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The Hindu Gist



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October 2019, Edition

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1. India still unable to control the hepatitis B virus (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Polity & Governance)

Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal and Thailand

On September 3, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal and Thailand became the first four countries in the World Health Organization's southeast Asia region to have successfully controlled hepatitis B. The virus is said to be controlled when the disease prevalence is reduced to less than 1% among children less than five years of age.

Status in India

Despite the introduction of hepatitis B vaccine in the Universal Immunisation Programme in 2002 and scaling-up nationwide in 2011, about one million people in India become chronically infected with the virus every year. According to the Health Ministry, as on February 2019, an estimated 40 million people in India were infected. Hepatitis B infection at a young age turns chronic, causing over 1,00,000 premature deaths annually from liver cirrhosis or liver cancer.

Reasons

One of the reasons for this is the sub-optimal coverage of birth dose in all infants within 24 hours of birth.

Hepatitis B birth dose, given in the first 24 hours, helps prevent vertical transmission from the mother to child. The compulsion to increase birth dose to cut vertical transmission arises from two important reasons — about 70-90% newborns infected this way become chronic carriers of hepatitis B, and about 20-30% carriers in India are due to vertical transmission.

Source: The Hindu

2. Why did Tamil Nadu ban sex normalisation surgeries on intersex children? (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Polity & Governance)

The Tamil Nadu government passed an order on August 13 banning sex normalisation surgeries in intersex children and infants, except in life threatening circumstances.

What does intersex mean?

Intersex refers to people born with physical and biological characteristics that are more diverse than stereotypical definitions of male or female bodies. Gopi Shankar, a Madurai-based activist/anchor of the student movement Srishti Madurai, whose petition to the National Human Rights Commission on the subject the court leaned heavily on, says there are differences between gender, sexual identity and sexual orientation. While gender identity is assigned at birth based on the anatomy (male or female sexual organs, both internal and external), sexual identity is what one sees oneself as, and sexual orientation is the sex a person is attracted to. Mr. Gopi claims that every year there are 10,000 babies born with intersex conditions, when it is difficult to classify the reproductive organs as male or female.

Why are sex selective surgeries performed on infants?

When these differences are apparent at birth, parents are eager to resolve the question of the gender of the baby and pick a gender, possibly ignorant of the fact that the child will have to pick a sexual identity in the process of growing up. Surgery to correct the genitalia is then performed on the child which could lead to physical trauma, emotional turmoil and problems arising out of confusion about identity.

The government order specifies that such surgeries can only be performed in case there is a life-threatening situation. It adds that this call would be made by a team that includes paediatric surgeons/urologists, endocrinologists, a social worker/intersex activist and a government representative. The consent of the parent cannot be considered the consent of the child.

Source: The Hindu

3. CJ Tahilramani's transfer to the Meghalaya HC once again shows collegium system's flaws (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Polity & Governance)

Chief Justice of the Madras High Court, Justice Vijaya Kamlesh Tahilramani, has been unusually transferred to Meghalaya High Court.

What is wrong with the transfer?

While the Constitution does provide for such transfers from one high court to another, it is extremely rare that the senior-most Chief Justice in the country is shifted from a large court with a complement of 75 judges to one of the newest courts, which has a strength of only three judges. It is no surprise, therefore, that the judge, who entered the superior judiciary in 2001, and is the senior-most high court judge in the country, chose to resign, rather than continue in circumstances bordering on humiliation.

Flaws in collegium system

It is unfortunate that the collegium rejected her request for reconsideration without assigning a reason. It is easy to argue that one high court is as good as any other, that such transfers should not be seen as a 'demotion', and that the Chief Justice of India (CJI) should be free to transfer the head of any high court in the interest of "better administration of justice".

However, it is a fallacious argument when one considers that there are no known complaints about her performance or any public controversy around her judicial or personal conduct. It is possible that the transfer is based on an internal performance assessment, or complaints not available in the public domain. However, in the absence of any explanation, the transfer seems to be punitive. If it is performance-related, a question arises as to whether all judges are being assessed on the same criteria.

Method of transfer

Judicial transfers are initiated solely at the instance of the CJI. The Memorandum of Procedure relating to appointments and transfers of high court judges says the opinion of the Chief Justice in this regard “is determinative”. And in the case of a Chief Justice of a High Court, the CJI needs to take into account, “only the views of one or more knowledgeable Supreme Court Judges” while proposing a transfer. In the Second and Third Judges cases, the Supreme Court felt that the fact that the proposal is initiated by the CJI and recommended by a plurality of judges is enough as a safeguard against arbitrary transfers. However, the Tahilramani controversy shows that the systemic faults of the collegium system — opaqueness and the scope for personal opinions colouring decision-making — remain unaddressed.

Source: The Hindu

4. Need for a stronger worker safety law (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Polity & Governance)

Recent incidents

India’s record in promoting occupational and industrial safety remains weak. Making work environments safer is a low priority. The consequences are frequently seen in the form of a large number of fatalities and injuries, but in a market that has a steady supply of labour, policymakers tend to ignore the wider impact of such losses. It will be no surprise, therefore, if the deaths of four people, including a senior officer, in a fire at the Oil and Natural Gas Corporation gas facility in Navi Mumbai, or the tragedy that killed nearly two dozen people at a firecracker factory in Batala, Punjab are quickly forgotten.

Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code

The Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code, 2019, introduced in the Lok Sabha in July to combine 13 existing laws relating to mines, factories, dock workers, building and construction, transport workers, inter-State migrant labour and so on, pays little attention to the sector-specific requirements of workers.

One of its major shortcomings is that formation of safety committees and appointment of safety officers, the latter in the case of establishments with 500 workers, is left to the discretion of State governments.

Evidently, the narrow stipulation on safety officers confines it to a small fraction of industries.

On the other hand, the Factories Act currently mandates appointment of a bipartite committee in units that employ hazardous processes or substances, with exemptions being the exception. This provision clearly requires retention in the new Code.

Failure to ratify ILO convention on worker’s safety

A safe work environment is a basic right, and India’s recent decades of high growth should have ushered in a framework of guarantees. Unfortunately, successive governments have not felt it necessary to ratify many fundamental conventions of the International Labour

Organization (ILO) covering organised and unorganised sector workers' safety, including the Occupational Safety and Health Convention, 1981.

Source: The Hindu

5. The recent nomination of Governors calls for a review of the appointments process (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Polity & Governance)

The recent appointment of five Governors by the President must be viewed with grave scepticism. By nominating persons who are deeply embedded within the Bharatiya Janata Party ecosystem, the Union Government has sent the clear and ominous signal that constitutional principles and judicial dictats are secondary to the propagation of the party's ideology.

Who are the new Governors?

The President appointed Bhagat Singh Koshyari, Bandaru Dattatreya, Arif Mohammed Khan and Tamilisai Soundararajan as Governors, and transferred Kalraj Mishra from Himachal Pradesh to Rajasthan. Mr. Mishra had assumed office at the Raj Bhavan in Shimla as recently as July 22, 2019. Seen as a whole, all these appointees have recent, strong and uncompromising links with the BJP. Mr. Koshiyari is a former Chief Minister of Uttarakhand and was a member of the 16th Lok Sabha; Mr. Mishra and Mr. Dattatreya served in the Council of Ministers under Prime Minister Narendra Modi; and Mr. Khan and Ms. Soundararajan unsuccessfully contested the 2004 and 2019 elections, respectively, on BJP tickets.

Constitutional position

The process of gubernatorial appointments is anything but transparent. We know little more than the fact that the President has appointed a person as Governor "by warrant under his hand and seal".

B.P. Singhal v. Union of India

A five-judge Bench of the Supreme Court looked at the scope of the Union's power to remove Governors in the landmark case of B.P. Singhal v. Union of India (2010). In this case, the Supreme Court spoke about the dual role of the Governor — as the constitutional head of the State government and as a vital link between the State and Union governments. Elucidating the specific functions of the Governor, the Supreme Court, speaking through Justice R.V. Raveendran, said that the Governor is "not an employee of the Union Government, nor the agent of the party in power nor required to act under the dictates of political parties". The Court further anticipated that there "may be occasions when he may have to be an impartial or neutral Umpire where the views of the Union Government and State Governments are in conflict".

Commission recommendations

Over the years, the Sarkaria Commission on Centre-State Relations and the National Commission to Review the Working of the Constitution have reiterated that the Governor appointee "should be a person who has not taken too great a part in politics generally, and

particularly in the recent past". Unfortunately, the President has overlooked this important recommendation which is critical to the existence of a federal and constitutional democracy. As such, this reignites the debate around the office of the Governor, its appointments and processes involved.

Source: The Hindu

6. Lynching is not murder: killing of Tabrez Ansari (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Polity & Governance)

What has happened?

The decision of the Jharkhand police that the killing of Tabrez Ansari, 24, in June did not amount to murder is quite debatable. They have chosen to charge the 11 men arrested for his lynching with culpable homicide that does not amount to murder. To the layman, it would seem strange that those who labelled Ansari a thief, tied him to a pole and assaulted him for hours at night, are not going to be prosecuted for murder.

It is not clear if the police are going to include accounts that claim he was forced to chant 'Jai Shri Ram'. This aspect may help establish a clear sectarian motive on the part of the crowd to turn into a lynch mob and attack him. It is known that it was only the arrival of the police that ended the assault on him.

Charges levied

That the police have chosen to prosecute them for culpable homicide and not death is strange. It is true that the line between culpable homicide and murder is thin. It is the courts that usually assess the circumstances in which a homicide took place and decide whether it amounted to murder or not. Murder is punishable under Section 302 with death or life imprisonment, while forms of culpable homicide attract either a life term or 10 years in prison under Section 304 of the IPC.

Explanation given for treating act as culpable homicide

The official explanation for concluding that it was not murder is unconvincing. The two-pronged argument is that the medical report gave the cause of death as 'cardiac arrest due to stress', and the fact that the victim did not die immediately, but succumbed some days later. The police also say a second opinion from forensic experts was that the death was caused due to a combination of heart attack and the injuries he suffered. It is quite obvious that merely attributing death to a heart attack is meaningless without referring to the trauma caused by the physical assault.

Need for anti-lynching law

The suspicion that the charge is being diluted underscores the need for a special anti-lynching law. Such a law could cover acts of group violence, whether spontaneous or planned, so that those who join lynch mobs do not gain from any ambiguity about their intentions.

Source: The Hindu

7. Reaction to higher traffic penalties (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Polity & Governance)

Response of State governments

The steep penalties for violation of road rules that came into force on September 1 under the Motor Vehicles (Amendment) Act, 2019 have produced a backlash, with several State governments opting to reduce the quantum of fines, or even to reject the new provisions. Gujarat has announced a substantial reduction in the fines, West Bengal has refused to adopt the higher penalties.

Response of people

Motorists have reacted with outrage at the imposition of fines by the police, obviously upset at State governments pursuing enforcement without upgrading road infrastructure and making administrative arrangements for issue of transport documents.

Autonomy to State governments

Union Transport Minister Nitin Gadkari has reiterated that it is left to the States to choose the quantum of fines, since it is their responsibility to bring about deterrence and protect the lives of citizens. Mr. Gadkari's argument is valid, and the intent behind amending the Motor Vehicles Act cannot be faulted. After all, India has some of the deadliest roads in the world, and 1,47,913 people died in road accidents only during 2017. The question that has arisen is whether enhanced fines can radically change this record when other determinants, beginning with administrative reform, remain untouched.

Mr. Gadkari should lose no time in forming the National Road Safety Board to recommend important changes to infrastructure and to enable professional accident investigation.

Source: The Hindu

8. Illegal hoardings are threat to road users (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Polity & Governance)

What happened?

A banner put up on a road divider in Chennai by a functionary of the AIADMK to celebrate a wedding, fell on a young woman riding a two-wheeler. Consequently, she went off balance and under a tanker lorry, leading to her death. Only two years ago, a young engineer, died under similar circumstances in Coimbatore and another youth, was electrocuted in Udthagamandalam when he touched a party flag that was in contact with a wire.

Response of political parties

Political parties do not observe any restraint in placing hoardings even after many directions from the Madras High Court to stop endangering public safety, goes to show that there are no serious consequences. Evidently, they are not persuaded by the orders issued in February this year by a division bench, impleading 11 political parties and reminding them of its many earlier orders that prohibit threats to public safety through banners and boards.

What should be done?

The government must fix accountability and make individual members of the executive liable for lack of public safety. There are disturbing aspects to the official response to the incident in Chennai, and the inquiry must go into the reported reluctance of the police to proceed against the AIADMK member who was responsible for the banners being put up. The Revenue Department and the local body must explain their failure to prohibit the dangerous structures, when there are clear orders in force, and acts of omission and commission should attract strong action.

Source: The Hindu

9. Rajasthan's Jan Soochna portal (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Polity & Governance)

Fourteen years since the implementation of Right to Information (RTI) Act, Rajasthan has launched "Jan Soochna Portal" (public information portal) to increase transparency and accountability in governance.

