamination of waterbodies and the groundwater.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>● MoEFCC has developed the criteria of categorization of industrial sectors based on the Pollution Index (a number from 0 to 100) which is a function of the emissions (air pollutants), effluents (water pollutants), hazardous wastes generated and consumption of resources.</td>
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<tr>
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<td>(1) <strong>Red category</strong>: Industrial Sectors having PI score of 60 and above</td>
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<td></td>
<td>➢ Industries falling under ‘Red’ category will not be permitted in ecologically fragile or sensitive areas. Interestingly, industries like integrated automobile manufacturing, airports and commercial air strips, and milk &amp; dairy products are included in the ‘Red’ category.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(2) <strong>Orange category</strong>: Industrial Sectors having PI score of 41 to 59</td>
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<td>(3) <strong>Green category</strong>: Industrial Sectors having PI score of 21 to 40</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(4) <strong>White category</strong>: Industrial Sectors having PI score incl. &amp; upto 20</td>
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<td>➢ The white category will exempt companies that are mostly non-polluting from obtaining ‘Consent to Operate’ certificate. Henceforth, a mere written intimation to PCC or SPCB will be sufficient to proceed.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>➢ Industries falling under ‘White’ category include LED and CFL bulb assembly, power generation using solar photovoltaic technology, wind power generating units, hydel units less than 25 MW, products made from rolled PVC sheets using automatic vacuum forming machines, cotton and woolen hosiers using dry processes etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sources</td>
<td>The Hindu</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Arunachal puts off survey of road through tiger reserve
### Why in news?
- The Arunachal Pradesh government decided to “keep in abeyance” the survey work for a road through the Pakke Tiger Reserve (PTR).
- A 40-km stretch of the East-West Industrial Corridor road proposed to connect Seijosa in Pakke Kessang district and Bhalukpong in West Kameng district of the State passes through PTR, a biodiversity hotspot of the eastern Himalayas.

### More in news
- **About Pakke Tiger Reserve:**
  1. Pakke Tiger Reserve, also known as Pakhui Tiger Reserve, is a Project Tiger reserve in the Pakke Kessang district of Arunachal Pradesh in northeastern India.
  2. This Tiger Reserve has won India Biodiversity Award 2016 in the category of 'Conservation of threatened species' for its Hornbill Nest Adoption Programme.
  3. It is bounded by Bhareli or Kameng River in the west and north, and by Pakke River in the east.
  4. To the east lies Papum Reserve Forest.
  5. Towards the south and south-east, the sanctuary adjoins reserve forests and Assam’s Nameri National Park.
  6. To the west, it is bounded by Doimara Reserve Forest and Eaglenest Wildlife Sanctuary.
  7. The main perennial streams in the area are the Nameri, Khari and Upper Dikorai. West of Kameng River are Sessa Orchid Sanctuary and Eaglenest Wildlife Sanctuary.
  8. The habitat types are lowland semi-evergreen, evergreen forest and Eastern Himalayan broadleaf forests.
  9. **Notable mammals in the Tiger Reserve are:** tiger, leopard, clouded leopard, Malayan giant squirrel, flying squirrel, squirrel, capped langur, rhesus macaque, Assamese macaque, gaur.

### Sources
The Hindu

### Though hunters lose interest in Red Panda, traps still snare endangered mammal

#### Why in news?
- The iconic and endangered Red Panda (ailurus fulgens) has fewer hunters because of younger generation of people across its Himalayan habitat are losing interest in animal products, a new study by wildlife trade monitoring network TRAFFIC has found.

#### More in news
- **Title of the report:** Assessment of illegal trade-related threats to Red Panda in India and selected neighbouring range countries
- **Findings in the Study and about Red Panda:**
  1. The report looked at the 10-year period from July 2010 to June 2019, and analysed poaching and illegal trade of the species.
  2. Other than seizures, the researchers carried out market surveys, surveys of e-commerce websites and village level surveys where they spoke to hundreds of people in Red Panda habitat (only in India) to look into poaching.
  3. The reddish-brown arboreal mammal, not closely related to the iconic black-and-white giant panda, is falling to traps laid for other animals such as the musk deer and wild pigs.
(4) It’s survival is crucial for eastern & north-eastern Himalayan subalpine conifer forests & eastern Himalayan broadleaf forests.

(5) The only living member of the genus Ailurus, Red Panda is listed as ‘endangered’ on the IUCN Red List of threatened species.

(6) The animal has been hunted for meat and fur besides illegal capture for the pet trade.

(7) An estimated 14,500 individuals are left in the wild across Nepal, Bhutan, India, China and Myanmar.

(8) In India, the species is recorded in northern West Bengal, Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh.

(9) During the study the researchers and authors found neither India nor Bhutan had reported any incidences of poaching or illegal trade in Red Pandas.

(10) But in Nepal a total of 13 seizure records were reported between 2016 and 2019, accounting for a total of 29 pelts. All except two took place in Kathmandu.

Significance of the Study:
(1) Because Red Panda is an iconic species and classified as Endangered under the IUCN Red List.

(2) Because a large part of its habitat is restricted to inaccessible higher reaches of the Eastern Himalayas.

