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NEWS JUICE MONTHLY

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Summary of The Hindu & The Indian Express along with News
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Message from Shubham Singla

Author

Civil Services Coach

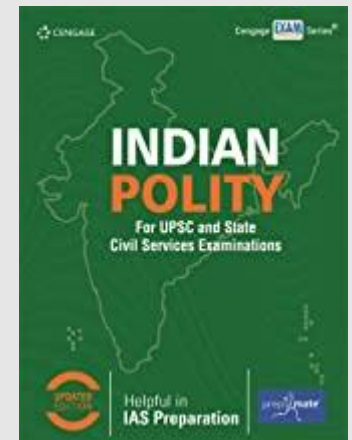
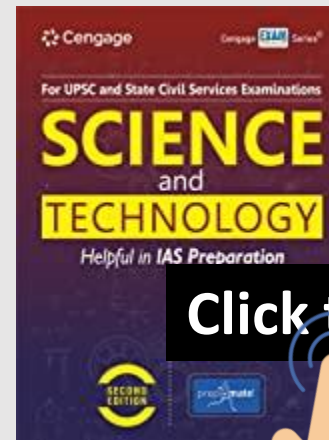
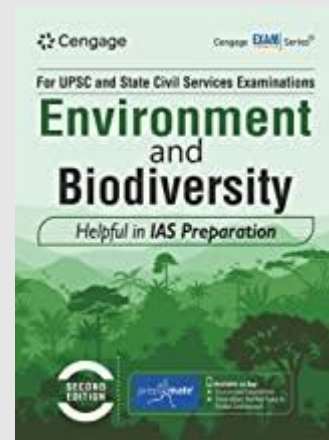
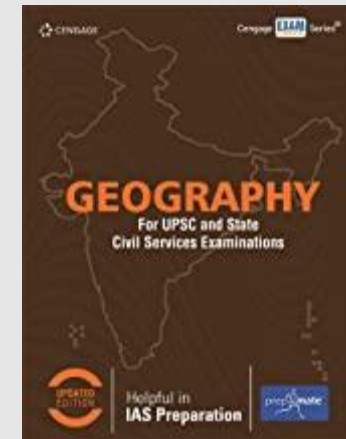
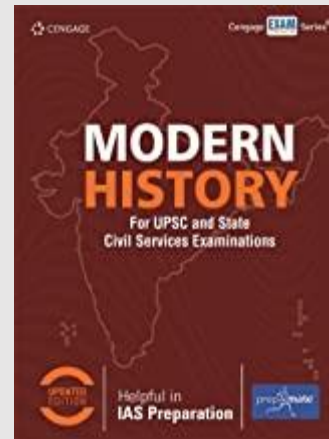
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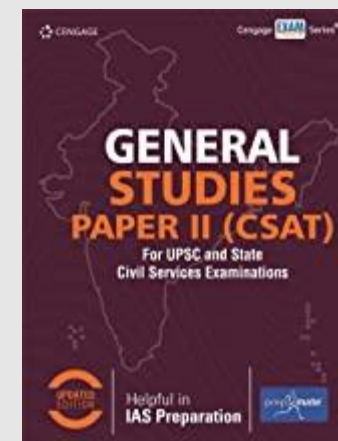
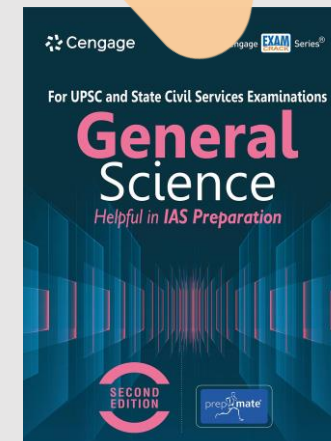
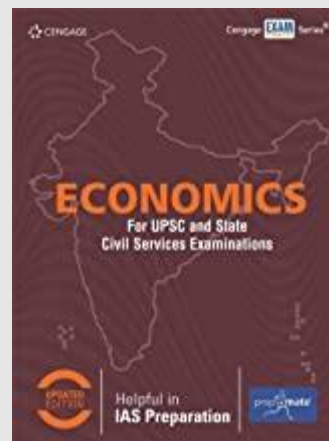
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POLITY
&
GOVERNANCE

Menstrual leave policy in India



Relevance: Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance

Why in news?

- On February 24, the Supreme Court refused to entertain a PIL about menstrual leave for workers and students across the country, calling it a policy matter.
- It highlighted that there were different “dimensions” to menstrual pain leave, and also that while menstruation was a biological process, such leave may also act as a “disincentive” for employers from engaging female employees.

Menstrual leave

- Menstrual leave or period leave refers to all policies that allow employees or students to take time off when they are experiencing menstrual pain or discomfort.
- In the context of the workplace, it refers to policies that allow for both paid or unpaid leave, or time for rest.
- Most women experience a menstrual cycle of 28 days— a normal cycle may vary from 23 to 35 days. For some, period pain, or dysmenorrhea, is an uncomfortable component of it.
- More than half of those who menstruate experience pain for a couple of days a month; for some it is debilitating enough to hamper daily activities and productivity.

Menstrual Leave Policies

- Menstrual leave policies are designed with a view to allow women time off if they suffer from symptoms which may hamper their functioning and productivity.
- However, not everyone— not even all those who menstruate— are in favour of menstrual leave. Some believe either that it is not required or that it will backfire and lead to employer discrimination against women.

Attempts so far

- In India, certain companies have brought in menstrual leave policies— the most famous example being Zomato in 2020, which announced a 10-day paid period leave per year.
- Other such as Swiggy and Byjus have also followed suit.
- Among State governments, Bihar and Kerala are the only ones to introduce menstrual leave to women.
- The Bihar government, then headed by Lalu Prasad Yadav, introduced its menstrual leave policy in 1992, allowing employees two days of paid menstrual leave every month.
- Recently, on January 19, Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan announced that the State's Higher Education department will now grant menstrual and maternity leaves for students in universities that function under the department. Girl students will get the benefit of a lowering of the minimum attendance required to appear for examinations to 73% (from the existing 75%).

Centre for Policy Research's FCRA licence suspended



Relevance: Prelims; Governance

Why in news?

- The Government of India recently suspended the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) licence of the Centre for Policy Research (CPR).
- The CPR was established in 1973 as a think tank with the mission to contribute to “a more robust public discourse about the issues that impact life in India.” Its headquarters is located in Chanakyapuri, New Delhi.

What exactly does the CPR do?

- The CPR covers a broad range of subjects, with experts from different fields working under its aegis to conduct policy-oriented research on these subjects.
- According to its website, research areas include “air pollution, climate change, economy, education, environmental law & justice, energy & electricity, federalism, governance, accountability & public finance, health & nutrition, Indian politics, international relations & security, jobs, land rights, sanitation, social justice, state capacity, technology, urbanisation, and water”.
- A lot of the work CPR does is oriented towards helping policy-makers and authorities to make better, more well-informed decisions based on the scholarship that the CPR produces.
- The CPR also conducts research on specific government schemes and policies in order to improve them or learn from them in the future.

Who works for the CPR?

- Over the years, some of India's foremost scholars, public intellectuals, and bureaucrats have been associated with the CPR in various capacities.
- The Centre was founded by noted economist and former secretary general of Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI), DH Pai Panandiker.

How is CPR funded?

- The CPR is recognised as a not-for-profit society by the Government of India, and contributions to it are tax exempt.
- According to its 2021-22 annual report, CPR received government grants from the Indian Council for Social Science Research (ICSSR), Ministry of Jal Shakti, Government of Meghalaya and Government of Andhra Pradesh.
- Beyond government funding, the CPR also receives grants from a variety of domestic and international sources. Some of these sources are the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (USA), William & Flora Hewlett Foundation (USA), Macarthur Foundation (USA), UNICEF, and the World Bank.

One Nation, One Challan initiative



Relevance: Prelims; Governance

One Nation, One Challan initiative

- One Nation, One Challan is an initiative of the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways to bring all related agencies, such as the traffic police and the Regional Transport Office (RTO), on one platform, to enable seamless collection of challans as well as data transfer.
- The integrated system involves detection of traffic violations through the CCTV network and getting the registration number of the erring vehicle from applications like VAHAN (detecting the vehicle's ownership details) and SARATHI (compilation of driving licenses).
- An e-challan is then generated with the relevant penalty amount, and sent to the mobile number linked with the vehicle.

How does the integration help?

- Earlier, if a State traffic police had to penalise someone from a different state using the CCTV network, they were unable to find details of the vehicle ownership, as the database was not integrated.
- Now, with the integration of all the states' RTO data and traffic police data with the support of National Informatics Centre (NIC) servers, "if someone coming from other state is captured violating traffic regulations on CCTV, the vehicle's registration number and its related data can be accessed by the State police, and the challan is sent directly to the mobile number mentioned at the time of the vehicle's registration."
- Also, e-challans so far are delivered through mobile phone SMSes, or through post when the phone number is not available. But now, the NIC is set to launch its own application for this.

Working of virtual traffic courts



- If someone doesn't pay the challan amount within 90 days, the challan will be automatically forwarded to a virtual court and proceedings will be initiated. Summons will be sent on the mobile phone of the offender. If the fine is still not paid, further legal proceedings will follow.
- Virtual courts are aimed at eliminating the presence of litigants in the court. An accused can search their case on the virtual court's website. Upon successful payment of fine, the case will be shown as disposed of.
- State governments are in the process of setting virtual traffic courts.

Supreme Court verdict on ECI appointments



Relevance: Prelims; Polity

Why in news?

- A five-judge bench of the Supreme Court unanimously ruled that a high-power committee consisting of the Prime Minister, Leader of Opposition in Lok Sabha, and the Chief Justice of India must pick the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) and Election Commissioners (ECs).
- In 2015, a public interest litigation was filed challenging the constitutional validity of the practice of the Centre appointing members of the Election Commission.
- In October 2018, a two-judge bench of the SC referred the case to a larger bench since it would require a close examination of Article 324 of the Constitution, which deals with the mandate of the Chief Election Commissioner.

What is the challenge?

- Article 324(2) reads: “The Election Commission shall consist of the Chief Election Commissioner and such number of other Election Commissioners, if any, as the President may from time-to-time fix and the appointment of the Chief Election Commissioner and other Election Commissioners shall, subject to the provisions of any law made in that behalf by Parliament, be made by the President.”
- The crux of the challenge is that since there is no law made by Parliament on this issue, the Court must step in to fill the “constitutional vacuum.”
- As per the current process, the Law Minister suggests a pool of suitable candidates to the Prime Minister for consideration. The President makes the appointment on the advice of the PM.

What did the court decide?

- The SC stated that “The appointment of the Chief Election Commissioner and the Election Commissioners shall be made by the President on the advice of a Committee consisting of the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition of the Lok Sabha, and in case no leader of Opposition is available, the leader of the largest opposition Party in the Lok Sabha in terms of numerical strength, and the Chief Justice of India”.
- The Court also made it clear that this will be subject to any law to be made by Parliament. This means that Parliament can undo the effect of the SC verdict by bringing in a new law on the issue.

