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What is News Juice?

BY PREPMATE
1. Mix and match dose: About Booster doses for Covid-19

Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Science & Technology

With the number of COVID-19 cases creeping up the curve since May 24, a certain sense of guarded concern has naturally crept into pandemic control activities. With the number of cases, rising by the thousands on a daily basis, (on June 11, in a span of 24 hours, over 8,000 fresh cases were reported), repeat infections, breakthrough infections for those who have had the double dose of vaccine, the debate about getting a booster or precaution dose has gotten shriller.

What is the vaccine strategy?
Currently, the government supports vaccination through its healthcare network only for senior citizens, with or without co-morbidities, and certain categories including frontline workers and healthcare workers. It has given the private sector the go-ahead to vaccinate eligible groups with the precaution dose for a price. The debate has also increasingly called to question the appropriate vaccine to use in the precautionary dosage, whether it should be homologous, the same vaccine that was administered as primary dose, or if it should be heterologous — any vaccine other than the primary dose, for a better immune response.

Are heterologous booster shots better?
There is a growing body of scientific evidence to prove that when heterologous doses are used as booster shots, the immune response is more efficient.

In a May 23 article, in eBioMedicine, part of Lancet Discovery Science, Zoltán Bánki et al, basing their conclusions on a single-blinded, three-arm, partially randomised clinical trial, said: “This study clearly shows the immunogenicity and safety of heterologous AZ/BNT vaccination and encourages further studies on heterologous vaccination schedules.”

In the March 17 issue of the New England Journal of Medicine, Robert L. Atmar et al discuss this point: “Heterologous prime-boost strategies may offer immunologic advantages to extend the breadth and longevity of protection provided by the currently available vaccines.” Demonstrating with the AstraZeneca base vaccine supplemented by an mRNA vaccine booster, the authors concluded that “the heterologous boost immunisation strategy provides an immune response that may prove to be beneficial for durable prevention and control of COVID-19.”

The arguments of an April 23 study conducted in Chile and published in Lancet Global Health by Alejandro Jara et al re-emphasised the pressing need to come to a conclusion about the most effective booster to be used: "Policy makers urgently need evidence of the effectiveness of additional vaccine doses and its clinical spectrum for individuals with complete primary immunisation schedules, particularly in countries where the primary schedule used inactivated SARS-CoV-2 vaccines."

Many countries have restricted vaccine boosters to people at high risk of SARS-CoV-2 infection or related complications, including older adults, healthcare workers, and individuals with underlying health conditions, making it all the more important to prioritise the use of appropriate vaccines that would also enable a fair and equitable distribution of the doses.

The authors reported: “Our results suggest that a homologous or heterologous booster dose for individuals with a complete primary vaccination schedule with CoronaVac provides a high level of protection against COVID-19, including severe disease and death.” Without a doubt, in this study, heterologous boosters showed higher vaccine effectiveness than a homologous booster for all outcomes, providing additional support for a mix and match approach.

What are the other advantages?
In the NEJM paper, the authors pointed out that "an option to use heterologous booster vaccines could simplify the logistics of administering such vaccines, since the booster formulation could be administered regardless of the primary series."

Since the first introduction of a vaccine for COVID-19 several more vaccines have entered the market. More options are now available across the spectrum, made from various vaccine candidates. While their availability in numbers might be low, the fact that there are more vaccines available in the market is likely to level the playing field.

**What is the way ahead?**

A comment on the Jara Lancet paper by Mine Durusu Tanriover and Murat Akova highlights how the results of the study provide insights to policy makers on how to manage the booster dose strategy after two doses of CoronaVac vaccination.

"It is now clear that, in a world where vaccine equity is a utopia, scientists can only strive for how to best use the available vaccines to reach for a maximum attainable benefit. A mix and match vaccination strategy, including inactivated vaccines for priming and heterologous boosters thereafter, seems to be a realistic policy."

It would be prudent for governments, including in India, to switch to a heterologous booster regimen to allow more persons eligible for the vaccine and able to pay for it, access it in the market. As a community health move, it will also be easy for health administrators to deploy newer vaccines in the market as part of the public vaccination programme. Shortages of vaccines will not be an issue when the reliance on just a few vaccines disappears, public health experts said.

