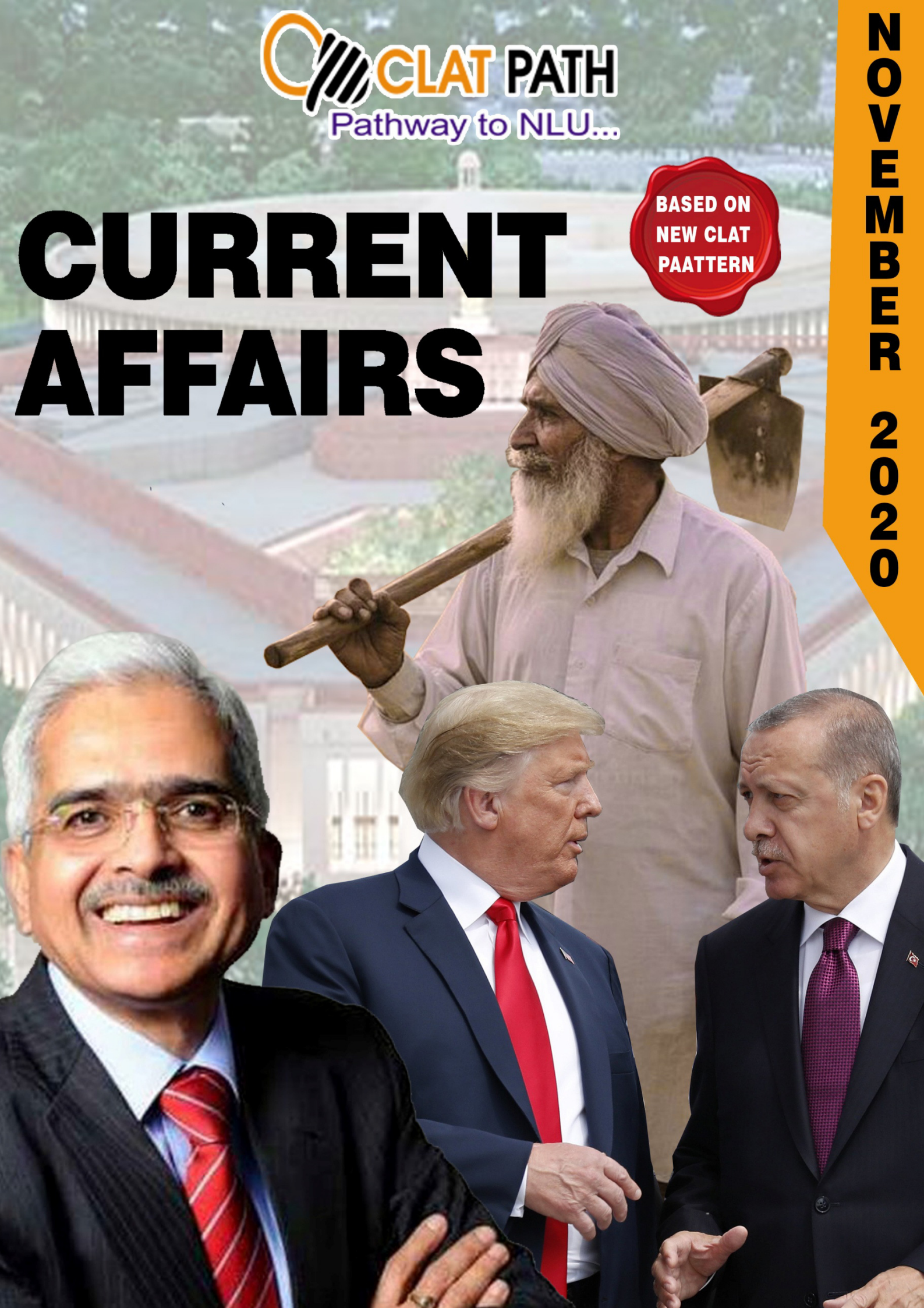




**NOVEMBER
2020**

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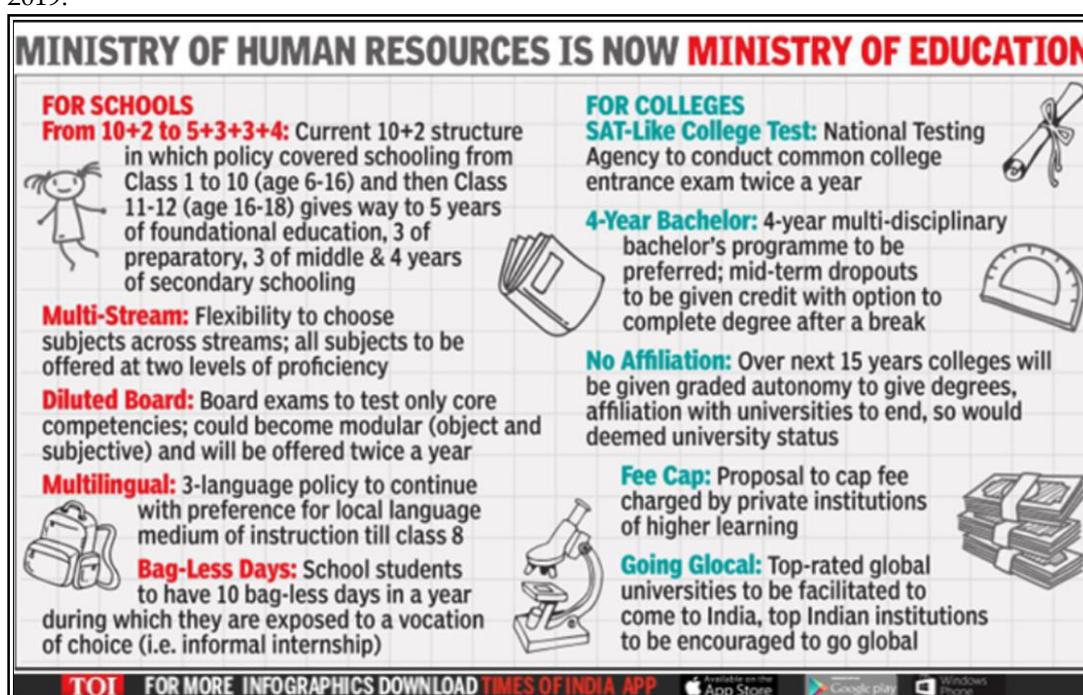
Focus Articles

India's education policies and concerns

The union cabinet recently approved the new National Education Policy, making way for large scale, transformational reforms in both school and higher education sectors.

More on News:

- The policy marks the fourth major policy initiative in education since Independence and is the first education policy of the 21st century and replaces the 34-year-old National Policy on Education (NPE), 1986.
- In June 2017 a '**Committee for the Draft National Education Policy**' was constituted under the Chairmanship of **Dr. K. Kasturirangan**, which submitted the Draft National Education Policy, 2019.



MINISTRY OF HUMAN RESOURCES IS NOW MINISTRY OF EDUCATION

FOR SCHOOLS
From 10+2 to 5+3+3+4: Current 10+2 structure in which policy covered schooling from Class 1 to 10 (age 6-16) and then Class 11-12 (age 16-18) gives way to 5 years of foundational education, 3 of preparatory, 3 of middle & 4 years of secondary schooling

Multi-Stream: Flexibility to choose subjects across streams; all subjects to be offered at two levels of proficiency

Diluted Board: Board exams to test only core competencies; could become modular (object and subjective) and will be offered twice a year

Multilingual: 3-language policy to continue with preference for local language medium of instruction till class 8

Bag-Less Days: School students to have 10 bag-less days in a year during which they are exposed to a vocation of choice (i.e. informal internship)

FOR COLLEGES
SAT-Like College Test: National Testing Agency to conduct common college entrance exam twice a year

4-Year Bachelor: 4-year multi-disciplinary bachelor's programme to be preferred; mid-term dropouts to be given credit with option to complete degree after a break

No Affiliation: Over next 15 years colleges will be given graded autonomy to give degrees, affiliation with universities to end, so would deemed university status

Fee Cap: Proposal to cap fee charged by private institutions of higher learning

Going Global: Top-rated global universities to be facilitated to come to India, top Indian institutions to be encouraged to go global

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Concerns:

- **Centre's dominating role:**
 - ✓ The NPE, 2020 **didn't fully acknowledge the variety prevailing in states** and the legacies those practices are rooted in.
 - ✓ For education to fulfil its social role, it must respond to the specific milieu in which the young are growing up.
- **States' old ways:** States have their own social worlds to deal with, and they often prefer to carry on with the ways they became familiar with in colonial days.
 - ✓ A prime example is the continuation of intermediate or junior colleges in several States more than half a century after the report by Kothari Commission.
- **Social justice:** Inequalities have become sharper with the rise in overall prosperity. In higher education, an RTE like attempt to balance private autonomy with an obligation to provide social justice is yet to be made.
- **Coordination:** The new policy document underestimates the problem of reconciling the three systems.
 - ✓ Accreditation norms and recognition procedures create a semblance of public accountability.
 - ✓ Coordination among the three systems has proved unmanageable, even in purely functional terms.

- **Top down approach:** In higher education, NPE, 2020 proposes nationally codified and administered measures to oversee institutional transformation across State capitals and district towns.
 - ✓ The idea of a monolithic regulatory architecture to control a system that is privatising at a rapid pace is impulsive. Functional uniformity is unlikely to offer any real solution.
- **Economic policy favours greater private enterprise** in higher education. How to reconcile this push with the necessity of equitable public education is a nagging question.
- **Autonomy:** It cannot be interpreted in financial terms alone. The many different ways in which the States have maintained their colleges and universities cannot all be regarded as signs of a dysfunctional or failing system.
 - ✓ If failure is the criterion for choice of remedy, gradations of failure will have to be determined first and their causes studied before remedial steps are contemplated.
- **At the school level** too, the new policy proposes a post-RTE structural shift, ignoring the fact that the RTE itself has not yet been fully implemented.

Way forward: The government should accept that one size does not fit all.

- **Defining aim and vision:** We must ask what kind of human being and society we want before we draft a policy in education.
 - We also need a systemic vision: both for recovery from institutional decay and for future progress.
- **Coordination between different systems:** There should be a reliable mechanism to reconcile the marking standards of different Boards and universities.
 - Coordination is required in adherence to social responsibilities in a period of rapid economic change.
- **Social vision:** Education must mediate between different social strata divided by caste and economic status.
 - Further progress of this role called for **continued financial support for the implementation of RTE and policy guidance** for the proper use of this support so that regional disparities diminish.
 - The recent attempt made by Tamil Nadu to create a modest quota in NEET for students who attended government schools' points towards an endemic problem exacerbated by centralisation.

US presidential election: A comparative study

With the election of Democratic candidate Joseph Robinette Biden Jr., as the 46th President of the United States, beating incumbent U.S. President Donald Trump, India is looking forward to strengthening its ties with the US and weeding out differences.

More on the news:

- Biden secured more than the required 270 of 538 Electoral College votes needed to win the White House.
- Mr. Biden's running mate, **Kamala Devi Harris**, a U.S. Senator from California, will become the first woman and first Indian and African-American Vice-President of the country.
- Unlike Trump, Biden's approach could have a salutary impact on how the US leads the rest out of this tricky phase for the world economy amid Covid infections.

Comparative study - India and US Presidential election:

• FORM OF GOVERNMENT:

India (Parliamentary)

- Elected head of Government: Prime Minister.
 - ✓ He is the executive head.
 - ✓ Citizens cast their vote to elect their representatives to the Lok Sabha.
 - ✓ The party that wins a majority of seats in the Lok Sabha gets invited by the President to form the government.

USA (Presidential)

- Head of State: President.
 - ✓ Citizens cast their ballot in every state to elect members of the electoral college (popular vote) who in turn cast electoral votes to determine the President.
- The President holds office for a four-year term.

- ✓ The leader of that party becomes the Prime Minister.
- ✓ Elections to the Lok Sabha are held every five years generally.
- Constitutional head of state: The President.
- ✓ Article 52: There shall be a President of India.
- ✓ Article 53: The executive power of the Union shall be vested in the President.

• QUALIFICATIONS FOR ELECTION AS PRESIDENT:

US

The President must:

- Be a natural-born citizen of the United States
- Be at least 35 years old
- Have been a resident of the United States for 14 years

Note:

- In the US, Vice-President must also meet all of the qualifications of being a President.
- In India, the President can also be a naturalized citizen.
- In the US, a person can be the president for only two terms (Each term - 4 years). But there is no such bar in India.

India

No person shall be eligible for election as President unless he

- Is a citizen of India;
- Has completed the age of thirty-five years, and
- Is qualified for election as a member of the House of the People.

• NOMINATION PROCESS:

US (Primaries and Caucuses):

- A number of candidates from each party announce their candidacy more than a year before Election Day.
- Among them one candidate is chosen from each party by the nominating process conducted by each party.
- It currently consists of two major parts
 - ✓ A series of presidential primary elections and caucuses held in each state &
 - ✓ The presidential nominating conventions held by each political party.
- The primary elections are run by state and local governments where party members gather to vote through a secret ballot for the best candidates.
- Caucuses are private meetings run by political parties.
 - ✓ At the end of the primaries and caucuses in each state, the numbers of delegates allocated to the state are divided among the candidates according to their vote share.
- These delegates choose the party's Presidential Candidate on the convention day. The chosen presidential candidate also chooses a vice presidential nominee to run with him or her on the same ticket.
- A delegate is a person chosen by the people from each state to vote on their behalf to choose the nominee. These delegates are chosen by Primaries and Caucuses.
- This system was never included in the US Constitution and thus evolved over time by the political parties.

India: A candidate to be nominated for the office of president needs 50 electors as proposers and 50 electors as seconders for his name to appear on the ballot.

• ELECTION PROCESS:

US (Indirect Election)

- Article Two of the United States Constitution originally established the method of presidential elections, including the Electoral College.
- The voters do not directly elect the president. Instead, they elect representatives called "electors", who usually pledge to vote for particular presidential and vice presidential candidates. (Similar to the delegates in the primary elections).

India (Indirect Election)

Article 54: The President shall be elected by the members of an electoral college consisting of

- a) The elected members of both Houses of Parliament; and
- b) The elected members of the Legislative Assemblies of the States. Explanation: "State" includes the National Capital Territory of Delhi and the Union territory of Pondicherry.

- The number of electors in each state is equal to the number of members of Congress to which the state is entitled.
- Also, most state laws establish a winner-take-all system.
- This sometimes leads to a situation where a candidate who fails to get a popular vote wins, if he wins all the big states with a large number of electors.

• SUPERVISION OF ELECTIONS:

US

- Directly organised by the ruling governments of individual states: The US Constitution and laws grant the states wide latitude in how they administer all elections (federal, state, and local), resulting in varying rules across the country.
- ✓ In many US states, the responsibility of conducting elections falls on the state's secretary of state, a politician who in some states is directly elected and in others appointed by the state governor.

Article 55: Manner of Election

1. As far as practicable, there shall be uniformity in the scale of representation of the different States at the election of the President.
2. The election of the President shall be held in accordance with the system of proportional representation by means of the single transferable vote and the voting at such election shall be by secret ballot.

India

- Article 324: In India, the Constitution of India provides for a separate rule-making Election Commission of India (ECI) that is independent of the executive in government.
 - ✓ The ECI was set up in 1950 and it is charged with the responsibility of conducting polls to the offices of the President and Vice President of India, to Parliament, and to the state Assemblies and Legislative Councils.
- ECI - An apolitical body: Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar (chairman of the drafting committee), while introducing Article 324 in the Constituent Assembly said that the whole election machinery should be in the hands of a Central Election Commission, which alone would be entitled to issue directives to returning officers, polling officers and others.
- **Election Day:** An election for President of the United States occurs every four years on Election Day, held the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November.
- **Inauguration Day:** Each state's winning set of electors then meets at their respective state's capital in December to cast their electoral votes on separate ballots for President.

National

Law to check stubble burning soon

The Centre is planning to bring a law to address air pollution as well as check stubble burning in Delhi as well as the surrounding National Capital Region.

More on the news:

- Informing the Supreme Court, the central government held that a draft legislation would be ready this week.
- As a result, the Court suspended its earlier decision to have a one-man committee led by former **Justice Madan Lokur** to monitor stubble burning.

Need for such a law:

- **Stubble burning leading to air pollution:** Stubble burning accompanied with the withdrawal of monsoon and starting of winter season, is responsible for air quality deterioration in the Delhi-NCR region.

Supreme Court's observations:

1. Incentives for those not burning the stubble and disincentives for those who continue the practice.
2. The existing **Minimum Support Price (MSP) Scheme** must be so interpreted as to enable the States concerned to wholly or partly deny the benefit of MSP to those who continue to burn the crop residue.
3. **Student patrol:** The court had said the student forces could patrol highways and fields in the regions surrounding NCR and ensure that no fires were started in the fields.