(3) A recent study has pointed out that the Red Panda is not one species but two based on the DNA evidence.

| Sources | The Hindu |

**CPCB notifies contaminated sites**

| Why in news? | ● There are 128 sites in India contaminated by toxic and hazardous substances, according to a March update by the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB).
● West Bengal led the list with 27 sites followed by Odisha at 23. Including those, there are 324 sites that may be contaminated, with 196 still awaiting an investigation and confirmation.
● These incidents include oil contamination due to leakage of underground oil pipelines of Bharat Petroleum Corporation Limited in Tamil Nadu, pesticide and heavy metal contamination in creeks at Eloor, Kerala, chromium contamination at Rania, improperly disposed electronic waste lying on the banks of river Ramganga, Moradabad and mercury contamination of the soil at Kodaikanal, Tamil Nadu, and Ganjam, Odisha |

| More in news | ● About Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB):
(1) It is a statutory organisation under the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (Mo.E.F.C).
(2) It was established in 1974 under the Water (Prevention and Control of pollution) Act, 1974.
(3) The CPCB is also entrusted with the powers and functions under the Air (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act, 1981
(4) It serves as a field formation and also provides technical services to the MoEFCC under the provisions of the Environment (Protection) Act, 1986.
(5) It is the apex organisation in the field of pollution control, as a technical wing of MoEFCC. |
The board is led by its Chairperson, who is generally a career civil servant from the Indian Administrative Service appointed by the Appointments Committee of the Cabinet.

### Stiff opposition to Hubballi railway line

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Why in news?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- The Hubballi-Ankola railway line project in Karnataka entails large-scale destruction of forests, including the felling of nearly 2.2 lakh trees in a biodiversity hotspot.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- The 164.44-km railway line passes through forests between two major protected areas: <strong>Kali Tiger Reserve &amp; Bedthi Conservation Reserve</strong>.</td>
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<tr>
<th>More in news</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- About Kali Tiger Reserve:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1) It is a protected area and tiger reserve located in Karnataka.</td>
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<tr>
<td>(2) The park is a habitat of Bengal tigers, black panthers and Indian elephants, amongst other distinctive fauna.</td>
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<tr>
<td>(3) The Kali River flows through the tiger reserve and is the lifeline of the ecosystem and hence the name. The Tiger reserve is spread over an area of 1300 square kilometers.</td>
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<td>(4) The forest in the area was declared the <strong>Dandeli Wildlife Sanctuary on 10 May 1956</strong>. The state proposed carving out a section of the sanctuary to form the Anshi national park, and the proposal was implemented on 2 September 1987.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5) It was renamed to Kali Tiger Reserve in Dec 2015.</td>
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<td>(6) The park is home to several hydroelectric dams and a nuclear power station.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- About Bedthi Conservation Reserve:</td>
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<tr>
<td>(1) It is located in Karnataka and was established in 2011.</td>
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<th>Sources</th>
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<tr>
<td>The Hindu</td>
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Stop violence targeting Muslims, Iran tells India

**Why is it in news?**
- Iran has asked India to stop “thuggery” and communal violence targeting Muslim citizens.

**More in news**
- **Timing of the statement**: The unusually strong statement from Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif came five days after India fast-tracked infrastructure work on Iran’s Chabahar port.
- **Iran’s latest interactions with India**
  1. Mr. Zarif was a leading guest in January’s Raisina Dialogue, India’s biggest foreign policy discussion forum.
  2. He also hosted External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar in December for the 19th Joint Commission Meeting of the two countries.
- **More about Chabahar Port**
  1. **Location**: Chabahar Port is a seaport in Chahbahar in south-eastern Iran in the Gulf of Oman.
  2. **Significance**: Chabahar Port is the one and only Iranian port with direct access to the ocean.
  3. **Objective**: To promote exports to Iran and also possibility of connectivity to the Central Asian region and Afghanistan.
  4. In the 1990’s under the Ashgabhat agreement, India partially built the port with the intention of providing access to the Central Asian region and Afghanistan, bypassing Pakistan.
  5. A series of agreements were signed by the Indian Prime Minister and his counterpart, the President of Iran in May 2016 in Teheran for developing the Chabahar port.

**Source** The Hindu

UN rights body to move SC on CAA

**Why is it in news?**
- In an unprecedented and rare move, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) has announced that it plans to file an application in the Supreme Court, asking to be impleaded in petitions challenging the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA).

**More in news**
- **Petition**: The OHCHR wants to be appointed as amicus curie (court’s friend) in the case against CAA through a petition to be filed before Supreme Court.
- **Amicus curie**: The amicus curiae will focus on providing an overview of relevant and applicable international human rights standards and norms to support the Court’s deliberations in the context of its review of the CAA.
- **MEA statement**: The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) said the United Nations body had no right to file a petition that will ask the court to appoint the Commissioner for Human Rights as an assistant or amicus curiae in the case.
More about OHCHR
(1) The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, commonly known as the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) or the UN Human Rights Office, is a department of the Secretariat of the United Nations.
(2) The office was established by the UN General Assembly on 20 December 1993 in the wake of the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights
(3) **Mandate**: To promote and protect the human rights that are guaranteed under international law and stipulated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948.
(4) **Headquarters**: Geneva and New York.

**Sources**
The Hindu, OHCHR website

### USCIRF hears witnesses on NRC, CAA

**Why is it in news?**
- A week after Delhi’s riots, India and Myanmar were the subjects of discussion at a hearing in Washington organised by an independent bipartisan federal government commission, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom.

**More in news**
- **Panel of witness**: The panel of witnesses consisted of Brown University Professor and author Ashutosh Varshney and Aman Wadud, a human rights lawyer from Assam. They spoke entirely on the Indian situation.
- **Focus of hearing**: The hearing focused on the National Register of Citizens (NRC) and the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA).
- **India’s answer**: India has asked world to refrain from making any unsubstantiated comments about the issue and India is doing all it can to restore normalcy in the national capital.
- **More about USCIRF**
  (1) USCIRF claims to be an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government commission, the first of its kind in the world, dedicated to defending the universal right to freedom of religion or belief abroad.
  (2) **Working**: USCIRF reviews the facts and circumstances of religious freedom violations and makes policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress.
  (3) USCIRF Commissioners are appointed by the President and the Congressional leadership of both political parties in U.S.

**Sources**
The Hindu

### PM’s visit to Brussels put off as COVID-19 cases rise to 30

**Why is it in news?**
- Owing to the recent global COVID-19 outbreak, Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s visit to Brussels has been rescheduled, the Ministry of External Affairs said on Thursday.