What does the portal cover?

The portal details various schemes run by 13 government departments — the employment guarantee programme, sanitation, the public distribution system among others, by not only explaining the schemes but also providing real time information on beneficiaries, authorities in charge, progress, etc. This is a laudable effort by the State government which is worthy of emulation by other States.

Step in the direction of voluntary disclosures

The portal is implementation of provisions of Section 4(2) of RTI Act. This section requires public authorities to publish information pro-actively. As a one-shot portal for public information on government programmes, the JSP, therefore, can advance the objective of transparency. The challenge would be to ensure that the information flow remains unhampered over time. Besides this, it is important to educate the public about the use of data on the portal. While digital connectivity and literacy have increased over time, these have not adequately translated into digital knowledge of public affairs.

Source: The Hindu

10. SC finds death, terror, violence from 1990 'formidable reasons' for J&K lockdown (Relevant for GS Mains Paper II; Polity & Governance)

The Attorney General K.K. Venugopal told a Bench led by Chief Justice of India (CJI) Ranjan Gogoi that since 1990, 41,866 persons have lost their lives in 71,038 terror incidents. This included 14,038 civilians; 5,292 security personnel and 22,536 terrorists.

Response of Supreme Court

1. The Supreme Court found the government's statistics of thousands of instances of death,

terror and violence in Jammu and Kashmir from 1990 as “formidable reasons” leading to the August 5, 2019 lockdown that followed the withdrawal of the special rights and privileges of Kashmiri people with the reading down of Article 370.

2. The government was also asked to restore normalcy, keeping in mind national security.

3. The court asked petitioners like Kashmir Times editor Anuradha Bhasin to approach the Jammu and Kashmir High Court with “local” problems like lack of Internet and mobile connectivity.

Source: The Hindu

11. The Justice Kureshi episode raises fresh questions about the Collegium’s role (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Polity & Governance)

The Supreme Court Collegium has modified its recommendation on Justice A.A. Kureshi. It appears that the collegium has succumbed to pressure from the Union government.

What is the modification in the order?

Modifying its resolution of May 10 that the senior judge be appointed Chief Justice of the Madhya Pradesh High Court, the Collegium has now decided to send him to the Tripura High Court.

What has happened so far?

It was quite apparent that the Centre was averse to the elevation of Justice Kureshi, who is from the Gujarat High Court, but serving in the Bombay High Court on transfer. The government did not act on the recommendation for months, raising the suspicion that it was blocking his appointment. The Collegium modified its decision after considering letters from the Department of Justice on August 23 and 27, and “accompanying material”.

It is possible that the Collegium and the Centre have arrived at a compromise under which the government drops its opposition to his appointment as Chief Justice on the condition that he is sent to a smaller high court.

Analysis of the present situation

It is common to charge the Collegium with lack of transparency, but in this case, the government is equally guilty. If the Law Ministry had a bona-fide objection to Justice Kureshi, it could have disclosed its opinion on his suitability. The failure to do so has the inevitable consequence of the public imagination concluding that the ruling party is blocking his elevation because of judicial orders he had passed while serving in Gujarat. As for the Collegium, it is unclear why it could not have disclosed what the government had wanted in its communications. This episode makes a dent in the prevailing narrative that the Collegium system is a shield against executive interference in judicial appointments.

Source: The Hindu

12. U.K. top court rules suspension of Parliament unlawful (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Polity & Governance)

U.K. Supreme Court decision

U.K. Supreme Court has ruled that British Prime Minister Boris Johnson's decision to shut down Parliament for five weeks in the run-up to Brexit was unlawful.

The unanimous decision by the 11 presiding judges thrusts Britain's exit from the European Union further into turmoil as it undermines Mr. Johnson and gives legislators more scope to oppose his Brexit plans.

Reason why Mr. Johnson suspended British Parliament

Mr. Johnson has promised that UK will leave the EU with or without a deal by October 31. However, many members of parliament oppose him. To avoid their opposition, he suspended the parliament.

British Parliament was prorogued from September 10 to October 14. The prorogation was approved by Queen Elizabeth, Britain's politically neutral head of state, on the advice of the Prime Minister.

Implications of SC judgement

Some lawmakers, including those thrown out of Mr. Johnson's Conservative Party for rebelling against his Brexit plans, had said he should resign if he was found to have misled the queen.

British Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn called on Mr. Johnson to consider his position and call a new election.

Source: The Hindu

13. Supreme Court decision on illegal Maradu high rise apartments (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Polity & Governance)

Decision of Supreme Court

The court said that illegal high-rise Maradu high rise apartments should be demolished because they violate coastal zone regulations. These regulations restrict construction in coastal areas.

Further, the court ordered demolition and removal of debris to be completed by February 9, 2020. It also ordered the State government to file a written undertaking to this effect in seven days.

The Supreme Court also ordered the Kerala government to immediately pay an interim compensation of Rs. 25 lakh each to the residents of the illegal high-rise Maradu blocks facing demolition for violation of coastal zone regulations.

The court ordered the State to pay the interim compensation within four weeks and recover the sum from the builders and promoters of the apartments.

Source: The Hindu

14. What's Boris Johnson's Brexit strategy? (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; IOBR)

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson's move to "prorogue" or suspend Parliament for over five weeks beginning September second week has triggered furious responses from opposition leaders, who call the decision a threat to democracy. The decision comes at a time when Britain is inching closer towards the October 31 deadline for Brexit. By suspending Parliament for over a month, Mr. Johnson has effectively narrowed the lawmakers' opportunities to reject his Brexit plans.

What is prorogation?

Typically, prorogation is to bring a parliamentary session to end by the monarch on the advice of the government. In this case, Queen Elizabeth II approved the Johnson government's request to suspend Parliament. It is said that the length of session has been deliberately curtailed.

What does it mean for Brexit?

By suspending Parliament for over a month, Mr. Johnson has effectively narrowed the lawmakers' opportunities to reject his Brexit plans. This would have been crucial time for rebel MPs to come up with legislation against a no-deal Brexit.

What is next?

Mr. Johnson's plan is clearly to cut short the time available for MPs. With a reduced timeframe, he will try to force his Brexit legislation through Parliament. Once Parliament reconvenes, Mr. Johnson would ask the lawmakers either to support his plan or get ready for a no-deal exit. When Theresa May was the Prime Minister, MPs rejected her Brexit deal thrice. They failed to come up with an alternative plan either. The only thing they agreed regarding Brexit was to oppose a no-deal Brexit. It is not sure whether Prime Minister Johnson will even have a Brexit deal that's different from Ms. May's deal. The EU has rejected any new deal. Even if Mr. Johnson repackages Ms. May's deal and presents before Parliament, MPs won't have many options this time. The threat of no-deal will be hanging over them with the clock ticking fast.

Source: The Hindu

15. Consular access to Kulbhushan Jadhav (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; IOBR)

Consular access

More than three and a half years after Pakistan announced it had arrested Kulbhushan Jadhav on charges of espionage and terrorism, India finally received consular access to him.

The path to receiving the access, which should technically have been provided shortly after the arrest, had to be bitterly fought for by India.

Vienna Convention of 1963

Despite being a signatory to the Vienna Convention of 1963, which mandates that arrested foreign nationals be allowed to meet consular officers, Pakistan refused the access until it was ordered to by the International Court of Justice at the Hague this July 17 in response to an Indian petition.

Access in video cameras and in front of Pakistan officials

Even after India won the case for consular access, Pakistan took weeks to respond, offering to allow the meeting only in the presence of video cameras, and Pakistani officials. India rejected this at first, and it is unclear why the government finally accepted those same terms, and nominated its Charge d'affaires to meet Mr. Jadhav despite the conversation being recorded, and Pakistani officials being present.

Responses of Mr. Jadhav

According to the officials who met him, Mr. Jadhav's responses during the meeting seemed to be tutored and coerced, much like his "confessional" statements that were released by Pakistan during his trial in a military court. The MEA concluded that he was under "extreme pressure to parrot a false narrative". As a result, Pakistan's consular access appears to be as much of a sham as the trial itself, which was held in complete secrecy. And Mr. Jadhav, who was not allowed to choose a competent lawyer, was pronounced guilty and handed a death penalty in a matter of months.

Source: The Hindu

16. Highlights of Modi- Putin meet ahead of the Eastern Economic Forum in Vladivostok, Russia (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; IOBR)

Mr. Modi, who arrived in Russia on a two-day visit, during which he will also attend the Eastern Economic Forum (EEF), is the first Indian Prime Minister to visit to the Russian Far East region.

Major Highlights

1. PM Modi and President Putin made joint statement that India and Russia are against 'outside influence' in internal matters of any nation.

The remarks came against the backdrop of tension between India and Pakistan after New Delhi revoked Jammu and Kashmir's special status.

India has categorically told the international community that the scrapping of Article 370 of the Constitution was an internal matter and also advised Pakistan to accept the reality.

Russia has backed India's move on Jammu and Kashmir, saying that the changes in the status are within the framework of the Indian Constitution.

The two leaders also held the delegation-level talks at the India-Russia 20th Annual Summit.

2. Chennai-Vladivostok sea route: India, Russia ink proposal on developing Chennai-Vladivostok sea route. Prime Minister Modi said a proposal had been made to have a full-fledged maritime route between Chennai and Vladivostok. A Memorandum of Intent was signed in this regard.

3. Russia to train Indian astronauts: Russia would help train Indian astronauts for the manned space mission — the Gaganyaan project.

The two sides signed 15 agreements/MoUs in areas such as defence, air, and maritime connectivity, energy, natural gas, petroleum and trade.

The annual bilateral trade between India and Russia is \$11 billion.

What is Eastern Economic Forum?

Eastern Economic Forum is an international forum held each year since 2015 in September, at Far Eastern Federal University in Vladivostok, Russia, for the purpose of encouraging foreign investment in the Russian Far East. The Russian president and the Japanese premier have attended this forum since its beginning.

Far East Economic Forum is sponsored by the organizing committee appointed by Roscongress, an association of the Russian Government, which also sponsors other international forums, such as St. Petersburg International Economic Forum.

Source: The Hindu and Wikipedia

17. Kartarpur Corridor pact stuck over visitor fees (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; IOBR)

The agreement on the Kartarpur Corridor project, which will open the famed pilgrimage centre to Indians, could not be signed after Pakistan declared that it would charge fees from the visitors. A statement from government sources said the two sides, which met in Attari, were in agreement on most points, but the final pact stalled over key differences.

What are the key differences?

1. Pakistan has insisted on charging a service fee for allowing pilgrims to visit Gurdwara Kartarpur Sahib, which is not agreeable to India in the spirit of smooth and easy access through the corridor.

2. It was also pointed out that Pakistan declined India's request to let consular officials accompany the pilgrims. The presence of Indian consular officials at Kartarpur has acquired importance in view of the reported activities of Khalistan proponents in Pakistan.

India had objected to the inclusion of pro-Khalistan Gopal Singh Chawla in the reconstituted Pakistan Sikh Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (PSGPC) and other such

figures in the organisation that looks after the Sikh holy shrines in Pakistan. These names were removed from the PSGPC before the July 14 technical-level meeting.

Points on which understanding was reached

1. Sources declared that understanding was reached on the visa-free travel of Indian pilgrims without any restrictions. The pilgrimage will also be available to the holders of OCI cards.

2. According to the bilateral understanding 5,000 pilgrims can visit the Gurdwara daily and the Corridor will also be able to accommodate a surge crowd of additional 5,000 pilgrims on special days like Vaisakhi and the birth anniversary of the founder of Sikhism, Guru Nanak.

About Kartarpur Corridor

India and Pakistan have been building infrastructure on both sides of the border for the pilgrims who will begin festivities in the first week of November to mark the 550th birth anniversary of Guru Nanak, who spent many years of his life at this sacred location. Pakistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, however, stated that a "nominal amount" was to be charged from pilgrims for the maintenance of the holy shrine.

The inability to sign the agreement now has left both sides with a narrow timeline as the festivities for the birth anniversary are to intensify by the last week of October. The Pakistani side has insisted that in view of the approaching events, the next round of talks be held as early as next week. Once operational, Kartarpur Corridor project will be the first such project between the two countries since the Partition of 1947 which left the Sikh shrine across the border in Pakistani territory.

In a historic first, a Sikh Jatha or procession arrived in Amritsar in the first week of August from Nankana Sahib, the birth place of Guru Nanak, in Pakistan. The event was part of the celebrations regarding the Guru and was the first time that such a procession was received in India in the last seven decades.

Source: The Hindu

18. India extends \$1 b line of credit to Russia's Far East (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; IOBR)

Russia is eager to develop its Far East region, where 98 per cent of diamond and 50 per cent of gold of Russia are mined.

During the 5th Eastern Economic Forum (EEF) in Vladivostok, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has extended \$1 billion line of credit to Russia for development of far east.