About Stubble Burning:

It is a common practice followed by farmers to prepare fields for sowing of wheat (in November) as there is little time left between the harvesting of paddy and sowing of wheat.

Impact:

- Results in emission of harmful gases such carbon dioxide, Sulphur dioxide, nitrogen dioxide along with particulate matter.
- It adversely affects the environment and public health. For example, one of the associated reasons for clouds of smog choking NCR of Delhi is stubble burning in neighbouring states of Punjab, Rajasthan, Haryana, UP.

Why do farmers opt for stubble burning?

1. Have no alternatives for utilising crop residue/stubble effectively.
2. Farmers are ill-equipped: To deal with waste because they cannot afford the new technology that is available to handle the waste material.
3. Cost cutting: Because of less income due to crop damage, farmers are likely to be inclined to burn residue to cut costs and not spend on scientific ways of stubble management.
4. It quickly clears the field and kills weeds, slugs and other pests including those resistant to herbicide.
5. Stubble burning can also reduce nitrogen tie-up.

Alternative solutions:

1. Wealth from the stubble: There is great potential for making investments in paddy straw-based power plants which can help avoid stubble burning to a large extent and also create employment opportunities.
2. Improve soil productivity: Adding crop residues in the soil can improve soil moisture and help activate the growth of soil microorganisms for better plant growth.

3. Generation of organic manure: The removed residues can be converted into enriched organic manure through composting.
4. Industrial use: Like extraction of yeast protein can be explored through scientific research.

Initiatives at the level of different states:

Nodal officers in villages:

- To check stubble burning this kharif season, the Punjab government has appointed 8,000 nodal officers in villages that grow paddy.
- Also, the crop residue management machines are being given to farmers for on-site management of straw.

Gauthans:

- Chhattisgarh has already undertaken an innovative experiment by setting up gauthans.
- A gauthan is a dedicated five-acre plot, held in common by each village, where all the unused parali (stubble) is collected through parali daan (people's donations).
- It is then converted into organic fertiliser by rural youth.

Now, outsiders can buy land in Jammu and Kashmir

People as well as investors outside Jammu and Kashmir can now purchase land in the Union Territory (UT) as the Centre notified new land laws for the region, ending the exclusive rights of locals over the land granted under now abrogated Article 370.

J&K Development Act

- The introduction of the UT of J&K Reorganisation (Adaptation of Central Laws) by the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) has resulted in the repeal of at least 11 land laws in vogue in J&K.
- Under the 'transfer of land for the purpose of promotion of healthcare or education', the government may now allow transfer of land "in favour of a person or an institution for the purpose of promotion of healthcare or senior secondary or higher or specialized education in J&K".
- Only agriculturists of J&K can purchase agricultural land.
 - No sale, gift, exchange, or mortgage of the land shall be valid in favour of a person who is not an agriculturist.
 - No land used for agriculture purposes shall be used for any non-agricultural purposes except with the permission of the district collector"
- Under a new provision, an Army officer not below the rank of Corps Commander can declare an area as "Strategic Area" within a local area, only for direct operational and training requirements of the armed forces.

Rationale behind: The Centre has been arguing that Article 370 hampered development in the U.T. as investors were unable to purchase land prior to August 5, 2019. The Centre is likely to notify separate land laws for the UT of Ladakh soon.

Opposition: Political parties, including the National Conference (NC) and the People's Democratic Party (PDP) opposed the move.

Shashi S. Vempati committee: To review Guidelines on Television Rating Agencies in India

The Ministry of Information and Broadcasting (MIB) has constituted Shashi S. Vempati committee to review Guidelines on Television Rating Agencies in India notified by the Ministry in 2014.

More on the news:

- The present guidelines issued by the MIB on Television Rating Agencies in India were notified after detailed deliberations by the Parliamentary Committee, Committee on Television Rating

Points (TRP) constituted by the MIB and recommendations of Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) etc.

Need to review the guidelines:

- **Technological advancements** or interventions to address the system.
- Further strengthening of the procedures for a **credible and transparent rating system**.
- **To study different aspects of the television rating system in India** as they have evolved over a period of time.

The Terms of Reference for the Committee:

- **Study past and present recommendations** made by various forums (like TRAI) on the subject of television rating systems in India.
- Suggest steps for **enhancing competition** in the sector.
- To make recommendations on a way forward for a robust, transparent and accountable rating system in India.

About TRP:

- **A metric used in marketing and advertising:** To indicate the percentage of the target audience reached by a campaign or advertisement through a communication medium.
- **In the particular case of television:** A device is attached to the TV set in a few thousand viewers' houses to measure impressions.
 - ✓ Anyone who watches television for more than **a minute** is considered a viewer.
- **Significance:**
 - ✓ It represents how many people, from which **socio-economic categories**, watched which channels for how much time during a particular period.
 - ✓ This period is **one minute** as per the international standards.
- **Limitations of TRP:**
 - ✓ **Tampering devices used for assessing viewership:** by bribing viewers or cable operators or tampering with the selection of devices.
 - ✓ **Very small sample size:** Hence, manipulation becomes easier as even manipulating a few homes will change the TRP.
 - ✓ **Absence of any specific law:** That can penalize the suspects involved in panel tampering.
 - ✓ **Over dependence of advertising:** About 70% of the revenue for television channels comes from advertising (only 30% from the subscription), leading to broadcasting content which suits the advertisers.
- **Recent controversy:** The Mumbai Police has claimed about a scam about the manipulation of TRPs (Target Rating Points) by some TV channels by rigging the devices used by the Broadcast Audience Research Council (BARC) India.
- **Way ahead:**
 - ✓ Increasing the sample size for more accurate results.
 - ✓ Developing a legal framework for the regulation of TRP.
 - ✓ The subscription rates should be raised so that TV channels are not forced to serve the lowest common denominator.

Broadcast Audience Research Council (BARC):

- A company created in 2010 and jointly owned by advertisers, ad agencies, and broadcasting companies, represented by the Indian Society of Advertisers, the Indian Broadcasting Foundation and the Advertising Agencies Association of India.
- The Ministry of Information and Broadcasting notified the Policy Guidelines for Television Rating Agencies in India in 2014, and registered BARC in 2015 under these guidelines, to carry out television ratings in India.

Activists urge FSSAI to reconsider planned fortification of rice, oil

The Alliance for Sustainable and Holistic Agriculture (ASHA) has called upon the FSSAI to reconsider its planned fortification of edible oil and rice, citing a number of negative outcomes.

More on the news:

- The FSSAI is considering **mandatory fortification of edible oil with Vitamin A and Vitamin D and rice with Vitamin B12, Iron and Folic Acid.**
- There will be a **special focus on 112 aspirational districts**, according to a recent statement from the Food Ministry.
- The Food Corporation of India has now been asked to come up with a comprehensive plan to scale up the annual supply of fortified rice from the current 15,000 tonnes to at least 1.3 lakh tonnes.

Concerns raised by ASHA

- No scientific basis:
 - ✓ The primary reason for ASHA disagreeing with the decision was that the **benefits of rice fortification are still unproven.**
 - ✓ According to a **global meta-analysis on fortification of rice with vitamins and minerals**, fortification of rice with iron alone or in combination with other micronutrients made **little or no difference in the risk of having anaemia.**
 - ✓ Fortification of rice with iron and other micronutrients such as vitamin A or folic acid made **little or no difference in the risk of having vitamin A deficiency.**
- **Problems of overdose:** There were also health risks associated with fortification. A study at St John's Medical Institute, Bengaluru had cautioned that food fortification and iron tablet supplementation **may expose women to excess iron.**
- **Threatening livelihood:** Fortification would create an assured market for multinationals, which in turn would threaten the livelihoods of small rice and oil processing units across India.
- **Other:** This move would further **erode biodiversity, push monocultures** and deplete soil health.

Rice Fortification:

- Fortification is the practice of deliberately increasing the content of an essential micronutrient, i.e. vitamins and minerals (including trace elements) in food, so as to improve the nutritional quality of the food supply and provide a public health benefit with minimal risk to health.
- Fortifying rice involves grinding broken rice into powder, mixing it with nutrients, and then shaping it into rice-like kernels using an extrusion process.
- These fortified kernels are then mixed with normal rice in a 1:100 ratio, and distributed for consumption.

Way ahead

- ASHA has suggested that instead of fortifying rice and edible oil, the FSSAI could take other steps to meet the nutritional challenge in India.
 - ✓ One such option was food grown through Amrut Krishi, an organic farming technique that would lead to an increase in food nutrition.
- Another solution can be breast feeding with proper latching techniques. It could make critical impacts on nutrition deficiency in the critical first 1,000 days.
- Kitchen gardens: A study in Maharashtra had shown how vegetables grown in organic kitchen gardens have been found to increase haemoglobin levels.
- Reform in PDS: Less processed or unpolished rice can be added in the public distribution system. This would make sure that rice bran, a rich source of various micronutrients reached people.
- Awareness generation: FSSAI could play a greater role in building awareness about the diverse grains, vegetables, fruits and other crops grown in India.

Home Ministry amends FCRA rules

The Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) has recently relaxed norms for farmer, student, religious, and other groups who are not directly aligned to any political party to receive foreign funds if the groups are not involved in “active politics”.

Background:

- FCRA Rules, 2011 dealt with “guidelines for the declaration of an organization to be of a political nature, not being a political party”, and the Central government could specify an organization as that of political nature based on six criteria.

Recent Amendments:

- The Ministry notified new rules under the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA), 2010 recently thereby amending the FCRA Rules, 2011.
- Provisions under new rule: The organizations specified shall be considered to be of political nature, if they participate in active politics or party politics, as the case may be.”
 - ✓ **Clause V of Rule 3 (FCRA 2011)** qualified a political group as, “organizations of farmers, workers, students, youths based on caste, community, religion, language or otherwise, which is not directly aligned to any political party.
 - ✓ **Clause (VI)** qualified a group as political if the “organization by whatever name habitually engages itself in or employs common methods of political action like rasta roko, jail bharo, rail roko, bandh, or hartal **in support of the public cause.**
- **Stringent registration:** Any organisation that wants to register itself under FCRA “**shall be in existence for three years**”.
 - ✓ It should also have “**spent a minimum amount of ₹15 lakh on its core activities** for the benefit of society during the last three financial years”.
 - ✓ **Exceptions:** However, exceptions could be granted “provided that the Central Government, in exceptional cases or in cases where a person is controlled by the Central Government or a State Government may waive the conditions”.
 - ✓ The office bearers of NGOs or organisations seeking registration under the FCRA **must submit a specific commitment letter from the donor** indicating the amount of foreign contribution and the purpose for which it was being given.

Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA)

- It regulates foreign donations and ensures that such contributions do not adversely affect the internal security of the country.
- The Act, first enacted in 1976, was amended in the year 2010, when a slew of new measures was taken by the Union Home Ministry to regulate foreign donations. It was again amended in September 2020.
- Applicability:
 - ✓ The Act is applicable to all associations, groups, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) who intend to receive foreign donations.
- Prohibited members:
 - ✓ As per the FCRA, members of legislatures, political parties, government officials, judges, and media persons are prohibited from receiving any foreign contribution

Constitutional fault lines

The Governor of Tamil Nadu has continued to withhold his decision on an application seeking pardon filed by A.G. Perarivalan, one of the seven prisoners convicted in the Rajiv Gandhi assassination case.

More on news:

- In 2018, the Supreme Court (SC) had asked that the Governor should take a decision.

- A resolution passed by the Council of Ministers in favour of releasing all seven prisoners had rendered the matter decided.
- The inaction by the Governor now has given rise to ambiguity over constitutional powers.

Pardoning power of the governor: Article 161

- The Governor of a State has the power to grant pardons, reprieves, respites or remissions of punishment or to suspend, remit or commute the sentence of any person convicted of any offence against any law.
- It must be related to a matter to which the executive power of the state extends.
- Death sentence: It should be noted that the President can grant pardon to a person awarded death sentence. But a governor of a state does not enjoy this power.

Various powers

- **Pardon:** It means completely absolving the person of the crime and letting him go free. The pardoned criminal will be like a normal citizen.
- **Commutation:** means changing the type of punishment given to the guilty into a less harsh one, for example, a death penalty commuted to a life sentence.
- **Reprieve:** It means a delay allowed in the execution of a sentence, usually a death sentence, for a guilty person to allow him some time to apply for Presidential Pardon or some other legal remedy to prove his innocence or successful rehabilitation.
- **Respite:** It means reducing the quantum or degree of the punishment to a criminal in view of some special circumstances, like pregnancy, mental condition etc.
- **Remission:** It means changing the quantum of the punishment without changing its nature, for example reducing twenty-year rigorous imprisonment to ten years.

Past judgments on inordinate delay by constitutional authorities

- **In *Maru Ram v. Union of India* (1981),** the SC held that the pardoning power “under Articles 72 and 161 of the Constitution can be exercised by the Central and the State Governments, **not by the President or Governor on their own.**”
 - ✓ The **advice of the appropriate Government binds** the Head of the State.
 - ✓ To test the constitutionality of the order or resolution is a power reserved exclusively for constitutional courts of the country.
- ***Shatrugan Chouhan v. Union of India:*** The SC laid down the principle of “presumption of dehumanising effect of delay”.
 - ✓ Under Article 32 of the Constitution, the SC commuted the death sentences of 15 convicts when an inordinate delay to perform a constitutional function was brought to its notice.
 - ✓ The Supreme Court confirmed that the due process guaranteed under **Article 21** was available to each and every prisoner “till his last breath”.
 - ✓ The apex court has clarified that constitutional functionaries are not exempt from judicial scrutiny.
- ***Keisham Meghachandra Singh v. Hon'ble Speaker* (2020):** It was argued that the powers of the Speaker, holding a constitutional office and exercising powers granted under the Constitution, were beyond the scope of a 'writ of mandamus'.
 - ✓ However, the SC recalled an earlier judgment in *Rajendra Singh Rana v. Swami Prasad Maurya* (2007).
 - ✓ It confirmed that the “failure on the part of the Speaker to decide the application seeking a disqualification cannot be said to be merely in the realm of procedure”.
- **Keisham Meghachandra Singh case:** The SC issued a judicial direction to the Speaker to decide the disqualification petitions within a period of four weeks.

In the present case, there has been a substantial delay at the hands of the Governor. This calls for the immediate interference of the Supreme Court, for it otherwise would render the words contained in Article 161 of the Constitution meaningless.

HunarHaat returns after a gap of several months

Union Minister for Minority Affairs recently inaugurated the "HunarHaat", being organized at Delhi Haat, Pitampura from 11th to 22nd November 2020.

More on the news:

- "HunarHaat" is available on virtual and online platforms also.
- This time, people will be able to buy "HunarHaat" products digital and online also. Union Minority Affairs Ministry is registering these artisans and their indigenous products on "GeM" (Government e Marketplace).

About 'Hunar Haat'

- The Ministry of Union Minority Affairs organizes "Hunar Haat" under its USTAAD (Upgrading the Skills & Training in Traditional Arts/Crafts for Development) scheme.
- It has become a credible brand of rare exquisite indigenous handmade products.
- Besides handicrafts, it displays the diversity of India's varied cuisine too.
- It provides a market and opportunity to master artisans and craftsmen from remote areas of the country.
- Hunar Haat plays an important role in national and international branding of the heritage of master artisans in India.
- It has provided employment and employment opportunities to more than 5 lakh Indian artisans, craftsmen, culinary experts, and other people associated with them in the last 5 years.

USTAD" (Upgrading the Skills and Training in Traditional Arts/Crafts for Development) scheme Aims

- The scheme has been launched by the **Ministry of Minority affairs** to **preserve the rich heritage of traditional arts/crafts of minorities** and **build the capacity** of traditional artisans/craftsmen.
- The scheme will also establish **linkages of traditional arts/crafts with the national and international markets** and ensure the dignity of labor.
- The scheme **ensures the growth of lakhs of traditional artisans of the city.**
- The scheme, which will be **funded by the Central Government**, will prepare skilled and unskilled artisans and craftsmen to compete with big companies.
- The scheme will provide **employment opportunities and a better future to the youths belonging to the minority community.**

Finance:

Applicability The "USTAD" scheme is for **all areas of the country** from Kashmir to Kanyakumari and from Arunachal Pradesh to Gujarat.

Mission Purvodaya for eastern India

Union Minister of Petroleum & Natural Gas and Steel recently said that India cannot become Aatmanirbhar without eastern India becoming self-reliant. He also said that Purvodaya- eastern India has to drive national growth.