**Source: The Hindu**

2. **Why are economic stakes high in West Asia?**

**Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Bilateral Relations**

The diplomatic fallout from the provocative and communally charged comments made by two erstwhile spokespersons of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), forced the government into firefighting mode earlier this month after several West Asian nations including Qatar, Kuwait, Iran, Bahrain, Oman, Iraq, Saudi Arabia and the UAE as well as the 57-nation Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the six-member Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) took strong exception to the remarks denigrating Islam and the Prophet Muhammed. In response, Indian officials strenuously asserted that the government stood by the country's traditional values and respected all religions. It also tasked its diplomats to reach out to individual OIC member states and reassure them on India's position of an 'inclusive' approach to all communities.

**What prompted the government response?**

India's cultural, economic and trade ties with the countries of the West Asian region are deep and abiding. Starting with maritime trade, the exchange of goods, services and cultures between the people of the Gulf region including those on the western shores of the Arabian Sea and the people of India's southern and western States reaches back several millennia and significantly predates even the foundation of the Islamic faith.

The West Asian region also served as a land trade bridge to Greece, Rome and other early European empires and a flourishing trade in spices, cloth, silk and indigo in exchange for gold and silver is well recorded.

In a more contemporary historical context, the British colonial era saw the advent of even a loose common monetary system with the rupee serving as legal tender in several Gulf states till the middle of the 20th century. It was also the discovery and subsequent commercial exploitation of oil in the Gulf region during the colonial era that started to alter the balance of trade flows between India and the countries in the region.
Today, the countries of the West Asian region collectively account for well over a sixth of India’s total bilateral merchandise trade and contribute about three fifths of India’s crude oil supplies. The region is also a major provider of jobs and economic opportunities to Indian workers, professionals and entrepreneurs and houses about 89 lakh Indians. These non-resident Indians (NRIs) annually send home about $40 billion, and account for more than 55% of the country’s total remittance inflows. Investments from sovereign wealth funds and other large investors from the GCC have also climbed steadily in recent years and India, which earlier this year signed a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) with the UAE, is looking to significantly boost trade ties with the region by negotiating more such trade and investment pacts.

It is the sizeable and rapidly growing economic interconnectedness that the government is keen to insulate from any fallout over this sensitive and potentially disruptive issue.

Why is India so dependent on West Asian countries for its energy needs?
Domestic crude production, which has been declining over the years, meets less than a fifth of the country’s oil requirement, forcing India to take recourse to imports to fill the gap of more than 80%. An Observer Research Foundation (ORF) April 2022 paper analysing ‘India’s oil imports: Trends in diversification’ notes that out of India’s total imports of crude oil, the share of the Gulf countries has remained fairly steady at about 60% over the last 15 years. The ORF study observes that in 2020-21, the top oil exporter to India was Iraq, with a share of more than 22%, followed by Saudi Arabia — about 18%. The UAE, Kuwait and Oman were other Gulf countries among the top-10 suppliers of crude oil to India in the fiscal year ended March 2021.

A large proportion of India’s refineries have also historically been predominantly configured to process the sulphur-heavy sour grades of crude that are produced in the Gulf region and with the sweeter (low sulphur) grades of oil such as Brent proving comparatively costlier, India’s crude purchases have over the last two decades gradually shifted to being more weighted towards the Oman and Dubai sour grades, according to data on the composition of the Indian basket of crude compiled by the Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas’s Petroleum Planning and Analysis Cell (PPAC). While the ratio of sour grades to sweet grades was 57:43 in the fiscal year ended March 2001, the proportion of sour crude to Brent had increased to 75.62:24.38 in the 12 months ended March 2022.

How reliant is India on the region for non-oil trade?
Over the five years from 2017 through 2021, Iran and the GCC member states comprising the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Oman, Kuwait and Qatar accounted for a 15.3% share of India’s cumulative two-way merchandise trade of $3.98 trillion in that period, according to statistics available on the UN Comtrade database. Of the $609 billion of exports and imports that the seven countries accounted for in this period, the UAE contributed the lion’s share of $277.4 billion, or almost 7%, making it one of India’s largest trading partners. Saudi Arabia was next with $153 billion. The region is today a key market for several Indian commodities ranging from tea and basmati rice to electrical equipment, apparel, and machinery. Reflecting this importance, India and the UAE signed the CEPA in February with the aim of increasing the total value of bilateral trade in goods to more than $100 billion in five years and getting services trade to exceed $15 billion over the same period. The trade pact will provide Indian exporters preferential market access on ‘99% of the country’s exports to the UAE in value terms, particularly from labour-intensive sectors such as gems and jewellery, textiles, leather, footwear, sports goods, plastics, furniture, agricultural and wood products, engineering products, pharmaceuticals, medical devices, and automobiles’, according to a Ministry of Commerce and Industry release. With the CEPA now serving as a framework, the government is actively pursuing a broader FTA (Free Trade Agreement) with the GCC as a whole. With the region serving as a key hub to markets in Africa, India is keen to gain tariff-free access for its exports not just to the Gulf region but also to countries across Africa.