Rationale of Court

- The deliberate addition of the words “subject to the provisions of any law made in that behalf by Parliament” after prolonged discussions, according to the court, indicate that “what the Founding Fathers clearly contemplated and intended was, that Parliament would step in and provide norms, which would govern the appointment to such a uniquely important post as the post of Chief Election Commissioner and the Election Commissioners.”
- The ruling examined a number of provisions in the Constitution, including the ones relating to the powers of the Supreme Court and High Court; establishing the SC, ST and Backward Classes Commissions, etc. where the Constitution uses the phrase “subject to the provisions of any law made by Parliament”.
- The Court finds that while a legislation has been supplemented for those provisions, there is no law on appointment of the CEC even 70 years after independence.

SoO agreement withdrawn by Manipur govt



Relevance: Prelims & Mains Paper III; Internal Security

Why in news?

- The BJP-led Manipur government on March 10 decided to withdraw from the Suspension of Operations (SoO) agreement with two hill-based tribal militant groups, alleging they were “influencing agitation among forest encroachers”.
- The state government claimed that a protest rally organised recently, defying Section 144, was influenced by the two groups, Kuki National Army (KNA) and Zomi Revolutionary Army (ZRA).

Kuki insurgency

- Underground Kuki groups spread across Manipur have fought the Indian government for an ‘independent Kuki homeland’.
- The Kuki insurgency gained momentum after ethnic clashes with the Nagas of Manipur in the early 1990s, with the Kuki arming themselves against Naga aggression.
- While the two tribes have shared a hostile relationship since colonial times, things came to a head in the 1990s when the Naga-Kuki clashes took place.
- Land that the Kukis claim to be their “homeland” in the Manipur hills overlaps with the imagined Naga homeland of Greater Nagaland or Nagalim.
- As many as 115 Kuki men, women and children were believed to have been killed by the NSCN-IM in Tengnoupal in 1993 — a day still marked by the Kuki as ‘black day’.

Suspension of Operations pact

- There are nearly 30 Kuki insurgent groups in Manipur, of which 25 are under tripartite Suspension of Operations (SoO) with the Government of India and the state.
- As many as 17 are under the umbrella group Kuki National Organisation (KNO), and eight are under the United People's Front (UPF).
- The SoO pact was signed on August 22, 2008, with the primary objective of initiating political dialogue.
- The Kuki outfits who were initially demanding a separate Kuki state have come down to a 'Kukiland territorial council', which would have financial and administrative powers independent of the Manipur Assembly and government.

Terms of the pact

- While the period of the Suspension of Operation agreement is one year, it is extendable according to the progress of its implementation.
- To oversee the effective implementation of the SoO pact, a committee called the Joint Monitoring Group (JMG), with representatives from all the signatories, has been formed.

What next?

- Union Home minister Amit Shah, ahead of the 2022 elections, promised to "solve" the Kuki issue if the BJP was voted to power. The Kuki groups even officially announced their support for the BJP.
- The revocation of this SoO agreement by the BJP Led Biren government has now raised questions about this arrangement.

The rise of the ESG regulations



Relevance: Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance

Why in news?

- Over the last decade, regulators and corporations around the world have embraced the idea that **businesses should be measured not just on traditional economic metrics such as shareholder return, but also by their environmental impact, commitment to social issues and the soundness of their corporate governance and protection of shareholder rights.**
- While this development is partially due to the belief that companies have a distinct responsibility as corporate citizens, the main driver is the realisation that **environmental, social and governance (“ESG”) considerations** need to be included by investors in a company’s risk profile in order to accurately assess the enterprise.

Different from CSR

- **India has a robust corporate social responsibility (CSR) policy that mandates that corporations engage in initiatives that contribute to the welfare of society.**
- **This mandate was codified into law with the passage of the 2014 and 2021 amendments to the Companies Act of 2013.**
- **The amendments require companies with a net worth of ₹500 crore (approximately \$60 million) or a minimum turnover of ₹1,000 crore (approximately \$120 million) or a net profit of ₹5 crore (approximately \$6,05,800) in any given financial year spend at least 2% of their net profit over the preceding three years on CSR activities.**

Examples

- ESG regulations differ in process and impact.
- The U.K. Modern Slavery Act, for example, requires companies with business in the U.K. and with annual sales of more than £36 million to publish the efforts they have taken to identify and analyse the risks of human trafficking, child labour and debt bondage in their supply chain; establish internal accountability procedures; evaluate supplier compliance and to train supply chain managers regarding these issues.
- The EU's Sustainable Finance Disclosure Regulation requires banks, pension funds, asset managers and other financial market participants to disclose how they have integrated sustainability risks into their investment decision-making processes.
- These are only examples; there are scores of such regulations at the state, national and transnational level.

First woman IAF officer to get command appointment



Relevance: Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance

Why in news?

- In the first command appointment for a woman officer in the Indian Air Force (IAF), Group Captain Shaliza Dhama has been selected to take over the command of a frontline combat unit in the Western sector.
- Group Captain Dhama was commissioned in 2003 as a Helicopter pilot and has over 2,800 hours of flying experience. A Qualified Flying Instructor, she has served as Flight Commander of a Helicopter Unit in the Western sector.

History

- The armed forces have opened up command appointments for women officers following a Supreme Court verdict.
- The Army recently conducted interviews and approved the first batch of women officers for command appointments.

Foreign lawyers can practise in India but not appear in court



Relevance: Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance

Why in news?

- In a move that could potentially change the landscape of legal practice in the country, the Bar Council of India (BCI) has allowed foreign lawyers and law firms to practise in India.
- Although they cannot appear in court, they can advise clients on foreign law and work on corporate transactions.

Decision by BCI

- The BCI is a statutory body established under the Advocates Act, 1961, and it regulates legal practice and legal education in India.
- For over a decade, BCI was opposed to allowing foreign law firms in India.
- On March 13, the BCI notified in the official gazette the Rules for Registration and Regulation of Foreign Lawyers and Foreign Law Firms in India, 2022.

Rationale

- Now, the BCI has reasoned that its move will address concerns about the flow of Foreign Direct Investment in the country and make India a hub of International Commercial Arbitration.
- The rules bring legal clarity to foreign law firms that currently operate in a very limited way in India.

What do the new rules allow?

- According to the Advocates Act, advocates enrolled with the Bar Council alone are entitled to practise law in India. All others, such as a litigant, can appear only with the permission of the court, authority or person before whom the proceedings are pending.
- The notification essentially allows foreign lawyers and law firms to register with BCI to practise in India if they are entitled to practise law in their home countries. However, they cannot practise Indian law.
- They shall be allowed to practise transactional work /corporate work such as joint ventures, mergers and acquisitions, intellectual property matters, drafting of contracts and other related matters on a reciprocal basis.
- They shall not be involved or permitted to do any work pertaining to the conveyancing of property, Title investigation or other similar works.
- Indian lawyers working with foreign law firms will also be subject to the same restriction of engaging only in “non-litigious practice.”

Earlier position

- Earlier, foreign lawyers and law firms could not practice in India.
- Courts held that ‘practice’ would include both litigious and non-litigious practice, so foreign firms can neither advise their clients in India nor appear in court.

Rameshwar Prasad case and Shiv Sena crisis



Relevance: Prelims & Mains Paper II; Polity

Why in news?

- The Supreme Court Bench hearing the cases filed in the wake of the Shiv Sena political crisis, in an oral observation, asked whether the Governor can call for a floor test in case of internal dissatisfaction within a party.
- Responding to this, Solicitor General Tushar Mehta drew attention to a 2005 ruling of the Supreme Court in Rameshwar Prasad v Union of India, which he said, had answered this question.
- The landmark ruling defines the contours of the Governor's powers to dissolve the Assembly.

Hung Assembly in Bihar in 2005

- In February 2005, Bihar saw a hung Legislative Assembly, as no party or alliance could muster the required majority of 122 seats in the 243-member House.
- The contenders to form the government included the NDA, then comprising the BJP and Nitish Kumar's JD(U), which had won 92 seats, followed by Lalu Prasad's RJD, which had won 75 seats. The late Ram Vilas Paswan's LJP had won 29 seats, and the Congress had won 10.
- After a series of meetings with political parties, then Governor Buta Singh concluded that no party or alliance was in a position to reach a majority in the Assembly.
- On the report of Governor, the President's Rule on Bihar was imposed and Legislative assembly was dissolved.
- Meanwhile, a group of 17 Independent MLAs and three smaller parties extended their support to the NDA group led by Nitish Kumar.

Petition in Supreme Court

- Rameshwar Prasad, who had won the Sandesh Assembly seat in February 2005, filed a petition before the Supreme Court, along with three other MLAs in the defunct House, challenging the constitutionality of the Presidential Proclamation, and asking that the dissolution of the Assembly be struck down as “unconstitutional”.
- Meanwhile the Election Commission of India stepped in to announce fresh elections in Bihar.
- This created a difficult situation. The Supreme Court was yet to decide in the matter, and the outcome of the election could potentially complicate things.

SC Verdict

- The court struck down the President’s Proclamation dissolving the state Assembly as unconstitutional. However, the court chose not to restore the Assembly, owing to the elections that were fast approaching.
- The court rejected the action of the Governor as “mere pretence”, and said that the real object was to “keep away a political party from staking a claim to form the Government”.

Maharashtra crisis

- On March 15, the SC expressed concern over then Maharashtra Governor Bhagat Singh Koshyari using his powers to order a floor test, which pushed then Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray to resign.
- The crisis in the state had arisen after a rebellion in the Shiv Sena in June 2022, with the majority of MLAs going over to the faction led by current Chief Minister Eknath Shinde.
- During the proceedings, a five-judge Bench headed by CJI D Y Chandrachud enquired whether the Governor could intervene by calling for a floor test in case of internal dissatisfaction within a party.

Different than Present crisis

- When SG Mehta referred to the 2005 ruling in Rameshwar Prasad's case, Justice P S Narasimha, who was part of the Bench, **pointed out that in Rameshwar Prasad vs Union of India, the government was never formed — however, in the present situation, the government in Maharashtra had been there for more than three-and-a-half years.**
- This **also prompted the CJI to distinguish** between the decision in Rameshwar Prasad and the present case. **“The Governor cannot refuse the formation of a new government and override the majority because of his subjective assessment.”** he said.

Rahul Gandhi calls for invoking Rule 357 to speak in Lok Sabha



Relevance: Prelims & Mains Paper II; Polity

Why in news?

- Facing the heat for his recent critical remarks on the state of Indian democracy, Congress MP Rahul Gandhi has once again approached Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla, seeking permission to respond to “totally baseless and unfair charges” made against him by senior Ministers in the Lok Sabha.
- He has requested to invoke Rule 357 of the Rules of Procedure and Conduct of Business in Lok Sabha to speak on this issue.
- Rahul referred to the instance when former Union Minister Ravi Shankar Prasad, in 2015, invoked rule 357 to respond to comments on him in Parliament by then-Congress leader and now Minister of Civil Aviation in the BJP-led Central government, Jyotiraditya Scindia.