Background: Even though The Eastern region of India is extremely rich in resources like coal, bauxite with locational advantage with the presence of major ports such as Paradip, Haldia, Vizag, Kolkata, it lags behind other states in terms of GSDP per capita and Human Development Index (HDI).

Purvodaya-Accelerated Development of Eastern Region

- **About:** The Ministry of Steel in partnership with CII and JPC is organizing the launch of Purvodaya-Accelerated Development of Eastern Region through an Integrated Steel hub, in line with government Vision for focused development of the Eastern States.
- **About the integrated steel hub**
 - ✓ The proposed Integrated Steel Hub, encompasses Odisha, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, West Bengal, and Northern Andhra Pradesh.
 - ✓ The Integrated Steel Hub would focus on 3 key elements:
 - Capacity addition through easing the setup of greenfield steel plants.
 - Development of steel clusters near integrated steel plants as well as demand centers.

- Transformation of logistics and utility infrastructure which would change the socio-economic landscape in the East.

Benefits of Integrated Steel Hub

- Development of eastern India
 - ✓ It will play a significant role in the overall socio-economic growth of Eastern India, thus reducing the disparity between the East and other regions of the country.
- Steel sector
 - ✓ It would enable **swift capacity addition** and **improve the overall competitiveness of steel producers both in terms of cost and quality.**
- The multiplier effect in the economy
 - ✓ The creation of world-class logistics and utility infrastructure would also spur the development of other manufacturing industries across sectors.
- **Job Creation:** Growth of the steel industry through such a hub would lead to significant employment opportunities across the entire value chain, creating over **2.5 Million jobs** in the region.

In India's **march towards a \$5 trillion economy**, the 5 Eastern states can play a major role where the steel sector can become the catalyst in the growth of the established steel industry, thus improving the HDI standards and GDP of eastern India.

International

FATF keeps Pakistan on grey list till next review

The Financial Action Task Force (FATF) recently decided to keep Pakistan on the “greylist” till the next review of its compliance to the recommendations in February next year.

More on the news:

- Pakistan has **failed to deliver on action against organisations linked to terror groups banned** by the UN Security Council.
- It has also seen **delays in prosecution of banned individuals** and entities like Lashkar-e-Taiba chief Hafiz Saeed and LeT operations chief Zaki Ur Rahman Lakhvi as well as Jaish-e-Mohammad chief Masood Azhar.
- Pakistan was found **non-compliant in cracking down on terror financing** through narcotics and smuggling of mining products including precious stones.
- Pakistan has so far made progress across all action plan items and has **now largely addressed 21 of 27 FATF action items**.

India's UN journey, from outlier to the high table

The 75th anniversary of the founding of the United Nations (UN) is an opportunity to look at the major trends, patterns and future challenges as far as India's role in the UN is concerned.

Background:

- United Nations Day is celebrated on 24 October each year.
- On June 26, 1945, India became one of the first 50 countries to sign the UN charter.
- The United Nations officially came into existence on 24 October 1945, when the UN Charter had been ratified by China, France, the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom, the United States and by a majority of other signatories.
- India joined the United Nations after ratifying the UN Charter on October 30, 1945.

India and United nations

India's experience of Seven and a half decades at the UN may be divided in three distinct phases.

The first phase: until the end of the Cold War in 1989

- India **enhanced its diplomatic influence** as a moderating force in easing armed conflicts in Asia and Africa by disentangling them from the superpower rivalry.
- **Common causes:** India strove to utilise the UN only to focus on common causes such as anti-colonialism, anti-racism, nuclear disarmament, environment conservation and equitable economic development.
 - ✓ In 1988, India proposed a bold three-phase plan to eliminate nuclear weapons from the surface of earth.
- **Bilateral issues:** India also realised that the UN could not be relied upon to impartially resolve vital security disputes such as Jammu and Kashmir.
 - ✓ It **resisted attempts by neighbouring countries to raise bilateral problems** which was reflected during the Bangladesh liberation war and after.
 - ✓ After the **India-China war debacle** India redesigned its diplomatic style to privilege bilateral contacts over the third party role by the UN.

Second phase (1990s): A demanding decade

- It was the most difficult decade for India in the UN because of
 - ✓ The sudden end of the Cold War,
 - ✓ The disintegration of the Soviet Union and

- ✓ The resultant emergence of the United States as the unrivalled power in world politics.
 - ✓ Unstable coalition governments
 - ✓ The balance of payments crisis which constrained the country's capability to be active in the Security Council (UNSC) and the General Assembly.
- **A change in India's foreign policy** was reflected in voting patterns at the UN. India showed pragmatism in enabling the toughest terms on Iraq even after eviction from occupied Kuwait, or in reversing the hitherto stated position on Zionism as racism.
 - **Internationalisation of Kashmir issue:** Growing militancy in Kashmir in the early 1990s emboldened Pakistan to internationalise the dispute with accusations about gross human rights violations by India.
 - ✓ India had to work hard to seek favours from Iran and China in the Human Rights Commission to checkmate Pakistan.
 - **The threat to the UN's sovereignty principle** by NATO intervention against Yugoslavia in 1999 without the authorisation of the UNSC deeply disturbed India.
 - **Diplomatic difficulties:** India suffered a humiliating defeat in the hands of Japan in the 1996 contest for a non-permanent seat in the UNSC.
 - **Against NPT and CTBT:** India resolutely stood against indefinite extension of the Non-Proliferation Treaty in 1995, and it stoutly rejected the backdoor introduction for adoption of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty in 1996.
 - ✓ India surprised the world in 1998 with its Pokhran nuclear weapon tests, ignoring the likely adverse reaction from the nuclear club.

Third phase (The 21st century): India shining at UN

- The **impressive economic performance** due to economic liberalisation and globalisation policies, helped a great deal in strengthening India's profile.
- India contributes its **reliable and substantial troop contributions** to several peacekeeping operations in African conflict theatres.
- India has emerged as a **responsible stakeholder in non-traditional security issue areas** such as
 - ✓ the spread of small and light weapons,
 - ✓ the threat of non-state actors acquiring weapons of mass destruction, and
 - ✓ the impact of climate change.
- **Humanitarian and funding assistance:** India has scaled up its contributions to development and humanitarian agencies, while India's share to the UN assessed budget has registered a hike from 0.34% to 0.83%.
- **The successful electoral contests** for various prestigious slots in the UNSC, the Human Rights Council, the World Court, and functional commissions of the Economic and Social Council, highlight India's growing popularity.

Challenges for India at UN:

- Security Council expansion
 - ✓ India has long sought a **permanent seat** at the Council.
 - ✓ It is also a proponent of other UNSC reforms — such as **increasing the number of permanent (currently five) and non-permanent (currently 10) seats** and **ensuring greater representation for Africa**.
 - ✓ The move has been stuck for more than 25 years because of a **lack of unity among the regional formations**.
 - ✓ It also includes **stout opposition from some 30 middle powers** such as Italy and Pakistan which fear losing out to regional rivals in the event of an addition of permanent seats.
- **The draft Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism:** India proposed the draft but it encountered reservations from among Islamic and other countries on provisions regarding definition of terrorist and the convention's application to state armed forces.
- Volatile global situation
 - ✓ The Trump administration's disdain towards multilateral institutions,
 - ✓ The changing U.S.-China equation,
 - ✓ China's growing political isolation on account of the spread of the novel coronavirus, and

- ✓ China's aggressive territorial forays in eastern Ladakh and the South China Sea,
- ✓ An unabated economic slowdown

Way forward:

India's future role will probably depend on its ability to weather the impact of the multiple crises it now faces. This is pertinent as India will soon begin its two-year term as a non-permanent UNSC member.

- **Its areas of priority** will continue to be the
 - ✓ Upholding of Charter principles,
 - ✓ Mounting effective punitive measures against those who support, finance and sponsor terrorists,
 - ✓ Striving for securing due say to the troop contributing countries in the management of peace operations.
- **If China succeeds in convening a formal meeting on Kashmir** to please Pakistan, India may have to choose either to abstain in the vote since it is a party to the dispute or vote against any unfavourable proposal that might be tabled.
 - ✓ The growing proximity with the U.S. may prompt India not to stay neutral in order to counterbalance China.
- **Compromise on UN reforms:** Although India enjoys by far the greatest support, the only realistic possibility seems to settle for a compromise, i.e. a new category of members elected for a longer duration than the present non-permanent members without veto power.

About 'Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism' (CCIT)

- It provides a legal framework which makes it binding on all signatories to deny funds and safe havens to terrorist groups.
- Proposed first by India in 1996, the ratification of the Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism is impeded due to opposition from the US and OIS countries.
- Its major objectives are:
 - ✓ To have a universal definition of terrorism that all 193-members of the UNGA will adopt into their own criminal law
 - ✓ To ban all terror groups and shut down terror camps
 - ✓ To prosecute all terrorists under special laws
 - ✓ To make cross-border terrorism an extraditable offence worldwide.

After 35 years, India assumes the Chairmanship of the Governing Body of International Labour Organization

Mr. Apurva Chandra, Secretary (Labour and Employment) has been elected as the Chairperson of the Governing Body of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) for the period October 2020- June 2021.

- It marks a new chapter in the 100 years of productive relationship between India and ILO.
- The Governing Body (GB) is the **apex executive body of the ILO** which decides policies, programmes, agenda, budget and elects the Director-General.

About ILO

- The ILO was created in 1919, as part of the Treaty of Versailles that ended World War I, to reflect the belief that universal and lasting peace can be accomplished only if it's based on social justice.
- In 1946, the ILO became a specialized agency of the United Nations.
- The only tripartite U.N. agency, the ILO brings together governments, employers and workers of member States, to set labour standards, develop policies and devise programmes promoting decent work for all women and men.
- The ILO has 187 member states: 186 of the 193 UN member states plus the Cook Islands are members of the ILO.
- The International Labour Office is the permanent secretariat of the International Labour Organization.

- It is the focal point for the International Labour Organization's overall activities, which it prepares under the scrutiny of the Governing Body and under the leadership of the Director-General.
- The Headquarter of ILO is in Geneva, Switzerland.

Malabar naval exercise

The Malabar Naval exercise including Australia along with Japan and the U.S., was held off the Visakhapatnam coast.

More on the news:

- It is being conducted as a '**non-contact, at sea only**' exercise in view of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Phase 1: November 3 to 6
 - ✓ Phase-1 of Malabar saw the participation of U.S. guided-missile destroyer USS John S McCain, Australian long-range frigate HMAS Ballarat with integral MH-60 helicopter, and Japanese destroyer JS Onami with integral SH-60 helicopter.
 - ✓ The Indian side will see the participation of destroyer INS Ranvijay, stealth frigate INS Shivalik, off-shore patrol vessel INS Sukanya, fleet support ship INS Shakti and submarine INS Sindhuraj.
- **The second phase** was held from November 17 to 20.

Background:

- Shift from earlier stance:
 - ✓ After years of reluctance by India for inclusion of Australia, it was finally open to the inclusion of the country in the Malabar exercise.
 - ✓ The inclusion of Australia in the Malabar exercises would surely **mark a major shift for India's Indo-Pacific plans.**
- Repeated requests by Australia
 - ✓ **Since April 2017** Australia has made repeated requests to join the exercises.
 - ✓ However, India did not include Australia in the exercises in 2018 and 2019, on the other hand, the **bilateral AUSINDEX naval exercise expanded in scope and complexity.**

Significance of including Australia in Malabar exercise

- Signal to China:
 - ✓ The move of expansion of Malabar exercise comes in the midst of the **ongoing stand-off with China on the border**, the biggest crisis along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in over five decades.
 - ✓ And Australia's inclusion would be surely seen as a possible **first step towards the militarization of the Quad coalition**, which has been opposed by China in the past.
- Expanding strategic cooperation with Australia
 - ✓ Recently, at the 'virtual summit' between Indian Prime Minister and Australian PM the two countries
 - **Signed the long-pending Mutual Logistics Support Agreement.**
 - It also elevated their partnership to a **Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.**
 - A joint declaration on a **shared vision for maritime cooperation in the Indo-Pacific** was also announced.
- Indo-Pacific
 - ✓ It is based on their shared values and commitment to an *open, inclusive Indo-Pacific* and a rules-based international order.
 - ✓ The exercise will showcase the **"high-levels of synergy and coordination between the friendly navies.**

Malabar Exercise

- It is an annual trilateral naval exercise between the navies of India, Japan, and the USA which is held alternately in the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

- Malabar had begun as a bilateral naval exercise between India and the U.S. in 1992, and was expanded into a trilateral format with the inclusion of Japan in 2015.
- Other bilateral exercises between India and Australia are Pitch Black and AUSINDEX.

Mission Sagar: Handing over Food Aid to Sudan

As part of Mission Sagar-II, Indian Naval Ship Airavat entered Port Sudan recently.

More on the news:

- The Government of **India is providing assistance to Friendly Foreign Countries to overcome natural calamities** and COVID-19 pandemic.
- Towards the same INS Airavat is carrying a consignment of 100 Tonnes of food aid for the people of Sudan.

About Mission Sagar-II:

- It follows the first Mission Sagar undertaken in May-June 2020.
 - ✓ Under the first mission, **India reached out to:** Maldives, Mauritius, Seychelles, Madagascar and Comoros, and provided food aid and medicines.
- As part of Mission Sagar-II, Indian Naval Ship Airavat will deliver food aid to Sudan, South Sudan, Djibouti and Eritrea.
- Mission Sagar-II, is in line with the vision of **Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR)** and highlights the importance accorded by India to relations with her maritime neighbours and further strengthens the existing bond.
- The Indian Navy is progressing this mission in **close coordination** with the Ministries of Defence and External Affairs, and other agencies of the Government of India.

Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR):

- It was launched in 2015 as a step towards India's strategic vision for the Indian Ocean Region (IOR).
- **Objectives:**
 - ✓ Through SAGAR, India seeks to deepen economic and security cooperation with its maritime neighbours and assist in building their maritime security capabilities.
 - ✓ Further, India seeks to safeguard its national interests and ensure Indian Ocean region to become inclusive, collaborative and respect international law.
- **Significance:** When seen in conjunction with India's other policies impacting the maritime domain like Act East Policy, Project Sagarmala, Project Mausam, India as 'net security provider', focus on Blue Economy etc, the key relevance of SAGAR emerges.

The importance of Gilgit-Baltistan

Recently, Pakistan Prime Minister announced that his government would give the Gilgit-Baltistan (G-B) region provisional provincial status.

More on the news:

- This will make G-B the fifth province of Pakistan.
- The region is claimed by India as part of the erstwhile princely state of Jammu & Kashmir as it existed in 1947.
- The plan to grant G-B provincial status is linked to CPEC and Chinese interest. The push might have come from India's reassertion of its claims post reorganization of Jammu & Kashmir.

About the region:

- **Northernmost territory:** Administered by Pakistan.
 - ✓ To G-B's west is Afghanistan, to its south is Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, and to the east J&K.

- **Administrative arrangements:** They are different from those in PoK. While PoK has its own Constitution that sets out its powers and their limits vis-à-vis Pakistan, G-B has been ruled mostly by executive fiat.
- **Strategic importance:** It provides Pakistan its only territorial frontier, and thus a land route, with China, where it meets the **Xinjiang** Autonomous Region.
 - ✓ The **China Pakistan Economic Corridor** (CPEC) has made the region vital for both countries.

Background:

- **Possession of G-B:** Gilgit had been leased to the British by Hari Singh (ruler of J&K) in 1935. The British returned it in August 1947.
- **Instrument of Accession:** After J&K ruler Hari Singh had signed the Instrument of Accession with India, and the Indian Army had landed in the Valley to drive out tribal invaders from Pakistan, there was a rebellion against Hari Singh in Gilgit.
- **Mutiny in the region:** A small force raised by the British to guard Gilgit, on the frontiers of what was then the Soviet-British Great Game territory, mutinied. Later, it managed to bring Baltistan under their control.
- **Pakistan's stand:** After India went to the UN, Pakistan believed that neither G-B nor PoK should be annexed to Pakistan, as this could undermine the international case for a plebiscite in Kashmir.
 - ✓ This is why it is only being called "provisional" provincial status.