What else is at stake?
The West Asian region provides among the largest number of overseas jobs for Indians, with nearly 89 lakh Indians living and working in the Gulf economies. The UAE, which comprises the seven emirates of Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Sharjah Ajman, Umm Al-Quwain, Fujairah and Ras Al Khaimah, accounts for the largest share of NRIs
in the region and is home to more than 34 lakh Indians. Saudi Arabia with close to 26 lakh and Kuwait with over 10 lakh are the other large providers of jobs and economic opportunities for Indians. Indians are today ubiquitous by their presence across a vast range of job categories in the region spanning construction labour to oil industry workers, nurses and doctors in the medical sector to the hospitality industry and finance professionals.

The remittances that they sent back home in 2017, according to Pew Research data, accounted for about 55% of the total $68.97 billion in inward remittances received in India from across the world that year.

**Source: The Hindu**

### 3. What are SEBI’s concerns around crypto assets?

**Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Economics**

The Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI), the watchdog which regulates the securities and commodities market, has reportedly told the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Finance led by Jayant Sinha that regulation of crypto assets would be difficult given the nature of technology that sustains them. It was reported last month that the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) had also shared its worries about cryptocurrencies with the committee.

**What exactly did the SEBI tell the committee?**

SEBI has essentially flagged the problems with regulating crypto assets because they “are maintained in decentralised distributed ledgers, which are nested in computer nodes spread all across the globe.” Crypto assets is usually used as an umbrella term to encompass cryptocurrencies (e.g., Bitcoin, Ether) as also non-currency tokens such as utility tokens (which provide a certain utility within an ecosystem) and non-fungible tokens (which help establish ownership of unique items), among others. The underlying technology for crypto assets is the same — distributed ledgers that aren’t controlled by any one entity.

**What else did SEBI say?**

As per media reports, SEBI has elaborated upon the possible need for different regulators to deal with different aspects of a crypto asset market. Crypto exchanges, for instance, represent one such aspect. These exchanges, in case of a cross-border transaction, in effect enable the use of a cryptocurrency as a bridge to convert one nation’s official currency to another. These exchanges, SEBI has suggested, could be brought under the regulatory purview of the RBI. The idea is to implement what are called KYC/AML/CFT (Know Your Customer/Anti-Money Laundering/Combating of Financing of Terrorism) norms. For some years now, the RBI has implemented a set of these guidelines in regulating banks so as to prevent them from being used by criminal elements.

The subscribers or customers of crypto assets form another important part of the market. SEBI has suggested that the Consumer Protection Act of 2019 be invoked to make sure their interests are safeguarded. It has also sought clarity on whether cryptocurrencies can be legally classified as securities. Right now, they aren’t. According to media reports, SEBI has said that crypto assets are not part of the definition of what constitutes as securities under the Securities Contracts (Regulation) Act of 1956, also known as SCRA. It is to be noted that what constitutes as securities under the SCRA is what is used under the SEBI Act.

**Why is this important?**

In December 2021, it was widely reported that the government was looking to get SEBI to regulate crypto assets by bringing in legislation around that time. Though such a legislation — the Cryptocurrency and Regulation of Official Digital Currency Bill, 2021 — did not materialise at that time, the talk that the government wants to treat cryptocurrencies as digital assets, rather than as currencies, has not ebbed. Ajay Tyagi, former chairman of SEBI, had in March said that the regulator has made several representations to the government regarding cryptocurrency regulation since November last year.
Has SEBI also flagged issues about celebrity endorsements?
Yes. It has proposed to the committee that celebrities should not be allowed to endorse cryptocurrencies. A Hindu BusinessLine report quoted a source who spelt out SEBI’s stance thus: “Given that crypto products are unregulated, prominent public figures including celebrities, sportsmen, etc, or their voice shall not be used for endorsement/advertisement of crypto products.” It was also mentioned that they must be held responsible for making any endorsement of crypto products.