In December 2014, the countries' leaders set a goal to bring bilateral trade and investment figures to \$30 billion by 2025. While two-side investments have crossed \$50 billion by

2017, thanks to acquisition of Essar Oil by the Rosneft-led consortium, the annual bilateral trade is still \$11 billion.

Previous investments in far east

India's largest state-owned companies as well as private business conglomerates have been investing in the Far East, which includes ONGC's investments in oil and gas projects, the development of coal and gold deposits by Tata Power and Sun Group, diamond polishing factories set up recently by KGK group and M Suresh, among others.

However, experts in both countries believe the scale of these investments does not correspond to the potential of the region, nor to the opportunities or interests of Indian business.

Multiple delegations of state authorities and business from both countries have visited each other since the beginning of 2019. The latest and largest delegation of four chief ministers and over 130 companies was headed by Minister of Railways and Minister of Commerce & Industry Piyush Goyal.

Source: The Hindu Business line

19. An erratic President Trump changes his mind over talks with the Taliban (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; IOBR)

In a dramatic set of posts on Twitter, U.S. President Donald Trump announced the cessation of peace negotiations with the Taliban. His tweets abruptly seem to have indicated the end, at least for now, to the negotiations conducted by the chief U.S. negotiator, Zalmay Khalilzad, with the Taliban.

State of negotiations

Mr. Khalilzad had disclosed that he had reached an "in principle" agreement with the Taliban, but the details have not been revealed. The negotiations were over U.S. troop withdrawal from the country and assurances from the Taliban of not letting the country to be used as a safe haven for terrorists targeting the U.S.

Reason for end of talks

Mr. Trump said that a suicide car bomb attack in Kabul on Thursday was the trigger for his sudden decision. However, Taliban has been continually engaging in terrorist attacks. One estimate suggests that it has engaged in 173 terror attacks resulting in 1,339 fatalities in 2019 alone. It is not clear why Mr. Trump chose this moment to call off talks.

State of Afghanistan

Taliban has increased its control over several provinces and the government's rule prevails only in the north-central parts of the country. A durable peace, with the U.S. seeking early troop withdrawal, is only possible if there are talks between all Afghan groups and other regional stakeholders.

Source: The Hindu

20. Election results in Israel- 2nd election in the same year (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; IOBR)

Israel went through the second election in the same year. The results of the election are again inconclusive. The two main political parties of Israel are expected to form coalition government.

Result of recent elections

Israel parliament is called Knesset. It has 120 seats. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu party is Likud party. Likud party is a right wing party. The party has secured 31 seats only. Before this, Benjamin Netanyahu has been prime minister for four continuous terms.

Blue and White, the Opposition of former Army chief Benny Gantz, has won 33 seats.

Previous elections

In the April elections, Mr. Netanyahu failed to form government. At that time, Mr. Gantz offered Netanyahu to form the government. However, Netanyahu refused to form coalition government.

Moreover, Netanyahu who is Israel's longest serving Prime Minister would be probed within weeks for bribery and fraud against him.

Source: The Hindu

21. What is China's One Country Two Systems policy? (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; IOBR)

Protests in Hong Kong have brought a decades-old policy of the People's Republic of China back into focus — One Country Two Systems.

The protesters, who started occupying the city's streets in April after the local government proposed a controversial extradition law, say Beijing is trying to violate this policy by infringing on Hong Kong's autonomy. They want China to end its interference, while Beijing has likened the protesters to terrorists and have said that it won't tolerate any challenge to its sovereignty over Hong Kong.

So, what's this One Country Two Systems approach?

To put it simply, it means that the Hong Kong and Macau Special Administrative Regions, both former colonies, can have different economic and political systems from that of mainland China, while being part of the People's Republic of China.

Position of Taiwan

The One Country Two Systems policy was originally proposed by Deng Xiaoping shortly after he took the reins of the country in the late 1970s. Deng's plan was to unify China and Taiwan under the One Country Two Systems policy. He promised high autonomy to

Taiwan. China's nationalist government, which was defeated in a civil war by the communists in 1949, had been exiled to Taiwan. Under Deng's plan, the island could follow its capitalist economic system, run a separate administration and keep its own army but under Chinese sovereignty. Taiwan, however, rejected the Communist Party's offer.

The island has since been run as a separate entity from the mainland China, though Beijing never gave up its claim over Taiwan.

Story of Hong Kong and Macau

The idea of two systems in one country resurfaced when Beijing started talks with Britain and Portugal, who were running Hong Kong and Macau, respectively.

The British had taken control of Hong Kong in 1842 after the First Opium War. In 1898, the British government and the Qing dynasty of China signed the Second Convention of Peking, which allowed the British to take control of the islands surrounding Hong Kong, known as New Territories, on lease for 99 years. London promised Peking that the islands would be returned to China after the expiry of the lease, in 1997. Macau, on the other side, had been ruled by the Portuguese from 1557. They started withdrawing troops in the mid-1970s.

In the 1980s, Deng's China initiated talks with both Britain and Portugal for the transfer of the two territories. In talks, Beijing promised to respect the region's autonomy under the One Country Two Systems proposal. On December 19, 1984, China and the U.K. signed the Sino-British Joint Declaration in Beijing, which set the terms for the autonomy and the legal, economic and governmental systems for Hong Kong post 1997.

Similarly, on March 26, 1987, China and Portugal signed the Joint Declaration on the Question of Macau in which China made similar promises for the region of Macau after it was handed over to Beijing.

Hong Kong returned to Chinese control on July 1, 1997, and Macau's sovereignty was transferred on December 20, 1999. Both regions became Special Administrative Regions of China.

The regions would have their own currencies, economic and legal systems, but defence and diplomacy would be decided by Beijing. Their mini-Constitutions would remain valid for 50 years — till 2047 for Hong Kong and 2049 for Macau. It is unclear what will happen after this term.

What triggered the current crisis?

In recent years, there has been a growing outcry from Hong Kong's pro-democracy civil society against China's alleged attempts to erode the city's autonomy. This has created tensions between the city's youth and the local government, which is effectively chosen by Beijing.

Source: The Hindu

22. US House of Representatives begins impeachment inquiry on Trump (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; IOBR)

Democrats in the US House of Representatives launched a formal impeachment inquiry into President Donald Trump, accusing him of seeking foreign help to damage the reputation of Democratic rival Joe Biden ahead of next year's election.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi announced the inquiry after a closed-door meeting with Democratic lawmakers, saying Trump's actions undermined national security and violated the US Constitution.

What are the charges against Trump?

It is said that Trump had pressured Ukrainian President, Volodymyr Zelenskiy, in a July 25 phone call to investigate Biden, the Democratic presidential front-runner, and his son Hunter, who had worked for a company drilling for gas in Ukraine.

What does Trump say?

Trump promised to release a transcript of his phone call. He has acknowledged he discussed Biden in the call. However, he has denied that he withheld nearly \$400 million in US aid to Ukraine as leverage to get Zelenskiy to launch a probe that would damage Biden, who leads opinion polls in the Democratic presidential race.

Procedure for impeachment

The impeachment inquiry could eventually lead to Trump's removal from office. Even if the Democratic-controlled House voted to impeach Trump, the Republican-majority Senate would have to take the next step of removing him from office after a trial. A conviction would require a two-thirds Senate majority.

It will be the first impeachment inquiry in Congress since the 1998 probe of President Bill Clinton for perjury and obstruction of justice in relation to his affair with White House intern Monica Lewinsky.

The House voted to impeach Clinton in December 1998, but the Democratic president was acquitted two months later by the Senate and remained in office. The only other president to be impeached, Andrew Johnson in 1868, was also acquitted by the Senate.

Source: The Hindu Businessline

23. How likely is Donald Trump to get impeached? (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; IOBR)

Even by the standards of his rambunctious term in office so far, U.S. President Donald Trump has found himself in the cross hairs of a political-existential challenge — the prospect that he might be the fourth American President in history to face impeachment proceedings, after Andrew Johnson in 1868 (violation of the Tenure of Office Act), Richard Nixon in 1974 (Watergate), and Bill Clinton in 1998-99 (high crimes or misdemeanours).

Mr. Trump's troubles mounted after his telephonic conversation/s (on July 25, 2019) with Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelensky, about the former U.S. Vice-President Joe Biden (Mr. Trump's potential 2020 opponent). These were allegedly done in a bid to influence Mr. Zelensky to investigate the business dealings of Mr. Biden's son, Hunter Biden (in relation to links to a Ukrainian natural gas company). Subsequently a whistle-blower, believed to be an officer of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), filed a formal complaint outlining alleged improprieties that the call entailed, as well as broader hints about potential compromise of national security in the White House. As news of a whistle-blower complaint outlining such alleged improprieties reached the U.S. Congress, pressure began to mount on the White House to release the edited memo — not a full call transcript — of the discussion between Mr. Trump and Mr. Zelensky. In a rare show of bipartisanship, the U.S. Senate voted and passed unanimously earlier this week a resolution calling for the White House to release the whistle-blower complaint. The White House had no choice but to accede, and on Thursday, Capitol Hill had in its possession both the complaint and the edited memo on the call.

What are the specific allegations of wrongdoing?

First, Mr. Trump is said to have “personally ordered” his staff to freeze more than \$391-million in military aid to Ukraine, a short while before the incriminating call with Mr. Zelensky. Given that such aid is considered to be essential for Ukraine to purchase Javelin anti-tank missiles potentially for use against Russia-backed rebels, anything that Mr. Trump demanded in return for releasing these monies would imply that his conditions represented an outright quid pro quo involving a questionable use of taxpayer funds. Second, Mr. Trump went on to say, “I would like you to do us a favour though...” and then mentioned two “favours” relating to his personal political interests — not national security. In the view of Democrats on Capitol Hill, this would constitute a betrayal of Mr. Trump's oath of office. The first favour related to asking Mr. Zelensky to help him “get to the bottom of” the dealings of a prominent U.S. cybersecurity company called CrowdStrike, the firm that the Democratic National Committee (DNC) called in 2016 after discovering a hack of its server leading to email and other data theft. This is widely believed to be based on Mr. Trump's erroneous belief that there was a “missing server” in CrowdStrike's possession that held some undefined but incriminating evidence against the Democratic Party.

The second favour related to Mr. Trump's belief, again not supported by any known facts, that Mr. Biden stopped the prosecution of his son (relating to his role on the board of Burisma Holdings Limited, a Ukrainian gas company). Mr. Trump appears to not attach importance to Ukraine's (now former) public prosecutor, Yuriy Lutsenko, saying on the record that he had no evidence of wrongdoing by the younger Biden. Third, Trump administration officials may have overreached their authority when they sought to block that complaint from reaching the House of Representatives Intelligence Committee, despite Michael Atkinson, Inspector General of the intelligence community, saying that he considered it a credible matter of “urgent concern” that merited notifying the U.S. Congress.

What do Democrats consider “explosive” in the whistle-blower's complaint?

The complaint, that some media reports said were authored by a CIA analyst stationed at the White House, not only references Mr. Trump's telephone call with Mr. Zelensky, but

also alleges that Mr. Trump used that phone call to “solicit interference” in the 2020 election, and that the White House then intervened to “lock down” the transcript of the call. Indeed, the whistle-blower added that this was “not the first time” that Trump administration officials placed presidential call transcripts in a separate, classified system that was intended for national security, not political protection. This protocol may also be investigated by Congress.

It was in this backdrop that House Speaker Nancy Pelosi announced an inquiry into impeachment proceedings against Mr. Trump, which is set to begin after she meets with her colleagues next week.

How likely is Mr. Trump to be impeached?

A majority of House members have now said ‘they support an impeachment inquiry into Mr. Trump’. One media report has the figures as 225 being in favour (223 Democrats, 1 Independent and 1 Republican) while 155 are undecided; a response is waited from 54. ‘If the House votes on articles of impeachment, a simple majority, or 218 votes, would be needed to impeach’. The success of the inquiry would depend on whether there is a “smoking gun” to be found, of the kind that brought down President Nixon.

In U.S. history, impeachments have tended to pick up momentum in the House, but a conviction, which is necessary for the impeachment to succeed, has depended on which party controlled the Senate. In this case, the Republican Party’s control of the Upper House might just be the lifeline that rescues the Trump presidency if the inquiry moves forward as planned.

Source: The Hindu

24. RBI’s transfer to government and from where do the RBI’s earnings come from? (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Economics)

On August 26, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) central board decided to transfer Rs. 1.76 lakh crore to the government (including a sum of Rs. 52,637 crore from its contingency reserve), a move that is likely to address the Central government’s precarious fiscal situation. The transfer amount included the payment of dividend worth Rs. 1.23 lakh crore, and funds from its reserves, as identified under a new economic capital framework (ECF) adopted by the RBI board. The RBI had formed a committee chaired by former RBI Governor Bimal Jalan to review its ECF last year.