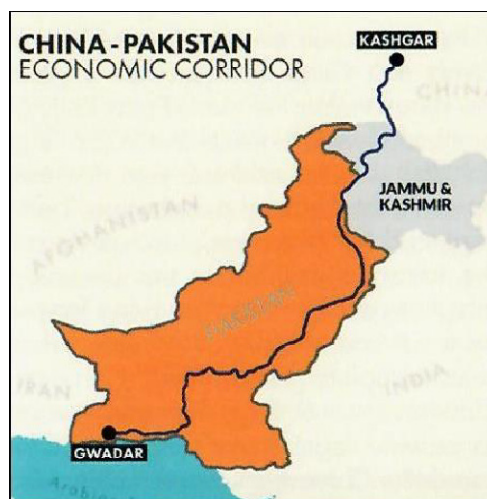
Different stakeholders in the region:

- **India:** While India has objected to the plan to make G-B a province of Pakistan and in the recent past asserted that it will take control of G-B, there is a realisation that it is impossible to change the map now.
- **Pakistan:** As majority of the estimated 1.5 million G-B residents are Shias, there is anger against Pakistan for unleashing extremist sectarian militant groups that target Shias.
 - ✓ But the predominant sentiment is that all this will improve once they are part of the Pakistani federation.
- **People in G-B:** The people of G-B have been demanding that the region be made a part of Pakistan, as they do not have the same constitutional rights Pakistanis have.
 - ✓ There is virtually no connection with India. They belong to several non-Kashmiri ethnicities, and speak various languages.

In this sense, it can be argued that the merger of G-B with Pakistan is a move that could help both countries put the past behind and move forward on the Kashmir issue, sometime in the future.

China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC):

- It is the flagship project of China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), that links the Western part of China (Xinjiang) to the Gwadar Port in Balochistan, Pakistan via Khunjerab Pass in Northern Pakistan.
- The bilateral project intends to promote connectivity across Pakistan with a network of highways, railways, and pipelines accompanied by energy, industrial and other infrastructure development projects.
- India has protested to China over the CPEC as it is being laid through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir.



Nagorno-Karabakh: The disputed region between Nagorno-Karabakh

Recently, Russia brokered a new peace deal between Armenia and Azerbaijan, the two countries that have been in a military conflict over the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh in the South Caucasus.

More on the news:

- During the course of the conflict, over 1200 have lost their lives, while thousands have been displaced.
- Since the conflict started, multiple ceasefire agreements have been signed between the two sides, but none so far have been successful.

About the Nagorno-Karabakh region:

- Recognised as Azerbaijan's territory: Straddling western Asia and Eastern Europe, Nagorno-Karabakh is internationally recognised as part of Azerbaijan. Nagorno-Karabakh has been part of Azerbaijan territory since the Soviet era.
- Controlled by: Most of the region is controlled by Armenian separatists.
- Strategic significance of the region:
- Energy-rich: Azerbaijan has built several gas and oil pipelines across the Caucasus - the region between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea - to Turkey and Europe.
- Reason for dispute:
 - ✓ When the Soviet Union began to collapse in the late 1980s, Armenia's regional parliament voted for the region's transfer to Armenia. However, the Soviet authorities turned down the demand.
 - This was followed by years of clashes between Azerbaijan forces and Armenian separatists.
 - ✓ Role of ethnicity: At present, the disputed region consists of a majority Armenian Christian population, even though it is internationally recognised as a part of Muslim-majority Azerbaijan.
- Other ceasefire agreements:
 - ✓ Even after the 1994 peace deal, the region has been marked by regular exchanges of clashes.
 - ✓ In 2016, it saw a Four-Day War before Russia mediated peace.
- The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Minsk Group, has tried to get the two countries to reach a peace agreement for several years.



Role of regional players:

- **Turkey:** Turkey shares a border with Armenia and is backing Azerbaijan.
- **Russia:** Russia's role in the conflict has been somewhat opaque since it supplies arms to both countries and is in a military alliance with Armenia called the Collective Security Treaty Organisation.
- **Israel:** Dominated by the Sunni and Jewish communities, Israel supports and arm Azerbaijan. The conflict marks a strange coupling of Turkey and Israel, which are hostile to one another both diplomatically and in terms of security.

Role of India:

- **Armenia:** With Armenia, India has a friendship and cooperation treaty signed in 1995, which would prohibit India from providing military or any other assistance to Azerbaijan.
 - ✓ Armenia extends its unequivocal support to India on Kashmir issue.
- **Azerbaijan:** ONGC/OVL has made investments in an oilfield project in Azerbaijan and GAIL is exploring the possibilities of cooperation in LNG.

- ✓ **Strategic location:** Azerbaijan also falls on the International North South Transport Corridor (INSTC) route, connecting India with Russia through Central Asia. It can also connect India with Turkey and beyond.
- ✓ Azerbaijan not only opposes but also promotes Pakistan's narrative on Kashmir issue.
- **Indian foreign policy:** Unlike "Neighbourhood First", "Act East" or "Central Asia Connect", India does not have a publicly articulated policy for the South Caucasus.
- Way ahead for India:
 - ✓ Though India has every reason to support Armenia, it can have repercussions for India as its adversaries like Pakistan may misuse it.
 - ✓ Therefore, under these circumstances, India should adopt a **balanced and neutral stance** and pitching for a political solution as outlined in the Madrid Principles (Demilitarisation of Nagorno-Karabakh and the gradual liberation of Azerbaijani territory that Armenia had occupied in the 1991-94 war).

20th Summit of SCO Council of Heads of State

Recently, the 20th Summit of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Council of Heads of State was held.

More on the news:

- The Meeting was chaired by the President Vladimir Putin of the Russian Federation.
- Other SCO Member States were represented by their Presidents, while India and Pakistan were represented at the level of Prime Minister.
- It is the first meeting in Virtual Format and the third meeting that India participated after becoming a full member in 2017.

Highlights of Indian Prime Minister's address:

- Reformed multilateralism: India, as a non-permanent member of the UNSC, will focus on the theme of reformed multilateralism to bring about desirable changes in global governance.
 - This is imperative to meet the expectation of a world suffering from the social and financial after-effects of the pandemic.
- India's firm belief in regional peace: This will promote security and prosperity and raising voice against terrorism, smuggling of illegal weapons, drugs and money-laundering.
- Respect territorial integrity and sovereignty: In an indirect reference to the Chinese infrastructure projects in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir, India urged members of the SCO to respect "territorial integrity" and "sovereignty".
- Strong cultural and historical connect: India has strong links with the SCO region and has a firm commitment towards strengthening connectivity in the region with initiatives like International North-South Transport Corridor, Chabahar Port and Ashgabat Agreement.
 - SCO Year of Culture: India also extended full support to observing the 20th anniversary of SCO in 2021 as the "SCO Year of Culture".

About SCO:

- The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation or the Shanghai Pact, is an economical -political military organisation founded in 2001 in Shanghai.
- China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Tajikistan were the original 5 founding members of the organisation who found the Shanghai Five Group.
 - ✓ The group was then renamed to Shanghai Cooperation Organisation with Uzbekistan joining the organisation in 2001.
- There are eight member states in the SCO at present, namely, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Pakistan and India (both joined in 2017).
- There are about four observer states and six dialogue partners in the SCO at present:
 - ✓ Observer States: Afghanistan, Belarus, Iran and
 - ✓ Dialogue Partners: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Cambodia, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Turkey.

- **Objectives of the SCO:**
 - ✓ To strengthen mutual trust among the neighbouring member states.
 - ✓ To promote effective cooperation in various fields like economy, trade, politics, culture and research and technology.
 - ✓ To ensure peace, prosperity, security and stability in the region, and
 - ✓ To establish a democratic, fair and rational international eco-political order.
- **Organisational Structure of the SCO:**
 - ✓ The supreme decision-making body in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation is the Heads of State Council.
 - ✓ The second highest body of the SCO is the Heads of Government Council.
 - ✓ Whereas the SCO secretariat, Beijing and the Executive Committee of the Anti-Terrorist Structure, Tashkent are the permanent bodies of the SCO.
 - ✓ Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) – Established to combat terrorism, separatism and extremism.

Mega trade bloc RCEP takes off without India

Recently, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), a mega trade bloc comprising 15 countries led by China came into existence.

- The initialising ceremony of the RCEP was held among the member-countries on the sidelines of the 37th ASEAN Summit held virtually.
- Addressing ASEAN Summit, India maintained silence regarding RCEP, indicating it's difficulty in welcoming the China-backed grouping.
- The new organisation has laid down the path for restarting discussion that had failed to admit India earlier and new developments would be taken into consideration when India will reapply.

About RCEP:

- Largest regional trading agreement: Described so, RCEP was originally being negotiated between 16 countries - ASEAN members and countries with which they have free trade agreements (FTAs), namely Australia, China, Korea, Japan, New Zealand and India.
- The purpose of RCEP: To make it easier for products and services of each of these countries to be available across this region.
- India walked out: Negotiations to chart out this deal had been on since 2013, and India was expected to be a signatory until its decision last year to walk out from the agreement.

RCEP-Background:

- The RCEP trade pact includes a mix of high-income, middle-income, and low-income countries.
- It was conceived at the 2011 ASEAN Summit in Bali, while its negotiations were formally launched during the 2012 ASEAN Summit in Cambodia.
- The RCEP is the first free trade agreement between China, Japan, and South Korea (three of the four largest economies in Asia).
- It is the first multilateral free trade agreement to include China.

Reason for India's exit:

- **To safeguard the interests of industries:** Like agriculture and dairy and to give an advantage to the country's services sector and according to officials, the current structure of RCEP still does not address these issues and concerns.
- **Unfavourable trade balances with several RCEP members:** India has trade deficits with 11 of the 15 RCEP countries, and India has been unable to leverage its existing bilateral free trade agreements with several RCEP members to increase exports.
- **China factor:** Escalating tensions with China are a major reason for India's decision.
 - ✓ **Exposure that India would have to China:** The various measures India has taken to reduce its exposure to China would have sat uncomfortably with its commitments under RCEP, that include inadequate protections against surges in imports.

- ✓ **Silent on the criteria of the national source of a product:** In the absence of which some countries could dump their products by routing them through other countries that enjoyed lower tariffs.
- ✓ **Inclusion of MFN obligations:** India wanted RCEP to exclude most-favoured nation (MFN) obligations from the investment chapter, especially to countries with which it has border disputes.
- ✓ **Market access:** RCEP also lacked clear assurance over market access issues in countries such as China and non-tariff barriers on Indian companies.
- ✓ **South China Sea:** At the 15th East Asia Summit (EAS), India referred to China and said that actions and incidents in the important maritime region eroded trust and suggested the need to adhere to the rules-based international system.

Implications for India:

- Reapply for the membership:
 - ✓ India will have to re-apply for membership negotiation.
 - ✓ However, as an original negotiating participant of RCEP, India has the option of joining the agreement on easier terms, unlike new members.
- **Did not influence other Quad partners:** Like Japanese and Australian plans regarding RCEP.
- Leverage for China:
 - ✓ Experts are interpreting the beginning of RCEP as a major development that will help China and trade in Asia-Pacific region in the post-COVID-19 scenario.
 - ✓ Also, the idea of decoupling from China is not a substantive issue in a regional sense.
- **May affect bilateral relations:** Staying out of RCEP may interfere with India's bilateral trading with the RCEP member-countries and could potentially leave India with less scope to tap the large market that RCEP presents.
- **Repeatedly missing the Asian bus:** Likening the present to India's decision to stay out of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum in the 1990s.
- **Push Aatmanirbhar Bharat:** The policy of self-dependent India where India could decide the rules and consolidate "comprehensive national power".

What lies ahead for India?

- **Open for accession by India:** As India may participate in RCEP meetings as an "observer".
- **Cooperation between India and like-minded countries:** Especially the Quad countries (Australia, the United States, Japan) to have a resilient supply chain in future.
- **For India, RCEP hardly makes a difference:** As it has Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) with ASEAN, and CEPAs (Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreements) with Japan and South Korea already.

Some analysts argue that "if you don't want to be on the menu, you have to be at the table". That is why India's seat at the table as an "observer" is an important development, where Delhi can make sure that it is not on the "menu".

Economy

Draft Coastal Shipping Bill, 2020

The Ministry of Shipping has issued the draft of Coastal Shipping Bill, 2020 for suggestions from the stakeholders and general public.

More on the news:

- The bill is in accordance with the Union government's vision for augmenting people's participation and transparency in the governance.
- The Ministry of Shipping has drafted a Coastal Shipping Bill, 2020 in lieu of the Merchant Shipping Act, 1958.

Background:

- As the shipping sector grows and evolves in the country, a need was felt to have a separate legislation on coastal shipping.
- The new legislation shall consider coastal shipping as an integral part of the transport chain and recognizes the policy priorities of the sector to meet the demands of the Indian shipping industry.
- While drafting this Bill, the global best practices have also been considered.

Some of the highlights of the Bill are as under:

- The definition of coastal shipping and coastal waters has been expanded.
- It is proposed to do away with the requirement of trading licence for Indian flag vessels for coastal trade.
- The Bill seeks to create a competitive environment and reduce transportation costs, while encouraging Indian vessels to increase their share in coastal shipping.
- The Bill also proposes integration of coastal maritime transport with inland waterways.
- There is a provision for a National Coastal and Inland Shipping Strategic Plan.

The Merchant Shipping Bill, 2016:

- The Bill seeks to bring in reforms in the shipping sector to promote ease of doing business, and develop Indian coastal shipping.
- The Bill replaces the Merchant Shipping Act, 1958, and repeals the Coasting Vessels Act, 1838.

Key features of the Bill include:

- National Shipping Board: The Board will advise the central government on the development of Indian shipping. It will have the power to regulate its own procedure.
- Seafarers Welfare Board: The Board will advise the central government on measures to promote the welfare of seafarers with regard to the following:
 - (i) Lodging and boarding,
 - (ii) Provision of hospitals and medical treatment, etc.
- Registration of Indian vessels: Every Indian vessel must be registered at a port or place in India that has been declared as a port of registry by the central government.
- Rights and standards for seafarers: The central government will grant a certificate of competence or a certificate of proficiency to seafarers on the basis of service, age limit, medical fitness, training, and examination.
- Safety and Security: The Bill requires all ships to comply with various international conventions such as (i) the Safety Convention, 1974, (ii) the Convention on the International Regulations for Preventing Collisions at Sea, 1972, and (iii) the International convention for Safe Containers, 1972.

How has Covid-19 affected the finances of state governments?

The Reserve Bank of India's study on state governments' finances indicates that gross fiscal deficits (GFDs) of state governments are set to double in 2020-21.

The gross fiscal deficit (GFD)

- It is the excess of total expenditure including loans net of recovery over revenue receipts (including external grants) and non-debt capital receipts.
- Generally fiscal deficit takes place either due to revenue deficit or a major hike in capital expenditure.

Gross Fiscal Deficit = (Total Expenditure + Loans Servicing) - (Revenue Receipts + Non Debt Capital Receipts)

- ✓ Capital expenditure is incurred to create long-term assets such as factories, buildings and other development.
- A deficit is usually financed through borrowing from either the central bank of the country or raising money from capital markets by issuing different instruments like treasury bills and bonds.

Key takeaways of the RBI study:

- **GFD-to-GSDP ratio:** In 2020-21, about half the states have budgeted the GFD-to-GSDP (gross state domestic product) ratio at or above 3%.
 - ✓ The average for states' budget before the outbreak of the pandemic is 2.4% of GSDP, while it is 4.6% for the remaining states that made their budget after the outbreak.
- **Primary deficits:** Most states are incurring primary deficits in 2019-20, as against primary surpluses at the onset of the global financial crisis.
 - ✓ Primary Deficit is the **difference between the current year's fiscal deficit and the interest paid on the borrowings** of the previous year.
 - ✓ Primary Deficit indicates the **borrowing requirements of the government, excluding interest.**
- **Operation of 'scissor effects':** It is the loss of revenues due to demand slowdown, coupled with higher expenditure associated with the pandemic.
- **The duration of stress on state finances** will likely be contingent upon factors such as
 - ✓ The **lockdown** tenure
 - ✓ The risk of **new waves of infection**
 - ✓ These factors make traditional backward-looking tax buoyancy forecasting models unreliable.
 - ✓ The **quality of spending and the credibility of state budgets** will assume critical importance.
- **Covid-19 impact on states**
 - ✓ **Revenue fall:** Considering the fact that tax revenues fall faster than GDP when growth is negative, tax revenues are likely to be reduced for the next few years.
 - ✓ **Pandemic-related spending**, particularly on health and other support measures, are likely to keep states' expenditures high, prolonging the 'scissor effects'.
 - ✓ **A surge in contingent liabilities** (guarantees) will affect states' finances.
 - ✓ **Tough choice of putting investment projects on hold**, will inevitably entail growth losses in a vicious cycle due to multiplier effect.
 - ✓ **States' indebtedness** is set to rise, and if it is not accompanied by an acceleration in growth, fiscal sustainability will become the casualty.
- **Pandemic response in specific states**
 - ✓ **KERALA MODEL:** With the resurgence in new cases, Kerala is actively roping in the services of **empowered local self-governments (LSGs)** in its fight against the pandemic.
 - ✓ **DHARAVI MODEL:** The RBI said **public-private partnership and community participation** played a crucial role in combating Covid-19 in Dharavi.