What is Rule 357?

- In the Rules of Procedure and Conduct of Business in Lok Sabha, under the section ‘Rules to be observed by the members’, there is rule 357 for ‘personal explanation’.
- It states, “A member may, with the permission of the Speaker, make a personal explanation although there is no question before the House, but in this case no debatable matter may be brought forward, and no debate shall arise.”



Rahul's comments in London

- Speaking at Cambridge University on Feb. 28, Rahul alleged that “everybody knows...that Indian democracy is under...attack”, and “the institutional framework which is required for a democracy — Parliament, a free press, the judiciary, just the idea of mobilisation..., these are all getting constrained...”.

BJP's reaction

- The BJP has accused Rahul of making “denigrating, unwarranted comments” and spreading an “untenable narrative” about Indian institutions on foreign soil as part of a “calculated attempt” to bring them into disrepute.
- Last week, the party also approached the Lok Sabha Speaker, asking him to “set up a special committee of Lok Sabha to explore whether Congress leader Rahul Gandhi should be suspended for allegedly insulting the country, its democracy, and Parliament”,

SC asks govt to explore alternatives to death penalty by hanging



Relevance: Prelims & Mains Paper II; Polity

Why in news?

- The Supreme Court has asked the Centre to defend the law that allows hanging by the neck as a mode of execution.
- A bench led by Chief Justice of India (CJI) D Y Chandrachud is essentially reopening a decades-old debate over whether there can be a more humane and dignified way of executing the death penalty.

About that case

- In 2017, an advocate filed a public interest petition (PIL) seeking a more dignified way to execute the capital punishment. He argued that a convict whose life has to end because of the conviction and the sentence, should not be compelled to suffer the pain of hanging.
- The plea in the PIL challenged the constitutional validity of Section 354(5) of the Code of Criminal Procedure (CrPC), 1973. This provision reads: "When any person is sentenced to death, the sentence shall direct that he be hanged by the neck till he is dead."
- In the landmark 1982 ruling in 'Bachan Singh v State of Punjab', a five-judge Bench of the Supreme Court upheld the constitutional validity of the death sentence by a 4:1 majority ruling.

The Centre's stand

- In its 2018 affidavit, the govt had argued that death by hanging was the only “viable” option to execute a death warrant. However, the government also sought additional time to examine the methods followed in other countries.
- In its 187th report in 2003, the Law Commission of India recommended that Section 354(5) of the CrPC should be amended by providing an alternative mode of execution of death sentence by “lethal injection until the accused is dead”.
- The report suggested that it should be the discretion of the judge to pass appropriate orders regarding the mode of execution of death sentence and to hear the convict on the question of mode of execution of death sentence before passing the discretionary order.

Practice in other countries

- According to Amnesty International, 55 countries around the world have the death sentence on the books. While death by hanging is still the most prevalent form of execution, especially in the former British colonies, other modes are followed in some countries.
- In the U.S., for e.g., an intravenous lethal injection is given in every state (27 states and American Samoa) that allows the death penalty. Electrocutation is a secondary method in some states. Execution by firing squad is employed in China, and Saudi Arabia uses beheading apart from other methods.
- In India, The Air Force Act, 1950, The Army Act 1950, and The Navy Act 1957 say that execution has to be carried out either by hanging by the neck until death or by being shot to death.

PM Modi launches 'Call Before u Dig' app

Relevance: Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance



Why in news?

- Prime Minister Narendra Modi recently launched the 'Call Before u Dig' (CBuD) app.
- This mobile app is an initiative of the Department of Telecommunications, Ministry of Communications.
- It aims to prevent damage to underlying assets like optical fibre cables that occurs because of uncoordinated digging and excavation. It leads to losses of about Rs 3,000 crore every year.
- This app will facilitate coordination between excavation agencies and underground utility owners.
- It will save potential business loss and minimise discomfort to the citizens due to reduced disruption in essential services like road, telecom, water, gas and electricity.

How it works?

- The CBuD app will connect excavators and asset owners through SMS/Email notifications and click-to-call so that there are planned excavations in the country while ensuring the safety of underground assets.
- It aims to give excavating companies a point of contact, where they can inquire about existing subsurface utilities before starting excavation work.
- Utility owners can also find out about impending work at the location.

Rahul Gandhi gets convicted, MP status gets in the spotlight



Relevance: Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance

Why in news?

- Congress leader Rahul Gandhi has been held guilty and sentenced to two years in jail in a 2019 defamation case. This verdict has come over his remarks about the “Modi surname” by a court in Gujarat’s Surat.
- Gandhi allegedly said “how come all the thieves have Modi as the common surname?” during a rally in Kolar, Karnataka in the run-up to the 2019 Lok Sabha elections.
- The court of Chief Judicial Magistrate which held Gandhi guilty under Indian Penal Code sections 499 and 500, also granted him bail and suspended the sentence for 30 days to allow him to appeal in a higher court.
- Gandhi’s conviction has led to questions over his status as a Member of Parliament from Wayanad, Kerala.

How does an MP gets disqualified?

- The disqualification of an MP convicted for an offence can happen in two instances.
- First, if the offence for which he is convicted is listed in Section 8(1) of the Representation of the People Act of 1951.
- This includes certain specific offences such as promoting enmity between two groups, bribery and undue influence or personation at an election. Defamation does not fall under this list.
- Second, if the lawmaker is convicted for any other offence but is sentenced for a period of two years or more.
- Section 8(3) of the RPA provides that an MP can be disqualified if convicted and sentenced for not less than two years of imprisonment.

Appeal against conviction

- Section 8(4) states that the disqualification takes effect only “after three months have elapsed” from the date of conviction. Within that period, Gandhi can file an appeal against the sentence before the High Court.
- But, while the law had initially provided for a pause on disqualification if an appeal against the conviction was filed before a higher court, in the landmark 2013 ruling in ‘Lily Thomas v Union of India’, the Supreme Court struck down Section 8(4) of the RPA as unconstitutional.
- This means that simply filing an appeal will not be enough but the convicted MP must secure a specific order of stay against the conviction of the trial court. Significantly, the stay cannot merely be a suspension of sentence under Section 389 CrPC but a stay of conviction.
- Under Section 389 of the CrPC, an Appellate Court can suspend the sentence of a convict while the appeal is pending. This is akin to releasing the appellant on bail.

Govt. makes PENCIL portal, aims to eradicate child labour



Relevance: Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance

Why in news?

- The Govt. has enacted the Child Labour (Prohibition & Regulation) Act, 1986 which was amended in 2016. The amended Act is called the Child and Adolescent Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) [CALPR] Act, 1986.
- The Act provides for complete prohibition of work or employment of children below 14 years in any occupation and process and adolescents in the age group of 14 to 18 years in hazardous occupations and processes.
- The amendment also provides for stricter punishment of employers for violation of the Act and made the offence as cognizable.
- The Child and Adolescent Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986 is enforced by the State Government except in railway administration, major port, mine, oil field where Central Government is the appropriate Government.

About NCLP scheme

- Ministry of Labour & Employment has been implementing National Child Labour Project (NCLP) Scheme for rehabilitation of child labourers through District Project Societies under the chairmanship of the District Magistrate.
- Under the NCLP scheme, the children in the age group of 9-14 years are rescued/withdrawn from work and enrolled in the NCLP Special Training Centres (STCs), where they are provided with bridge education, vocational training, mid-day meal, stipend, health care, etc. before being mainstreamed into formal education system.
- NCLP scheme has now been subsumed under Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) Scheme with effect from 01.04.2021.

About PENCIL portal

- The govt. has also developed **an online portal PENCIL (Platform for Effective Enforcement of No Child Labour)** for effective enforcement of CALPR Act.
- The **portal has also a complaint corner for registering the complaint regarding child labour.**
- These complaints are dealt by the respective District Nodal Officers of the District.
- Besides, Ministry of Labour & Employment also carries out public awareness about child labour through its website and various social media handles.
- Around 14 lakh child labourers have been rescued/withdrawn from work, rehabilitated and mainstreamed under National Child Labour Project (NCLP) Scheme since inception of the Scheme in 1988.

India plans to achieve its target of eliminating tuberculosis by 2025



Relevance: Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance

Why in news?

- PM Modi recently addressed the One World TB Summit on World TB Day. He announced initiatives to help the country meet the 2025 target of eliminating tuberculosis, five years ahead of the global target. This year's theme is 'Yes! We can end TB!'.
- India continues to be the largest contributor to global TB cases. **It accounts for 28% of all TB cases in the world. There were 21.3 lakh cases detected in 2021 as compared to 18.05 lakh cases in 2020.**
- New TB cases reduced by 18% in 2021 over the 2015 baseline. They dropped to 210 cases per lakh population as compared to 256 cases per lakh population.

India's TB elimination target

- **Although elimination of Tuberculosis is one of the sustainable development targets to be achieved by 2030 by the world, India has set the target of 2025.**
- The **national strategic plan 2017-2025 sets the target of India reporting no more than 44 new TB cases or 65 total cases per lakh population by 2025.** The estimated TB incidence for the year 2021 stood at 210 per lakh population.
- The programme also aims to **reduce the mortality to 3 deaths per lakh population by 2025.** The estimated TB mortality for the year 2020 stood at 37 per lakh population.

Steps being taken

- The govt has taken several steps including looking for cases actively among vulnerable and co-morbid populations, **screening for it at the health and wellness centres, and calling on the private sector to notify all TB cases.**
- The pandemic has led to improved access to **more accurate molecular diagnostic tests like CB-NAAT and TureNat** that were also used to test for Covid-19.
- Last year, the **govt also launched a community engagement programme where Ni-kshay mitras can adopt TB patients and provide them monthly nutritional support.** So far, 71,460 Ni-kshay Mitras have adopted about 10 lakh TB patients under the programme.

Improvements in treatment

- **Newer drugs such as Bedaquiline and Delamanid for the treatment of drug-resistant TB have been included in the govt's basket of drugs provided free to TB patients.**
- These oral drugs can replace the injectable kanamycin that was associated with serious side effects like kidney problems and deafness.
- These new drugs have also been **included in the new National List of Essential Medicines that gives the govt power to regulate their market price as well.**

Perks and Benefits given to MP

Relevance: Prelims; Polity

Why in news?

- Congress leader Rahul Gandhi was disqualified from the Lok Sabha on March 24, a day after being sentenced to two years in jail in a defamation case over his 'Modi surname' remark in 2019.
- Losing his membership of the Lok Sabha comes alongside the loss of the many amenities that MPs receive.
- Members of Parliament are entitled to certain perks and benefits with "a view to enable them to function effectively". These are governed by the Salary, Allowances and Pension of Members of Parliament Act, 1954 and the rules made thereunder.