**More in news**
- **India-EU summit**:
  (1) Responding to questions about the India-EU summit, MEA spokesperson Raveesh Kumar told journalists that it was decided that delegates should not travel to each other’s countries.
  (2) Mr. Kumar said the summit would be rescheduled to a mutually convenient date, which is yet to be decided.
Military Cooperation Group dialogue postponed

Why is it in news?
- The India-U.S. Military Cooperation Group (MCG) dialogue, scheduled for later this month, has been cancelled in view of coronavirus outbreak, and the proposed trip of U.S. Defence Secretary Mark Esper is also in question.

More in news
- **US Indo Pacific Command**: India is considering a U.S. request for posting liaison officers at the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM) and the U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM). This was to be discussed at the dialogue.
- **What is MCG?**
  1. The MCG is a forum to review the progress of defence cooperation between India’s Integrated Defence Staff and the USINDOPACOM at the strategic and operational levels.
  2. The Integrated Defence Staff was responsible for coordination among the armed forces before the appointment of the Chief of Defence Staff.

Source: The Hindu

Modi calls off visit to Dhaka

Why is it in news?
- India is ready to work with Bangladesh to stop the spread of COVID-19, which prompted cancellation of the inauguration ceremony of the birth centenary celebrations of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in Dhaka.

More in news
- **Statement from MEA**
  1. Statement from External Affairs Ministry confirmed that Prime Minister Narendra Modi, scheduled to participate in the March 17 event, would not travel to Dhaka.
  2. Bangladesh had formally communicated that the authorities were forced to “defer” the event in the prevailing health scenario in Bangladesh.
- **COVID-19 outbreak in Bangladesh**
  1. Authorities in Dhaka detected three cases of COVID-19 on Sunday which led to widespread panic in the country.
  2. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina assured people that her government was capable of meeting the public health emergency.

Source: The Hindu

International Event

Taliban attacks Afghan bases, throwing peace talks in doubt

Why is it in news?
- The Taliban carried out dozens of attacks on Afghan Army bases, officials said on Tuesday, hours after ending a partial truce and throwing into doubt peace talks between Kabul and the insurgents.
Intra Afghan dialogue: The intra-Afghan negotiations are due to begin March 10, according to a U.S.-Taliban deal signed in Doha on Saturday, but a dispute over a prisoner swap has raised questions about whether they will go ahead.

Rising complexities: The row has highlighted the tough road ahead, with the Taliban’s decision to end a partial truce on Monday complicating matters further.

COVID-19 now a pandemic, says WHO; India confirms 60 cases

Why is it in news? The World Health Organisation (WHO) on Wednesday said that according to its assessment, COVID-19 “can be characterised as a pandemic.”

More in news

Over 1 lakh positive cases: WHO noted with concern that 1,18,000 positive cases have been reported globally in 114 countries and more than 90% of cases are in just four countries.

Suspension of visa: The Central government on Wednesday night issued a new travel advisory stating that all existing visas, except diplomatic, official, UN/International Organisations, employment, project visas, stand suspended till April.

What is a pandemic?

(1) A pandemic is a disease epidemic that has spread across a large region; for instance multiple continents, or worldwide.
(2) A widespread endemic disease that is stable in terms of how many people are getting sick from it is not a pandemic.

Travel from EU, U.K. banned as India tightens preventive steps

Why is it in news? In a series of temporary preventive measures, the Group of Ministers (GoM) on COVID-19 on Monday banned the entry of travellers from European Union nations, the European Free Trade Association, Turkey and the United Kingdom to India from March 18.

More in news

Expansion of quarantine: The GoM also called for expanding the compulsory quarantine for a minimum period of 14 days for passengers coming from/transiting through UAE, Qatar, Oman, and Kuwait.

Spread in states: Reports from States, however, put the total number of cases, including fatalities, at 123. The highest number of cases at 39, is from Maharashtra, with two more people, including a Philippine national, testing positive, State Health Department officials said

India to join WHO’s COVID-19 trials

Why is it in news? India is all set to join World Health Organisation’s “Solidarity trial” aimed at rapid global search for drugs to treat COVID-19.

More in news

More about the trial
(1) The Solidarity Trial will test four different drugs or combinations viz. remdesivir, a combination of two drugs, lopinavir and ritonavir, the two drugs plus interferon beta, and chloroquine.
(2) The trial will compare their effectiveness to what is called standard of care, the regular support hospitals treating COVID-19 patients use now.

| Sources   | The Hindu |

**G20 commits $5 trillion amid COVID-19 scare**

**Why is it in news?**
- The G20 countries committed to inject more than $5 trillion into the global economy, and contribute to the World Health Organisation (WHO) led COVID-19 solidarity response fund.

**More in news**
- **More interactions:** The leaders agreed to have more interactions of G-20 Foreign Ministers, health officials and the respective Sherpas before the Riyadh Summit of the G-20 nations in November 2020.
- **Criticism of WHO:** Many countries have been critical of WHO’s failure to alert the world quickly enough of the potential threat from the pandemic, even after it had been informed of its spread in Wuhan by China on December 31 last year.
- **More about G-20**
  - (1) The G20 is an informal group of 19 countries and the European Union, with representatives of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank.
  - (2) **Membership:** The G20 membership comprises a mix of the world’s largest advanced and emerging economies, representing about two-thirds of the world’s population, 85% of global gross domestic product, 80% of global investment and over 75% of global trade.
  - (3) **G20 Members:**
    - The members of the G20 are Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, France, Germany, India, Indonesia, Italy, Japan, Republic of Korea, Mexico, Russia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, Turkey, the United Kingdom, the United States, and the European Union.
    - Spain as a permanent, non-member invitee, also attends leader summits.

| Sources   | The Hindu |
India Philanthropy Report, 2020

Why is it in the news?
- According to the India Philanthropy Report 2020, the domestic philanthropic funding had grown rapidly in the last decade.
- It grown from around Rs. 12,500 crore in 2010 to Rs. 55,000 crore in 2018.
- The share of individual contributions had increase from 26% to 60% in the same period.
- The report is co-created by Dasra foundation and Bain &Company, took a broad 10 year view of the Indian philanthropic landscape.