- The government tied up with local private doctors, hospitals, NGOs, volunteers and elected representatives and civil society organisations for **accessible testing, proactive screening, early detection, contact tracing, timely isolation**.
- Community participation, community kitchens and collective solidarity were the key features that helped contain the spread.
- **Dharavi has flattened the curve** and is worthy of emulation worldwide (WHO).

Reinforcing RBI's accountability

In each of the last three quarters, average inflation has not only exceeded the target, but has persisted above the upper tolerance limit set by the Centre.

More on the news:

Inflation, as measured by the consumer price index (CPI), was 6.7% in the January-March quarter, 6.6% in the April-June quarter (based on imputed data) and 6.9% in the July-September quarter.

Background:

The new monetary framework:

- **An agreement between the RBI and central government in 2015:** It explicitly made inflation targeting the objective of the MPC while using the repo rate as the instrument for it.
- **Target given to MPC:** The Reserve Bank of India's (RBI) MPC was given the target of keeping inflation at 4% +/- 2%. This meant that inflation should be between 2% and 6%.
- **Contrasting target:** It contrasted with the multiple indicator approach that predated this framework where the central bank focused on both growth and price stability.

Procedure of inflation targeting:

- **Review meeting** (every two months): Where MPC discuss the likely inflation and growth estimates over the coming months.
- **Targeting inflation using the policy rate:** Based on this review, the MPC targets inflation using the policy rate, or the repo rate.
 - ✓ **When inflation is higher:** Than the inflation target set by the central bank - then the MPC must increase the repo rate.
 - ✓ **When the actual inflation is lower than the target:** The MPC could decrease the repo rate.
- **Anchor:** The MPC looks at consumer price inflation (CPI) as the inflation target that it must keep between 2% and 6%.
- Average inflation overshooting the upper tolerance level or remaining below the lower tolerance level for any three consecutive quarters constitutes a **failure to achieve the inflation target**.
- In such an event, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) is required
 - ✓ To send a report to the Centre,
 - ✓ Stating the reasons for the failure to achieve the inflation target,
 - ✓ The remedial actions it proposes to initiate, and
 - ✓ An estimate of the time-period within which it expects to achieve the inflation target through the corrective steps proposed.

Objectives: They are aimed at ensuring enhanced transparency and accountability of the central bank and are a key feature of the inflation-targeting regime agreed upon between the RBI and Finance Ministry.

Data limitations-RBI's reasons for breach

- Reports suggest that RBI has provided defence for the breach of the 4% inflation target and 6% upper tolerance limit was the handicap of data limitations.

- **Coivid-19 disruption:**
 - ✓ The normal data collection exercise of the National Statistics Office was disrupted during the lockdown imposed due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
 - ✓ The publication of the CPI had to be suspended for the months of April and May.

Accommodative range: However, the range, according to the Ministry's statement, allows for unanticipated short-term shocks to be accommodated.

- The statement emphasised, is that it “accommodates data limitations, projection errors, short-run supply gaps and fluctuations in the agriculture production”.
 - ✓ The last factor is an important one for CPI inflation, as food articles constitute about 46% of the CPI basket.
- Also, the break that the RBI referred to is not visible in the inflation data. The data for the last four quarters – 5.8%, 6.7%, 6.6%, 6.9% – appears continuous.

Way forward:

- **Clarity of policy objectives:** The central bank should be allowed to state expressly what support by way of government policy it needs to meet the inflation target.
- **Reinforce the MPC framework:** Transparency can enable more informed decision-making within the government, greater public scrutiny of the RBI's performance, and an improved inflation-targeting regime.

To slack off on it would be to compromise with the credibility, transparency and predictability of monetary policy.

Maritime cluster coming up at GIFT City in Gujarat

While launching the Ghogha-Hazira ferry earlier this week, Indian PM spoke about the upcoming maritime cluster at GIFT City in Gujarat.

Maritime Cluster project

- It is an **agglomeration of firms, institutions, and businesses in the maritime sector** that are geographically located close to each other.
- The **concept of maritime cluster is new to India**, but these clusters have been driving some of the most competitive ports of the world like Rotterdam, Singapore, Hong Kong, Oslo, Shanghai, and London.

Need for a maritime cluster in Gujarat

- This current project will try to **bring back businesses that have migrated over the years to foreign locations** due to the absence of the right ecosystem in the country.
 - ✓ Landlocked countries like Switzerland and Luxembourg have developed a number of maritime services that are not currently available in India.
- Advantage of ports:
 - ✓ Gujarat has a lot of ports and handles 40 per cent of the country's cargo, but we have not targeted the entire value-chain.
 - ✓ For instance, Adani Group has the biggest port in Gujarat, but for their chartering needs, they are based out of Dubai. Similarly, JM Baxi have their port facilities in Gujarat, but they operate out of Mumbai for their chartering needs.

Finance Minister announces measures on Atma Nirbhar Bharat 3.0

Union Minister for Finance & Corporate Affairs has recently announced 12 key measures, as part of the Government of India's stimulus to the economy, under AatmaNirbhar Bharat 3.0.

12 Key announcements under AatmaNirbhar Bharat 3.0**1. AatmaNirbhar Bharat Rozgar Yojana**

- A new scheme to **incentivize job creation during COVID-19 recovery** has been launched. If EPFO-registered establishments take in new employees without EPFO registration or those who lost jobs earlier, the Yojana will benefit these employees.
- **Beneficiaries / New Employees under the scheme** would be:
 - ✓ any new employee joining employment in EPFO registered establishments on monthly wages less than Rs.15,000
 - ✓ EPF members drawing a monthly wage of less than Rs.15,000 who made exit from employment during COVID Pandemic from 01.03.2020 to 30.09.2020 and are employed on or after 01.10.2020.

2. Emergency Credit Line Guarantee Scheme

- It is for **MSMEs, businesses, MUDRA borrowers, and individuals** (loans for business purposes).
- A Credit guarantee support scheme ECLGS 2.0 is being launched for the Healthcare sector and 26 stressed sectors with credit outstanding of above Rs. 50 crore and up to ₹ 500 Crores on 29.2.2020 stressed due to COVID-19, among other criteria.

3. Production Linked Incentive worth ₹ 1.46 Lakh Crore to 10 champion sectors

- 10 more Champion Sectors will be covered under the Production Linked Incentives Scheme to help boost the competitiveness of domestic manufacturing.
- This will give a big boost to the economy, investment, exports and job creation.
- A total amount of **nearly 1.5 Lakh Crore** has been earmarked across sectors, for the next five years.

4. 18,000 Crore Additional outlay for PM Awas Yojana - Urban

- A sum of Rs 18000 cr is being provided for PMAY- Urban over and above Rs. 8000 Crore already allocated this year.
- It will help ground 12 Lakh houses and complete 18 Lakh houses, create additional 78 Lakh jobs and improve production and sale of steel and cement, resulting in a **multiplier effect on the economy**.

5. Support for Construction & Infrastructure - Relaxation of Earnest Deposit Money & Performance Security on Government Tenders

- To provide ease of doing business and relief to contractors whose money otherwise remains locked up, performance security on contracts has been reduced from 5-10% to 3%.
- It will also extend to ongoing contracts and Public Sector Enterprises.
- EMD for tenders will be replaced by the **Bid Security Declaration**. The relaxations in the General Financial Rules will be in force till December 31, 2021.

6. Income Tax relief for Developers & Home Buyers

- The differential between circle rate and agreement value in real estate income tax under Section 43 CA of IT Act has **been increased from 10% to 20%**.
- This is for the primary sale of residential units up to ₹ 2 Crore (from date of announcement of this scheme, till June 30 2021).
- Consequential Relief up to 20% shall also be allowed to buyers of these units under section 56(2)(x) of the IT Act for the said period.
- Income Tax relief provides incentives to the middle class to buy homes.

7. The platform for Infra Debt Financing

- The government will make ₹6,000 Crore equity investment in the debt platform of the **National Investment and Infrastructure Fund (NIIF)**
- It will help NIIF provide a debt of ₹ 1.1 Lakh Crore for infrastructure projects by 2025.

8. **Support for Agriculture: ₹65,000 Crore for subsidized fertilizers**
 - As fertilizer consumption is going up significantly, ₹65,000 Crore is being provided to ensure an increased supply of fertilizers to farmers to **enable the timely availability of fertilizers** in the upcoming crop season.
9. **Boost for Rural Employment**
 - An additional outlay of ₹10,000 Crore is being provided for **PM Garib Kalyan Rozgar Yojana** to provide rural employment.
 - This will help accelerate the rural economy.
10. **Boost for Project Exports**
 - 3,000 Crore boost is being **provided to EXIM Bank for promoting project exports** under Indian Development and Economic Assistance Scheme (**IDEAS Scheme**).
 - It will help EXIM Bank facilitate Lines of Credit development assistance activities and promote exports from India.
11. **Capital and Industrial Stimulus**
 - 10,200 Crore additional budget stimulus is being provided for capital and industrial expenditure on **domestic defense equipment, industrial infrastructure, and green energy**.
12. **R&D grant for COVID Vaccine**
 - 900 Crore is being **provided to the Department of Biotechnology** for Research and Development of Indian COVID Vaccine.

Environment

Green crackers: Amid growing air pollution crisis

This Diwali green crackers is set to make its full-fledged debut in Delhi amid growing sentiment against not deepening the air pollution crisis in the Capital.


More on the news:

A **ban on fireworks was imposed in 2018 and in 2019** and only green crackers were allowed, but the permission had come too late for manufacturers to ensure their availability on time.

Background:

- Traditionally, firecrackers have been made with **barium nitrate**, **antimony** and a range of metals that have been linked to **respiratory diseases and even cancer**.

Toxic nature		
Conventional firecrackers contain chemicals which produce effects like bright lighting and colours. However, these chemicals can have adverse effects on human health and the environment		
Initial ingredient	Use in crackers	Health hazards
Charcoal, potassium nitrate and sulphur	Black powder which is the primary fuel in the cracker	The dust released is hazardous when inhaled; different compounds formed can be carcinogenic
Strontium and lithium	Colouring agent (Red)	Strontium can replace calcium in the body which can be toxic; Lithium releases harmful fumes
Barium	Colouring agent (Orange)	Fumes can cause respiratory and other health issues
Nitrates, chlorates/perchlorates	Oxidising agents	The compounds can hamper the growth of small children; they remain airborne for days and can be poisonous



- These factors guided the Supreme Court of India, putting a ban on fireworks.
- In an attempt to resolve the crisis of air pollution, the Government has launched green firecrackers.
- These crackers are available as sparklers, flowerpots, maroons and atom bombs.

About Green crackers:

- Developed by:** The National Environmental and Engineering Research Institute (NEERI), a Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) lab.
 - ✓ **Green logo as well as a Quick Response (QR) coding** system has been developed for differentiation of green crackers from conventional crackers. This will avoid manufacture and sale of counterfeit products.
- Formulations:**
 - ✓ The Nagpur-based NEERI substituted barium nitrate with potassium nitrate and zeolite.
 - ✓ The green versions of the 'flower pot', one of the most popular fireworks, has a mixture of water and lime that is chemically stored in the cracker.
- Mechanism:** When lit, the effulgence also triggers water and the makers claim that the moisture wets the dust-and-smoke particles.
- Name:** Scientists have given these crackers alternative names: Safe Water Releaser (SWAS), Safe Thermite Cracker (STAR) and Safe Minimal Aluminium (SAFAL).
- Licence:** Petroleum and Explosives Safety Organisation (PESO) would ensure the sale of green fireworks giving a final manufacturing licence after emission tests.

- **Advantages:**
 - ✓ As per the CSIR's assessment, green crackers **would reduce particulate matter pollution by 30%**.
 - ✓ It also reduced a release of sulphur dioxide and nitrous oxide emissions.
 - ✓ When exploded these also emit similar levels of sound (100-10dBA) associated with traditional crackers.
- **Challenges:**
 - ✓ **Not verified in real world conditions:** The claims of reducing particulate matter pollution by 30% have been computed in a laboratory setting.
 - ✓ **The production levels on the lower side this year:** Due to the ongoing novel coronavirus pandemic.

Petroleum and Explosives Safety Organisation (PESO):

- PESO is an office under the Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade, Ministry of Commerce and Industries, with its head office located in Nagpur, Maharashtra.
- It was established in 1898 as a nodal agency for regulating safety of substances such as explosives, compressed gases and petroleum.

National Environmental and Engineering Research Institute (NEERI):

- Council of Scientific & Industrial Research (CSIR) is an autonomous body under Ministry of Science & Technology, having 38 national laboratories working in various areas of science and technology
- CSIR-NEERI is one among those laboratories.

Uttarakhand's first Ramsar site: Asan Conservation Reserve

Asan Conservation Reserve has become Uttarakhand's first Ramsar site, making it a 'Wetland of International Importance', announced the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change.

More on the news:

- The conservation Reserve **cleared five out of the nine criteria** needed to be declared as a Ramsar site and get identified as a Wetland of International Importance.
- Asian Conservation Reserve cleared the **category on species and ecological communities, one on water-birds and another on fish**.
- With this inclusion, the **number of Ramsar sites in India goes up to 38**, which is the highest in South Asia.

Asan Conservation Reserve

- It is spread across a 4.44 sq km area in Dehradun district on the banks of the Yamuna river.
- Species found: Many endangered birds are found here and some even migrate to the Reserve, making it an ecologically important site.
 - ✓ Asan receives about 40 migratory species, which includes Rudy Shelduck, Common coot, Gadwall, Kingfisher, Indian cormorant, Baer's pochard, Northern pintail, Bar-headed goose.

Ramsar Convention:

- It is an **intergovernmental treaty** that provides the framework for the **conservation and wise use** of wetlands and their resources.
- It was signed in **1971** in Ramsar, Iran and came into force in 1975.
- In **India**, the convention entered into force on 1 February **1982**.
- It has released its maiden global report named "**Global Wetland Outlook**".

Importance of Being a Ramsar Site

- They are recognized as being of significant value for **humanity as a whole**, not just for the concerned countries.
- The inclusion in the list embodies the government's commitment to take the steps necessary to ensure that its **ecological character is maintained**.

- The selection is made on the basis of various criteria defined under the convention.
- Wetlands should be selected on account of their **international significance** in terms of **ecology, botany, zoology, limnology or hydrology**.

Montreux Record

- It is maintained as a part of the Ramsar List.
- It is a register of wetland sites on the List of Wetlands of International Importance where **changes in ecological character** have occurred, are occurring, or are likely to occur as a result of technological developments, pollution or other human interference.
- Two wetlands from India, namely **Keoladeo National Park** (Rajasthan) and **Loktak Lake (Manipur)** feature in the Montreux Record.

State of Wetlands in India

- A **petition** filed in **Supreme Court** states reveals that India has over **7 lakh wetlands** covering 1.6 crore hectares or **4.5% of India's area**
 - ✓ The Court extended protection to 2,01,503 of these under Rule 4 of the 2010 Rules, and **ordered authorities to notify sites**.
 - ✓ But not a **single wetland has been notified** under domestic laws.
- The **Supreme Court** too expressed concern over the **disappearance** of wetlands, and observed, "If there are no wetlands left, it will affect agriculture and several other things. It is a very, very important issue."
- Wetlands are regulated under the **Wetlands (Conservation and Management) Rules, 2017**.

Other newly inducted Ramsar sites in India:

States	Ramsar Sites	Description
Maharashtra	Nandur Madhameshwar	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Located in Nashik District. It houses a bird sanctuary. • It is also known as the Bharatpur of Maharashtra.
Punjab	Keshopur-Miani	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It lies in the middle of the Ravi and Beas rivers, and just 12 km away from the Indo-Pak border. • Being the first-ever notified community reserve of India, it has the mechanism of joint management of locals and forest department. • Participatory management has resulted in better conservation and a role model for others. • It has emerged as a favorable home for migratory birds.
	Beas Conservation Reserve	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is a 185-km stretch starting from the Harike headworks to Talwara Conservation Reserve. • It is widely known for successful reintroduction of Gharials.
	Nangal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is dependent on Sutlej river for its sustenance. • It is home to numerous species of both residents as well as migratory birds from the trans-Himalayan region. • Among those are the red jungle fowl, large Indian parakeet, Indian cuckoo, wood shrike, yellow-eyed babbler and crested bunting. • It also houses threatened species like the Indian pangolin.
Uttar Pradesh	Nawabganj	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Nawabganj Bird Sanctuary is located in the Unnao District. • The sanctuary welcomes many international and national migratory birds. • Among those are Garganey Teal, Mallard, Purple Moorhen, Little Grebe, Spoonbill Duck, Red Wattled Lapwing, Wigon.