Salary and allowance for 'residence on duty'

- An MP is entitled to a salary of Rs 1 lakh a month and an allowance of Rs 2,000 per day during any period of residence on duty.
- 'Period of residence on duty' means the period during which a member resides at a place where a session of a House of Parliament or a sitting of a Committee is held or where any other business connected with his duties as such member is transacted, for the purpose of attending such session or sitting or for the purpose of attending to such other business.
- The salary and daily allowance of MPs is increased every five years, on the basis of the Cost Inflation Index.

Constituency allowance

- A member shall be entitled to receive the constituency allowance of Rs 75,000 per month.

Office expenses allowance

- A total of Rs 60,000 is allotted to an MP per month to take care of their office expenses.
- Of this, Rs 20,000 is for stationery items and postage, with the Lok Sabha Secretariat paying Rs 40,000 per month to any staffer engaged for obtaining secretarial assistance.

Housing and other related allowances

- Each Member shall be entitled, without payment, to housing accommodation in the form of a flat throughout his term of office. If they are allotted a bungalow, they have to pay a normal license fee.
- They are also entitled to free electricity (upto 50,000 units per annum) and free water (upto 4,000 kilo litres per annum).

Travelling allowance and free rail transit

- MPs also get a travel allowance to facilitate any journeys they undertake in connection with their duties as a member of Parliament.
- They get paid the air fare for any journey they may undertake to fulfil their duties. If they travel by road, they get paid a mileage fee of Rs 16 per kilometre.
- While previously, MPs were also paid rail fare if they chose to travel by rail, now they are given a free, non-transferable pass which entitles them to travel at any time by any train in air-conditioned first class or executive class of any train.
- There are also provisions to allow MPs free transit by steamer. This is relevant for MPs of coastal, island or riverine districts.

Telephone charges

- MPs are entitled to free of cost installation and operation of telephones at their Delhi residence and office, as well as their residence and office at the state which they represent.
- Furthermore, MPs are entitled to avail one mobile phone connection of Mahanagar Telephone Nigam Limited (MTNL) with national roaming facility and another mobile phone connection of MTNL or Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited (BSNL) with national roaming facility for utilisation in his constituency.

Medical services

- After a monthly payment of Rs 500 (which is deducted from a member's salary), MPs are entitled to free medical care for themselves and their family.

Rajasthan's Right to Health Bill



Relevance: Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance

Why in news?

- The Rajasthan Assembly recently passed the Right to Health (RTH).
- This came even as doctors continued their protest against the Bill, demanding its complete withdrawal.

Provisions

- RTH gives every resident of the state the right to avail free Out Patient Department (OPD) services and In Patient Department (IPD) services at all public health facilities and select private facilities.
- The free healthcare services, including consultation, drugs, diagnostics, emergency transport, procedure and emergency care, will be provided subject to conditions specified in the rules, which will be formulated now.
- Also, all residents will be entitled to emergency treatment and care without prepayment of any fee or charges, and the hospital can't delay treatment on grounds of police clearance if it is a medico-legal case.
- The Bill extends a total of 20 Rights to the citizens of the state.

'Emergency clause'

- One of the most controversial issues of the RTH is emergency care.
- It states that people will have the right to emergency treatment and care for accidental emergency, emergency due to snake bite/animal bite and any other emergency decided by the State Health Authority under prescribed emergency circumstances.
- Importantly, this can be availed without prepayment of requisite fee or charges for prompt and necessary emergency medical treatment and critical care.

Doctors' opposition

- The protesting doctors are **objecting to the definition of 'emergency', and "compelling doctors of one speciality to treat patients outside their speciality as part of emergency" in the RTH.**
- However, as per the govt, the definition of "emergency" was reworked only after consultations with doctor associations, while the second part will be addressed in the Rules which will be made subsequently, and hence there is no question of compelling doctors to treat outside their specialty.

View of IMA

- The Indian Medical Association (IMA) has demanded the inclusion of several clauses in the Bill.
- One of them lists nine "responsibilities and duties" that the patients and caretakers should have towards the healthcare facilities: be respectful to providers; avoid crowding with a patient; not to be abusive or with violent behaviour; timely meet financial responsibilities," etc.
- Another clause lists as many as 17 "Rights of Health Care Providers," such as "to be treated with respect by patients and the person attending the patient; to be duly informed when patients are seeking a second opinion; to get the tests done in-house or the nearest lab in case of an emergency to prevent delay in patient care; cost of treatment reimbursement must be within 15 days through a separate portal other than govt health insurance schemes," etc.

Karnataka govt ends 4% reservation for Muslims under the OBC category



Relevance: Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance

Why in news?

- The BJP govt. in Karnataka recently decided to end the nearly three-decade-old 4% reservation for Muslims in the Other Backward Classes (OBC) category.
- It has decided to distribute it equally among the Veerashaiva-Lingayats and Vokkaligas, two dominant land-owning communities in the State, at 2% each.
- Following the change, the reservation quantum for Vokkaligas and others in the group went up from 4% to 6% and for Veerashaiva-Lingayats and others in the group, from 5% to 7%.

Govt's arguments

- The Karnataka govt's scrapping of reservation for Muslims is based on the argument that backward classes reservation is not based on religion.
- Notably, Muslims were given 4% reservation on grounds of being socially and educationally backward.
- Since the community has now lost its social and educational backwardness reservation status, it can claim reservation under the 10% quota for Economically Weaker Sections. This change has to be approved by the Centre.
- However, Christians, Jains, Sikhs, Buddhists and converted Christians continue to remain in the backward classes category.

New India Literacy Programme



Relevance: Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance

Why in news?	Objective of Scheme	Beneficiaries	Implementation
<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Government has launched a new Centrally Sponsored Scheme namely, “New India Literacy Programme” (NILP) for implementation during five years from the FYs 2022-23 to 2026-27.- The Scheme is launched with financial outlay of Rs.1037.90 crore out of which Rs.700.00 crore is Central share and Rs.337.90 crore is State share.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- The scheme aims to cover a target of 5.00 crore non-literates in the age group of 15 years and above.- The Scheme has five components: (i) Foundational Literacy and Numeracy, (ii) Critical Life Skills, (iii) Vocational Skills Development, (iv) Basic Education and (v) Continuing Education.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- The beneficiaries under the scheme are identified through door to door survey on Mobile App by the surveyors in the States/UTs.- The non-literate can also avail the benefit of the scheme through direct registration from any place through mobile app.- The scheme is mainly based on volunteerism for teaching and learning. Volunteers can also register through mobile app for this purpose.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- The scheme is based on technology and implemented predominantly through online mode.- The teaching learning material and resources have been made available on DIKSHA platform of NCERT and can be accessed through the mobile-apps.- Further, other modes like TV, Radio, Samajik Chetna Kendra etc. are also to be used for dissemination of Foundational Literacy and Numeracy.

INTERNATIONAL
ORGANISATIONS
&
BILATERAL
RELATIONS

Australia to get nuclear-powered submarines under AUKUS partnership



Relevance: Prelims & Mains Paper II; International Events

Why in news?

- Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States on March 13 unveiled plans to provide Australia with conventionally armed, nuclear-powered attack submarines in the early 2030s to counter China's ambitions in the Indo-Pacific.
- The arrangement was made through the Australia-United Kingdom-United States (AUKUS) enhanced security partnership.

What is AUKUS?

- **AUKUS is a 2021 defence deal between Australia, the UK and the US, which was struck to help Australia deploy nuclear-powered submarines in the Pacific region.**
- Officially, the deal was made to emphasise upon the countries' "shared commitment to a free-and-open Indo-Pacific region".
- **In effect, it seeks to combat China's ambitions in the region.**

Against China

- China has been an aggressive player in the South Pacific and Indian Oceans, staking territorial claims across the resource-rich region which also hosts some of the world's busiest shipping lanes.
- China's increasing aggression against Taiwan and in the South China Sea has been of particular note.
- **Crucially, unlike Australia, China has multiple nuclear-capable submarines.**
- **Thus, the AUKUS partnership was signed to bolster Australia's naval heft in the region.**

Latest announcement

- The plan involves a **phased approach** which will **culminate in the production and operation of SSN-AUKUS**. The phases are,
 - **Embedded Personnel and Port Visits.** Beginning in 2023, the Australian military and civilian personnel will embed with the US Navy, the UK Royal Navy and within the countries' submarine industrial bases. This will accelerate the training and development of Australian personnel to handle nuclear-powered submarines.
 - **Submarine Rotational Forces.** As early as 2027, the UK and the US plan to establish a rotational presence of one UK Astute class submarine and up to four US Virginia class submarines at HMAS Stirling near Perth, Western Australia.
 - **Sale of US Virginia Class Submarines.** Beginning in the early 2030s, the **US intends to sell Australia three Virginia-class submarines**, with the potential to sell two more if needed.
 - **SSN-AUKUS.** **With the combination of the UK's submarine design and advanced United States technology, SSN-AUKUS will be the future attack submarine for both Australia and the UK.**

Clarification

- Notably, while Australia will **receive nuclear-powered submarines, these will not be equipped with nuclear warheads**. The newly announced deal includes “clear commitments” to the countries' respective **nuclear non-proliferation obligations**.
- It also includes commitments to improve infrastructure and industrial capacities as well as provisions for greater integration of the countries' submarine forces.

How will nuclear submarines help Australia?

- Conventional diesel-engine submarines have batteries that keep and propel the vessel underwater. The life of these batteries can vary from a few hours to a few days. These submarines **need to come to the surface to recharge their batteries** using the diesel engine.
- Nuclear-powered submarines, on the other hand, **have an internal nuclear reactor, giving them near infinite endurance to operate and stay submerged** – effectively, a nuclear submarine only needs to port/surface when it is out of food and other essential supplies for the crew.
- Typically, **nuclear subs are also faster than conventional submarines**. This allows them to reach far out into the ocean and launch attacks on the enemy.
- Virginia class submarines and SSN-AUKUS will give the Royal Australian Navy the capability to go into the South China Sea to protect its assets and conduct patrols, a capability which it currently does not possess.

Treaty on the high seas



Relevance: Prelims & Mains Paper II; International Organisations

Why in news?

- Recently, the UN member states agreed on a historic treaty for protecting marine life in international waters that lie outside the jurisdiction of any country, marking the culmination of over a decade of negotiations to protect the high seas that cover nearly two-thirds of the global ocean.
- The 'breakthrough' followed protracted talks led by the UN during the Intergovernmental Conference (IGC) on Marine Biodiversity of Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ) in New York.
- The treaty is yet to be formally adopted as members are yet to ratify it.

High seas- Meaning

- Parts of the sea that are not included in the territorial waters or the internal waters of a country are known as the high seas.
- Simply put, it is the area beyond a country's Exclusive Economic Zone which extends up to 200 nautical miles (370 km) from the coastline and till where a nation has jurisdiction over living and non-living resources.
- No country is responsible for the management and protection of resources in the high seas.