Why is the RBI payout different this year?

Each year, the RBI transfers to the government any money in its balance sheet that it deems to be beyond its operational and contingency needs. The RBI’s transfer of funds to the government per se is nothing new. But what has raised eyebrows this time is that the amount of funds being transferred by the central bank to the government this year is much higher than earlier — 146.8% more than what it had paid out last year, when it transferred Rs. 50,000 crores as dividend. Previously, the highest amount of surplus funds that the RBI had transferred to the government was Rs. 65,896 crores in 2014-15. The net surplus

figures are: Rs. 52,683 (2013-14); Rs. 65,896 (2014-15); Rs. 65,880 (2015-16); Rs. 30,659 (2016-17) and Rs. 50,000 (2017-18)

What is the controversy around the transfer?

The massive payout has raised concerns that the government may be confiscating money from the RBI to meet its urgent spending needs, thus effectively turning the central bank into a banker for the government. Central banks such as the RBI, however, are supposed to be independent from all forms of government influence. In reality, governments across the world try to influence decision-making by their respective central banks in various ways.

When appointing members to the central bank, such as to the post of Governor for instance, governments tend to pick bureaucrats who have been loyal to them over time.

Is this a part of larger policy of government?

Many also view the move to get the RBI to let go of a portion of its accumulated reserve as part of a wider campaign by the government to strip the powers of various independent regulatory bodies. In July, the government amended the Finance Bill to ensure that the Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) transferred surplus funds in its custody over to the government.

Some economists argue that the government has the right to make use of funds in the custody of public institutions such as the RBI to meet its fiscal needs. Critics, however, argue that stripping the financial assets of regulatory institutions such as the RBI and SEBI can compromise their independence.

How does the RBI earn money?

The RBI earns money in a variety of ways. Open market operations, wherein a central bank purchases or sells bonds in the open market in order to regulate money supply in the economy, are a major source of income for the RBI. Apart from the interest received from these bonds, the RBI may also profit from favourable changes in bond prices. Dealings in the foreign exchange market that the RBI engages in may also contribute to the bank's profits. The RBI, for instance, may buy dollars cheaply and sell them dear in the future to pocket profits. It should be noted, however, that unlike commercial banks, the primary mandate of the RBI is not to earn profits but to preserve the value of the rupee. Profit and loss are thus merely a side effect of its regular operations to shape monetary policy.

Are the RBI's powers being diluted?

The primary issue with the transfer of surplus funds is the damage that it does to the credibility of the RBI as an independent central bank. The government has been criticised for taking steps since last year to progressively dilute the powers of the RBI. The government had tried to convince the central bank to part with more than Rs.3 lakh crore from its reserves last year. It appointed a committee headed by Mr. Jalan to overhaul the economic capital framework. The government argued that the quantum of reserves accumulated by the RBI over the years was well beyond the needs of the central bank. This, it is believed, caused friction between the government and the then Governor of the RBI, Urjit Patel, who resigned from his post last December. Some believe the government will

still manage to get hold of the initial corpus of funds that it wanted from the RBI, but over the next few years. Some have raised concerns about the RBI's ability to meet emergencies with its now depleted reserves. These concerns, however, may be unwarranted since, as the sole and sovereign issuer of the rupee, there is effectively no limit to the amount of rupees that the RBI can create to deal with an emergency. The real impact that the forced transfer of funds will have is on the RBI's independence in setting monetary policy. The transfer of surplus reserves to the government is in effect a forced injection of extra liquidity into the economy. The increased demand to meet the government's fiscal needs will thus compromise the RBI's ability to fulfil its primary mandate — to preserve the value of the rupee by reining in inflation, by retaining full and final control over the supply of rupees in the wider economy.

What lies ahead?

The government is expected to achieve its 3% fiscal deficit target this year with the help of the funds it has received from the RBI. The fresh funds will also help the government to spend more on any fiscal stimulus plan that it may decide to implement in order to tackle the slowdown in the economy. The transfer of money from the vaults of the RBI to fund government spending will increase the amount of money supply in the economy, thus exerting an upward pressure on prices. The RBI's transfer of surplus funds to the government could thus effectively turn into a monetary stimulus for the economy which has been slowing down for several consecutive quarters now.

Former RBI Deputy Governor, Viral Acharya (whose resignation earlier this year was linked to his conflicts with the government), warned in a speech last year that governments that do not respect the independence of the central bank will eventually be punished by financial markets. His warning might turn out to be prescient in the coming years if the RBI is turned into a piggy bank to fund the government's increasing spending needs. It can cause investors to lose confidence in the RBI's ability to preserve the value of the rupee and force them to ditch the currency.

Source: The Hindu

25. 10 public sector banks to be merged (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Economics)

Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman announced merger of 10 public sector banks into four entities. This would take the number of banks in the country from 27 in 2017 to 12.

Rationale behind merger

These bank mergers, and the ones already carried out, will lead to the creation of big banks with an enhanced capacity to give credit, she said. These big banks, she said, would also be able to compete globally and increase their operational efficiency by reducing their cost of lending. The merger also has the potential to lead to large cost reductions due to network overlaps.

Details of merger

Website: www.prepmate.in

Prepmate Cengage Books Preview: <https://prepmate.in/books/>

Telegram Channel: [@upscprepmate](https://t.me/@upscprepmate)

Youtube channel: [PrepMate Edutech](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCPrepMate)

1. The largest of the mergers announced is that of Punjab National Bank with Oriental Bank of Commerce and United Bank. The amalgamated entity — to be called Punjab National Bank — will become the second-largest public sector bank in India, after the State Bank of India. It will also become the second-largest bank in India in terms of its branch network, with a combined total of 11,437 branches.
2. The second merger announced was that of Canara Bank and Syndicate Bank, which would render the merged entity the fourth-largest public sector bank.
3. The third merger is of Union Bank of India with Andhra Bank and Corporation Bank.
4. The fourth merger announced is of Indian Bank and Allahabad Bank.

Following all these mergers, the country will have a total of 12 public sector banks, half of which—Punjab National Bank, Canara Bank, Union Bank of India, Indian Bank, State Bank of India, and Bank of Baroda—will be able to compete at a global level.

The government did not give the date by which these mergers are to be completed, as that decision will be taken following further consolidation with the relevant banks.

Previous merger

Previously, the government has already merged State Bank of India with its affiliate banks, and Bank of Baroda with Vijaya Bank and Dena Bank.

Other reforms

Apart from the mergers, Ms Sitharaman also announced a number of smaller reforms to the boards of the banks that are aimed at improving their efficiency and accountability.

In order to make the management accountable to the boards of the banks, a board committee would be made in charge of appraising the performance of officers of the rank of general managers and above, including the managing director. The banks have also been allowed to recruit chief risk officers from the market, at market-linked compensation to attract the best available talent.

Other reform measures were aimed at increasing the engagement of non-official directors, allowing bank boards to reduce or rationalise the number of committees, and increasing the effectiveness of the directors on the Management Committees of Boards by increasing the length of their terms.

Source: The Hindu

26. Eight core sectors growth slows to 2.1% in July (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Economics)

Growth in core sector activity rose in July 2019 to 2.1% due to recovery in the cement sector. The Index of Eight Core Industries had grown at just 0.7% in June 2019. However, July's growth rate is far lower than the 7.3% growth registered in the same month last year.

What is Index of Core industries?

Core industries are the backbone of the overall economy. Their output is used by various other industries. Thus, the core industries determine the state of overall industrial development of the economy.

The index of industrial production (IIP) is a composite indicator that measures the short-term changes in the volume of production of a basket of industrial products during a given period. It is compiled and published monthly by the Central Statistical Organisation (CSO). The current base year for IIP is 2011–12 with a value of 100.

Classification of Indian Economy

Eight core industries comprise nearly 38% of the weight of items included in the IIP

1. Electricity generation (weight: 10.32%)
2. Steel production (weight: 6.68%)
3. Petroleum refinery production (weight: 5.94%)
4. Crude oil production (weight: 5.22%)
5. Coal production (weight: 4.38%)
6. Cement production (weight: 2.41%)
7. Natural gas production (weight: 1.71%)
8. Fertilizer production (weight: 1.25%)

Source: The Hindu

27. RBI's diktat to banks could spur borrowing but may pressure lenders' margins (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Economics)

RBI directions to banks

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has finally decided that it needs to address the problem of inadequate interest rate transmission head on. In a circular to banks on Wednesday, it directed lenders to link all new floating rate loans given to borrowers in the personal, retail and micro, small and medium enterprise (MSME) categories to external benchmarks, including the repo rate, with effect from October 1.

While giving banks the relative freedom to choose the specific external benchmark, including yields on the 3-month and 6-month Treasury Bills published by the Financial

Benchmarks India Pvt. Ltd., the central bank made it clear that lenders would need to adopt a uniform benchmark within a loan category.

Banks do not transmit lower interest rates to customers

In recent times Reserve Bank of India has significantly reduced the interest rates. However, banks do not pass the reduction in interest rates to the borrowers, and continue to charge interest on the same rate. Lower interest rates can play important role in boosting economy.

Source: The Hindu

28. What is ration card portability? How will the 'One Nation One Ration Card' scheme be carried out? What are the challenges? (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Economics)

The Bharatiya Janata Party government is showcasing the rollout of the 'One Nation One Ration Card' scheme as one of the biggest achievements of its first 100 days in power. The launch of the nationwide food security net is scheduled for June 2020, but several challenges remain before migrants can take advantage of full portability.

What is the scheme about?

India runs the world's largest food security programme, distributing more than 600 lakh tonnes of subsidised food grain to more than 81 crore beneficiaries every year. This is done through a vast network of more than five lakh ration or fair price shops. Under the National Food Security Act (NFSA), each beneficiary is eligible for five kg of subsidised grains per month at the rate of Rs. 3/kg for rice, Rs. 2/kg for wheat and Rs. 1/kg of coarse cereals.

However, until recently, this has been a location-linked benefit, leaving crores of migrant workers and families out of the food safety net. Each household's ration card is linked to a specific fair price shop and can only be used to buy rations in that particular shop. Over the last few years, 10 States (partially in one) have implemented the Integrated Management of Public Distribution System, which allows beneficiaries to buy rations from any fair price shop within that State.

The Centre is now in the process of expanding these efforts into a nationwide portability network which is called the 'One Nation One Ration Card' scheme. It is scheduled to come into full effect by June 2020, after which a ration card holder can buy subsidised grain at any fair price shop in the country.

What are the benefits? Who will gain the most?

The main beneficiaries of the scheme are the country's migrant workers. According to data from the Census 2011, there are more than 45 crore internal migrants in India, of whom more than half have not completed primary education, while 80% have not completed secondary education. Lower levels of education are linked to lower income, which would make a large percentage of these migrants eligible for NFSA benefits.

Apart from this, field studies estimate that four crore to ten crore people are short-term migrants, often working in cities, but not moving there permanently. Women who change locations after marriage also find it difficult to start accessing ration benefits using a new household's card.

The Centre hopes that allowing ration card portability will also curb corruption and improve access and service quality by removing monopolies. Under the old system, beneficiaries were dependent on a single fair price shop and subject to the whims of its dealer. Under the new system, if they are denied service or face corruption or poor quality in one shop, they are free to head to a different shop.

The scheme is also driving the faster implementation of initiatives to digitise and integrate the food storage and public distribution system.

What is needed to make it work?

The scheme involves the creation of a central repository of NFSA beneficiaries and ration cards, which will integrate the existing databases maintained by States, Union Territories and the Centre. Aadhaar seeding is also important as the unique biometric ID will be used to authenticate and track the usage of ration by beneficiaries anywhere in the country.

Currently, it is estimated that around 85% of ration cards are linked to Aadhaar numbers. For the scheme to work, it is critical that all fair price shops are equipped with electronic point-of-sale machines (ePoS), replacing the old method of manual record-keeping of transactions with a digital real-time record. On the back-end, the Food Corporation of India's Depot Online System is integrating all warehouses and godowns storing subsidised grain in an attempt to create a seamless flow of online information from procurement until distribution.

What is the progress so far?

Two pairs of States — Andhra Pradesh-Telangana and Maharashtra-Gujarat — became the first to begin implementing portability between their States last month. From October 1, two more pairs — Kerala-Karnataka and Rajasthan-Haryana — will join the experiment. By January, all eight States and at least three others which already implement intra-State portability will form the first national grid for the 'One Nation One Ration Card' scheme.

What are the difficulties ahead?

There are only 4.32 lakh ePoS machines which have been installed in more than 5.3 lakh fair price shops.

In some States, the challenge comes from the difference between ration benefits offered by the State in comparison to the Central entitlement. Tamil Nadu, for example, offers 20 kg of free rice per month to almost 2 crore ration card holders, as well as subsidised sugar, pulses and oil, over and above the NFSA benefits. The State government has made it clear that it will not be offering these benefits to migrant workers, as the Centre will cover the costs of NFSA benefits only.