More in the news
- **On Gender and Adolescent girls:**
  1. The report states that despite the country ranking low in gender equality, less than 1% of philanthropic funding went towards addressing issues related to them.
  2. An investment of Rs. 11,000 crore every year in secondary education for adolescent girls has the potential to add Rs. 47,000 crore to the GDP per annum.

- **Regional Disparity:**
  1. The report cited the example of “mismatch” in receiving philanthropic funds between Jharkhand and Maharashtra to project the disparity.
  2. Maharashtra, India’s richest state, receives 34% of the country’s philanthropic and corporate social responsibility funds.
  3. Jharkhand- one of the poorest states, on the other hand receives less than 1% of the funding.

- **Recommendation:**
  1. Philanthropic funding in the next decade should focus on solutions to comprehensively address issues faced by vulnerable sections of society and bridge a mismatch of funding that occurs in different geographies and sectors.
  2. The report also highlighted the need to invest in adolescent girls as it noted that the country was faring particularly poorly on gender equality.

Source: The Hindu

Parliamentary panel on Education

Why is it in the news?
- According to a report submitted by the parliamentary panel on education, almost half the government schools in the country do not have any electricity or playgrounds.
- The budgetary allocations saw a 27% cut from proposals made by the School Education department.

More in the news
- **Cut in Funds:**
  1. The proposals made by the School Education department was for ₹82,570 crore, but only ₹59,845 crore has been allocated.
The panel recommended that these core schemes get additional funds at the revised estimates stage.

- **Deficit in Infrastructure:**
  1. The panel expressed dismay at the stark deficits in government school infrastructure.
  2. Only 56% of schools have electricity, with the lowest rates in Manipur and Madhya Pradesh, where less than 20% have access to power.
  3. Less than 57% of schools have playgrounds.

- **In higher secondary schools:**
  1. Not a single additional classroom had been built by December 31, 2019, although 1,021 had been sanctioned for the FY 2019-20.
  2. Only three laboratories had been built— one each for physics, chemistry and biology— despite sanctioned funds for 1,343 labs.

- **No boundary wall:**
  1. Almost 40% of schools did not have a boundary wall, endangering the safety of students and school property.

- **The panel recommendation:**
  1. The HRD Ministry should collaborate with the MGNREGS to construct boundary walls, and work with the Ministry of New and Renewable Energy so that schools have access to power.

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**COVID-19 now a pandemic**

**Why is it in the news?**
- The World Health Organisation (WHO) said that according to its assessment, COVID-19 “can be characterised as a pandemic.”

**More in the news**
- **Pandemic** is declare when an epidemic spreads throughout the world.
- WHO noted with concern that 1,18,000 positive cases have been reported globally in 114 countries.
- **WHO said**—
  1. Pandemic is not a word to use lightly or carelessly.
  2. It is a word that, if misused, can cause unreasonable fear, or unjustified acceptance that the fight is over, leading to unnecessary suffering and death.

Source: The Hindu.

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**The Indian Institutes of Information Technology (IIITs) Laws (Amendment) Bill, 2020**

**Why is it in the news?**
- The Lok Sabha passed a bill which seeks to confer the status of Institution of National Importance (INI) on five more Indian Institutes of Information Technology (IIITs).

**More in the news**
- **What the Bill proposes?**
  1. To bring the five institutions under the IIIT (Public-private Partnership) Act, 2017, similar to the other 15 IIITs established under the scheme in Public-private Partnership (PPP) mode.
The five IIITs which are proposed to be given the INI status are located in Surat, Bhopal, Bhagalpur, Agartala and Raichur.

These five IIITs along with 15 others which are also build in PPP mode will now be able to use the nomenclature of Bachelor of Technology (BTech) or Master of Technology (MTech) or PhD degree.

It will also enable the institutes to attract enough students required to develop a strong research base in the country in the field of information technology.

Source: The Hindu.

Lockdown hits NREGA workers hard

Why is it in the news?
- The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) scheme has been officially shut down in at least seven States.
- It is effectively closed in many more, as COVID-19 lockdown comes into effect across the country.

About MGNREGA 2005
- The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), guarantees 100 days of unskilled manual work to all rural households in India.
- **Aim**: To enhance the livelihood security of people in rural areas.
- **Applying for a job card**:
  1. In order to get work under MGNREGA, a household has to apply for a MGNREGA job card from their Gram Panchayat (elected village council).
  2. Each household is entitled to one job card. However, each card can have any number of names on it from that household.
  3. Once a household has a card, they can request MGNREGA work from the Gram Panchayat and work should be provided within 15 days of a request being made.
  4. If a Gram Panchayat cannot provide work, an unemployment allowance should be given.

Source: The Hindu
Yes Bank Issue

Why is it in the news?

- The Reserve Bank of India has moved in to take charge of new generation private bank Yes Bank.
- As part of RBI bailout, SBI to pick up 49% in Yes Bank.