What did the RBI tell the committee?
According to a report by PTI, top RBI officials told the committee that cryptocurrencies can lead to “dollarisation” of a part of the economy. This, they said, was against India’s sovereign interest. “Almost all cryptocurrencies are dollar-denominated and issued by foreign private entities, it may eventually lead to dollarisation of a part of our economy which will be against the country’s sovereign interest,” the officials were reported as saying. They linked this to a possible undermining of RBI’s ability to regulate money supply in the economy.

What has been the stance of the government?
Over the last few years, the government’s stance has definitely changed. But there is still ambiguity around what it really wants to do. A Bill that was sought to be introduced last year signalled its intention to ban cryptocurrencies outright. It, however, didn’t see the light of day.

The idea that the administration doesn’t consider cryptocurrencies desirable has been made clear from time to time for some years now. It started as statements in the Budget but then an inter-ministerial report recommended an outright ban. Such currencies were and are considered problematic as they can easily evade official scrutiny, bypass and weaken the monetary system, and fuel illegal trade. Around this time, an RBI circular sought to bar banks from dealing in such currencies, only for the Supreme Court to strike it down.

The cryptocurrency industry saw a window of hope earlier this year when Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman imposed a tax for the first time on crypto assets. The tax, at 30%, was seen at first to settle the question of legality of such currencies. But, Ms. Sitharaman, in a TV interview indicated that taxability was an issue that is not to be linked to legitimacy.

Legislative clarity is still awaited. Meanwhile, the Sinha-led committee has in recent months been holding extensive conversations with the financial regulators, who being statutory bodies, report to Parliament. The committee last November also met with representatives of the crypto industry. The Bill aims to set up a facilitative framework for creation of the official digital currency to be issued by the RBI.

Source: The Hindu

4. BrahMos, 21 and developing

Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Science & Technology

On June 12, 2001, the BrahMos supersonic cruise missile was first tested from a land-based launcher in Chandipur. In the 21 years since, BrahMos has been upgraded several times, with versions tested on land, air and sea platforms. A look at the 21-year journey of the versatile asset, which recently bagged an export order from the Philippines.

Background and development
Since the early 1980s, the Integrated Guided Missile Development Programme, conceived and led by Dr A P J Abdul Kalam, started developing a range of missiles including Prithvi, Agni, Trishul, Akash and Nag, with a wide spectrum of capabilities and ranges.
In the early 1990s, India's strategic leadership felt the need for cruise missiles — guided missiles that traverse the majority of their flight path at almost constant speed and deliver large warheads over long distances with high precision. The need was felt primarily following the use of cruise missiles in the Gulf War.

An Inter-Governmental Agreement was signed with Russia in Moscow in 1998 by Dr Kalam, who headed the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO), and N V Mikhailov, Russia's then Deputy Defence Minister. This led to the formation of BrahMos Aerospace, a joint venture between DRDO and NPO Mashinostroyenia (NPOM), the Indian side holding 50.5% and the Russians 49.5%.

In 1999, work on development of missiles began in labs of DRDO and NPOM after BrahMos Aerospace received funds from the two governments. The first successful test in 2001 was conducted from a specially designed land-based launcher. The missile system has since reached some key milestones, with the first major export order of $375 million received from the Philippines Navy this year.

**Strategic significance**

BrahMos is a two-stage missile with a solid propellant booster engine. Its first stage brings the missile to supersonic speed and then gets separated. The liquid ramjet or the second stage then takes the missile closer to three times the speed of sound in cruise phase. The missile has a very low radar signature, making it stealthy, and can achieve a variety of trajectories. The ‘fire and forget’ type missile can achieve a cruising altitude of 15 km and a terminal altitude as low as 10 m to hit the target.

Cruise missiles such as BrahMos, called “standoff range weapons”, are fired from a range far enough to allow the attacker to evade defensive counter-fire. These are in the arsenal of most major militaries in the world. The BrahMos has three times the speed, 2.5 times flight range and higher range compared to subsonic cruise missiles. With missiles made available for export, the platform is also seen as a key asset in defence diplomacy.