	Parvati Agra	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> It is located near Gonda district of Uttar Pradesh. Parvati and Agra are two connected rain-fed lakes which are 1.5 km apart. It is a potential ecotourism site in terms of providing facilities of bird conservation awareness.
	Saman	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Saman Bird Sanctuary is located in Bhogav, near Agra. It was notified in 1990 with an objective to protect the large population of Cranes in the area. Among the storks it houses include Painted Stork, Black-necked Stork, Open-billed Stork and Woolly-necked Stork.
	Samaspur	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> It is located in Raebareli district. Samaspur bird sanctuary is exclusively known for the preservation of bird species including various migratory birds. It houses more than 250 species of birds and remains a favourite bird destination. Vulture, Kingfishers, Spot Bill Teel common and Teel Whistling etc. are permanent residents of this sanctuary.
	Sandi	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Situated in Hardoi district. Bombay natural history society has listed this sanctuary as an "important bird area".
	Sarsai Nawar	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> It is a small unprotected wetland, in Etawah District of Uttar Pradesh. It comprises two small lakes that attract Sarus Cranes, White Ibis and other water birds in large numbers. It houses a large population of the threatened species of Sarus Cranes which are the world's tallest flying birds.

Translocating the corals off the coast of Mumbai

The Mumbai civic body recently received the green signal from the Principal Chief Conservator of Forests (Wildlife), Nagpur, for translocating the corals off the coast of Mumbai for the Rs 12,700-crore Mumbai Coastal Road Project.

More on the news:

- **Corals in Mumbai:** The Mumbai coast hosts a tiny population of corals. The corals found across rocky patches along the Mumbai coastline are **mostly fast-growing and non-reef building corals**.
- **The National Institute of Oceanography (NIO)**, appointed to study the presence of marine biodiversity along with the Coastal Road project area, has identified
 - ✓ Six coral species at Worli and Haji Ali;
 - ✓ Two species of the **Rhizangiidae family** (Oulangia and one unidentified species),
 - ✓ 18 colonies were documented across 0.251 square meters in Worli; along with another species (**Dendrophylliidae family**), Rhizangiidae across 1.1 square foot area at Haji Ali.

The translocation of corals

- **Survival rate of translocated corals:**
 - ✓ Some experts are of the view that for a high survival rate, it is important to translocate corals in a place with similar environmental characteristics such as depth, current flow, amount of light, and pressure.

- ✓ Experts have suggested to the NIO and BMC to undertake the translocation post-monsoon, when the colonies would likely be healthy.
- **Experiments along the Indian coastline:**
 - ✓ In India translocation of corals is at a **nascent stage**.
 - ✓ **Pilot projects at the Lakshadweep islands, and off the coast of Kutch and Tamil Nadu** have been undertaken to study the survival rate, method and site of translocation, and creation of high heat-resistant coral colonies, etc.
 - ✓ In a **project in Sindhudurg**, corals were cultivated fragments of corals were taken and attached to concrete frames with the help of nylon threads and then left on ocean beds at a depth suitable for their growth.
 - ✓ In a **project at the Andaman islands**, Reef Watch Marine Conservation has transplanted coral fragments on to nine artificial structures, totalling a 20-square-metre area.

Typhoon Goni, Asia's most powerful tropical storm

Typhoon Rolly or Goni, as it is called internationally, made landfall in the eastern Philippines recently.

More on the news:

- This is the 18th typhoon to hit the Philippines this year.
- The **catastrophic violent winds and intense to torrential rainfall** associated with the region of the eyewall and inner rainbands of the typhoon is prevailing or expected within the next 12 hours.

About Tropical cyclones or hurricanes

- **Location:** They use warm, moist air as fuel and therefore form over warm ocean waters near the equator.
- **Mechanism:**
 - ✓ When the warm, moist air rises upward from the surface of the ocean, it creates an area of low air pressure below.
 - ✓ After this, the air from the surrounding areas, which has higher pressure, enters this space, eventually rising when it becomes warm and moist too.
 - ✓ As the warm and moist air continues to rise, the surrounding air will keep entering the area of low air pressure.
 - ✓ Ultimately, when the warm air rises and cools off, the water in the air forms clouds.
 - ✓ And this corresponding system of clouds and winds continues to grow and spin, fuelled by the ocean's heat and the water that evaporates from its surface.
 - ✓ As such storm systems rotate faster and faster, an eye forms in the center.
- **Direction:**
 - ✓ Storms that form towards the north of the equator rotate counter-clockwise.
 - ✓ On the other hand, those that form south of the equator spin clockwise because of the rotation of the Earth on its axis.
- **No difference between a hurricane and a tropical storm:**
 - ✓ Depending on where they occur, hurricanes may be called typhoons or cyclones.
 - ✓ As per NASA, the scientific name for all these kinds of storms is tropical cyclones.
 - ✓ The tropical cyclones that form over the Atlantic Ocean or the eastern Pacific Ocean are called hurricanes.
 - ✓ On the other hand, tropical cyclones that form in the Northwest Pacific are called typhoons.

Naming of the tropical cyclones

- Atlantic tropical storms have been named according to lists **by the National Hurricane Center (NHC)**.
 - ✓ The National Hurricane Center (NHC) is the division of the United States' NOAA/National Weather Service.

- Earlier it was also decided that the NHC will use **alternating men and women's names**, on the lines of the practice earlier adopted by Australia's Bureau of meteorology.
- **Role of WTO:**
 - ✓ These names are also **maintained and updated by an international committee of the World Meteorological Organisation (WTO)**.
 - ✓ The WTO represents over 120 countries and **uses predetermined lists of names for each ocean basin** of the world.
- **Guidelines for naming**
 - ✓ The names should be **short and should be readily understood** when broadcast.
 - ✓ There are **six such lists of names with 21 names each**.
 - ✓ Each name starts with one alphabet except Q, U, X, Y, and Z (because names beginning with these letters are in short supply).
 - ✓ These names are used in rotation, which is to say that the list of names attributed to Atlantic tropical storms in 2019 will also be used in 2025.
 - ✓ However, **names of storms that caused particular damage and deaths are retired** and in case there are more storms than names in the list, NHC names them using the Greek alphabet.
 - ✓ Further, the **only time that a storm may be renamed is when it dissipates to a tropical disturbance and reforms**.

No cyclonic storm witnessed in October

The October to December period is among the favorable months for the development of tropical cyclones in the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea. However, October 2020 passed without witnessing a cyclonic storm.

Causes of no cyclone developments this year

- **Weak La Nina development:** IMD officials have attributed it to the weak La Nina conditions along the equatorial Pacific Ocean.
 - ✓ Cooler than normal sea surface temperatures over this region—termed as La Nina has been prevailing since August 2020.
- **Favorable Madden Julian Oscillation (MJO) phase:** Because Madden Julian Oscillation (MJO) was positioned in a favorable phase, the low-pressure systems intensified maximum up to a deep depression.
 - ✓ MJO is kind of an eastward-moving cyclic weather event along the tropics that influences rainfall, winds, sea surface temperatures and cloud cover. They have a 30 to 60-day cycle.
- **High wind shear:** There was the high wind shear noted between the different atmospheric levels, last month.
 - ✓ The vertical wind shear created due to significant wind speed difference observed between higher and lower atmospheric levels **prevented the low-pressure systems and depression** from strengthening into a cyclone.

Cyclones making landfall on Indian coasts:

- **Annual Stats:** About 80 cyclones are formed around the world annually, out of which **five are formed in the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea**, together known as the North Indian Ocean.
- **The area affected:** India's east and west coasts are prone to cyclones with the maximum associated hazards rain, heavy winds and storm surge faced by coastal districts of West Bengal, Odisha and Andhra Pradesh.
- **Season:** Cyclones in the North Indian Ocean are **bi-modal in nature**, that is, they occur during two seasons as follows.
 - ✓ **April to June (pre-monsoon) and**
 - ✓ **October to December (post-monsoon)**
- Of these, May and November remain the most conducive for the development of cyclones.

Deemed forests in India

Recently, Karnataka Forest Minister announced that the state government would soon declassify nearly 67% of deemed forests in the state and hand it over to Revenue authorities.

More on the news:

The issue of deemed forests is a contentious one, with different stakeholders alleging that large amounts of agriculture and non-forest land are **not scientifically** classified as deemed forest.

About deemed forests:

- **Definition:** The concept of deemed forests has not been clearly defined in any law including the Forest Conservation Act of 1980.
- **T N Godavarman Thirumalpad case (1996):** The Supreme Court in the case accepted a wide definition of forests under the Act.
 - ✓ This description covers all statutorily recognised forests, whether designated as reserved, protected or otherwise for the purpose of **Section 2 (1) of the Forest Conservation Act**.
 - ✓ The provisions enacted under the Forest Conservation Act 1980 must apply clearly to all forests so understood irrespective of the ownership or classification.
 - ✓ An expert committee constituted by the Karnataka government identified deemed forests as land having the characteristic of forests **irrespective of the ownership**.
- **Why are there demands to reclassify?**
 - ✓ **Classified without taking into account needs of the people:** According to different stakeholders, the move has adversely affected farmers, as well as barred large tracts from mining.
 - ✓ **Wrong classification:** As some of the 'statutory forests' had been wrongly classified as 'deemed forest' by the expert committee constituted after the Supreme Court order as claimed by certain political parties.
 - ✓ **Subjective classification:** A well-defined scientific, verifiable criteria was not used, resulting in a subjective classification of areas as deemed forests.

Forest (Conservation) Act of 1980

- **Background:** Alarmed at India's rapid deforestation and resulting environmental degradation, the Centre Government enacted the Forest (Conservation) Act in 1980.
- **Purpose:** It was enacted to consolidate the law related to forest, the transit of forest produce and the duty leviable on timber and other forest produce.
- **Administered by:** The provisions under the act are administered by the forest officers and their staff.
- **Approval for diversion of the land:** Under the act, prior approval of the Central Government is required for diversion of forestlands for non-forest purposes.
 - An Advisory Committee constituted under the act advises the Centre on this.
- **Four categories of the forests:** The Act deals with the forests, namely reserved forests, village forests, protected forests and private forests.

Reserved forest	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A state may declare forestlands or waste lands as reserved forest and may sell the produce from these forests. • Any unauthorized felling of trees quarrying, grazing and hunting in reserved forests is punishable with a fine or imprisonment, or both
Village forests	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reserved forests assigned to a village community are called village forests.
Protected forests	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The state governments are empowered to designate protected forests and may prohibit the felling of trees, quarrying and the removal of forest produce from these forests. • The preservation of protected forests is enforced through rules, licenses and criminal prosecutions.

Social Justice & Development

The chronic battle with malnourishment

According to the recently released Global Hunger Index 2020, India has the highest prevalence of wasted children under five years in the world, which reflects acute undernutrition.

Key highlights of the report:

- **India ranks 94 out of 107** countries in the Index, lower than her neighbors such as Bangladesh (75) and Pakistan (88).
 - ✓ In 2020, **India falls in the 'serious' category** on the Index, with a total score of 27.2.
 - ✓ India was ranked 102 among 117 countries in Global Hunger Index (GHI), 2019 report.
- Poor performance in the region:
 - ✓ This is a **definite improvement from the situation two decades ago**, when it scored 38.9 and fell into the 'alarming' category. However, its scores are **abysmal when compared to its peers in the BRICS countries**.
 - ✓ In the region of the south, east, and south-eastern Asia, the only countries which fare worse than India are Timor-Leste, Afghanistan, and North Korea.
 - ✓ The number of young children in India who are very short and thin, reflecting severe undernutrition, puts it **alongside the poorest African nations**, with some indicators showing actual declines over the last five years.
- **Child stunting:** Although it is still in the poorest category, however, child stunting has actually improved significantly, from 54% in 2000 to less than 35% now.
- **Child wasting:** It has not improved in the last two decades, and is rather worse than it was a decade ago.
- **Child mortality rates:** India has improved in both child mortality rates, which are now at 3.7%, and in terms of undernourishment, with about 14% of the total population which gets an insufficient caloric intake.
- **Overall undernourishment:** 14% of India's population does not get enough calories, an improvement from almost 20% in 2005-07.

The worldwide scenario of food security

- Worldwide nearly **690 million people are undernourished**, according to the report, which warns that the COVID-19 **pandemic could have affected the progress made on reducing hunger and poverty**.
- SDG Goals progress:
 - ✓ The world is also **not on track to achieve the second Sustainable Development Goal – known as Zero Hunger for short – by 2030**.
 - ✓ At the current pace, **nearly 37 countries will fail even to reach low hunger**, as defined by the Global Hunger Index Severity Scale, by 2030.

Key reasons for India's poor performance

- **Large existence of small and marginal holdings:**
 - ✓ The agriculture output from small and marginal holdings are either stagnant or declining due to reasons such as **reduced soil fertility, fragmented lands or fluctuating market price** of farm produce.
 - ✓ Almost 50 million households in India are dependent on these **small and marginal holdings**.
 - ✓ Though we have **surplus food**, most small and marginal farming households do not produce enough food grains for their year-round consumption.
- **Seasonal Phenomena**
 - ✓ Hunger is a seasonal phenomenon in many parts of the country, with families dependent on agriculture for their livelihoods, facing lean periods based on the sowing and harvesting cycle.

- **Declining relative income:**
 - ✓ The relative income of one section of people has been on the decline.
 - ✓ This has **adverse effects on their capacity to buy adequate food**, especially when food prices have been on the rise.
- **Unemployment:**
 - ✓ The kind of work a section of people have been doing are **less remunerative or there is less opportunity** to get remunerative work.
 - ✓ The Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) 2017-18 revealed that **rural unemployment stood at a concerning 6.1 per cent**, which was the highest since 1972-73.
 - ✓ The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005 (MGNREGA) **MGNREGA too, had been weakened over the years** through great delays in payments and non-payments, ridiculously low wages and a reduced scope of employment due to high bureaucratic control.
- **Inefficient PDS system:** The public distribution system (PDS) of the state is not functioning well or is not accessible to everyone.
- **Poor state of maternal health:**
 - ✓ **Mothers are too young, too short, too thin and too undernourished** themselves, before they get pregnant, during pregnancy, and then after giving birth, during breast-feeding.
 - ✓ It is more than a health issue, there are **social factors like early marriage**.
 - ✓ **Few Stats:**
 - **Almost 42% of adolescent girls aged 15 to 19 have a low body mass index (BMI)**, while 54% have anaemia.
 - Almost 27% of girls are married before they reach the legal age of 18 years, and 8% of adolescents have begun child bearing in their teens.
 - **Almost half of all women have no access to any sort of contraception.** These poor indicators of maternal health have dire consequences for the child's health as well.
- **Poor sanitation**
 - ✓ Poor sanitation, leading to diarrhoea, is another major cause of child wasting and stunting.
 - ✓ At the time of the last NFHS, almost 40% of households were still practising open defecation.
 - ✓ Only 36% of households disposed of children's stools in a safe manner. One in ten children under the age of five suffer from diarrhoea.

Way ahead:

- **Renewed focus on small and marginal holdings:**
 - ✓ More crops have to be grown, especially by small and marginal farmers with support from the Union government. A renewed focus on small and marginal holdings is imperative.
- **Create provisions to supply cooked nutritious food to the vulnerable section of the society:**
 - ✓ A model of **cheap canteen**, which provides cooked food to vulnerable sections of the society **for just Rs 15-20**, is being successfully run during the coronavirus pandemic in many parts of West Bengal.
 - ✓ This has to be done **in addition to the existing provisions of healthy diets from Anganwadi and schools through mid-day meals** for children, mothers and students.
- **Increase employment and wages**
 - ✓ The rural employment schemes such as MGNREGA **should be given a boost to increase employment and wages**.
 - ✓ Several organisations and individuals working under the scheme have suggested that the **guaranteed work-days be increased to 200**.
 - ✓ Also, commensurate wages need to be given **in accordance with the minimum agricultural wages of the states**.
- **Improve access to food grains under the PDS**
 - ✓ The access to food grains under the PDS needs to be streamlined by simplifying technical processes and **reducing Aadhaar-related glitches**.
 - ✓ This can be the right time to **universalise PDS**: COVID-19 has exposed the weaknesses of the targeted nature of the scheme.

- ✓ The government should also ensure that the 'One Nation One Ration card' scheme, if brought into effect, is operationalised through proper preparations such as proper grain allotments to shops, identification procedures and proper issuance of ration cards to individuals seeking food grain.

“There is no single solution. Every kind of household deprivation that makes life difficult for women needs to be dealt with. The focus needs to be on healthy mothers”

Lessons to be learnt from the pandemic

As the global pandemic is marching on, the most important lesson to be learnt is the **significance of investing in public health and primary healthcare.**

More on the news:

- Countries that have invested in primary healthcare over the past decade or so are reaping the benefits now. Another lesson is the positive role of science and scientists.