More in the news

- **Reasons why the RBI superseded the board of Yes Bank:**
  - **Deteriorating Financial Position:**
    1. The financial position of Yes Bank has undergone a steady decline over the last few years because of its inability to raise capital to address potential loan losses and resultant downgrades.
    2. The bank was making losses and inadequate profits in the last four quarters.
  - **Governance Issues:**
    1. The bank has experienced serious governance issues and practices in recent years which have led to a steady decline of the bank.
    2. Take, for instance, the bank under-reported NPAs to the tune of Rs 3,277 crore in 2018-19.
  - **False Assurance:**
    1. The bank management had indicated to the Reserve Bank that it was in talks with various investors and they were likely to be successful.
    2. But in reality, there was no concrete proposal from investors to put the kind of money that the bank required to survive and grow.
  - **Non-serious Investors:**
    1. The bank was engaged with a few private equity firms for exploring opportunities to infuse capital as per the filing in stock exchange in February this year.
    2. These investors did hold discussions with senior officials of the Reserve Bank but for various reasons eventually did not infuse any capital.
  - **Outflow of liquidity:**
    1. The bank was facing regular outflow of liquidity. It means that the bank was witnessing withdrawal of deposits from customers.
    2. In fact, the deposits are bread and butter of a bank.
    3. The bank had the deposit book of Rs 2.09 lakh crore at the end of September 2019.

Source: The Hindu.

RBI opens dollar-swap window

Why is it in the news?

- The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has opened a six-month dollar sell-buy swap window to pump liquidity in the foreign exchange market.
- The move following financial markets in India and across the globe experiencing turbulence over the spread of COVID-19.
- The spread of COVID-19 could lead to a slowdown in growth.
The central bank will conduct U.S. dollar-rupee sell-buy swaps worth $2 billion on March 16, to begin with, in its effort to fight market volatility.

The swaps would be conducted through the auction route in multiple tranches and the auctions would be multiple price-based, that is, successful bids will be accepted at their respective quoted premiums.

Source: The Hindu.

Government Policies and Taxation

Kisan Credit Card benefits extended to Pisciculture

Why is it in the news?

- The benefits of Kisan Credit Cards (KCC) have been extended for the first time to those engaged in pisciculture in Rajasthan.
- It will provide for short-term loans to those engaged in pisciculture, while covering the cost of establishing the fisheries units and their maintenance.

More in the news

- Credits obtained through KCC will make available funds for purchasing feed for fish, meeting the cost of power and water and payment of wages to the labourers.
- A campaign had been launched to include more pisciculture unit owners, dairy farmers and animal rearers in the KCC scheme.
- Credit limit extension:
  1. Those already availing of the scheme’s benefit could get the credit limit of their cards extended.
  2. The productivity from reservoir fisheries in Rajasthan is above the national average, while the breeding and rearing of fish is also done in tanks, ponds and waterlogged areas in the State.
- About Kisan Credit Card (KCC): The scheme aims at providing adequate and timely credit for the comprehensive credit requirements of farmers under single window for their cultivation and other needs as indicated below:
  1. To meet the short term credit requirements for cultivation of crops
  2. Post harvest expenses
  3. Produce Marketing loan
  4. Consumption requirements of farmer household
  5. Short term credit requirements of rearing of animals, birds, fish, shrimp, other aquatic organisms, capture of fish.
- Eligibility:
  1. All farmers-individuals/Joint borrowers who are owner cultivators.
  2. Tenant farmers, Oral lessees and Share Croppers etc.
  3. SHGs or Joint Liability Groups of farmers including tenant farmers, share croppers etc.

Source: The Hindu.

A.P. not in list for World Bank water scheme

Why is it in the news?

- According to the Union Minister of State for Jal Shakti, Andhra Pradesh is not in the list of States that benefited from the ₹6,000-crore Atal Bhujal Yojana.
- The scheme is partially funded by the World Bank.

Source: The Hindu.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>More in the news</th>
<th>About Atal Bhujal Yojana:</th>
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<td></td>
<td>(1) It has been designed with the principal objective of strengthening the institutional framework for participatory groundwater management.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(2) It also aims to bring about behavioral changes at the community level for sustainable groundwater resource management in seven States, viz. Gujarat, Haryana, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(3) Implementation of the scheme is expected to benefit nearly 8350 Gram Panchayats in 78 districts in these States.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(4) It will promote panchayat led ground water management and behavioural change with primary focus on demand side management</td>
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**Nod for changes to Companies Act**

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Why is it in the news?</th>
<th>The Centre proposes to amend the Companies Act again, in a bid to decriminalise a number of offences.</th>
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<td></td>
<td>It also looks to ease corporate social responsibility (CSR) requirements, especially for smaller companies.</td>
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<tr>
<th>More in the news</th>
<th>The Union Cabinet approved the proposal to amend 65 sections of the companies Act.</th>
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<td><strong>The amendments:</strong></td>
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<td>(1) The bill will enable the listing of Indian companies on stock exchanges in foreign jurisdictions.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(2) This is expected to give Indian firms greater access to capital, a broader investor base and better valuations.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(3) For 11 kinds of offences, the provision of imprisonment will be removed, limiting punishment to fines only.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(4) Six offences that had already been decriminalised earlier will see a further reduction in the quantum of penalties.</td>
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<td>(5) It will ensure that companies which have an obligation to spend ₹50 lakh per annum or less on Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) are no longer required to have a CSR committee.</td>
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<td>(6) Companies that spend more than the mandatory 2% on CSR in a particular year can carry it forward as credit for fulfilment of CSR obligations for the next few years as well.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Significance of the Amendments:</th>
<th>The changes are expected to significantly enhance the confidence of Indian corporates in the government’s resolve to provide greater ease of doing business.</th>
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<td>It will accord highest respect to honest wealth creators in the country and reduce the burden on the justice system.</td>
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**Source** The Hindu.

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**Cabinet allows NRIs to take 100% in Air India**

| Why is it in the news? | The Union Cabinet decided to allow Non-Resident Indians (NRIs) who are Indian nationals to own up to 100% stake of Air India, which is bound for disinvestment. |
| More in the news | • As per an official statement, the Cabinet had decided to increase the maximum stake for NRIs from 49% to 100.
• The government is in the process of selling the national carrier, having invited preliminary bids recently.
• **To liberalise FDI:**
  (1) The FDI policy would be amended to allow NRIs who are Indian nationals to own up to 100% of Air India under automatic route.
  (2) The amendment was meant to ‘liberalise and simplify the FDI policy to provide ease of doing business in the country.
• **Data of FDI Inflow:**
  (1) While FDI inflows stood at $45.15 billion in 2014-2015, the provisional figures for FDI had increased to $62 billion in the last financial year 2018-2019.