Another issue could arise if the members of a single household are split between two different locations. The scheme's guidelines only permit purchase of half the subsidised grain at one time in an effort to prevent one member of the household taking the entire ration for the month, leaving family members in a different location stranded without food.

The biggest challenge may lie in the lack of any concrete data on inter-State migration trends, especially short-term migration. The allocation of food grains to States will have to be dynamic to allow for quick additional delivery to cover any shortfalls in States with large migrant populations. Currently, Food Corporation of India godowns stock grains up to three months in advance. Food Ministry officials acknowledged that there is a "steep learning curve" ahead to ensure that movement of grain matches migration flows.

Source: The Hindu

29. A minor win for India at WTO- The trade body ruled that renewable energy incentives offered by U.S. were discriminatory (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Economics)

What was the matter?

In a welcome judgment for India, a World Trade Organization (WTO) panel in June accepted its claim in a dispute concerning U.S. regulations on domestic content requirement in the production of renewable energy. This was also significant as New Delhi had earlier lost a similar dispute over its own domestic content requirements. Though Washington has since challenged the ruling, it is important to discern the reasoning adopted by the organisation in reaching its conclusion.

What was the dispute?

The dispute revolved around certain States in the U.S. that give incentives to local producers in the form of tax rebates, refunds and credits when they produce renewable energy using locally manufactured products. Article III of the WTO's General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) requires that countries do not provide less favourable treatment to 'like products' originating from other nations. For instance, a solar photovoltaic cell manufactured in the U.S. should be liable to the same amount of tax as one made anywhere else in the world.

But how does the WTO determine whether an item is a 'like product'? The organisation's criteria pertains to the product's end use, composition, substitutability, consumer preferences and tariff classifications.

Disputing the causal link

In this case, the U.S. conceded that the import from India was a 'like product'. What it disputed was the causal link between the incentives provided by the respective States and its effect on the Indian goods. For instance, the U.S. argued that the figures quoted by India showing a growth in the number of solar photovoltaic (PV) systems installed in Washington State between 2005 and 2015 do not support its assertion that additional

incentives by themselves have induced the wide-scale adoption of locally made renewable energy products.

However, the WTO panel rejected this argument, stating instead that Washington State's additional incentive accords an advantage on the use of local products not available for 'like imported products'. India, the panel held, was not required to prove factually that the rise in the production of PV systems was caused by a rise in the production of upstream local products at the cost of 'like-imported products'.

The 'mere incentivisation' of only the local products was sufficient to make a prima facie case that Washington State's additional incentive affected the sale, purchase, transportation, distribution or use of the relevant products, the panel said.

Solar module exports to U.S.

The ruling is also important considering that the U.S. imported 44% of the Indian solar module exports in the 2018-2019 period.

We believe that this dispute could have been easily avoided had the two countries settled their differences beforehand. This is especially so because there are various other disputes pending between the countries at the WTO involving the export promotion scheme brought in by India and the imposition of excess customs duty on steel and aluminium by the U.S. New Delhi claims that its export promotion schemes are in consonance with its developing country status while Washington has cited 'national security' as the reason for the imposition of the duty.

Source: The Hindu

30. Nirmala Sitharaman unveils package to boost exports, revive housing sector (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Economics)

Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman announced a third set of government decisions to revive the economy. The decisions announced by the Minister follow two previous mega announcements designed to encourage private sector investment and bring further stability into the banking system through several public sector bank mergers.

Areas focused in third set of measures:

1. Exports

The third set of announcements focused on providing boost to exports, which contracted 6.05% in August.

Scheme for Remission of Duties or Taxes on Export Product (RoDTEP)

One major decision is that of the setting up of the Scheme for Remission of Duties or Taxes on Export Product (RoDTEP), which will replace the Merchandise Exports from India Scheme (MEIS).

The previous MEIS and the new RoDTEP are designed to incentivise exports by giving them rewards to offset the duties they pay to export their products. The rate of reward under MEIS varies between 2% and 7% of the free-on-board (FOB) value, depending on the item and the country it is being exported to. The RoDTEP is expected to incentivize exporters even more. The revenue foregone under RoDTEP is projected at up to Rs. 50,000 crore per year.

Electronic refund module

In another move aimed at freeing up the working capital of exporters, the Finance Minister announced a fully electronic refund module for the quick and automated refund of input tax credits that will become operational by the end of this month.

Increase in lending to exporters

To increase bank credit to exporters, the Export Credit Guarantee Corporation (ECGC) will expand the scope of its Export Credit Insurance Scheme to provide a higher insurance cover to banks that are lending working capital for exports. At present banks are covered for 60% of what they lend to exporters for working capital. This will be increased to 90%. Credit flow to exporters has come down by 35%. This move is expected to increase export credit by about Rs. 4,000 crores in the first year and Rs. 5,000 crores in the second year.

The initiative will cost the exchequer about Rs. 1,700 crore per year and would enable a reduction in the overall cost of export credit including interest rates, especially to MSMEs. Simultaneously, the Reserve Bank of India is also looking into modifying the priority sector lending norms for the export sector to release an additional Rs. 36,000 crores to Rs. 68,000 crores as export credit.

Administrative measures

These measures will include digitalization of export clearances. Further, an action plan to reduce the time to export and turn-around time in airports and ports benchmarked to international standards will be implemented by December 2019.

Other measures

Other decisions aimed at making exports more competitive include working with exporters to help them best exploit the advantages of the various free trade agreements India has signed with other countries, increasing the testing and certification infrastructure in India, and enforcing the time-bound adoption by industry of all necessary mandatory technical standards.

2. Housing

For the housing sector, the most notable decision was the setting up of a special fund that would provide last-mile funding for unfinished housing projects which are that are not categorised as non-performing assets and are not undergoing National Company Law Tribunal proceedings.

The government, on the lines of the National Investment and Infrastructure Fund, can contribute to the fund while the rest of the investors would be LIC and other institutions and private capital from banks, sovereign funds, etc. The Finance Minister said the government's contribution to the fund would be ₹10,000 crore and the other investors would contribute "roughly the same amount". The fund is to be professionally run with experts from housing and banking sectors.

Other measures

In an attempt to increase bank credit for home buyers, the government also said the external commercial borrowing guidelines will be relaxed to facilitate financing for home buyers who are eligible under the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana.

Moreover, the interest rate on house building advances will be lowered and linked with the 10 Year Government Security yields.

Source: The Hindu

31. Drone strikes on Saudi facility lead to jump in crude prices (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Economics)

Impact of drone attacks

Drone attacks last week on Saudi Arabia's crude processing facility, the largest in the world, have impacted half of the country's crude oil production and about 5% of the world supply. Following the attacks, Global Brent crude futures shot up more than 20% to \$66.91 per barrel.

However, allaying Indian fears, Saudi Aramco officials have told oil companies that the attacks would not result in a shortage of supplies. However, oil prices are expected to rise.
Position of Saudi Arabia as oil supplier

Saudi Arabia is a major source of oil imports for India, accounting for nearly 18% of the 226 million tonnes of crude the country imported during 2018-19. India imports more than 80% of its crude oil requirement.

Who is responsible for attacks?

Tensions in the Middle East have escalated following drone attacks on two major oil facilities in Saudi Arabia.

Yemen's Houthi rebels have claimed responsibility for the attacks. However, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo swiftly accused Iran for the attacks. The allegations were rejected by Tehran which said the allegations were meant to justify actions against it.

Source: The Hindu

32. Government to peg MGNREGA wages to inflation in bid to hike incomes (Relevant for GS Prelims; Economics)

Website: www.prepmate.in

Prepmate Cengage Books Preview: <https://prepmate.in/books/>

Telegram Channel: [@upscprepmate](https://t.me/upscprepmate)

Youtube channel: [PrepMate Edutech](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCPrepMate)

The Centre plans to inject more money into the UPA's flagship Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) scheme by linking wages under the Act to an updated inflation index, which will be revised annually. It hopes this will increase wages, thus increasing purchasing power and reviving rural demand.

The increased wages based on updated inflation indices may result in 10% higher government expenditure on the scheme. Wage rate revisions are usually notified at the beginning of a financial year, but the Ministry is trying implement the hike during the current year itself, as part of a stimulus package to counter the ongoing slowdown.

Criticism of move

However, some economists question whether linking wage rates to a better inflation index will be sufficient, given that MGNREGA workers get paid much lower than market rates. The national average wage of an MGNREGA worker is Rs. 178.44 per day, less than half of the Rs. 375 per day minimum wage recommended by a Labour Ministry panel earlier this year.

Why revision of indices is justified?

The Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation and the Labour Bureau is working to update the consumer price indices for rural areas (CPI-R) and agricultural labourers (CPI-AL) respectively.

The consumption basket of CPI-AL [which determines MGNREGA wage revisions] has not been updated for more than three decades, but rural consumption patterns have changed drastically in that time. Food items make up more than two-thirds of the CPI-AL consumption basket, but rural workers today spend a much smaller percentage of their money on subsidised food, and an increasingly larger amount on health, education and transport costs.

High demand for MNREGA work

Even with existing wages, the scheme is running out of funds due to increased demand for work. MGNREGA received a budgetary allocation of Rs. 60,000 crore, of which more than 75% has already been released by the Centre even before the halfway point of the year.

Droughts and floods in several States have led to an increased demand for work in the early part of the year, and the economic slowdown could spur demand again once the rabi planting season is over.

Source: The Hindu

33. What corporate tax cut means for the Indian economy (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Economics)

What is the new tax rate?

Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman announced a significant cut in corporate tax rates, thus bringing down the effective tax rate (including various cesses and surcharges) on corporations from 35% to 25%. Also under the new corporate tax policy, new companies that set up manufacturing facilities in India starting in October and commence production before the end of March, 2023 will be taxed at an effective rate of 17%.

This will bring India's tax rates on par with its competing Asian peers. Following the government's decision, both the Nifty and the Sensex rose over 5%, which is their biggest one-day rise in a decade.

Why is the government cutting taxes?

The corporate tax cut is part of a series of steps taken by the government to tackle the slowdown in economic growth, which has dropped for five consecutive quarters to 5% in the June quarter.

The most immediate reason behind the tax cut may be the displeasure that various corporate houses have shown against the government's policies.

What impact will it have on the economy?

1. Tax cuts, by putting more money in the hands of the private sector, can offer people more incentive to produce and contribute to the economy. Thus the present tax cut can help the wider economy grow.
2. The corporate tax rate, it is worth noting, is also a major determinant of how investors allocate capital across various economies. So there is constant pressure on governments across the world to offer the lowest tax rates in order to attract investors.
3. The present cut in taxes can make India more competitive on the global stage by making Indian corporate tax rates comparable to that of rates in East Asia.
4. The tax cut, however, is expected to cause a yearly revenue loss of ₹1.45 lakh crore to the government which is struggling to meet its fiscal deficit target.
5. At the same time, if it manages to sufficiently revive the economy, the present tax cut can help boost tax collections and compensate for the loss of revenue.

Source: The Hindu

34. India to get up to five million tonnes of LNG a year (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Economics)

Indian Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) importer Petronet has decided to invest \$2.5 billion in American company Tellurian Inc., in an agreement that will give India access to up to five million tonnes of LNG a year. MoU have been signed and the final agreement is due to be completed by 31st March 2020.

Source: The Hindu

35. Move to link Aadhaar with GST registration (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Economics)

Earlier this month, the Directorate General of GST Intelligence and the Directorate General of Revenue Intelligence conducted a pan-India joint operation, which saw about 1,200 officers simultaneously conducting searches at 336 different locations.

In the process they unearthed a network of exporters and their suppliers who had connived to claim fraudulent refunds of Integrated GST, with more than Rs. 470 crore of input tax credit availed being based on non-existent entities or suppliers with fictitious addresses. A further Rs. 450 crores of IGST refund is also under review.

Fraud in GST refunds

Since the roll-out of the tax in July 2017, frauds totalling up to Rs. 45,682 crores have been detected. Consequently, GST Council has decided “in principle” to recommend linking Aadhaar with registration of taxpayers. The council also agreed to appraise the possibility of making the biometrics-based unique identifier mandatory for claiming refunds.

The council should move swiftly to recommend mandatory linking of Aadhar for refunds, especially since that has proved to be the main source of most frauds.

Source: The Hindu

36. India, U.S. trade deal falls through (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Economics)

Despite Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal’s presence in New York to conclude a trade package with U.S. Trade Representative (USTR) Robert Lighthizer, the two sides failed to bridge the gap in their positions. The announcement of an agreement was expected to coincide with bilateral between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Donald Trump.

Possible Reasons for failure of agreement:

Demands by US

1. The agreement could not be reached due to the failure to reach an agreement on Information and communications technology (ICT) products. The U.S. has wanted India to eliminate tariffs (20%) on ICT products, but New Delhi is concerned that this could open up the market to flooding by Chinese technology.