Gendered impact in India:

- On health
 - ✓ **Disruption of essential services:** Like disruption of immunisation services, diagnosis and treatment of non-communicable diseases, etc.
 - ✓ **Areas where progress is witnessed:** India has seen progress in maternal mortality and there have been significant gains in infant mortality, institutional births and replacement level fertility.
 - ✓ Areas where more needs to be done:
 - There is still a high unmet need for **family planning and improved access is required to contraceptive services** and safe abortions.
 - For example, because of the reduction in coverage of essential services, the prevalence of wasting in children could increase by 10% to 50%.
- **On the education system:**
 - ✓ **School meals not accessible:** Covid has adversely affected access to nutritious food as a huge number of children depend on school meals.
- **Surge in domestic violence:**
 - ✓ In India, a third of women said that they had experienced domestic violence, but less than 1% sought help from the police.
 - ✓ Governments can include response to violence against women in the package of essential services.
- **On work and livelihoods:**
 - ✓ **More women than men work in the informal economy:** Therefore, their income fell by over 60% during the first month of the pandemic.
- **Feminisation of poverty:**
 - ✓ In India, the number of women and girls living in extreme poverty is expected to increase from 87 million to 100 million.

Major issues:

- **Lack of gender-responsive public health policies:** The World Health Organization (WHO) emphasised the importance of gender analysis and gender-responsive public health policies.
- Lack of data:
 - ✓ One of the major issues is the lack of availability of data that is disaggregated by sex and age.
 - ✓ India also do not have data on violence against women and children.
- **Inadequate financial protection:**
 - ✓ This can be guaranteed only if there is either a health coverage scheme, like Ayushman Bharat, or through private health insurance.
 - ✓ The World Health Organization has been urging countries to ensure financial protection and effective coverage of health services.

Way ahead:

- **Moving toward digital technology:** Using platforms to provide telemedicine. Platforms like ECHO have been used in many States to train healthcare workers and the government's e-Sanjeevani platform is enabling telemedicine appointments.
 - ✓ India now has a **national digital health blueprint** and a road map.
- **Integrating social protection systems:** Like food systems and health systems in order to really have an impact on nutrition.
 - ✓ India has done much to ensure these services, but it needs to expand these to protect its most vulnerable population groups.
- **Better infodemic management:** False or misleading information leads to mistrust in governments and the public health response. In the last months India have done an incredible amount of work with many tech companies.
- **Improving essential services outside the health sector:** Such as the quality of water and air that impact our health. But investments here are much more difficult as they lie outside the health sector.
- **Empowering our frontline health workers:** There is the need to invest in them to ensure that they have the tools they need, receive regular training and mentoring, and are well paid.
- **Strengthening institutional mechanisms and capacities:** In regulatory bodies, research centres and public health institutions.
 - ✓ This will help to involve citizens and the people it is trying to serve and have them involved in developing the services that are brought to them.

Benefits of increasing legal age for women's marriage

Increasing the legal age for the marriage of women has enormous benefits on social and economic fronts according to the research note by SBI Eco wrap released recently.

Few women-oriented statistics noted by Report

- **Maternal mortality ratio:**
 - ✓ India's maternal mortality ratio has improved to 113 in 2016-18 from 130 in 2014-2016.
 - ✓ But, it is still far below the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals target of 70 per 1,00,000 live births.
 - ✓ **Regional disparities:** Out of 19 major states, seven states have maternal mortality rate higher than the national average and the number stands at six and 11 respectively in case of infant mortality rate and stillbirth rate.
- **Anemia:** Anemia is present amongst 51.4 percent of women of reproductive age, as against the world average of 32.8 percent in India.
 - ✓ Nearly 35 percent of females in India are married before the age of 21 years.

The situation is grave in some states. The **situation in West Bengal is currently the worst across all states** with the mean marriage age only 20.9 years and almost 47 percent of females getting married before the age of 21 years, even worse than Bihar and Rajasthan.

Key findings of the report:

- **Pushing the mean marriage age higher:**
 - ✓ According to the report, increasing the marriage age will push the mean marriage age higher and will **lead to more females doing graduation** and hence **improving the female labor force participation ratio**.
 - ✓ The report noted that the **mean marriage age in India is already at 22.3 years** and an increase in marriage age will be notional in nature.
 - ✓ As per its estimations, the percentage of females doing graduation will increase by at least 5-7 percentage points from the current level of 9.8 percent.
- **Impact on the social Front:**
 - ✓ On the social front, this will lead to social benefits like lowering the Maternal Mortality Ratio (MMR) as well as the **improvement of nutrition levels**.
 - ✓ The report said both men and women will gain economically and socially by marrying when they are more than the legal age, but added that the urge of the women is much

higher as they always get a higher pay off by becoming **financially empowered to take decisions**.

- ✓ Early marriages have an adverse impact on the **health of mothers as well as children**. If we look at the data on maternal deaths, it shows that the maximum proportion of maternal deaths occur in the lower age bracket
- **Impact on the economic front:**
 - ✓ While on the financial front opportunities will be opened up for women to pursue higher education and careers and become financially empowered, thus resulting in a **more egalitarian society** in thinking.

The report said it was recently reiterated signaling a possibility of the legal age of marriage for women to be raised from 18 soon and welcomes any such decision.

Maternal Mortality Ratio (MMR)

- It is one of the key indicators of maternal mortality. It is defined as the number of maternal deaths per 1,00,000 live births.
- The target 3.1 of UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) aims to reduce the global maternal mortality ratio to less than 70 per 1,00,000 live births.

Maternal mortality

- Maternal mortality in a region is a measure of the reproductive health of women in the area.
- As per the World Health Organization, maternal death is the death of a woman while pregnant or within 42 days of termination of pregnancy, from any cause related to or aggravated by the pregnancy or its management.

Few suggestions for improving the conditions of women

- **Delay the age of conception:**
 - ✓ Along with increasing the age of marriage, efforts need to be directed to delay the age of conception.
 - ✓ Schemes such as *universal registration of marriage* could prove to be vital in providing newly married couples with **timely information on family planning** and family care.
 - ✓ In addition, if the **registration is linked with Aadhaar**, it can facilitate support for women to enter pregnancy well-nourished and at the right time.
- **Recognize the diversities in society**
 - ✓ According to the 1978 amendment of the Child Marriage Restraint Act, and Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, the **minimum age of marriage is 18 years for girls and 21 years for boys**.
 - ✓ The Task Force responsible for reviewing the age of marriage should recognize the diversities that may hamper its implementation.
- **Keeping the girls in school for longer:**
 - ✓ Ensuring delayed marriage and pregnancy **depends not just on the legal age** but requires concerted efforts to keep girls in school for longer.
 - ✓ This also needs to be complemented by **enabling them to complete higher education or vocational training**.
 - ✓ The community often will find it difficult to adhere to the legal age unless an opportunity is provided and incentives built-in for a girl to have **access to completing secondary school education**.

Sarna Religion

The Jharkhand assembly has unanimously passed a resolution seeking the inclusion of Sarna as a separate religion in census, 2021.

More on news:

- A **separate column for tribes as a religious identity** was included in the census from 1871 to 1951, but was subsequently dropped.

- Currently, **citizens can choose from only six religions**: Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Sikhism, Buddhism and Jainism.
- If the Centre approves the new **Sarna code**, Census 2021 would have to make space for a new religion.

Need for Sarna code:

- **Decline in tribal population**: In the last eight decades, the population percent of tribal people in the state has come down to 26.02 per cent from 38.03 per cent as tribals would migrate to other states for non-agricultural employment when the surveys would be carried out.
- **Impact on the constitutional provisions** : The basis for identifying an area as Schedule V is dependent on the tribal population.
 - ✓ In 2019, there were demands of denotifying Schedule V areas where the tribal population has come down.
 - ✓ The recognition of Adivasi Sarna code will address this problem.
- **Environmental conservation**: Sarna religion can teach a lot to a world facing problems such as pollution and environmental degradation.
- **Tribal identity**: It boosts the idea of recognising a unique religious identity of tribals to the special laws and provisions in the country.

Objections to the move:

- The term Sarna is **not common to all the adherers of a naturalistic religion** based on worship of forests, rivers and mountains.
- Equating the idea of a naturalistic religion with only the Schedule Tribe population is problematic. It should be open to all.

The Sarna dharam

- The Sarna dharam of tribals worshipped nature, forests, mountains.
- It is the idea of recognising a unique religious identity of tribals to the special laws and provisions in the country.
- Jharkhand has 32 tribal groups. Eight groups belong to Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups.
- While many tribal groups follow Hindu religion, some have converted to Christianity.

Arunachal records best sex ratio, Manipur the worst

The 2018 report on "vital statistics of India based on the Civil Registration System was released recently.

The sex ratio refers to the number of females per 1000 males in a given area at a specified time period.

- Historically, all over the world it has been found that there are slightly more females than males in most countries.
- This is despite the fact that slightly more male babies are born than female ones; nature seems to produce roughly 943 to 952 female babies for every 1000 males.
- If despite this fact the sex ratio is somewhat in favour of females, this seems to be due to two reasons.
 - ✓ First, girl babies appear to have an advantage over boy babies in terms of resistance to disease in infancy.
 - ✓ At the other end of the life cycle, women tend to outlive men in most societies, so that there are more older women than men.

Key findings of the report

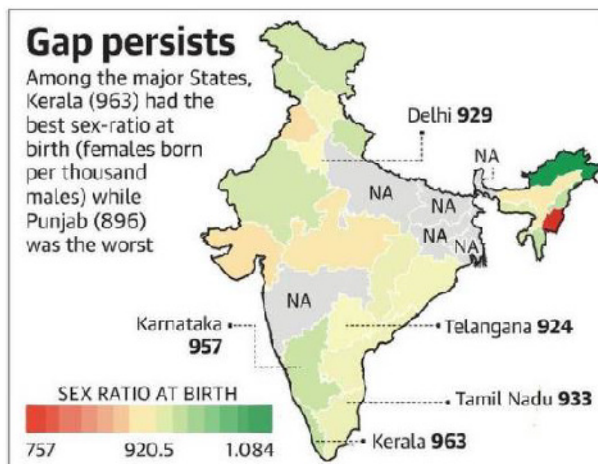
- **Sex ratio at birth**:
 - ✓ **Arunachal Pradesh recorded 1,084 females** born per thousand males, followed by Nagaland (965) Mizoram (964), Kerala (963) and Karnataka (957).
 - ✓ **The worst was reported in Manipur (757)**, Lakshadweep (839) and Daman & Diu (877), Punjab (896) and Gujarat (896).
 - ✓ Delhi recorded a sex ratio of 929, Haryana 914 and Jammu and Kashmir 952.

- **The number of registered births**

- ✓ The number of registered births **increased to 2.33 crore in 2018** from 2.21 crore registered births the previous year.
- ✓ The level of registration of births has increased to 89.3% in 2018 from 81.3% in 2009.

- **The prescribed time limit for registration of birth**

- ✓ The prescribed time limit for registration of birth or death is **21 days**. Some States, however, register the births and deaths even after a year.
 - The birth or death certificate is issued **free of charge by the Registrar concerned if reported within 21 days**.
- ✓ **If reported within 21-30 days**, it can be registered on payment of the prescribed fee.
- ✓ If the duration is **more than 30 days** but within a year, it can be registered with the written permission of the prescribed authority and on the production of an affidavit made before a notary public or any other officer authorised by the State government and on payment of a fee.
- ✓ The report says that "Births and deaths reported after one year of occurrence shall be registered only on an order of the Magistrate of the First Class after verification."



Science & Technology

VAIBHAV Summit: Possibilities of collaborations in new and emerging areas of Science & Technology

Recently, the Prime Minister of India inaugurated the Vaishwik Bharatiya Vaigyanik (VAIBHAV) Summit, a global virtual summit of overseas and resident Indian researchers and Academicians.

More on the news: It is a collaborative initiative by S&T and Academic Organisations of India including Department of S&T, Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO).

Objective:

- To bring out the comprehensive roadmap to leverage the expertise and knowledge of global Indian researchers for solving emerging challenges.
- To reflect in-depth on the collaboration and cooperation instruments with academia and scientists in India.
- To create an ecosystem of Knowledge and Innovation in the country through global outreach.

Significance:

- **VAIBHAV and Atmanirbhar Bharat:** VAIBHAV has led the way in establishing research capability as an important avenue towards Aatmanirbhar Bharat.
- **A wide spectrum of deliberations:** VAIBHAV deliberations were held under a structured framework of many areas and subjects.
- **New Collaborations in Emerging Areas:** Certain areas of collaboration have emerged which were not stressed in the past, such as bioremediation, urban ore recycling and metal organics.

Need for the initiative:

- **Multiple emerging challenges:** Global challenges such as climate change, health issues and sustainable energy resources have a special connotation in the Indian perspective and require immediate considerations.
 - It is time to evolve new ideas and bridge the varied experiences and proficiency of diverse academic cultures to push forward the cause of India.
- **Emergent phenomena:** Ideation through Virtual Associations, Complementary Research and Collaborative Development drive rapid turnaround of solutions to common issues confronting the world.
- **Collaboration is the new driver of Innovation:** Collaborative avenues will have a symbiotic bearing whereby Indian Diaspora will be able to connect with their roots, and Indian culture can imbibe the best practices from the global experiences in academics and research.

Other Government Initiatives for overseas Indian:

- **Know India Program (KIP):** It is a flagship initiative of the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) for diaspora engagement which familiarizes Indian-origin youth (18-30 years) with their Indian roots and contemporary India.
- **VAJRA (Visiting Advanced Joint Research):** It is a scheme of the Department of S&T, exclusively for overseas scientists and academicians NRI and PIO or OCI to work as adjunct or visiting faculty for a specific period of time in Indian Public funded academic and research institutions.

National Monsoon Mission

For every rupee spent by the government on the National Monsoon Mission and High-performance Computing programs of the Ministry of Earth Sciences (MoES), the country would gain economic benefits worth fifty rupees, which is 50 times more benefit on the investment over the next five years period.

More on news:

- The above information has been affirmed by a report by the National Council of Applied Economic Research (NCAER).
- The NCAER report refers to economic benefits accrued after the implementation of the **National Monsoon Mission**.
- A total of 173 districts from various **agro-climatic zones** were considered for the study to appropriately represent agro-climatic zones, rain-fed areas, coverage of major crops, and incidence of extreme weather events in the country.

The National Monsoon Mission

- It was launched by the **Ministry of Earth Sciences (MoES)** in 2012 with an aim to develop a state-of-the-art, dynamic monsoon prediction system for short, medium, and long-range forecasts.
- The Mission with High-performance Computing facilities has helped the country in achieving a paradigm shift in **weather and climate modeling for operational weather forecasts**.
- The successful development of a **Global Ensemble Forecast System** for short and medium-range prediction at 12 kilometers was made possible due to the National Monsoon Mission.

'Gramin Krishi Mausam Sewa (GKMS)'

- **India Meteorological Department (IMD)** in collaboration with the **Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR)** provides district-level agro-meteorological advisories to farmers under 'Gramin Krishi Mausam Sewa (GKMS)' for all the districts in the country.
- **Communication means:** These advisories are communicated to farmers via mobile SMS, apps such as Meghdhoot, on IMD website, Kisan Portal, and conventional media such as television, radio, and newspapers.

Key takeaways:

- **Weather advisories impact on livelihoods:**
 - ✓ **Farmers** use these weather advisories for critical farm operations like management of sowing, changing crop variety, spraying pesticides for disease control and managing irrigation etc.
 - ✓ **Livestock owners** reported making decisions about livestock management practices such as vaccinations, modification of sheds and shelters, and fodder practices based on weather parameters issued by IMD.
 - ✓ **Marine fishermen** reported using ocean state forecasts and substantially improving their livelihood by reducing their operational cost.
 - ✓ **Agriculture-related womenfolk of the country:**
 - Women play an important role in various agriculture activities, for example, in the fisheries sector, they support finance, supplies and sourcing, staff management, and marketing.
 - They handle the customer base and enhance it, keep track of prices, nets, and other fishing assets by using weather advisories.
 - Every woman from a fishing household included in the survey wanted to know the ocean state forecast provided by the **Indian National Centre for Ocean Information Services (INCOIS)** through messaging services on an everyday basis.

Global Ensemble Forecast System

- The India Meteorological Department (IMD) has launched a new Ensemble Prediction Systems (EPS) to provide **probabilistic weather forecasts**.
- These new systems, according to IMD, shall improve upon deterministic forecasts that are prone to high margins of error.
- The EPS involves **generation of multiple forecasts** using slightly varying initial conditions.
- The acquisition of eight petaflops high-power computing systems will help in generating newer forecasts which have a **higher resolution of 12 km** instead of the 23km resolution that has been in use.