Source | The Hindu.

### Lok Sabha passes Appropriation Bill

| Why is it in the news? | • The Lok Sabha passed the Appropriation Bill 2020-21 that empowers the government to draw over ₹110 lakh crore from the Consolidated Fund of India.
• The fund will be used for government’s working, as well as for the implementation of its programmes and schemes.

| More in the news | • **With the passage of the Appropriation Bill,** two-thirds of the exercise for the approval of the 2020-21 Budget has been completed.
• Now, with only the Finance Bill that pertains to the government’s taxation proposal awaiting passage.
• **Appropriation Bill:**
  (1) Post the discussions on Budget proposals and the Voting on Demand for Grants, the government introduces the Appropriation Bill in the Lok Sabha.
  (2) It is intended to give authority to the government to withdraw from the Consolidated Fund, the amounts so voted for meeting the expenditure during the financial year.
  (3) Under Article 114(3) of the Constitution, no amount can be withdrawn from the Consolidated Fund without the enactment of such a law by Parliament.

Source | The Hindu

### Indira Gandhi Matritva Poshan Yojana

| Why is it in the news? | • The Rajasthan government has announced a maternity benefit scheme for four districts in the State on a pilot basis under which it will offer ₹6,000 for the birth of the second child.
• The Rajasthan government scheme is called Indira Gandhi Matritva Poshan Yojana.

| More in the news | • **Indira Gandhi Matritva Poshan Yojana:**
  (1) The scheme will be implemented in the areas where nutrition indicators among children and anaemia levels among mothers are worse than the average for the State.
  (2) The government aims to reach out to 75,000 beneficiaries annually. It estimates an expenditure of Rs. 45 crore per year.
  (3) Beneficiaries will receive cash in three or five instalments upon meeting certain conditions.
The State scheme will complement the Central government’s Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana which offers ₹5,000 for the birth of the first child.

However, unlike the Central scheme they will not have to submit an Aadhaar card for the State scheme and the money will be transferred directly to their bank accounts.

Source: The Hindu

### MSMEs

**Why is it in the news?**

- Union Minister for Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSME) told the Rajya Sabha that the government would come out with a new definition of MSMEs.
- Currently the MSMEs are defined on the basis of investment in plant and machinery.

**More in the News**

- The government had accepted 39 suggestions by the U.K. Sinha committee appointed by the Reserve Bank of India, including the setting up a “fund of funds” for the sector.

  **Suggestions of the U.K. Sinha committee:**
  1. Rs. 5,000 crore stressed asset fund for domestic MSMEs.
  2. The fund will assist units in a cluster where there is a change in the external environment such as plastic ban.
  3. The RBI should increase the limit for non-collateralised loans to Rs. 20 lakh. This would address a significant proportion of the sector needs.
  4. There should be revision in loan limit sanctioned under MUDRA by the Finance Ministry to Rs. 20 lakh from Rs. 10 lakh.
  5. Banks that wish to specialise in MSME lending, their sub-targets for farm loans under the priority sector lender could be waived off.

- **Present MSME Classification:**
  1. A micro enterprise is an enterprise where investment in plant and machinery does not exceed Rs. 25 lakh.
  2. A small enterprise is an enterprise where the investment in plant and machinery is more than Rs. 25 lakh but does not exceed Rs. 5 crore.
  3. A medium enterprise is an enterprise where the investment in plant and machinery is more than Rs. 5 crore but does not exceed Rs. 10 crore.

Source: The Hindu

### Miscellaneous

#### Sharp decline in PSB fraud amount

**Why is it in the news?**

- According to the Finance Ministry, Comprehensive steps taken to curb fraud in public sector banks (PSBs) have resulted in a sharp decline in the amount involved.
- There is a decline from ₹50,329 crore in 2013-14 to just ₹3,781 crore in the first three quarters of 2019-20.

**More in the News**

- **An online searchable database of frauds reported by banks:**
  1. It has set up in the form of Central Fraud Registry to enable timely identification, control and mitigation of fraud risk and for carrying out due diligence during the credit sanction process.
**The Unique Academy**

- **The Fugitive Economic Offenders Act** is being invoked to attach and confiscate the assets of violators and strip them of the entitlement to defend any civil claim.

**Directives to Banks:**
1. The PSBs have been told to get certified copies of passports of promoters and directors and other authorised signatories of companies availing themselves of loan facilities of more than Rs. 50 crore.
2. PSBs have been advised to decide on publishing photographs of wilful defaulters as per procedure.
3. The government has also asked these banks to strictly ensure rotational transfer of officials to mitigate the possibility of their involvement in any fraud.
4. The bank heads have been empowered to issue requests for opening look-out circulars against suspects.

**Source** The Hindu.

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**SC frees trade in Cryptocurrencies**

**Why is it in the news?**
- The Supreme Court set aside an April 6, 2018, circular of the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) that prohibited banks and entities regulated by it from providing services in relation to virtual currencies (VCs).