2. The U.S. wanted greater access to Indian markets for medical devices, such as stents and knee implants, ICT and dairy products and sought the removal of price caps.

3. The US had sought the removal of price caps (“Trade Margin Rationalization” or TMR) on medical devices and greater access for dairy products and some other categories of agricultural goods.

Demands by India

1. On its part, India wanted the reinstatement of preferential market access to U.S. markets under the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) program, which was revoked in early June.

2. It had also wanted facilitation of processes in agricultural product markets where it already had access (such as easier certification of food product irradiation facilities) and greater access in some agricultural markets (table grapes, pomegranates for instance).

Although a limited trade package could not be finalised, the two sides had “narrowed their areas of difference”, and made “significant progress”. The two leaders, therefore, felt that they were optimistic in terms of reaching some kind of a trade agreement in the near future. And discussions will continue in this regard. However, he did not provide a time frame for the conclusion of agreement.

It is believed that there are other larger issues which have prevented conclusion of deal. Some of the larger issues for the U.S. include digital trade (for instance regulations around data localization and FDI in e-commerce). India also continued to appear on U.S.’s “Priority Watch List” this year along with 10 other countries. The annual list identifies countries which, according to the U.S., pose challenges to American intellectual property rights.

Source: The Hindu

37. What can be done to address the demand drought in our economy? (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Economics)

A worryingly persistent slowdown dragged economic growth in India down to 5% in the fiscal first quarter, its weakest pace in more than six years. The private consumption expenditure, which contributes more than half the gross domestic product and is the mainstay of demand, has declined significantly.

Automobile sales continues to plunge, posting worst drop since the Society of Indian Automobile Manufacturers (SIAM) started collating wholesale vehicle sales data in 1997-98. The absence of demand pervades almost every key sector: from consumer durables to biscuits and housing.

How did we get here?

Multiple factors have contributed to the demand drought. Lack of jobs, rural distress, widening inequality and, interestingly, in the opinion of some economists, even the Reserve Bank of India’s successful targeting of inflation are all cited as contributors.

The view on inflation is compelling as its proponents contend that for an economy such as India's, the central bank's target of containing consumer price index based inflation within a 2-6% band may be less than required.

Low inflation extracts costs in the form of lower nominal growth (growth measured in current prices) that could crimp tax receipts and in turn lead to cuts in government spending, these economists assert. Also, with wage/salary increases most often linked to inflation, slower price gains would result in smaller annual increments that would leave the earners more wary of spending on discretionary or non-essential purchases.

What can be done to revive demand?

Consumer sentiment is a key ingredient affecting consumption and it is vital for policy makers to address weakness in consumer sentiment through a mix of measures in the economic realm, both monetary and fiscal, as well as ensuring a congenial socio-political climate that enhances the 'feel-good' factor. As the RBI had pointed to in its last policy announcement in August, consumer confidence has worsened appreciably.

On the monetary side, ensuring lower borrowing costs as well as adequate availability of credit are crucial to helping create an enabling environment for consumers to consider taking out loans to fund their purchases.

However, fiscal measures are in many ways far more crucial. Targeted tax breaks or non-tax sops that incentivise consumption is one option. The government's latest decision to cut baseline corporate tax rates is certainly a good move, aimed at incentivising and spurring sluggish capital investment by businesses. However, companies may balk at adding capacity when demand for their manufactured goods is still weak and it is therefore imperative that the revival of demand stays front and centre of any new policy measures.

As far as rural demand goes, the government must go beyond the Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi, or PM-KISAN income supplementing scheme and tackle the crisis of low real farm incomes by radically recalibrating its approach to the agrarian economy. As an immediate and necessary measure, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme needs to be reinvigorated by ensuring timely and adequate funding and the fixing of appropriate wage levels. As studies have shown, in its first five years, the scheme gave a big fillip to rural incomes and consumption in the hinterland.

What, if any, are the risks?

Any economic stimulus package that the government may come up with would necessarily assume a short-term loosening of the fiscal deficit goals, whether from enhanced spending or from reduced tax revenues as the corporate tax cut may engender. If the stimulus also entails a large expenditure component, there could also be second-order inflationary consequences. However, the risks of failing to revive demand, at a juncture when the economy is heading for a stall, are far greater in the long run. Once, the economy has been reflat and demand revives, revenue buoyancy is bound to return and prudent management can ensure a gradual return to normal service on long-run fiscal goals.

Source: The Hindu

38. Measures to check price rise of onions (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Economics)

1. In view of sustained high price of onions in the market, the Central Government today took several steps to contain the prices namely, imposition of stock limits on traders, ban on exports and has asked State Governments to take strict measures to prevent hoarding by traders including organising raids.
2. In the past, Centre had authorised the State Governments to impose stock limits. This time, Centre has decided to impose stock limits directly upon the States across India. The stock limit of 100 quintal on retail traders and 500 quintals on wholesale traders has been imposed across the country today.
3. Further, Government has banned export of onions with immediate effect till further orders for improving domestic availability. The ban on export of onions is expected to improve domestic availability and cool prices.
4. Centre has asked the State Governments to enforce the stock limits strictly and carry out anti-hoarding operations against the unscrupulous traders by organising raids, etc.
5. A Central buffer of about 56,700 MT was built by the Government through NAFED during Rabi 2019 season. This buffer stock is being utilised for supplies to Delhi at a rate of not more than 23.90 per kg. Haryana and Andhra Pradesh are also being supplied from the buffer. Other States have also been asked to utilise this buffer and indicate their demand for the same to Department of Consumer Affairs and/or NAFED.

Source: The Hindu

39. Where does India stand on plastic waste? What is the protocol that needs to be in place before a ban on single-use plastic items comes into force? (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Environment)

On August 15, in his Independence Day address, Prime Minister Narendra Modi called for a movement to eliminate single-use plastic in India, beginning on Gandhi Jayanti (October 2).

Where does India stand on plastic waste?

In spite of the notification of the Plastic Waste Management (PWM) Rules, 2016, and amendments made two years later, most cities and towns are not prepared to implement its provisions. Even the biggest Municipal Corporations shouldering a staggering waste burden have failed to implement segregation of waste: collecting recyclable plastic, non-recyclable plastic and other waste separately for processing by material recovery facilities. This is a growing crisis amid criticism of under-reporting of the true extent of plastic waste. Per capita consumption of plastic is projected to go up from 11 kg in 2014-15 to 20 kg by

2022 (Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry data); about 43% is single-use packaging with poor rates of recovery.

An amendment to the PWM Rules in 2018, by which a six-month deadline was fixed for producers to arrange for recovery of waste in partnership with State Urban Development departments, has made little progress. Neither is plastic marked with numerical symbols (such as 1 for PET, 4 for Low Density Polyethylene, 5 for Polypropylene and so on) to facilitate recycling using the correct industrial process.

Recycling reduces the volume of non-recyclables that must be disposed of using methods such as co-processing in cement kilns, plasma pyrolysis or land-filling. In April this year, the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) issued notice to 52 companies asking them to file their plan to fulfil their EPR (extended producer responsibility) obligation.

Are alternatives such as compostable or biodegradable plastics viable?

Although compostable, biodegradable or even edible plastics made from various materials such as bagasse (the residue after extracting juice from sugarcane), corn starch, and grain flour are promoted as alternatives, these currently have limitations of scale and cost.

Some biodegradable packaging materials require specific microorganisms to be broken down, while compostable cups and plates made of polylactic acid, a popular resource derived from biomass such as corn starch, require industrial composters. On the other hand, articles made through a different process involving potato and corn starch have done better in normal conditions, going by the experience in Britain. Seaweed is also emerging as a choice to make edible containers.

In India, though, in the absence of robust testing and certification to verify claims made by producers, spurious biodegradable and compostable plastics are entering the marketplace. In January this year, the CPCB said that 12 companies were marketing carry bags and products marked 'compostable' without any certification, and asked the respective State Pollution Control Boards to take action on these units.

A ban on single-use plastic items would have to therefore lay down a comprehensive mechanism to certify the materials marketed as alternatives, and the specific process required to biodegrade or compost them. A movement against plastic waste would have to prioritise the reduction of single-use plastic such as multi-layer packaging, bread bags, food wrap, and protective packaging. Consumers often have no choice in the matter. Other parts of the campaign must focus on tested biodegradable and compostable alternatives for plates, cutlery and cups, rigorous segregation of waste and scaled up recycling. City municipal authorities play a key role here.

What can the packaging industry do?

Environment Minister Prakash Javadekar sent a message to the industry at the global flexible packaging conference in Mumbai recently that it must take its extended producer responsibility requirement under the law seriously. The Secretaries of the Environment and Petroleum Ministries said at the event that plastic waste was a key concern, and

industry should look at innovation and new materials in the days ahead, besides facilitating collection and recycling with the help of city administrations.

Packaging is projected to grow into a \$72.6 billion industry in India by 2020 from about \$31 billion in 2015, with a proportionate rise in waste volumes. The pressure on producers to streamline the collection, recycling and processing of all forms of plastic is bound to grow.

Source: The Hindu

40. PM Modi vows to more than double India's non-fossil fuel target to 450 GW by 2022 (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Environment)

India's renewable energy target will be increased to 450 GW, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said at the United Nations Climate Action Summit.

India would spend approximately \$50 billion "in the next few years" on the Jal Jeevan Mission to conserve water, harvest rainwater and develop water resources, he added.

Mr. Modi also said India planned to "considerably increase the proportion of the biofuel blend in petrol and diesel."

He said India had plans to make the transport sector green through the use of electrical vehicles.

The Prime Minister highlighted his call from banning single-use plastics, the International Solar Alliance, an Indian-led initiative, and that India had provided 160 million families with cooking gas connections.

New initiatives announced

1. He also announced two international initiatives. First, a platform with Sweden and other countries, for governments and the private sector to work together to develop low carbon pathways for industry.

2. Second, a Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure. This initiative was approved by the Union Cabinet last month and ₹480 crore has been allocated for technical assistance and projects.

The U.K., Australia and island nations such as Fiji and the Maldives will be part of this coalition.

Highlights from PM Modi's speech:

>> World not doing enough to overcome serious challenge of climate change.

>> Need a global people's movement to bring about behavioural change.

- >> India will spend \$50 billion on water conservation in next few years.
- >> India will increase share of non-fossil fuel, will increase renewable energy capacity to beyond 175 GW by 2022 and take it to 400 GW.
- >> India will inaugurate on Tuesday solar panels on the roof of the U.N. building, built at a cost of \$1 million.
- >> 80 countries have joined the International Solar Alliance initiated by India.
- >> Called for a people's movement to end the use of single use plastic and hoped that it will create an awareness at a global level about the harmful effects of single use plastic.
- >> Need is a global people's movement to bring about behavioural change.
- >> India will spend \$50 billion on his government's ambitious 'Jal Jeevan Mission' for water conservation, rainwater harvesting and for the development of water resources.
- >> India and China, which faced the highest burden of death from air pollution, will reap the biggest health benefits of a robust climate policy aimed at reducing carbon emissions.
- >> Calls for comprehensive approach which covers everything from education to values, and from lifestyle to developmental philosophy.

Source: The Hindu

41. India is seeking a transition from conventional fuel vehicles to e-vehicles. Are e-vehicles economically feasible for mass use? (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Science & Technology)

In May this year, NITI Aayog proposed to ban the sale of all internal combustion engine (ICE) powered three-wheelers post March 2023. It also suggested that all new two-wheelers below 150cc sold after March 2025 should be electric. In consonance with these proposals, the Union Budget presented on July 5 announced tax incentives for early adopters. However, there has been the worry that EVs are still not financially viable because of various costs associated with their manufacture and use.

How are cost structures of conventional vehicles and electric vehicles different?

The portion of the costs of the drivetrain of EVs — the system in a motor vehicle which connects the transmission to the drive axles — in comparison to the cost of the entire vehicle is four percentage points lower when compared to ICE vehicles. This is primarily due to less parts in the electric drivetrain. However, the battery pack takes up nearly half the cost of an electric vehicle. For any meaningful reduction in the physical value of EVs, the cost of battery packs needs to reduce significantly.

What are the components of a battery pack and how much do they cost?

The predominant battery chemistry used in EVs is lithium-ion batteries (Li-ion). No new technologies are on the horizon for immediate commercial usage.

The cost of the materials or key-components of the battery, namely the cathode, anode, electrolyte, separator, among others, contribute the most (60%) to the total cost. Labour charges, overheads and profit margins account for the rest.

Labour is a relatively minuscule component of the overall cost. Any reduction in the cost of the battery pack will have to come from a reduction in materials cost or the manufacturing overhead.

How has the cost of the Li-ion battery pack cost evolved in the last decade?

The price of these battery packs has consistently fallen over the past few years. This decrease is in part due to technological improvements, economies of scale and increased demand for lithium-ion batteries. Fierce competition between major manufacturers has also been instrumental in bringing down prices.