Agro-climatic zone

- It refers to a geographical area with **similar soil type, rainfall, temperature, and water availability**.
- India is divided into **15 major agro-climatic zones**.

EOS-01: India's latest earth observation satellite

With the launch of EOS-01, an earth observation satellite, India sent its first space mission in almost a year.

More on the news:

- EOS-01, along with nine (four each are from the United States and Luxembourg and a technology demonstrator from Lithuania) satellites from foreign countries, was launched by a **PSLV** rocket.
 - ✓ **New Launch Vehicle:** For the launch of EOS-01, ISRO used a new variant of its PSLV rocket that has been flown only once before, when it had placed the Microsat-R satellite in orbit last year.
- Progress:
 - ✓ EOS-01 was initially **named RISAT-2BR2**, and was supposed to be the third of the three-spacecraft constellation aimed at providing all-weather round-the-clock service for high-resolution images.
 - ✓ This is ISRO's first mission since the launch of RISAT-2BR1, another earth observation satellite similar to EOS-01, in december last year.
 - ✓ After that, ISRO had also sent communication satellite GSAT-30 in space in January this year, but that was done using an Ariane rocket launched from French Guiana.

About EOS-01:

- **New nomenclature:**
 - ✓ With EOS-01, ISRO is moving to a new naming system for its earth observation satellites which till now have been named according to the purpose they are meant for (thematically).
 - For example, the Cartosat series of satellites were meant to provide data for land topography and mapping, while the Ocean sat satellites were meant for observations over sea.
 - ✓ Henceforth (it seems) all the earth observation satellites would be called EOS-series.
- **Purpose:** Land and forest mapping and monitoring, mapping of resources like water or minerals or fishes, weather and climate observations, soil assessment, geospatial contour mapping.
- **Application:** According to ISRO, EOS-01 is intended for applications in agriculture, forestry and disaster management support. The radar images are also considered to be immensely useful for military requirements.
- **Radar imaging:** One big advantage that radar imaging has over optical instruments is that it is unaffected by weather, cloud or fog, or the lack of sunlight and it can produce high-quality images in all conditions and at all times.
 - ✓ EOS-01, and its sister RISATs, use X-band radars that operate at low wavelengths and are considered best for monitoring urban landscape, and imaging of agricultural or forest land.

PSLV and its new variant:

- For the PSLV, this was the 51st flight and earlier only two of its launches have not been successful.
- The new variant of PSLV **does not become waste** after depositing its satellite in orbit.
- In effect, **the fourth stage** acts like another satellite, with a life span of about six months.
 - ✓ The last stage of the rocket (the one that remains after the satellite is separated), can acquire its own orbit and be used as an orbital platform for other onboard instruments to perform experiments in space.

Future plans of ISRO:

- ISRO had planned more than 20 satellite launches in the fiscal year 2020-21 and half of the planned launches were those of earth observation satellites.
- This includes high profile missions like **Aditya L1** - the first exploratory mission to the Sun, and unmanned **Gaganyaan** - the precursor to India's first manned space flight.

OTT platforms: To come under IB ministry

The government has brought video streaming over-the-top (OTT) platforms such as Netflix, Amazon's Prime Video, Hotstar, and others under the ambit of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting.

More on the news: These platforms were so far under the purview of the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology, Government of India.

About the OTT platforms:

- These are **audio and video hosting and streaming** services which started out as content hosting platforms.
 - ✓ These platforms are now branched out into the **production and release** of short movies, feature films, documentaries and web-series themselves.
- These platforms offer a range of content and **use artificial intelligence** to suggest users the content they are likely to view based on their past viewership on the platform.
- According to reports, with a market size of nearly Rs 500 crore in 2019, the online video streaming platforms may become a Rs 4000-crore revenue market by the end of 2025.
 - ✓ At the end of 2019, India had as many as 17 crore OTT platform users.

Benefits of OTT Platforms:

- **Creative content:** These platforms help bring socio-political content or matters to a common man, which otherwise are censored in mainstream media.
- **On demand hybrid content:**
 - ✓ These platforms combine the passive consumption mode of television and the consumer choice of the web.
 - ✓ Hence, the advantage of playing media anywhere and anytime has created a massive demand for it.
- **A new life to traditional media:** Especially in the post-Covid era, due to social distancing becoming a norm in the society.
- **Better access:** The industry is benefiting numerous content producers and artists. It also helps in accessing regional films around the country as well as globally.

Related issues:

- **Little or no regulation:** While traditional media in India are regulated under specific laws - Films are regulated under the Cinematograph Act of 1952; The Cable Television Networks (Regulation) Act, 1995, there is no such specific law for regulation of content over OTT platforms.
 - ✓ Hence, the content on OTT platforms can disrupt social harmony and moral fabric of society.
- No consensus of self regulation:
 - ✓ OTT platforms had signed a self-regulation code under the aegis of the Internet and Mobile Association of India.
 - ✓ However, there's no consensus on the code amongst the various OTT platforms operating in India.
- **Digital Curated Content Complaints Council:** The Online Curated Content Providers (OCCPs) had proposed this council but was shot down by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, which will now oversee these platforms.
- **Cultural imperialism:** OTT platforms are streaming a lot of cross-cultural content. Though it is good for creating a cosmopolitan world, it has aggravated some of the means in the society like cultural imperialism.

Possible impact of recent changes:

- **A check on their content:** The first challenge before the OTT platforms would be keeping a check on their content.
- **Apply for certification and approval of the content:** This could lead to many conflicts as most OTT platforms have content that could otherwise be censored by the certification boards in India.
- **Censorship:** OTT platforms are likely to resist any plans to censor the content being provided and streamed by them as these platforms have often chosen to produce movies and documentaries on politically sensitive but relevant topics.

Therefore, the guidelines that the I&B ministry will put in place should regulate these OTT platforms, without censoring genuine content.

Concept of neutralizing antibodies

A recent study in Pune has revealed that nearly 85% of the people who had been found infected with COVID-19 in a serosurvey, had developed neutralizing antibodies. That is these people had developed immunity against the disease.

Serosurvey:

- It looks for the **presence of antibodies in people**. Its purpose is to find out whether a person has been infected with the virus or not, and through random testing of people, estimate the extent of spread of the disease, or prevalence, in a population group.
- Detection of disease-specific antibodies confirms that the person had been infected with the virus in the past.
- But a **further test needs to be carried out to detect the presence of neutralising antibodies**.

About the recent study in Pune:

- So far, the study in Pune is the only study that has looked for neutralizing antibodies.
- The study shows that while a majority of infected people do develop immunity, a significant proportion (15% in this case) do not become immune even after getting infected.
- Therefore, it would mean that they are at risk of reinfection.
- Therefore, people who have recovered from the disease are also urged to continue to take protective measures such as practice physical distancing and wearing a mask.

Background

- Antibodies and immunity:
 - ✓ Many times, it is thought that everyone who is infected with a disease-causing virus, and recovers, becomes immune to the disease because they build antibodies against it.
 - ✓ However, this is not true in all cases.
- Guarantee of immunity:
 - ✓ While the creation of antibodies is necessary for the recovery process, it does not guarantee immunity against a future attack from the same virus.
 - ✓ The immunity comes from what are known as “neutralizing” or “protective” antibodies.

Neutralizing antibodies

- These are like other antibodies that are created to fight the disease, and are nothing but proteins.
- The neutralizing antibodies are a small subset of the disease-specific antibodies that are generated once an infection has occurred.
- Their role:
 - ✓ They become special because they have the ability to thwart the entry of the same virus inside human bodies in the future.
 - ✓ The other antibodies help in fighting off the virus once the infection has already happened.
- Decline with time
 - ✓ The neutralising antibodies, as also other antibodies, decrease with time.
 - ✓ The rate of decline varies in different diseases and individuals.

- ✓ So, in the same time that people with low neutralising antibodies see their immunity becoming ineffective, those with higher levels could still have enough to continue to fend off the virus.

Is immunity permanent?

- Immunity can be against some infections, but in the case of the COVID-19, it is **not yet known whether the immunity acquired through natural infection lasts** for how long.
- Factors dependent:
 - The longevity of the immunity against a disease depends on a variety of factors, including the quantity of neutralising antibodies generated by a patient.
 - However, **those with a high quantity of neutralising antibodies (or specific protein molecules) could be expected to remain immune** to the disease for a longer time.

Conclusion from recent study

- The findings of the latest study **could be applied well in the small population groups** within the prabhags where the serosurvey was conducted.
- The findings also do suggest that the disease prevalence within these population groups had reached such levels **that the concept of herd immunity could be playing out.**

PTB Corner

PM to inaugurate National Conference on Vigilance and Anti-Corruption

The Prime Minister will inaugurate the National Conference on Vigilance and Anti-Corruption, on the theme- **Vigilant India, Prosperous India**.

More on news:

- The Central Bureau of Investigation organizes this National Conference coinciding with '**Vigilance Awareness Week**', which is observed in India every year from 27th October to 2nd November.
- Observance of **Vigilance Awareness Week** every year during the last week of October is taken up to encourage all stakeholders to collectively participate in the prevention of corruption.
- It is driven by the **Central Vigilance Commission**.

The three-day conference would discuss the

- Challenges in investigation in foreign jurisdictions;
- Preventive Vigilance as a Systemic Check against Corruption;
- Systemic improvements for financial inclusion and prevention of bank frauds;
- **Effective Audit** as an Engine of Growth;
- Latest amendments to the **Prevention of Corruption Act** as an impetus to the fight against corruption;
- Multi Agency Coordination-an enabler for faster and more effective Investigation;
- Emerging Trends in **Economic Offences**,
- Cyber Crimes and Transnational Organized Crime-measures to Control and
- Exchange of Best Practices among Criminal Investigative Agencies.

Significance:

- Activities in this conference would be focused on Vigilance issues aimed at raising awareness and reaffirming India's commitment to promotion of **integrity and probity in public life through citizen participation**.
- The Conference will act as an enabler to combat corruption, thereby ushering in **good governance and accountable administration**. This is a significant contributing factor for enabling **ease of doing business in India**.

Central Vigilance Commission

- The Central Vigilance Commission has the **mandate under the Central Vigilance Commission Act, 2003** to fight corruption and to ensure integrity in public administration.
- It is charged with **monitoring all vigilance activities under the Central Government** and advising various authorities in Central Government and organizations under it, in planning, executing and reviewing their vigilance work in order to bring out systemic improvement in governance.

Lilavati Award-2020: AICTE's Innovative education program to empower women

The union Minister of Education recently virtually launched the Lilavati Award-2020: AICTE's Innovative education program to empower women.

More on the news:

- To **treat women with 'equality and fairness'** in all spheres of life, by the means of this initiative, all the stakeholders (especially the girl students) in AICTE approved institutions would get a **unique opportunity**.
 ✓ The opportunity is to **present a solution to the prevalent issues of gender discrimination**, which includes illiteracy, unemployment, economic and nutritional disparities, maternal mortality, human rights, etc.

- Also, if anyone has already made a successful effort towards making a mark in the society, in establishing women's emancipation/ empowerment at large, she/ he can showcase their efforts/ contributions.

About Lilavati Award-2020

- **Theme:** Women empowerment
- **Objective:** To create awareness about issues like sanitation, hygiene, health, nutrition, literacy, employment, technology, credit, marketing, innovation, skill development, natural resources, and rights among women.
- **Covering multidisciplinary areas:** Women's health, self-defense, sanitation, literacy, entrepreneurship, and legal awareness
- **Significance:** The program is expected to ensure the participation of women and enable them to hold higher positions in educational institutions.

13th Urban Mobility India Conference 2020

The 13th Urban Mobility India (UMI) Conference is being organized by the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs.

More on the news:

- The main theme of this year's event is **"Emerging Trends in Urban Mobility"**.
- It is focused on innovative measures taken at national and international level to address the challenges posed by Covid-19 pandemic to provide accessible and convenient transport to the people.

Background:

- The Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs, Government of India has issued the **National Urban Transport Policy, 2006 (NUTP)**.
- **The objective of the policy** is to ensure safe, affordable, quick, comfortable, reliable and sustainable access for the growing number of city residents to jobs, education, recreation and such other needs within our cities.
- This is sought to be achieved by:
 - ✓ Incorporating **urban transportation** as an important parameter at the urban planning stage rather than being a consequential requirement;
 - ✓ Encouraging **integrated land use and transport planning** in all cities so that travel distances are minimized
 - ✓ **Access to livelihoods, education** especially for the marginal segments of the urban population is improved;
 - ✓ **Improving access of business to markets** and the various factors of production;
 - ✓ Bringing about a more **equitable allocation of road space with people**, rather than vehicles, as its main focus.
- Under the policy, the Ministry organizes an annual international Conference-cum-Exhibition on Urban Mobility India popularly known as UMI.
- The primary objective of the conference is to **disseminate information to the cities' officials**, about the **latest and best urban transport practices globally**.

Significance:

- Urbanization in India has catapulted India as one of the fastest growing major economies in the world.
- The transport sector is an important **component of the urban economy**.
- **Shift towards vehicle sharing:** With rapidly increasing mobility, needs and availability of technology, there is an expected shift from vehicle ownership to vehicle sharing and public transport. There is higher emphasis on **multimodal seamless connectivity and clean mobility**.
- These emerging trends are bringing a paradigm shift in the expectations of the commuters and our cities need to adapt to the rapidly changing mobility needs.

Mission Sagar: Handing over Food Aid to Sudan

As part of Mission Sagar-II, Indian Naval Ship Airavat entered Port Sudan recently.

More on the news:

- The Government of **India is providing assistance to Friendly Foreign Countries to overcome natural calamities** and COVID-19 pandemic.
- Towards the same INS Airavat is carrying a consignment of 100 Tonnes of food aid for the people of Sudan.

About Mission Sagar-II:

- It follows the first Mission Sagar undertaken in May-June 2020.
 - ✓ Under the first mission, **India reached out to:** Maldives, Mauritius, Seychelles, Madagascar and Comoros, and provided food aid and medicines.
- As part of Mission Sagar-II, Indian Naval Ship Airavat will deliver food aid to Sudan, South Sudan, Djibouti and Eritrea.
- Mission Sagar-II, is in line with the vision of **Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR)** and highlights the importance accorded by India to relations with her maritime neighbours and further strengthens the existing bond.
- The Indian Navy is progressing this mission in **close coordination** with the Ministries of Defence and External Affairs, and other agencies of the Government of India.

Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR):

- It was launched in 2015 as a step towards India's strategic vision for the Indian Ocean Region (IOR).
- **Objectives:**
 - ✓ Through SAGAR, India seeks to deepen economic and security cooperation with its maritime neighbours and assist in building their maritime security capabilities.
 - ✓ Further, India seeks to safeguard its national interests and ensure Indian Ocean region to become inclusive, collaborative and respect international law.
- **Significance:** When seen in conjunction with India's other policies impacting the maritime domain like Act East Policy, Project Sagarmala, Project Mausam, India as 'net security provider', focus on Blue Economy etc, the key relevance of SAGAR emerges.

Electricity Access & Utility Benchmarking Report

NITI Aayog, Ministry of Power, Rockefeller Foundation, and Smart Power India recently launched the 'Electricity Access in India and Benchmarking Distribution Utilities' report.

Details of the report:

- **Assessing 25 distribution utilities:** It is based on a primary survey conducted across 10 states representing about 65% of the total rural population of India which includes **households, commercial enterprises and institutions**.
- **Objectives:** Aimed at capturing insights from both the demand (electricity customers) as well as supply side (electricity distribution utilities), the report seeks to:
 - ✓ Evaluate the **status of electricity access in India** across these states and distribution utilities along all dimensions that constitute meaningful access
 - ✓ **Benchmark utilities' capacity** to provide electricity access and identify the drivers of sustainable access
 - ✓ **Develop recommendations for enhancing sustainable electricity access**

Key findings of the report

- Overall availability of electricity:
 - ✓ As much as **92% of customers** have reported the overall availability of electricity infrastructure within 50 metres of their premises;

- ✓ But, **not all have connections**, the **primary reason** being the distance of households from the nearest pole.
- Grid based electricity:
 - ✓ Overall, **87% of the surveyed customers have access** to grid-based electricity.
 - ✓ However, the remaining 13% either use non-grid sources or don't use any electricity at all.
- **The hours of supply improved significantly** across the customer categories to nearly **17 hours per day**.
- **Other details:**
 - ✓ Nearly 85% of customers reported to have a metered electricity connection.
 - ✓ Access to electricity has been observed in 83% of household customers.
 - ✓ **A satisfaction index** was also created to assess the overall satisfaction level of customers with utility services. The study has suggested that a total of 66% of those surveyed were satisfied-74% of customers in urban areas and 60% in rural areas.

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