**More in the news**
- **From the Supreme Court:**
  1. Till date, RBI has not come out with a stand that any of the entities regulated by it namely, nationalised banks/scheduled commercial banks/cooperative banks/NBFCs, have suffered any loss or adverse effect directly or indirectly, on account of VC exchanges.
  2. The bench found the RBI circular “disproportionate” with an otherwise consistent stand taken by the central bank that VCs were not prohibited in the country.
- **Centre’s failure:**
  1. Court referred to the Centre’s failure to introduce an official digital rupee despite two draft Bills and several committees.
  2. The court expanded on how the Centre had been toying with plans for an official digital currency.
- **Committee on VCs:**
  1. On November 2, 2017, the Centre constituted an Inter-Ministerial Committee, which initially recommended the ‘Crypto-token Regulation Bill of 2018’.
  2. This Bill found a complete ban on VCs an “extreme tool” and suggested regulatory measures.
  3. At that point, the committee was even fine with the idea of allowing the sale and purchase of digital crypto assets at recognised exchanges.
- **What is Virtual Currency (VC)?**
  1. VCs are digital currencies in which encryption techniques are used to regulate the generation of the currency units and verify the transfer of funds, operating independently of a central bank.

**Source** The Hindu.

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**Plea on GI tag for basmati rice by MP dismissed**
Why is it in the news?
- The State of Madhya Pradesh and the Madhya Shetra Basmati Growers Association have lost two separate cases filed by them in the Madras High Court in 2016.
- MP had challenged the exclusion of 13 districts in the State from a map submitted by the Agricultural and Processed Food Products Export Development Authority (APEDA) seeking Geographical Indication tag for basmati rice grown in the Indo Gangetic Plain.

More in the news
- Basmati rice was grown only in the States of Punjab, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Delhi and Uttarakhand apart from 26 districts in Uttar Pradesh besides Jammu as well as Kathua.
- Geographical Indication (GI) Tag:
  1. A geographical indication (GI) is a tag on products which indicates their specific geographical origin, quality or a reputation it acquires due to its origin.
  2. It conveys an assurance of quality and distinctiveness which is essentially attributable to the fact of its origin in that defined geographical locality, region or country.
  3. The GI tag in India is governed by the Geographical Indications of Goods (Registration and Protection Act), 1999.
  4. GIs are also covered under Articles 22 to 24 of the Trade Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) Agreement.

Source: The Hindu.

COVID-19 outbreak could help Agri exports

Why is it in the news?
- In the wake of the COVID-19 outbreak, the Centre has identified 21 agricultural products, in which Indian exports could benefit from trade restrictions against Chinese goods.

More in the news
- Products:
  1. The 21 agricultural products includes honey, potatoes, grapes, soya beans and groundnuts, mangoes, tamarinds, lychees etc.
- Value share:
  1. The total value of China's global exports of these products amounted to $5488.6 million in 2018.
  2. India exported $4,445.9 million worth of these commodities in the same period.
- Opportunities:
  1. There may be opportunities for Indian exporters of agri-items, in case some countries impose restrictions on Chinese goods.
  2. Finance Ministry analysing the disrupts in global supply chains due to the COVID-19 crisis and chart a government response.

Source: The Hindu.

Shared economy at $2 billion by end-2020

Why is it in the news?
- The shared economy in India is estimated to be an about $2 billion industry by the end of the current year, according to a recent report by Maple Capital Advisors.

More in the news
- The ‘shared economy’ includes segments such as:
  1. Co-working (Awfis, WeWork India)
  2. Co-living (Stanza Living, OYO Life, Oxford Caps)
(3) Shared mobility (Uber, Ola, Shuttl)
(4) Furniture rental (Furlenco, Rentomojo)

- India Story,’ with high mobile penetration, high millennial concentration and an aspirational population, Asia has the highest willingness to use shared assets.
- In 2019, the segment was estimated to be over $1.5 billion in size in India.
- **Market size:**
  (1) The market size for the co-working sector is pegged at $500 million, while that for co-living is estimated to be $400 million, shared mobility at over $630 million, and furniture rental at $200 million.
  (2) The report noted that about $3.7 billion worth of capital has been infused in India in such services till now, adding that a similar amount is expected to be infused in the next couple of years.

**Source** The Hindu

**Why are oil prices crashing?**

**Why is it in the news?**
- The price of a barrel of Brent crude closed down at around $33 a barrel.
- Oil prices saw their biggest single-day crash in almost 30 years on March 9, throwing global equity markets into turmoil.
- Prices crashed by almost 50% this year, from $66 a barrel on December 31, 2019 to the current levels.

**More in the news**
- Prices crashed primarily on account lack of demand.
- **OPEC-Plus alliance:**
  (1) After 2014 “glut” diplomacy which brought down prices below $30 a barrel, Saudi Arabia and Russia came together to cut output and steady prices.
  (2) Known as the “OPEC Plus” arrangement (Russia is not a member of the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries, or OPEC), this alliance kept production lower and pumped up the prices.
  (3) The OPEC-Plus cooperation collapsed last week after Russia rejected a Saudi request to effect more cuts in output given the fall in demand owing to the economic impact of the coronavirus outbreak.
  (4) The existing output reduction deal is set to expire later this month. The Russian and Saudi sides have said they are no longer constrained by the deal.
- **Aftermath:**
  (1) Saudi Arabia’s oil giant Aramco announced that it would increase output from 9.7 million barrels a day now to 12.3 million barrels in April.
  (2) Aramco also offered a discount to its variety of crude, targeting Russian markets in Asia and Europe.
  (3) The fear of glut at a time of slowing demand (supply and demand shock) rattled the markets, crashing prices.
- **Saudi’s likely plan:**
  (1) As it was clear that Russia was not ready to cut its output further, the Saudis moved to the attack mode.
  (2) The plan is to flood the markets with Saudi oil and depress the prices, which would hurt all oil exporters.

**Source** The Hindu.
Milder cases drive spread of coronavirus, finds study

Why is it in news?

- 86% of people in China who were infected with novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) were not tested in the two-week period before travel restrictions came into force on January 23 in Wuhan and other cities.
- These undetected cases contributed to the majority of virus spread in the community, says a paper published in the journal Science.

More in news

- Findings of the study
  1. The researchers used a computer model that draws on observations of reported infection and spread within China in conjunction with mobility data from January 10-23 and January 24-February 8.
  2. People who experienced mild, limited or no symptoms were not detected but spread the virus anyway.
  3. The modelling study suggests that a “radical increase” in identifying and isolating people who have not been tested yet would be needed to fully control the spread of the virus.