Where does India stand on EV adoption?

In India, EV adoption will be driven by two-wheelers rather than cars in high numbers on because India's mobility market is driven more by two wheelers. According to the NITI Aayog, 79% of vehicles on Indian roads are two-wheelers.

Three-wheelers and cars that cost less than Rs. 10 lakh account for 4% and 12% of the vehicle population, respectively.

Two-wheelers will also need smaller batteries when compared to cars and hence the overall affordable cost. India needs to manufacture Li-ion cells in-house. Now, cells are imported and "assembled" into batteries. Setting up a Li-ion manufacturing unit requires high capital expenditure. But battery manufacturing in India is expected to grow as electric vehicles grow.

Are EV vehicles completely environment friendly?

In conventional ICEs, petrol or diesel fuels the engine. However, in EVs, batteries are not the fuel; electrons supplied by the battery fuel the vehicle. The battery is a device that stores electrons/energy which is sourced from electricity.

Presently, most of India's electricity is generated using conventional sources. In 2018-19, over 90% of India's electricity was generated from conventional sources, including coal, and around 10% was produced from renewable sources such as solar, wind and biomass. While the rate of electricity generated from renewable sources has increased over the years, more needs to be done for their adoption.

This is because the EV-charging infrastructure needs to be powered through renewable sources to make it truly sustainable.

Source: The Hindu

42. New anti-tuberculosis drug (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Science & Technology)

Anti-tuberculosis drug Pretomanid

The anti-tuberculosis drug pretomanid recently approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration will be a game changer for treating people with extensively drug-resistant TB (XDR-TB) and those who do not tolerate or respond to now available multidrug-resistant TB (MDR-TB) drugs.

That pretomanid is only the third drug in the last 40 years to get FDA approval highlights the scarcity of new drugs to treat TB bacteria that are rapidly developing resistance against most available drugs.

Results of trials

The all-oral, three-drug regimen of bedaquiline, pretomanid, and linezolid (BPaL) had a 90% cure rate in a phase III trial in South Africa involving 109 participants. In contrast, the current treatment success rate for XDR-TB and MDR-TB is about 34% and 55%, respectively. Importantly, the regimen was found to be safe and effective in curing TB in people living with HIV. The safety and efficacy were tested in 1,168 patients in 19 clinical trials in 14 countries. Unlike 18-24 months needed to treat highly-resistant TB using nearly 20 drugs, the BPaL regimen took just six months, was better tolerated and more potent in clearing the bacteria. The shorter duration is more likely to increase adherence to therapy and improve treatment outcomes.

Expected benefits

According to the World Health Organisation, in 2017, there were an estimated 4.5 lakh people across the world with MDR-TB, of which India accounted for 24%, and about 37,500 with XDR-TB. With only a low percentage of MDR-TB cases being treated, the actual number of people who do not tolerate or respond to available MDR-TB drugs and so will be eligible to receive the BPaL regimen is unknown. Though the total number of people who will require the new drug may not be high, these are people who have very little alternative treatment options that are safe and efficacious. Also, the number of those who would need a pretomanid-based regimen is increasing due to rising drug resistance.

Source: The Hindu

43. Is India likely to ban single-use plastics soon? (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Science & Technology)

10,000 tonnes of plastic waste is left uncollected every day

India's policy on single-use plastic has been much in the news, with reports that a ban is in the offing. What are single-use plastics and why aren't they have been banned if they pose a major environmental threat?

What is single-use plastic?

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Single-use plastics, often also referred to as disposable plastics, are commonly used for packaging and include items intended to be used only once before they are thrown away or recycled. These include, among other items, grocery bags, food packaging, bottles, straws, containers, cups and cutlery. Plastic packaging is mostly single-use, especially in business-to-consumer applications, and a majority of it is discarded the same year it is produced. Such plastics are problematic because they are not biodegradable.

Is there an imminent ban on single-use plastic?

There is no ban in the works. Union Minister for Environment and Forests Prakash Javalker in a briefing said: "...Prime Minister Narendra Modi didn't say 'ban', but said 'goodbye' to single-use plastic waste. From October 2, we will begin an attempt to collect all that waste. Nearly 10,000 tonnes of plastic waste remains uncollected."

This was in the context of Mr. Modi's exhortations to Indians to eschew the use of single-use plastic by October 2, the 150th birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi.

Why is it difficult to ban single-use plastics?

India has Plastic Waste Management Rules, 2018. One of its key obligations is to have industries that make products that ultimately employ plastic (and generate plastic waste) collect a fixed percentage every year. The State Pollution Control Boards as well municipalities have the responsibility to ensure that plastic waste is collected and sent to recycling units.

Compared to other countries such as the U.S. and China, India has very low per capita generation of plastic waste. However, in real terms, this is quite substantial and nearly 10,000 tonnes of plastic waste is left uncollected every day.

Studies by organisations like The Energy Resources Institute (TERI) on landfills have found that 10.96% of waste was only plastic and of these, non-recyclable plastics accounted for 9.6%. The disparity is because certain kinds of plastic, such as PET bottles are remunerative for rag pickers as they are in demand at recycling facilities.

Source: The Hindu

44. Train 18 project status (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Science & Technology)

Launch of Train 18

In October 2018, Train 18 which can attain a semi-high-speed (of 160 kmph-200 kmph speed) was rolled out in a short span of 18 months. If Chandrayaan-2 brought India close to joining the select band of three countries in the world to have successfully achieved a soft landing on the moon, Train 18 propelled India into the exclusive club of about a half a dozen countries in the world that have the capability to produce a brand new design of a high-speed/semi-high-speed train set in such a short time.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, in February 2019, flagged off the inaugural run of the Train 18 as 'Vande Bharat Express' in Varanasi.

What issues have emerged now?

1. Following top-level changes in the Railway Board at the turn of the New Year, a vigilance investigation was launched into certain alleged procedural irregularities and allegations of undue favours shown to a particular indigenous firm in awarding contracts for the crucial propulsion system. It was also reported that deviations had been observed from the specifications prescribed by the Research Design and Standards Organisation (RDSO).

2. Meanwhile, the man who had spearheaded the Train 18 project — from its conception and design to its launch — as General Manager of Integral Coach Factory (ICF) and who retired at the end of last year, was not even extended an invitation for the train's ceremonial inaugural run in February 2019.

3. With the train set's production having come to a halt in ICF, Chennai, despite tenders having been floated, Project 18 is as good as dead now.

Breach of specifications

Indian Railways operates normally in 'maintenance mode' to keep the wheels of the railway network moving as efficiently as possible with the least disruption. This aim is achieved through more than a dozen functional departments that normally work in close coordination. Only certain specific projects or initiatives are undertaken in 'mission mode'. The Train 18 project was one such undertaking that required the planners to cut red tape and reduce needless procedural hassles. It is likely that in the process, certain 'sacrosanct' boundaries of departmental silos were breached for no other reason than to speed up decision-making.

Source: The Hindu

45. What is 'Vaccine hesitancy'? Why it is a significant threat? (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Science & Technology)

Vaccine hesitancy

Vaccine hesitancy is defined as the "reluctance or refusal to vaccinate despite the availability of vaccines.

With a 30% increase in measles cases worldwide in 2018, the World Health Organization, in January 2019, included 'vaccine hesitancy' as one of the 10 threats to global health this year.

Why 'vaccine hesitancy' for MMR vaccine?

Younger people (18-34 years) and those with less education are less likely to agree that the measles, mumps, and rubella (MMR) vaccine is safe.

A 2018 study found low awareness to be the main reason why 45% of children missed different vaccinations in 121 Indian districts that have higher rates of unimmunised children. While 24% did not get vaccinated due to apprehension about adverse effects, 11% were reluctant to get immunised for reasons other than fear of adverse effects. Thus, much work remains to be done to address misinformation.

With social media playing a crucial role in spreading vaccine disinformation, the commitment by Facebook to “reduce distribution” of vaccine misinformation will be helpful in winning the war against vaccine deniers.

Need for MMR vaccine

Measles vaccine not only provides lifelong protection against the virus but also reduces mortality from other childhood infections. This is because measles viruses kill immune cells, leaving the child vulnerable to infectious diseases for two to three years.

Source: The Hindu

46. What does ancient DNA show about history? How do genetic patterns relate to archaeological evidence about Indian pasts? (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Science & Technology)

What is ancient DNA (aDNA) and what has it been used to study?

Ancient DNA can be carefully extracted from archaeologically recovered bones, teeth or fossil plant remains. Small fragments are processed to sequence the genome of those ancient organisms.

Techniques developed over the past three decades have led to a revolution in how we understand the evolution and genetic history of a range of animals and plants, including species that are extinct today. Palaeogeneticists have been able to establish, for example, how genetic variation might relate to the independent evolution of species on different continents, or how different subspecies of horses emerged after their domestication, or how populations that today appear distinct and in different geographical areas were once related and likely existed together in one region.

What are challenges of studying human DNA?

Special challenges are attached to the study of ancient human DNA, especially as contamination from modern human DNA is a real hazard and requires special techniques at every stage of the recovery and extraction process.

What can be done with a DNA from human samples?

Modern human DNA databases are built on samples from people like us, alive today. They have been used for several applications, prominently including attempts to understand the genetic predisposition towards certain diseases and responses to medicines in different social groups in South Asia.

The comparison of aDNA samples with other aDNA and modern DNA databases can reveal otherwise unsuspected genetic histories. Scientists can trace the deep ancestry of ancient individuals and assess how their genetic makeup is distinct on account of specific variant genes (alleles), mutations and other markers (99% of all human DNA is common) and see how this compares with that of modern groups.

What are the recent results? What do they establish?

The first paper is based on 523 aDNA samples ranging over 8,000 years across Eurasia. The paper is titled, 'The Formation of Human Populations in South and Central Asia'. The authors demonstrate clearly that over the last 10,000 years, the present-day distinctive mix of South Asian genetic variability was formed through the mixture of populations then resident in the region with successive groups who moved into the region. This is a process that happened not just once but several times.

They make clear that these mixing of populations were far from "invasions", and the trends in their data show slow long-term processes of migration, co-mingling and integration.

What does the woman from Rakhigarhi teach us?

The second paper presents the results of the first successful aDNA extraction from prehistoric South Asia. Individual 6113 was an elite woman buried between 2300 and 2800 BCE (estimated) in a cemetery on the outskirts of the Harappan town of Rakhigarhi, located near the present day city of Hissar in Haryana. This is a scientific achievement, especially as efforts to extract archaeological DNA have hitherto been few in South Asia and several attempts resulted in DNA that was too degraded or was contaminated.

The DNA of this person from Rakhigarhi, it turns out, is a mixture with contributions coming from very ancient ancestry shared with Iranian populations and that from what the authors term Andamanese or South-East Asians in the deep past of her ancestry. Of all the ancient samples, contemporary to her that we can compare her to, she turns out to be genetically closest to another group who were buried in Khorasan (principally at the site of Shahr-i-Sokhta in Iran). These individuals — some of whose graves had objects that were previously known to have connections to the Indus Valley Civilisation — share a similar mixture of ancestry and are also outliers in the larger comparative database.

Source: The Hindu

47. ISRO initiates 'Project NETRA' to safeguard Indian space assets from debris and other harm (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Science & Technology)

What is Project NETRA?

Project NETRA (Network for space object Tracking and Analysis) was initiated by Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) in August, 2019. The objective of the project is to develop an early warning system in space to detect debris and other hazards to Indian satellites. The project estimated to cost ₹400 crore.

What is the benefit expected from NETRA?

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The project will give India its own capability in space situational awareness (SSA). It also goes so far as to serve as an unstated warning against missile or space attack for the country, experts say. The space agency says our SSA will first be for low-earth orbits or LEO which have remote-sensing spacecraft. NETRA's eventual goal is to capture the GEO, or geostationary orbit, scene at 36,000 km where communication satellites operate.

What will NETRA consist of?

Under NETRA, the ISRO plans to put up many observational facilities: connected radars, telescopes; data processing units and a control centre. They can, among others, spot, track and catalogue objects as small as 10 cm, up to a range of 3,400 km and equal to a space orbit of around 2,000 km.

With this the ISRO, which has placed satellites to track the earth from above, will also start training its eyes on space from earth.

What is Space debris?

Space debris could be floating particles from dead satellites or rocket parts that stay in orbit for many years. Satellite agencies fear over even a speck of paint or fragment floating towards their spacecraft: it disables on board electronics and cripples the satellite worth several hundred crore rupees besides many services that run on it. Agencies constantly look for debris at the time of a launch and through the life of a satellite.

What would constitute eyes on earth?

In the plans are a high-precision, long range telescope in Leh and a radar in the North East. Along with them, ISRO will also use the Multi-Object Tracking Radar (MOTR) that we is stationed at the Satish Dhawan Space Centre in Sriharikota, and the telescopes at Ponmudi and Mount Abu in order to get a broad SSA picture. The new SSA centre would consolidate debris tracking activities that are now spread across ISRO centres.