Importance

- The high seas account for more than 60% of the world's ocean area and cover about half of the Earth's surface, which makes them a hub of marine life.
- They are home to around 2.7 lakh known species, many of which are yet to be discovered. The high seas are fundamental to human survival and well-being.

Importance (Contd.)

- The **high seas regulate the climate** by playing a fundamental role in planetary stability by mitigating the effects of climate change through its **absorption of carbon** and by **storing solar radiation and distributing heat** around the globe.
- In addition, the ocean **provides a wealth of resources and services, including seafood and raw materials, genetic and medicinal resources, air purification, climate regulation, and aesthetic, scientific and cultural services.**

Threats

- These oceans absorb heat from the atmosphere, and are also **undergoing acidification** — all of which endanger marine flora and fauna.
- Several thousand **marine species are at a risk of extinction by 2100** if current warming and acidification trends continue.
- Anthropogenic pressures on the high seas include **seabed mining, noise pollution, chemical spills and fires, disposal of untreated waste (including antibiotics), overfishing, introduction of invasive species, and coastal pollution.**
- Despite the alarming situation, the high seas remain as one of the least-protected areas, with **only about 1% of it under protection.**

Process to adopt treaty

- In 1982, the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, or UNCLOS was adopted. The Convention delineated rules to govern the oceans and the use of its resources.
- **But there was no comprehensive legal framework that covered the high seas.**
- The treaty was **finally agreed upon by member states on March 4** after long negotiations.

Treaty

- The draft agreement of the 'High Seas Treaty' recognises the need to address biodiversity loss and degradation of ecosystems of the ocean and proposes rules to protect oceans outside national borders and regarding the sustainable use of its resources.
- It places "30% of the world's oceans into protected areas, puts more money into marine conservation and covers access to and use of marine genetic resources," as per the United Nations.
- (At the Conference of Parties of the Convention on Biological Diversity (COP15), countries agreed to protect 30% of oceans by 2030, as part of the '30 x 30 pledge' in December.)
- A marine protected area (MPA) is defined as a "geographically defined marine area that is designated and managed to achieve specific long-term biodiversity conservation objectives and may allow, where appropriate, sustainable use provided it is consistent with the conservation objectives."

Key features

- 1. **Access- and benefit-sharing:** An important negotiating point, and source of tension during the talks, was developing countries' access to benefits reaped from the commercialisation of resources (especially genetic resources) extracted from the ocean. The treaty has agreed to setup an access- and benefit-sharing committee to frame guidelines.
- 2. **Interest of all States:** Activities concerning marine genetic resources of areas on high seas should be in the interests of all States and for the benefit of humanity. They have to be carried out exclusively for peaceful purposes.
- 3. **Environmental impact assessments:** Signatories will have to conduct environmental impact assessments before the exploitation of marine resources.

Key features (Contd.)

- 4. **Marine genetic resources beyond jurisdiction:** It stipulates that marine resources in areas beyond national jurisdiction that are held by indigenous people and local communities can only be accessed with their “free, prior and informed consent or approval and involvement”.
- No State can claim its right over marine genetic resources of areas beyond national jurisdiction.
- 5. **Clearing house mechanism:** Members will have to provide the clearing-house mechanism (CHM), established as part of the treaty, with details like the objective of the research, geographical area of collection, names of sponsors, etc.
- 6. **Provision of funding:** Provision of funding to help developing countries implement the treaty.
- A special fund will be established which will be fixed by the conference of parties, which will be formed as part of the pact.
- The conference of parties will also oversee the functioning of the treaty.

Windsor Framework: UK and EU deal on Northern Ireland Protocol



Relevance: Prelims & Mains Paper II; International Organisations

Why in news?

- The UK government under Prime Minister Rishi Sunak on February 27 reached a landmark deal with the European Union (EU) on post-Brexit trade rules that will govern Northern Ireland.
- The 'Windsor Framework' will replace the Northern Ireland Protocol, which had proved to be among the thorniest of Brexit fall-outs, creating problems both economic and political.

Northern Ireland Protocol

- After the UK left the European Union, Northern Ireland remained its only constituent that shared a land border with an EU-member, the Republic of Ireland.
- Since the EU and the UK have different product standards, border checks would be necessary before goods could move from Northern Ireland to Ireland.
- It was decided the checks would be conducted between Great Britain (England, Scotland and Wales) and Northern Ireland (which together with Great Britain forms the United Kingdom). This was called the Northern Ireland Protocol.

Issues with Protocol

- Under the protocol, Northern Ireland remained in the EU single market, and trade-and-customs inspections of goods coming from Great Britain took place at its ports along the Irish Sea.
- The checks made trade between Great Britain and Northern Ireland cumbersome, with food products, especially, losing out on shelf life while they waited for clearance.
- Some taxation and spending policies of the UK government could not be implemented in Northern Ireland because of EU rules. The sale of medicines, too, was caught between different British and EU rules.

Windsor Framework proposal

- The framework has two crucial aspects – the introduction of a green lane and red lane system for goods that will stay in Northern Ireland and those that will go to the EU respectively; and the ‘Stormont Brake’, which allows Northern Ireland lawmakers and London to veto any EU regulation they believe affects the region adversely.

The two lanes

- British goods meant for Northern Ireland will use the green lane at the ports, and will be allowed to pass with minimal paperwork and checks. Physical checks will be conducted if the goods are deemed suspicious, in place of the routine checks now.
- Goods destined for Ireland or the rest of the EU will have to take the red lane, with the attendant customs and other checks.

Stormont Brake

- The new Stormont Brake means the democratically elected Northern Ireland Assembly can oppose new EU goods rules that would have significant and lasting effects on everyday lives in Northern Ireland.
- For this, they will need the support of 30 members from at least two parties. The British government can then veto the law.

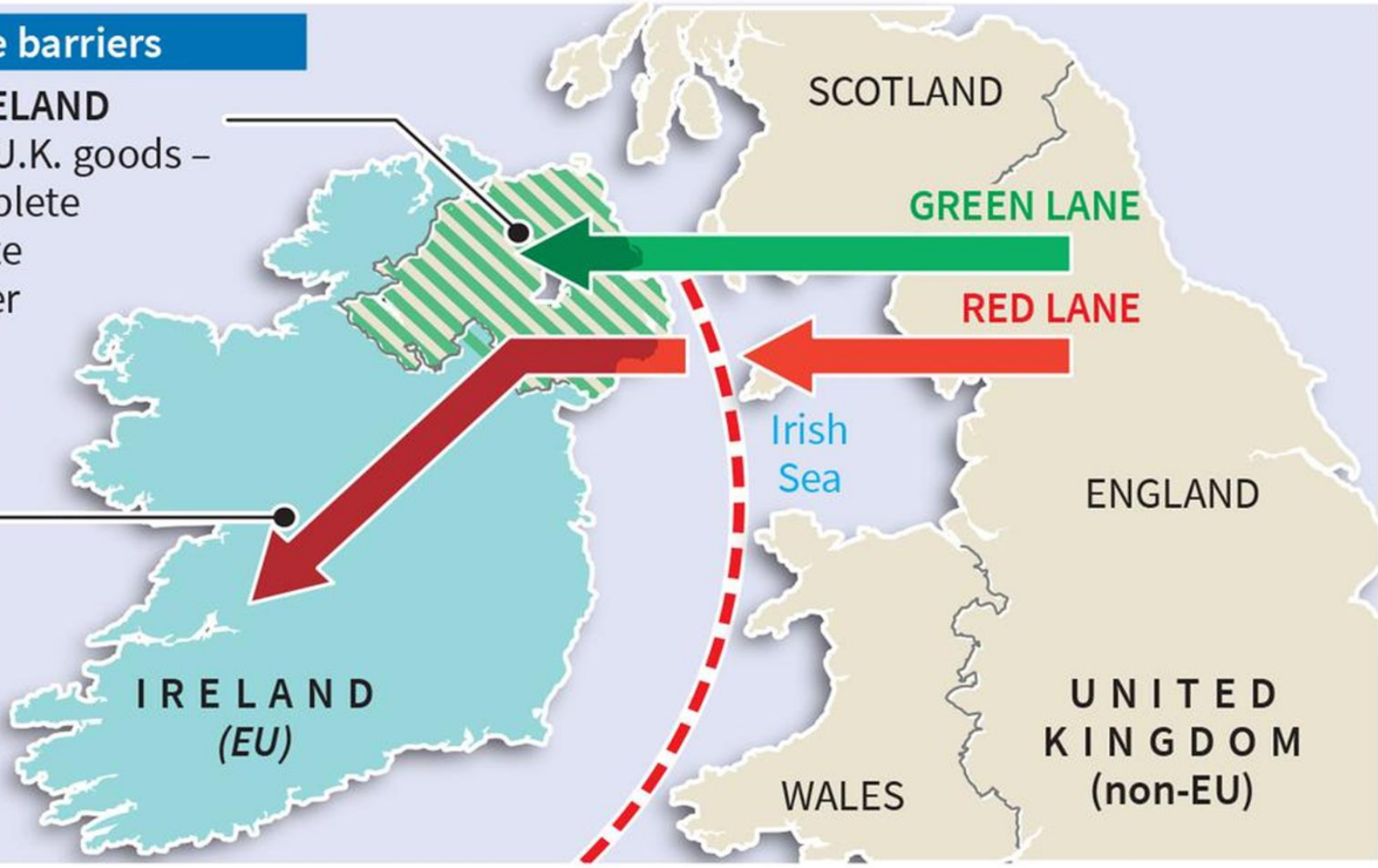
Lowering trade barriers

NORTHERN IRELAND

Green lane for U.K. goods – traders to complete single certificate per truck, rather than multiple forms per load

IRELAND

EU-destined goods go via red lane with full customs procedures



MIIRA- India's proposed global initiative to promote millets



Relevance: Prelims

Why in news?

- The acronym MIIRA stands for 'Millet International Initiative for Research and Awareness'.
- India has introduced a draft to launch a global initiative to encourage the consumption and production of millet.
- The draft of the proposed initiative — MIIRA — was placed during the first Agriculture Deputies Meeting under the Agriculture Working Group (AWG), G20 at Indore, Madhya Pradesh on February 13-15, 2023.
- According to Agriculture Ministry sources, the MIIRA will be aimed at coordinating millet research programmes at the international level.

International Year of Millets

- MIIRA is in line with the UN declaring 2023 as the International Year of Millets, the proposal for which was moved by India and supported by 72 countries.
- The International Year will see several events and activities such as conferences, issuing of stamps and coins etc. to raise awareness about millets, improve their production and quality, and attract investments.

Aim of MIIRA

- MIIRA will aim to connect millet research organisations across the world while also supporting research on these crops.
- This is significant as issues like food security and nutrition are among the key priority areas in the agriculture sector during India's G20 Presidency. India assumed the G20 Presidency on December 1, 2022.
- Besides setting up a web platform to connect researchers and holding international research conferences, the plan is also to raise awareness for promoting the consumption of millet.