Source: The Hindu

Pollution may affect COVID-19 patients

Why is it in news?

- A collective of doctors working on health impacts of air pollution has warned that people living regions with high levels of air pollution and with compromised lung function could be more vulnerable to COVID-19.

More in news

- **Warning on lung function**: The Doctors For Clean Air (DFCA) has warned that compromised lung function due to air pollution could lead to serious complications in patients affected by the pandemic.
- **Statement from DFCA**
  1. Exposure to air pollution in long term reduces the capacity of organs to function fully and makes it more vulnerable to infections and diseases.
  2. In the context of the current COVID-19 pandemic, such individuals are likely to face severe complications.
  3. It also noted that there was so far no proven links between air pollution and COVID-19 mortality.
  4. However, previous strains of coronavirus like SARS have known to cause higher deaths in regions with high levels of air pollution.

Source: The Hindu

China gives go-ahead for human trials of COVID-19 vaccine

Why is it in news?

- China has given the go-ahead for researchers to begin human safety tests of an experimental coronavirus vaccine in the race to develop a shot against the COVID-19 epidemic that has killed more than 7,000 people worldwide.
| More in news |  
| --- | --- |
| **More about the trials** |  
| (1) Details in the Chinese clinical trial registration database show that a “Phase 1” test that will examine whether experimental shot is safe in humans aims to recruit 108 healthy people.  
(2) The trial will be conducted by China’s Academy of Military Medical Sciences and the Hong Kong-listed biotech firm CanSino Biologics.  
**Vaccine being tested by U.S.:** Scientists in the United States said on Monday that clinical trials had begun for a vaccine developed by its National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases and the U.S. biotech firm Moderna. |

**IIT-Delhi team develops cheap COVID-19 test**

| Why is it in news? |  
| --- | --- |
| • Researchers at the Indian Institute of Technology here have developed a method to detect COVID-19 which can significantly reduce the test cost, making it affordable for large sections.  
• The National Institute of Virology, Pune, is in the process of validating this test on clinical samples. |

| More in news |  
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| • **Probe free assay:** The “probe-free detection assay” has been optimised and tested for sensitivity at the research laboratories of IIT.  
• **Indigenous kits:** According to the team, considering the scale of the ongoing pandemic, development of indigenous kits is the need of the hour.  
**More about the new test**  
(1) Using comparative sequence analysis, the team identified unique regions in COVID-19.  
(2) These unique regions are not present in other human coronaviruses providing an opportunity to specifically detect COVID-19. |

**How artificial intelligence can aid eye testing**

| Why is it in news? |  
| --- | --- |
| • A study conducted at two eye care centres in India — Aravind Eye Hospital, Madurai and Sankara Nethralaya, Chennai — which screened over 3,000 patients with diabetes, has shown that the AI’s performance exceeded the conventionally used manual grading method used to identify diabetic retinopathy. |

| More in news |  
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| • **Fundus photography**  
(1) A specialised retinal fundus camera was used to take photos of the eye.  
(2) Usually when doctors need to evaluate the retina, they dilate the pupil to allow more light to enter the eye and illuminate the back of the eye.  
(3) But in this fundus photography it is not necessary as a coherent beam of light can enter the small gap (Pupil) and take an image in just two to three minutes.  
**What is diabetic retinopathy?**  
(1) Diabetic retinopathy is a diabetes complication that affects eyes.  
(2) It’s caused by damage to the blood vessels of the light-sensitive tissue at the back of the eye (retina). |

Source: The Hindu
Navy to get four more P-8I aircraft from May

**Why is it in news?**
- The Navy will start receiving four more P-8I long-range maritime reconnaissance Anti-Submarine Warfare aircraft from Boeing from May and the process will be completed by January 2022.

**More in news**
- More about P-8I
  1. The P-8I is a long-range anti-submarine warfare, anti-surface warfare, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance aircraft.
  2. The P-8I is a variant of the P-8A Poseidon that Boeing is developing for the US Navy.
  3. It is capable of broad area, maritime and littoral operations.
  4. It is equipped with the sophisticated Harpoon missiles, lightweight torpedoes and rockets.

**Source** The Hindu

Nod for 83 LCA Tejas Mk-1A

**Why is it in news?**
- The Defence Acquisition Council (DAC) chaired by Defence Minister Rajnath Singh on Wednesday accorded approval for the procurement of 83 indigenous Light Combat Aircraft (LCA) Tejas Mk-1A from the Hindustan Aeronautics Ltd. (HAL) by “finalising the contractual and other issues”.

**More in news**
- LCA Tejas Mk-1A
  1. HAL Tejas is an Indian single-engine, delta wing, multirole light fighter designed by the Aeronautical Development Agency (ADA) and Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) for the Indian Air Force and Indian Navy.
  2. It came from the Light Combat Aircraft (LCA) programme, which began in the 1980s to replace India’s ageing MiG-21 fighters.
  3. In 2003, the LCA was officially named "Tejas"

**Source** The Hindu

Defence Ministry places order for 16,479 LMG

**Why is it in news?**
- The Ministry of Defence (MoD) on Thursday signed a Rs. 880-crore contract with the Israeli Weapon Industries (IWI) for 16,479 Light Machine Guns (LMG).

**More in news**
- Negev 7.62X51 mm LMG
  1. The IWI Negev is a gas-operated selective fire light machine gun that uses propellant gases from the barrel to cycle a short-stroke gas piston operating system under the barrel and a rotary bolt locking mechanism.
  2. The contracted Negev 7.62X51 mm LMG is a combat-proven weapon and currently used by several countries and would greatly enhance the lethality and range of a soldier compared to the presently used weapon.

**Source** The Hindu