What is the present status on protecting satellite from space debris?

Even now ISRO undertakes collision avoidance manoeuvres on satellites. To do that it depends on data from NORAD and others available in the public domain but ISRO doesn't get accurate [or comprehensive] information. By establishing an observation system of our own, ISRO will become part of the global network and can access precise data.

NORAD, or the North American Aerospace Defense Command, is an initiative of the U.S. and Canada that shares selective debris data with many countries.

Satellites presently functioning

Currently there are 15 functional Indian communication satellites in the geostationary orbit of 36,000 km; 13 remote sensing satellites in LEO of up to 2,000 km; and eight navigation satellites in medium earth orbits.

Military aspect

More importantly, the SSA also has a military quotient to it and adds a new ring to the country's overall security. With long-range tracking radars, the SSA also provides us the capability of an early warning system against ballistic missiles coming in at a height.

In future, apart from radars and telescopes, India will also think of deploying satellites that track other satellites — as the U.S. and other space powers had done.

Combined with other elements of military intelligence, SSA would also help us to understand motives behind any suspicious orbit changes of other satellites and to know if they were spying on or harming our spacecraft.

Source: The Hindu

48. What have researchers at Google achieved? How are quantum computers different from regular personal computers? How will it impact the technology world? (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Science & Technology)

Tech websites and theoretical computer-science outlets were aflame earlier this week after a story in the U.K.-based Financial Times said Google had claimed to have achieved 'quantum supremacy'. In a line, it means that researchers at Google had solved a really difficult problem in seconds with the help of quantum computers which a supercomputer could not. The research paper is yet to be formally vetted by peers in the field and became public after having appeared briefly on the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) website — apparently some of its researchers were involved in the project. It is likely to reappear soon in a complete form.

What are quantum computers?

Quantum computers work differently from the classical computers we work on today. Exploiting the principles of quantum mechanics, they can easily tackle computational problems that may be tough for the classical computer as the size of the numbers and number of inputs involved grows bigger. Quantum computers do not look like desktops or laptops that we associate the word 'computer' with. Instead (and there are only a handful of them) they resemble the air-conditioned server rooms of many offices or the stacks of central processing units from desktops of yore that are connected by ungainly tangled wires and heaped in freezing rooms. Conventional computers process information in 'bits' or 1s and 0s, following classical physics under which our computers can process a '1' or a '0' at a time. The world's most powerful super computer today can juggle 148,000 trillion operations in a second and requires about 9000 IBM CPUs connected in a particular combination to achieve this feat. Quantum computers compute in 'qubits' (or quantum bits). They exploit the properties of quantum mechanics, the science that governs how matter behaves on the atomic scale. In this scheme of things, processors can be a 1 and a 0 simultaneously, a state called quantum superposition. While this accelerates the speed of computation, a machine with less than a 100 qubits can solve problems with a lot of data that are even theoretically beyond the capabilities of the most powerful supercomputers. Because of quantum superposition, a quantum computer — if it works to plan — can mimic several classical computers working in parallel. The ideas governing quantum computers

have been around since the 1990s but actual machines have been around since 2011, most notably built by Canadian company D-Wave Systems.

How will it help us?

The speed and capability of classical supercomputers are limited by energy requirements. Along with these they also need more physical space. Looking for really useful information by processing huge amounts of data quickly is a real-world problem and one that can be tackled faster by quantum computers. For example, if we have a database of a million social media profiles and had to look for a particular individual, a classical computer would have to scan each one of those profiles which would amount to a million steps. In 1996, Lov K. Grover from Bell Labs discovered that a quantum computer would be able to do the same task with one thousand steps instead of a million. That translates into reduced processors and reduced energy.

In theory, a quantum computer can solve this problem rapidly because it can attack complex problems that are beyond the scope of a classical computer. The basic advantage is speed as it is able to simulate several classical computers working in parallel. Several encryption systems used in banking and security applications are premised on computers being unable to handle mathematical problems that are computationally demanding beyond a limit. Quantum computers, in theory, can surpass those limits.

What has Google achieved?

Quantum supremacy refers to quantum computers being able to solve a problem that a classical computer cannot. In the research paper, Google used a 53-qubit processor to generate a sequence of millions of numbers. Though these numbers appeared randomly generated, they conform to an algorithm generated by Google. A classical supercomputer checked some of these values and they were correct. Google's quantum computer, named Sycamore, claimed 'supremacy' because it reportedly did the task in 200 seconds that would have apparently taken a supercomputer 10,000 years to complete.

Is this an important achievement?

Impressive as this may sound, experts caution that this does not imply that the quantum computer can solve every challenging problem thrown at it. The number-generating task was the equivalent of having a Ferrari and a truck compete in a race and, on the car's predictable victory, declare that the Ferrari could do everything that a truck did. While IBM and a few other private establishments also have quantum computer prototypes, a common ailment is that they have their own unique propensity to errors and are not as amenable to executing real world problems as super computers.

Then again, nothing yet rules out the creation of new mathematical methods or techniques that would allow classical computers to execute the same task faster. Some experts even question the term 'quantum supremacy' coined by theoretical physicist John Preskill of the California Institute of Technology, United States. However, the Google feat shows that quantum computers are capable of a real world task. It gives confidence to private entrepreneurs and even academics to invest time and money to improving them and customise them to real world problems. In terms of the number of qubits, D-Wave Systems

says it is ready to commercially launch a 5000-qubit system by 2020. It already has a 1000-qubit system at NASA. D-Wave claims that car maker Volkswagen used its quantum computers to figure out how best to control a fleet of taxis in Beijing relying on data from 10,000 cars, but the research paper describing this experiment does not quite explain how the proposed solution is better than algorithms that are currently used to optimise traffic flow.

What will it mean for online banking?

A question critics raise is how the use of quantum computing and its ability to break encryption codes will impact online banking. Breaking banking grade encryption is far away. Scott Aaronson, a theoretical computer scientist who has written on Google's feat, opines that current encryption standards would require a quantum computer to have "several thousand logical qubits" working in tandem perfectly. It requires millions of qubits of the kind that powers Sycamore to make 'logical qubits' and the 53 at Sycamore's disposal does not quite cut the ice. However, there are other approaches to designing quantum computers and with it there may be cleverer ways to solve problems using them. Moreover, if technological breakthroughs were to pose a real threat to banking or financial operations, it is likely that banks will harness quantum computers themselves.

Is India working on quantum computing?

There are no quantum computers in India yet. In 2018, the Department of Science & Technology unveiled a programme called Quantum-Enabled Science & Technology (QuEST) and committed to investing ₹80 crore over the next three years to accelerate research. The ostensible plan is to have a quantum computer built in India within the next decade. Phase-1 of the problem involves hiring research experts and establishing teams with the know-how to physically build such systems.

Source: The Hindu

49. NATGRID wants to link social media accounts to central database (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Internal Security)

The ambitious National Intelligence Grid (NATGRID) project wants to link social media accounts to the huge database of records related to immigration entry and exit, banking and telephone details among others.

About NATGRID

The project, initially started in 2009 with a budget of ₹2,800 crore, is an online database for collating scattered pieces of information and putting them on one platform. At least 10 central agencies like Intelligence Bureau (IB), Research and Analysis Wing (R&AW) and others will have access to the data on a secured platform. The databases are procured from 21 providing organisations and include telecom, tax records, bank, immigration, etc. to enable the generation of intelligence inputs.

The project gathered pace in 2016, when the NDA government appointed an IB officer Ashok Patnaik as the Chief Executive Officer (CEO). After Mr. Patnaik retired, NATGRID is now headed by IAS officer Ashish Gupta.

Resistance to idea of linking social accounts

The proposal has received resistance from the intelligence agencies, whose officials fear that linking the social media accounts to sensitive government data could expose the system to “trojan attacks.”

Intelligence agencies had also earlier opposed the NATGRID itself amid fears that it would impinge on their territory and possibly result in leaks on the leads they were working on to other agencies.

Source: The Hindu

50. 312 Sikh foreigners removed from post-militancy ‘adverse list’ (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Internal Security)

At least 312 Indian-origin Sikhs living in foreign countries have been removed from a Ministry of Home Affairs “adverse list”, enabling them to apply for Indian visa and visit the country. Only two persons from the list have been excluded.

The official said that in future, Sikhs mentioned in the list could eventually apply for registration as Overseas Citizens of India (OCI) after they have applied for and held normal visa for a period of two years.

Why Sikhs were initially put under “adverse list”?

In 1980s, when Sikh militancy was at its peak, many members of the community in India and abroad were influenced by anti-India propaganda. Some Sikhs fled India to escape the authorities, acquired foreign nationality and took asylum outside the country. They were placed in the adverse list till 2016, making them ineligible to avail visa services to visit India.

The list prepared by the intelligence agencies was available with all Indian missions and it was a major roadblock for persons seeking visa even for their family members who were not on the list.

Source: The Hindu

51. Resumption of Balakot terrorist camp (Relevant for GS Mains Paper III; Internal Security)

Army chief Bipin Rawat’s said at the Officers Training Academy in Chennai that the terrorist camp in Balakot has resumed its functioning.

Why Balakot camp resumption is a major issue?

1. It was barely seven months ago, in February, that the Air Force bombed Balakot and claimed to have taken out about 300 terrorists being trained there. That action was explained as a pre-emptive one, and at the same time as a punitive response for the Pulwama attack which killed 40 CRPF personnel earlier that month.

That things have been turned around in less than seven months opens the door to more questions about the much touted efficacy of the strike as well.

2. Evidently, the Jaish-e-Mohammed, though a banned entity, continues to operate with impunity. This underlines the reality that replenishing the numbers of terrorists who are taken out of reckoning is not a challenge for Pakistan's establishment.

3. Certainly, the development does not increase the Indian people's confidence that the Balakot strike has somehow frightened terrorists and their patrons in Pakistan into demoralised disarray. Moreover, Gen. Rawat said that there were 500 terrorists ready to infiltrate into Kashmir, and that to counter those attempts the Army had "thickened" its presence along the Line of Control.

Source: The Hindu

52. Global Linker: A Facebook-like platform that connects small firms globally (Relevant for GS Prelims)

Global Linker is not a social media platform for small and medium enterprises (SMEs) where such entities can network with peers and potential customers while marketing their products and services.

The platform is developed by Indians. It is live in India and few countries in South East Asia.

Source: The Hindu

53. U.S. National Security Advisor John Bolton sacked (Read only for understanding)

U.S. National Security Advisor (NSA) John Bolton was forced to leave by President Donald Trump. Mr. Bolton's term in office was marked by his ultra-hawkish positions; he pursued hostilities with Iran, sanctions with Russia, brinkmanship on trade with China, opposed talks on Afghanistan, and with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, and pushed for regime change in Venezuela.

A former U.S. envoy to the United Nations, Mr. Bolton inflicted the greatest damage on multilateral institutions and agreements, as he advocated the U.S.'s exit from the Human Rights Council and UNESCO, presided over the cancellation of the multi-party nuclear deal with Iran, and informed Moscow that the U.S. was pulling out of the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty. His final act, one that is regarded with relief in India, was to ensure that the U.S. deal with the Pakistan-backed Taliban was scuttled.

Source: The Hindu**54. Irresponsible remarks: On U.P. Minister's Ayodhya comments (Read only for understanding)**

A Minister in Uttar Pradesh made remarks that the construction of a temple in the disputed site at Ayodhya is a certainty because "the Supreme Court is ours".

"The construction of a Ram temple is our resolve. The Supreme Court is ours, the judiciary, the country and the temple are ours," is what the Minister for Cooperatives, Mukut Bihari Verma, is reported to have said.

SC bench which is hearing a set of appeals against the decree passed by the Allahabad High Court on Ayodhya site, condemned the remarks.

Mr. Verma has sought to clarify that when he said the court was "ours", he did not mean that the government "owns the court", but only that the court belongs to everyone and that it reflected his faith in the top Court. However, the clarification given is not a sufficient explanation for the comments which were made.

Source: The Hindu**55. Ramanujan prize for U.K. mathematician (Relevant for GS Prelims)**

The SASTRA Ramanujan prize for 2019 will be awarded to mathematician Adam Harper, Assistant Professor with the University of Warwick, England.

About the award

The prize carries a citation and an award of \$10,000 and is conferred annually on mathematicians from across the world who are less than 32 years of age, working in an area influenced by the genius Srinivasa Ramanujan. The SASTRA-Ramanujan Award was instituted in 2005 and today is amongst the top five awards of this type for mathematics.

The age limit is 32 years to commemorate the fact that Srinivasa Ramanujan accomplished a phenomenal body of work in this short span.

Every year, this prize is awarded by SASTRA University on its campus near Kumbakonam in Tamil Nadu, on Ramanujan's birth anniversary, December 22.

Source: The Hindu