Funding

- For MIIRA to take off, India will contribute the “seed money”, while each G20 member will later have to contribute to its budget in the form of a membership fee.
- The MIIRA secretariat will be in Delhi.

UN event in which representatives of Nithyananda's Kailasa participated



Relevance: Prelims

Why in news?

- Representatives of fugitive 'godman' Nithyananda's self-proclaimed country, the United States of Kailasa (USK), attended a discussion conducted by the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) in Geneva on February 24.
- Notably, the USK isn't among the 193 countries recognised by the UN.
- In 2020, Nithyananda claimed to have founded a new country after he "bought an island" off the coast of Ecuador. The 'country' has a flag, a constitution, an economic system, a passport and an emblem.

Event attended

- The event was the 'Day of General Discussion on General Comment on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and Sustainable Development', where two persons spoke on behalf of the USK during the time allocated to raise questions.
- It is still unclear how the USK representatives participated in the discussion.

About CESCR

- United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) is a body of 18 independent experts that monitors the implementation of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) — a treaty signed in 1966 — by its State parties.
- Established on May 29, 1985, the committee seeks to develop a constructive dialogue with Member States, determine whether the Covenant's norms are being implemented in Member States and assess how the implementation and enforcement of the Covenant could be improved.

About CESCR (Contd.)

- Since 2018, the committee has been developing the General Comment, which clarifies the content of the rights set out in a particular treaty.
- The UN's website said, "The aim of general comments is to help State parties better implement the rights enshrined in the treaties."

What did the USK representatives say?

- The representative, who appeared to introduce herself as Vijayapriya Nithyananda, claimed, "Kailasa has been implementing the ancient Hindu policies and indigenous solutions that are in alignment with the time-tested Hindu principles for sustainable development".
- She also talked about Nithayananda's "intense persecution and human rights violation for reviving the indigenous traditions and lifestyle and lifestyle of Hinduism". "And he was even banned from preaching and exiled from his birth country" she said and also asked the panel what can be done to help him.
- Nithyananda fled India after he was accused of rape and of confining children in his ashram illegally in 2019.
- It is to be noted that none of the panellists responded to their questions and comments.

Saudi Arabia & Iran to renew ties

Relevance: Prelims; International Relations



Why in news?

- Saudi Arabia and Iran have announced the restoration of diplomatic ties on March 10 after four days of previously undisclosed talks in Beijing.
- The announcement could not only lead to a major realignment in West Asia, it also poses a major geopolitical threat to the United States, with China acting as peace broker for the historic deal.
- Under the agreement announced, Iran and Saudi Arabia will patch up a seven-year split by reviving a security cooperation pact, reopening embassies in each other's countries within two months, and resuming trade, investment and cultural accords.

History of rivalry

- The rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran is rooted in Islamic sectarianism. While Iran is the foremost Shia state in the world, Saudi Arabia is considered to be the religious home of Sunni Islam.
- In modern times, this sectarian rivalry has translated into a tussle for regional hegemony. This has played a role in both sides being involved in multiple proxy conflicts against each other in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria and most devastatingly, Yemen.
- The surprise new agreement is welcome. However, this does not mean that all problems will be immediately resolved. One of the major roadblocks to a true thaw in relationships is the underlying sectarian tension between Shias and Sunnis. A diplomatic deal does little to change this.

Geopolitical challenges



- There are **specific geopolitical questions which have not been directly addressed**. For instance, in both the wars in Yemen and Syria, Iran and Saudi Arabia find themselves on opposite sides – these conflicts will continue to fuel antagonism between the two countries.
- Also, Iran is highly critical of Saudi Arabia's closeness with the United States. The US has crippled Iranian economy with its sanctions regime for decades.
- Further, Saudi Arabia is wary of the large network of armed militias across West Asia that Iran funds and backs, seeing them as a threat to its own sovereignty as well as the regional balance of power.
- These tangible issues will continue to be roadblocks in building any sort of close ties between Iran and Saudi Arabia. However, the newly struck diplomatic deal can be a good starting point for more negotiations and agreements.

Bhutan graduated from the 'Least Developed Country' status



Relevance: Prelims; International Events

Why in news?

- **Bhutan**, the mountainous, landlocked country that is consistently ranked one of the happiest in the world, will on December 13th of this year, **become the seventh nation to graduate from the United Nations' (UN) list of Least Developed Countries (LDC)**.
- While this promotion is a cause for celebration, it **also raises some concerns, notably how Bhutan will compensate for the loss of certain trade privileges associated with being an LDC.**

Definition

- The LDCs are developing countries listed by the UN that exhibit the lowest indicators of socioeconomic development.
- The concept first originated in the late 1960s and was codified under UN resolution 2768 passed in November 1971.
- **According to the UN, an LDC is defined as “a country that exhibits the lowest indicators of socioeconomic development, with low levels of income, human capital and economic diversification, high levels of economic vulnerability, and a population that is disproportionately reliant on agriculture, natural resources, and primary commodities.”**

Criteria for LDC Country

- The UN identifies **three criteria** for a country to be classified as an LDC:
- *First, it must have a **gross national income (GNI) per capita below the threshold of USD 1,230 over a three-year average.**
- *Second, it must **perform poorly on a composite human assets index** based on indicators including nutrition, health and education.
- *Lastly, the country **must demonstrate economic vulnerability** such as being prone to natural disasters and possessing structural economic constraints.
- Countries must meet a selection from all three criteria simultaneously and are reviewed on a three-year basis by the UN. **Currently, the UN lists 46 countries that qualify as LDCs.** Of those, 33 are from Africa, nine from Asia, three from the Pacific and one from the Caribbean.

How did Bhutan get off the LDC list?

- **At the UN 2021 triennial review of LDC countries, the organisation recommended that Bangladesh, Laos, and Nepal be removed from the list.**
- To graduate from the LDC list, a country must meet certain criteria in the three areas stated before namely, income, human assets, and economic vulnerability.
- Bhutan was included in the first group of LDCs in 1971. However, over the last few decades, it has made remarkable progress on a variety of socio-economic metrics.
- For instance, Bhutan's economy increased more than eight times in the last 20 years. Bhutan has mostly accomplished this by increasing exports of hydropower to India, which now accounts for 20 per cent of its economy.
- **Bhutan first fulfilled the requirements for graduation in 2015, and then again in 2018. Bhutan was therefore scheduled to graduate in 2021. However, the UN agreed with Bhutan's request to match the effective graduation date with the conclusion of the nation's 12th national development plan in 2023.**

Advantages of being an LDC



- Being an LDC confers certain economic benefits to the listed country.
- LDCs enjoy duty-free and quota-free (DFQF) access to the markets of developed countries. This means that LDCs are not restricted by trade restrictions or tariffs when exporting their goods to wealthier nations. For LDCs, this is a significant advantage because it enables them to expand their exports and get access to new markets, which can boost their economic development.
- LDCs are also eligible for loans with special terms for development, which include loans with a lower interest rate and a longer repayment time than those given to other nations.
- Thus, graduation from LDC status is a major achievement, but it can be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it signals that a country has made significant progress in its economic and social development. On the other hand, it can also create new challenges and risks, as the country may lose access to some of the trade-related benefits and support that it had as an LDC.

India-Australia relationship: Strategic and trade ties



Relevance: Prelims & Mains Paper II; Bilateral Relations

Why in news?

- After a visit to the cricket stadium in Ahmedabad with Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese tweeted about the fierce but friendly sporting rivalry between the two nations.
- The details about the relationship between two nations are as follows.

Historical perspective

- The India-Australia bilateral relationship has been underpinned by the **shared values of pluralistic, Westminster-style democracies, Commonwealth traditions, expanding economic engagement, and increasing high-level interaction.**
- Several common traits, including **strong, vibrant, secular, and multicultural democracies, a free press, an independent judicial system, and English language**, serve as the foundation for closer co-operation and multifaceted interaction between the two countries.
- The end of the Cold War and beginning of India's economic reforms in 1991 provided the impetus for the development of closer ties between the two nations.
- The **ever-increasing numbers of Indian students travelling to Australia for higher education**, and the growing tourism and sporting links, have played a significant role in strengthening bilateral relations.

Towards Strategic Relationship

- With the passage of time, ties evolved in the direction of a strategic relationship, alongside the existing economic engagement.
- In recent years, the relationship has charted a new trajectory of transformational growth.
- With greater convergence of views on issues such as international terrorism, and a shared commitment to a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific region, the two democracies have taken their cooperation to plurilateral formats, including the Quad (with the United States and Japan).

Strategic ties

- In September 2014, Australia's Prime Minister Tony Abbott visited India, and in November that year, Modi became the first Indian Prime Minister to make an official visit to Australia after Rajiv Gandhi in 1986. He also became the first Indian PM to address a joint sitting of the Parliament of Australia.
- At the **India-Australia Leaders' Virtual Summit in June 2020**, Modi and Prime Minister Scott Morrison elevated the bilateral relationship from the Strategic Partnership concluded in 2009 to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP).
- At the **2nd India-Australia Virtual Summit in March 2022**, several key announcements were made, including on a **Letter of Intent on Migration and Mobility Partnership Arrangement** to foster the exchange of skills, and a **Letter of Arrangement for Educational Qualifications Recognition** to facilitate the mobility of students and professionals.

China factor

- Ties between Australia and China were strained after Australia in 2018 banned Chinese telecom firm Huawei from the 5G network.
- Later, it called for an inquiry into the origins of Covid-19, and slammed China's human rights record in Xinjiang and Hong Kong.
- China responded by imposing trade barriers on Australian exports, and by cutting off all ministerial contact.
- India has been facing an aggressive Chinese military along the border.

Economic cooperation

- The Economic Cooperation Trade Agreement (ECTA) was the first free trade agreement signed by India with a developed country in a decade.
- The agreement entered into force in December 2022, and has resulted in an immediate reduction of duty to zero on 96% of Indian exports to Australia in value (that is 98% of the tariff lines) and zero duty on 85% of Australia's exports (in value) to India.
- Bilateral trade was US\$ 27.5 billion in 2021; with ECTA, there is potential for it to reach around US\$ 50 billion in five years.

People-to-people ties

- India is one of the top sources of skilled immigrants to Australia.
- As per the 2021 Census, around 9.76 lakh people in Australia reported their ancestry as Indian origin, making them the second largest group of overseas-born residents in Australia.

Education

- The Mechanism for Mutual Recognition of Educational Qualifications (MREQ) was signed on March 2 this year. This will facilitate mobility of students between India and Australia.
- Deakin University and University of Wollongong are planning to open campuses in India.
- More than 1 lakh Indian students are pursuing higher education degrees in Australian universities, making Indian students the second largest cohort of foreign students in Australia.

Defence cooperation

- The Mutual Logistics Support Agreement (MLSA) was concluded during the Virtual Summit in June 2020, and the two militaries held several joint exercises in 2022.
- Australia will host military operations with India, Japan, and the US in the “Malabar” exercises off the coast of Perth in August, and has invited India to join the Talisman Sabre exercises later this year.