An extended range version of the BrahMos air-launched missile was tested from a Sukhoi-30 MKI recently. On January 11, an advanced sea-to-sea variant of BrahMos was tested from the newly commissioned INS Visakhapatnam.

The BrahMos is also said to have been involved in a recent controversy. Pakistan claimed that an unarmed Indian missile had landed in its territory on March 9, and the Ministry of Defence said a technical malfunction
had led to accidental firing. While the government, which ordered a high-level court of enquiry, did not officially identify the missile, experts felt its trajectory suggested the signature of BrahMos.

Present and future
Senior DRDO scientists say what makes the missile system unparalleled is its extreme accuracy and versatility. Land-based BrahMos formations along the borders, BrahMos-equipped Sukhoi-30s at bases in Northern theatre and and Southern peninsula, and BrahMos-capable ships and submarines deployed in sea together form a triad.

With requirements evolving in multi-dimensional warfare, the BrahMos is undergoing a number of upgrades and work is on to develop versions with higher ranges, manoeuvrability and accuracy.

Versions currently being tested include ranges up to 350 km, as compared to the original’s 290 km. Versions with even higher ranges, up to 800 km, and with hypersonic speed are said to be on cards. Efforts are also on to reduce the size and signature of existing versions and augment its capabilities further.

Versions deployed in all three Armed forces are still being tested regularly, and so are versions currently under development.

LAND-BASED: The land-based BrahMos complex has four to six mobile autonomous launchers, each with three missiles on board that can be fired almost simultaneously. Batteries of the land-based systems have been deployed along India’s land borders in various theatres.

The upgraded land attack version, with capability of cruising at 2.8 Mach, can hit targets at a range up to 400 km with precision. Advanced versions of higher range and speed up to 5 Mach are said to be under development. The ground systems of BrahMos are described as ‘tidy’ as they have very few components.

SHIP-BASED: The Navy began inducting BrahMos on its frontline warships from 2005. These have the capability to hit sea-based targets beyond the radar horizon. The Naval version has been successful in sea-to-sea and sea-to-land modes. The BrahMos can be launched as a single unit or in a salvo of up to eight missiles, separated by 2.5-second intervals. These can target a group of frigates with modern missile defence systems.

AIR-LAUNCHED: On November 22, 2017, BrahMos was successfully flight-tested for the first time from a Sukhoi-30MKI against a sea-based target in the Bay of Bengal. It has since been successfully tested multiple times.

BrahMos-equipped Sukhoi-30s, which have a range of 1,500 km at a stretch without mid-air refuelling, are considered key strategic deterrence for adversaries both along land borders and in the strategically important Indian Ocean Region. The IAF is said to be integrating BrahMos with 40 Sukhoi-30 fighter jets across the various bases.

SUBMARINE-LAUNCHED: This version can be launched from around 50 m below the water surface. The canister-stored missile is launched vertically from the pressure hull of the submarine, and uses different settings for underwater and out-of-the-water flights. This version was successfully tested first in March 2013 from a submerged platform off the coast of Visakhapatnam.

Source: The Indian Express

5. Food safety index: how it is worked out, how the states have performed

Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Polity & Governance
Last week, the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) released the State Food Safety Index (SFSI) 2021-22. A look at how the index assesses and ranks states, and their performances.

What is the SFSI?
Developed by the FSSAI, the index aims to measure the performance of states and Union Territories on selected “parameters” of food safety. According to the FSSAI, the index is aimed at encouraging states and UTs to “improve their performance and work towards establishing a proper food safety ecosystem in their jurisdiction…”

The SFSI is released annually for a financial year. For instance, the latest SFSI, released on World Food safety Day, June 7, is for the fiscal 2021-22. This is the fourth edition of the SFSI since its inception in 2018-19.

Which are these food safety parameters?
The SFSI takes into account the performance of the states on five key parameters, each of which is assigned a different weightage in the assessment.

HUMAN RESOURCES & INSTITUTIONAL DATA: This carries a weightage of 20% and measures the “availability of human resources like number of Food Safety Officers, Designated Officers facility of adjudications and appellate tribunals, functioning of State/ District level Steering Committees, pendency of cases and their monitoring and participation in Central Advisory Committee meetings of the Food Authority”.

COMPLIANCE: This carries the highest weightage, 30%. “This is the most important parameter and measures overall coverage of food businesses in licensing & registration commensurate with size and population of the State/UTs, special drives and camps organized, yearly increase, promptness and effectiveness in issue of state licenses/ registrations,” the FSSAI says. “Promptness” in attending to consumer grievances, and availability of a help desk and web portals, too, come under this parameter.

FOOD TESTING—INFRASTRUCTURE AND SURVEILLANCE: Weighted at 20%, this measures the “availability of adequate testing infrastructure with trained manpower in the States/ UTs for testing food samples”. The FSSAI says, “The States/ UTs with NABL accredited labs and adequate manpower in the labs score more in this parameter.” It takes into account the “availability and effective utilization” of Mobile Food Testing Labs and registration and utilization of InFoLNet (Indian Food Laboratories Network).

TRAINING & CAPACITY BUILDING: This parameter carries the lowest weightage, at 10%. It measures states’ performance on training and capacity building of regulatory staff.

CONSUMER EMPOWERMENT: This carries a weightage of 20% It evaluates the states and UTs on their performance on various consumer empowering initiatives of FSSAI, such as participation in Food Fortification, Eat Right Campus, BHOG (Blissful Hygienic Offering to God), Hygiene Rating of Restaurants, Clean Street Food Hubs, etc.

Besides, the states’ initiatives for creating consumer awareness are also considered under this parameter.
How is the states and UTs assessed?
The states and Union Territories are not assessed and ranked together. They are segregated into three categories — large states, small states and UTs — and assessed separately within their respective categories, based on their performance on the selected food safety parameters.

“The assessment and evaluation of each category are done by separate teams comprising of outside experts for food testing and food & nutrition professionals in addition to FSSAI officials,” the FSSAI says.

These expert teams examine details received from the states and UTs. They also interact with the states/UTs through video-conferencing for verification and confirmation of data.

How have the states and UTs performed this year?
In the category of the 20 large states, Tamil Nadu with an overall score of 82 out of 100 has performed the best and been ranked 1st on SFSI 2021-22, while Andhra Pradesh with an overall score of 26 has been ranked at the bottom — 17th place (some states share a common rank).

Following Tamil Nadu in the rankings of the larger states are Gujarat (rank 2nd with a score 77.5), Maharashtra (3rd with 70), Himachal Pradesh (4th with 65.5) and West Bengal and Madhya Pradesh (sharing 5th with a score of 58.5).

Bihar (rank 16th, score 30), Telangana (rank 15th , score 34.5), Assam (rank 14th, score 35) and Chhattisgarh and Haryana (rank 13th, score 38) join Andhra Pradesh in the bottom 5 among the large states on the SFSI for the large states.

Among the remaining 8 large states, Kerala with a score of 57 has been ranked at 6th, Uttarakhand (score 55) at 7th, Odisha and Uttar Pradesh (both 54.5) at 8th, Karnataka (score 52.5) at 9th, Rajasthan (score 50.5) at 10th, Punjab (score 45) at 11th and Jharkhand (41.5) at 12th.

Among the eight small states, Goa with a score of 56 has been ranked at the top, while Arunachal Pradesh (rank 8th and score 21) is at the bottom.

Among the eight Union Territories, Jammu and Kashmir with a score of 68.5 has been ranked 1st and Lakshadweep (score 16) as the bottom. Delhi with a score of 66 has been ranked 2nd place.

**Source:** The Indian Express

**6. What is the e-Vidhan system for paperless legislation?**

Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Polity & Governance

A delegation of MLAs from Gujarat visited the Uttar Pradesh Legislative Assembly on June 9, to learn about the novel e-Vidhan system for paperless proceedings that has been recently adopted by the UP state assembly.

Uttar Pradesh is one of the few state legislatures in India that has implemented the digital Vidhan Sabha system, and its last session was completely digitised. Earlier in May, a training programme was organised to familiarise the representatives with the technology.

The National e-Vidhan Application (NeVA) is a system for digitising the legislative bodies of all Indian states and the Parliament through a single platform on which house proceedings, starred/unstarred questions and answers, committee reports etc. will be available. Nagaland became the first state to implement NeVA, in March this year.

**What is the National e-Vidhan Application (NeVA) system?**

The NeVA system has been developed to make all the work and data related to legislative bodies available online for the use of both citizens and the members of Assemblies. It includes a website and a mobile app.