Clean energy

- The countries signed a Letter of Intent on New and Renewable Energy in February 2022 which provides for cooperation towards bringing down the cost of renewable energy technologies, especially ultra low-cost solar and clean hydrogen.

India- Australia Educational Cooperation



Relevance: Prelims & Mains Paper II; Bilateral Relations

Why in news?

- Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese while on visit to India on March 8 announced an 'Australia-India education qualification recognition mechanism'.
- He also announced that Geelong's Deakin University will be the first overseas university to open its branch campus in India, apart from a new 'Maitri' scholarship for Indian students to study in Australia for up to four years.

Education qualification recognition mechanism

- Australia-India education qualification recognition mechanism will mean that degrees obtained in Australia will now be recognised in India, and, vice-versa, degrees obtained in India will be recognised in Australia.
- This new mechanism was finalised by Australian Education Minister Jason Clare and Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan during the former's visit to Delhi last week.
- India has other agreements with countries like the US. What makes this broader than the agreement with the US is it includes online courses also.
- This agreement is expected to make it easier for Indians to go to Australia for both education and work, and vice-versa.
- However, this move will not apply to professional qualifications. Professional registrations of engineering, medicine and law graduates will remain outside the ambit of this agreement.

First ever foreign university

- The Australian premier also confirmed that Geelong's Deakin University will be the first ever foreign university to have an offshore campus in India, to be set up in Gandhinagar's GIFT City.
- Two Australian universities, ranked among the world's top 300, have reached out to the Union government to set up independent offshore campuses in India.
- The other university reportedly interested in setting up an Indian campus is the University of Wollongong (UoW).

Maitri scholarship

- A new scholarship was also announced for Indian students studying in Australia. The 'Maitri' scholarships will provide financial assistance to Indian students in Australia for as long as four years.
- The scholarships are part of the wider Maitri (friendship) programme that seeks to boost cultural, educational and community ties between Australia and India.
- The 'Maitri' scholarship was first mentioned in a joint media statement by Australian ministers on February 14, 2022.
- The \$ 11.2 million Maitri Scholarships Program will attract and support high-achieving Indian students to study at Australian universities.

UN High Seas Treaty draft agreement



Relevance: Prelims & Mains Paper II; International Organizations

Why in news?

- On March 4, a draft international agreement referred to as the UN High Seas Treaty was finalised to govern the conduct of governments in 'open seas' – a majority of the world's oceans that lie beyond the jurisdiction of any one country.
- Though this agreement is still in the draft stage, when it is ratified by countries (requiring them to also pass it in their own Parliaments), it will become legally binding.
- Also referred to as the 'Paris Agreement for the Ocean', the treaty to deal with Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction has been under discussion for several years. The discussions for the agreement began in 2004.

Need for such a treaty

- Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) lie from the coast of a country to about 200 nautical miles (or 370 km into the sea). Waters beyond that are known as open seas or high seas.
- Currently, it is estimated high or open seas constitute two-thirds of the world's oceans, and only one per cent of them are legally protected.
- At present, every country has the right to access open seas, resulting in large-scale drilling and trawling operations for catching fish and other animals for commercial purposes

Draft treaty



- The 54-page draft is officially called the 'Draft agreement under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea on the conservation and sustainable use of marine biological diversity of areas beyond national jurisdiction'.
- It states an objective "to ensure the conservation and sustainable use of marine biological diversity of areas beyond national jurisdiction" through the Convention and to further international cooperation.
- The draft often mentions a clearing-house mechanism that will be a centralised platform to enable parties to access, provide and give information on activities taking place in relation to the agreement. It will also help in coordination between parties.
- A Secretariat and a Global Environment Facility trust fund are other relevant bodies mentioned.

Two lawsuits and Section 230 of the U.S Communications Decency Act



Relevance: Prelims & Mains Paper II; International Events

Why in news?

- This week, the Supreme Court of the United States (SCOTUS) began hearing **two pivotal lawsuits** that will for the first time ask it to interpret Section 230 of the U.S.
- **Communications Decency Act of 1996**, the law that has shielded tech companies from liabilities over decades and essentially shaped the internet as we know it.
- The lawsuits pose a long-standing question, asked since the nascent days of the internet— should digital companies be held liable for the content that users post on their platforms?

1st Lawsuit - Gonzalez vs. Google

- **Both lawsuits have been brought by families of those killed in Islamic State (ISIS) terror attacks.**
- The first lawsuit, **Gonzalez vs. Google**, has been filed by the family of Nohemi Gonzalez, a 23-year-old American killed while studying in Paris, in the ISIS terror attacks of 2015 that killed 129 people.
- The family is **suing YouTube-parent Google** for “affirmatively recommending ISIS videos to users” through its recommendations algorithm.
- The Court filings say that the video-sharing platform YouTube “aided and abetted” the Islamic State in carrying out acts actionable under U.S. anti-terrorism law.

2nd Lawsuit - Twitter v. Taamneh

- The second case, **Twitter v. Taamneh**, pertains to a lawsuit filed by the family of a Jordanian citizen killed in an ISIS attack on a nightclub in Istanbul, Turkey, in 2017.
- The lawsuit relies on the Antiterrorism Act, which allows U.S. nationals to sue anyone who “aids and abets” international terrorism “by knowingly providing substantial assistance.”
- **The family argues that despite knowing that their platforms played an important role in ISIS’s terrorism efforts, Twitter and the other tech companies failed to take action to keep ISIS content off those platforms.**
- It also says that the platforms assisted the growth of IS by recommending extremist content through their algorithms.

Section 230

- **With Section 230 of the U.S Communications Decency Act in place, if a person posts on Facebook that the said individual is a fraud, they cannot sue the platform, but only the person who posted it.**
- It is **essentially a “safe harbour” or “liability shield” for social media platforms** or any website on the internet that hosts user-generated content, such as Reddit, Wikipedia, or Yelp.
- Section 230 acts as a shield for companies that host trillions of messages, protecting them from a deluge of lawsuits by anyone who feels wronged by something posted by someone else on their platforms, whether the complaint is legitimate or not.
- **Another thing Section 230 does is allow interactive computer service providers to engage in content moderation**, removing posts that violate their guidelines or are, for instance, obscene. According to the statute, these platforms can remove content posted on them as long as it is done in “good faith”.

ICC Arrest warrant against Putin



Relevance: Prelims & Mains Paper II; International Organizations

Why in news?

- The International Criminal Court (ICC) issued an arrest warrant against Russian President Vladimir Putin on March 17, for the alleged war crime of unlawfully deporting and transferring children from occupied areas of Ukraine to the Russian Federation.
- The crimes were allegedly committed in occupied territory from February 24, 2022.
- Apart from Putin, an arrest warrant was also issued against Russia's Commissioner for Child Rights, Maria Lvova-Belova.

Why are the arrest warrants being issued?

- Putin and Belova are allegedly responsible for the war crime of unlawful deportation and transfer of children from Russian-occupied areas of Ukraine to the Russian Federation under articles 8(2)(a)(vii) and 8(2)(b)(viii) of the Rome Statute.
- While the former relates to the "unlawful deportation or transfer or unlawful confinement", the latter relates to the direct or indirect transfer of its own civilian population by an occupying power into the occupied territory or the deportation or transfer of the population of the occupied territory within or outside its territory.

About ICC

- The ICC, headquartered in The Hague, Netherlands, was established under a 1998 treaty called the "Rome Statute".
- It "investigates and, where warranted, tries individuals charged with the gravest crimes of concern to the international community: genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity and the crime of aggression."

Purpose behind ICC

- The ICC was established to prosecute the most heinous offenses only when a country's own legal machinery fails to act.
- Unlike the International Court of Justice (ICJ), which deals with countries and inter-state disputes, the ICC prosecutes individuals. However, the ICC's jurisdiction is limited to offences occurring after it came into effect on July 1, 2002.
- Additionally, the offences should be committed either in a country that ratified the agreement or by a national of a ratifying country.
- The ICC can also practice its jurisdiction over cases referred by the UN Security Council to it.

ICC Membership

- Presently, 123 countries are party to the Rome Statute, including Britain, Japan, Afghanistan, and Germany.
- However, the USA has kept its distance, maintaining that ICC should not exercise jurisdiction over citizens of countries that are not a party to it. Similarly, India and China have also abstained from membership.

Can ICC prosecute Putin?

- It is to be noted that both Russia and Ukraine are not an ICC member. However, this move creates a situation where Putin risks arrest every time he travels. Thus, if Putin travels to a state party to the ICC, then that country can arrest him according to its obligations under international law.
- Also, this is the first time that the ICC has issued an arrest warrant against one of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council.
- In November 2022, an ICC prosecutor sought to move ahead with charges of war crimes against Ugandan militant and founder of the Lord's Resistance Army, Joseph Kony.
- Despite Kony turning kidnapped children into soldiers and being accused of murder, cruel treatment, slavery, rape, and kidnapping, he is still a fugitive and continues to be free.

SCO tourism ministers' conference in Varanasi



Relevance: Prelims & Mains Paper II; International Organizations

Why in news?

- India mooted an action plan to mark 2023 as the year of tourism development in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) region.
- This announcement was made at the tourism ministers' conference in Varanasi.
- Notably, India has assumed the SCO chairship for 2023.

SCO Membership

- The SCO is an intergovernmental organisation founded on June 15, 2001 in Shanghai, China.
- The SCO currently comprises eight “Member States” (China, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan) with four “Observer States” (Afghanistan, Belarus, Iran, and Mongolia) interested in full membership.
- Both India and Pakistan became full members of the SCO in 2017. The process of granting Iran “Member State” status was started in 2021 and is likely to be completed this year.
- Apart from these states, SCO also has many “Dialogue Partners” including Armenia, Azerbaijan, Cambodia, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Turkey. In 2022, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Egypt were also given “Dialogue Partner” status.
- Multiple other Gulf states including the UAE and Bahrain are also vying for “Dialogue Partner” status.

Functions



- The SCO was founded with **the primary aim to address security-related concerns**, such as regional terrorism, ethnic separatism, and religious extremism.
- **In 2004, at the SCO Summit held in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) was established. Through RATS, SCO members share crucial intelligence, know-how, legal expertise as well as allow for extradition of terrorists.**
- As of 2017, 600 would-be terror attacks had been nullified and more than 500 terrorists extradited using RATS.
- Though the SCO is not a formal military alliance, there have been **multiple instances of military cooperation among Member States such as joint military exercises and 'war games'**.
- The SCO also promotes **cooperation in the fields of economics and culture**. It has signed various treaties to promote trade and cultural exchanges among members.
- The SCO has also **forged crucial relationships with international organizations. It has been an observer in the United Nations General Assembly since 2005** and in 2010, the UN and SCO Secretariats signed a Joint Declaration on Cooperation.
- Over the years, the SCO has worked with various UN organizations to address various pressing global issues.