There has been a shift towards digitisation in recent years by the government. Prime Minister Narendra Modi mentioned the idea of “One Nation One Legislative Platform” in November 2021.

“A digital platform, a portal that not only gives the necessary technological boost to our parliamentary system, but also works to connect all the democratic units of the country,” he said.

Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla also said this year that the proceedings of all legislatures — both Houses of Parliament and state Assemblies and Legislative Councils — will be available on one platform by 2023.
Why is NeVA being introduced?
This has been done for streamlining information related to various state assemblies, and to eliminate the use of paper in day-to-day functioning. Its website states: “Several thousand tons of papers would be saved, which in turn would help in saving lakhs of trees annually”.

Himachal Pradesh’s Legislative Assembly implemented the pilot project of NeVA in 2014, where touch-screen devices replaced paper at the tables of the MLAs.

The then Chief Minister, the Congress party’s Virbhadra Singh, had inaugurated the e-Vidhan system. Though reluctant to learn the new system at the age of 80 years, he later appreciated the technology becoming “more useful for the MLAs”.

According to the state government’s website, by adopting the digitised system, the state has annually saved 6,000 trees, and around Rs 15 crore in expenditure.

Has this been done elsewhere?
Though both Houses of Parliament have not gone fully digital yet, governments world over are heading towards embracing the digital mode.

In December last year, the Government of Dubai became the world’s first government to go 100 percent paperless. It announced all procedures were completely digitised. This, as per a government statement, would cut expenditure by USD 350 million and also save 14-million-man-hours.

The US government announced in 2019 that by the end of 2022, all government agencies would stop dealing with paper.

What are the challenges?
The International Parliamentary Union, an organisation of more than 170 parliaments including India, in a 2018 report outlined some challenges in this regard.

Access, particularly for legislators representing rural constituencies, to devices and reliable internet and electricity was an issue. In its 2020 report, it said lack of training and heightened concerns over security are some more recent issues in the road to digitisation.

Source: The Indian Express

7. India’s new policy on air sports

Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Polity & Governance

The Union Ministry of Civil Aviation on June 7 released a new policy on air sports in India.

“This is an industry that is ripe for the picking but it lacked, until today, architecture to propel it forward,” said Civil Aviation Minister Jyotiraditya Scindia. He said that the policy aims to “organise a previously unregulated sector” and could potentially generate annual revenue of Rs 8,000 to Rs 10,000 crore in the near future.

What activities are classified as air sports?
The National Air Sport Policy (NASP), 2022, lists 11 games under this category. These include aerobatics, aero modelling and rocketry, ballooning, amateur-built and experimental aircraft, drones, gliding and power gliding, hand gliding and power hand gliding, parachuting, paragliding and paramotoring, powered aircraft and rotor aircraft. In India, the small-sized industry is currently worth about Rs 80 crore and has 5,000 practitioners according to the government.
Globally, the Fédération Aéronautique Internationale (FAI), headquartered in Lausanne, Switzerland is the governing body for air sports. It sets standards, organises events and has over 100 members.

**What does the National Air Sport Policy propose?**
The NASP, 2022, aims to create a structure that would help “promote the country’s air sports sector, by way of making it safe, affordable, accessible, enjoyable and sustainable.” It includes safety mandates, penalties for violating those norms.

Its vision is making India “one of the top air sports nations by 2030”.

Scindia said in his address that the industry can potentially generate 1 lakh jobs annually and give hundred times the revenue it gives now.

The first draft of the policy came out on January 1, 2022, from a committee that included armed forces officials, members from the National Cadet Corps, and experts. The policy says the Air Sports Federation of India, an autonomous body under the Ministry of Civil Aviation, will be the apex governing body. It will preside over the national sports federations, which in turn will preside over the district and state-level bodies.

**What impact is the policy expected to have?**
The Union government believes that India’s demographic dividend, of a young population, as well as its favourable climatic conditions can be leveraged to make India a top destination for air sports.

Tourism, the development of support infrastructure, and eventual manufacturing of sporting goods used in air sports can lead to “economic multiplier” effects, the Civil Aviation minister said.

“This will be a private sector-led initiative in the truest form to make sure that it thrives in the years to come,” said Scindia.

In view of heightened risk associated with air sports, safety will be maintained by coordinating with the Air Traffic Control department and creating segregated air spaces in certain air corridors exclusively for air sports.

**Source: The Indian Express**
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