Varanasi Conference



- The recent conference was aimed at improving tourism.
- At the end of the meeting, a joint action plan for implementing the agreement between the Member States on cooperation in the tourism sector was finalised and approved.
- The meeting adopted the Action Plan for 'Year of Tourism Development in the SCO Space in 2023'. The document identifies a list of activities and events to promote and showcase tourism products of SCO member states.
- Notably, Varanasi has been declared as the first tourism and cultural capital of SCO.

India-Bangladesh Friendship Pipeline inaugurated



Relevance: Prelims & Mains Paper II; Bilateral Relations

Why in news?

- PM Narendra Modi and PM of Bangladesh, Sheikh Hasina recently jointly inaugurated the India-Bangladesh Friendship Pipeline (IBFP) in a virtual mode.
- This pipeline runs from the Siliguri-based marketing terminal of the Numaligarh Refinery Limited (NRL) to the Parbatipur depot of Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation (BPC).
- Numaligarh Refinery Limited has been supplying petroleum products to Bangladesh since 2015.

More Details

- IBFP is the first cross-border energy pipeline between India and Bangladesh, though this is the 2nd cross-border energy pipeline between India and its neighbours. The first one is with Nepal.
- It has the capacity to transport 1 Million Metric Ton Per Annum (MMTPA) of High-Speed Diesel (HSD) to Bangladesh.
- The operationalization of the Friendship Pipeline will enhance ongoing energy cooperation between the two countries.

Vienna Convention invoked over Pro-Khalistani Vandalism in London



Relevance: Prelims & Mains Paper II; International Organizations

Why in news?

- Hours after a group of people chanting pro-Khalistan slogans took down the Indian flag at the High Commission in London, the Indian govt summoned the UK diplomat, Deputy High Commissioner Christina Scott, and lodged a strong protest.
- On the London incident, a statement by the Ministry of External Affairs said, “An explanation was demanded for the complete absence of the British security that allowed these elements to enter the High Commission premises. She (Dy High Commissioner Scott) was reminded in this regard of the basic obligations of the UK Government under the Vienna Convention.”

What is the Vienna Convention?

- The term “Vienna Convention” can refer to any of several treaties signed in Vienna. Most of them are related to the harmonization or formalization of the procedures of international diplomacy.
- The treaty being referred to by the MEA in this instance is the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations (1961), which “provides a complete framework for the establishment, maintenance and termination of diplomatic relations on a basis of consent between independent sovereign States”.
- Most notably, the Convention codifies the longstanding custom of diplomatic immunity, in which diplomatic missions are granted privileges that enable diplomats to perform their functions without fear of coercion or harassment by the host country.
- It affirms the concept of “inviolability” of a diplomatic mission, which has been one of the enduring cornerstones of international diplomacy.
- The Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations entered into force on April 24, 1964 and is nearly universally ratified, with Palau and South Sudan being the exceptions.

“Receiving State” and its obligations

- As per the Vienna Convention, a “receiving State” refers to the host nation where a diplomatic mission is located. In this case, the host nation is the UK and as per the Vienna Convention, it has some basic obligations towards the diplomatic missions it hosts on its sovereign territory.
- Article 22 of the Convention deals with obligations with regards to the premises of the Mission.
- Part 2 of this article states that “The receiving State is under a special duty to take all appropriate steps to protect the premises of the mission against any intrusion or damage and to prevent any disturbance of the peace of the mission or impairment of its dignity”.
- Basically, the security of any High Commission or Embassy is the responsibility of the host nation. While diplomatic missions can also employ their own security. However, ultimately, the host nation is accountable for security.
- The fact that protestors were able to climb the walls of the Indian High Commission premises indicates a breach.



Interpol withdraws Red Notice against Mehul Choksi

Relevance: Prelims & Mains Paper II; International Organisations



Why in news?

- The Interpol has withdrawn red corner notice against the fugitive diamantaire Mehul Choksi.
- The Red Notice was issued against Choksi in Dec. 2018 on a request from the CBI and Enforcement Directorate.
- The removal of the Red Notice means Choksi can travel around the world freely without any fear of being arrested by law enforcement agencies. The exception is India, where he faces multiple cases. This also weakens India's efforts to extradite him.
- CBI has sought the restoration of the red corner notice against Choksi.

Charges against Choksi and Modi

- Mehul Choksi is the owner of Gitanjali Group, a jewelery firm with 4,000 stores in India. He, along with his nephew Nirav Modi, are wanted in the Rs 13,500 crore Punjab National Bank (PNB) scam.
- The case came to light in Jan. 2018. CBI filed an FIR in the case a week later. By this time, Choksi had already fled the country.
- Choksi had acquired citizenship of Antigua and Barbuda in 2017 and was living there from 2018. However, he went missing from Antigua and Barbuda on May 23, 2021, and was soon caught in Dominica.
- While Choksi claimed he was kidnapped, he was charged with illegal entry by the police in Dominica. In May last year, Dominica dropped these charges against him.

What is an Interpol Red Notice?

- Criminals or suspects often flee to other countries to evade facing justice.
- A Red Corner Notice, or Red Notice (RN) alerts police forces across the world about fugitives who are wanted internationally either for prosecution or to serve a sentence.
- A Red Notice is thus a request to law enforcement worldwide to locate and provisionally arrest a person pending extradition, surrender, or similar legal action.
- RNs contain information that helps identify wanted persons, such as their names, dates of birth, nationality, and physical attributes such as the colour of their hair and eyes, as well as pictures and biometric data such as fingerprints, if they are available. RNs also mention the crime(s) they are wanted for.
- An RN is only an international wanted persons' notice; it is not an international arrest warrant.

IMF begins rolling out bailout for Sri Lanka

Relevance: Prelims & Mains Paper II; Int. Organisations



Why in news?

- It's been six months since Sri Lanka qualified for an International Monetary Fund (IMF) Extended Fund Facility of \$2.9 billion to get over the worst economic crisis in its history.
- Now, the IMF Board has finally signed off on the arrangement after receiving requisite financial assurances to restore debt sustainability from the country's biggest bilateral donors — China, India and Japan.
- While the IMF package is hardly sufficient — the first instalment of it is \$33 million — to get over Sri Lanka's crisis, it will help the country restore its credibility with international private creditors.

President facing criticism

- The IMF Board's move comes at a time when Sri Lanka's President Wickremesinghe is under fire from main opposition parties as well as from civil society groups and trade unions.
- They led last year's Aragalaya Movement that led to a dramatic change in the country's political leadership, and led to Wickremesinghe becoming the country's President.
- Wickremesinghe has been accused of using harsh methods to contain the protests, including the unjustified arrests of activists.

SL fulfils IMF conditions

- The assurance from bilateral donors to support Sri Lanka's debt restructuring was a precondition that Sri Lanka had to meet for the arrangement with the IMF.
- In Jan. 2023, the Chinese Exim Bank said it was ready to observe a two-year moratorium on Sri Lanka's debt to it.

Understanding IMF bailouts



Relevance: Prelims & Mains Paper II; International Organisations

Why in news?

- The International Monetary Fund (IMF) last week confirmed a **\$3 billion bailout plan for Sri Lanka's struggling economy.**
- IMF officials are also in negotiations with Pakistan for a **\$1.1 billion bailout plan** as the country faces a severe economic crisis marked by a falling currency and price rise.

Reasons why nations seek an IMF bailout

- Countries seek help from the IMF usually **when their economies face a major macroeconomic risk, mostly in the form of a currency crisis.** Both Sri Lanka and Pakistan have witnessed domestic prices rise rapidly and the exchange value of their currencies drop steeply against the U.S. dollar.
- Such currency crises are generally **the result of gross mismanagement of the nation's currency by its central bank,** often under the hidden influence of the ruling govt. Central banks may be forced by govts to create fresh money by whatever possible means to fund populist spending.
- Such spending eventually results in **a rapid rise of the overall money supply, which in turn causes prices to rise across the economy and the exchange value of the currency to drop.** A rapid, unpredictable fall in the value of a currency can destroy confidence in the said currency and affect economic activity as **people may turn hesitant to accept the currency in exchange for goods and services.**
- Foreigners may also be unwilling to invest in an economy where the value of its currency fluctuates unpredictably. In such cases, many countries are forced to seek help from the IMF to meet their external debt and other obligations, purchase essential imports, and also to boost the exchange value of their currencies.

How IMF helps countries?

- The IMF basically lends money, **often in the form of special drawing rights (SDRs)**, to troubled economies.
- **SDRs simply represent a basket of five currencies, namely the U.S. dollar, the euro, the Chinese yuan, the Japanese yen, and the British pound.**
- The IMF lends to troubled economies through lending programs such as **the extended credit facility, the flexible credit line, the stand-by agreement, etc.** Countries receiving the bailout can use the SDRs for various purposes depending on their individual circumstances.
- Currently, both Sri Lanka and Pakistan are in urgent need for U.S. dollars to import essential items and also to pay their foreign debt. So any money that they receive from the IMF is likely to go towards addressing these urgent issues.
- **The IMF was set up in 1945 out of the Bretton Woods conference.** IMF evolved to be a lender of last resort to govts of countries that had to deal with severe currency crises.

But not without conditions!

- The IMF **usually imposes conditions on countries before it lends any money to them.** For e.g, a country may have to agree to **implement certain structural reforms.**
- Such lending has been controversial as many believe that **these reforms are too tough on the public.**
- Notably, the IMF lending to troubled economies may eventually turn out to be a wasted effort because these economies have poor institutions and suffer from high corruption. Thus, these countries are **most likely to waste the bailout money.**

U.S. allows laid-off tech workers to switch from H1-B to B1/B2 visa



Relevance: Prelims & Mains Paper II; Bilateral Relations

Why in news?

- The U.S. has recently clarified that laid-off IT sector employees can continue to stay in the country even beyond the H1-B time limit of 60 days to find another job.
- Earlier, it was presumed that H1-B visa holders have only 60 days to find another employer file a visa petition on their behalf, or leave the US.
- But now, it is clear that they can change their visa status from H1-B to B1/B2 and stay in the US to find another job.

What is H1-B visa?

- The H-1B is a temporary (non-immigrant) visa category that allows employers to petition for highly educated foreign professionals to work in “specialty occupations” that require at least a bachelor’s degree.
- Jobs in fields such as mathematics, engineering, technology, and medical sciences often qualify for this visa type.
- While the initial duration of an H-1B visa is three years, it may be extended.
- Since the category was created in 1990, the U.S. Congress has limited the number of H-1Bs made available each year.
- The current annual statutory cap is 65,000 visas, with 20,000 additional visas for foreign professionals who graduate with a master’s degree or doctorate from the US.



What is B1/B2 visa?

- Visitor visas are non-immigrant visas for those who want to enter the US temporarily for business (B-1), for tourism (B-2), or for a combination of both purposes (B-1/B-2).
- Interviews are generally required for visa applicants with certain exceptions, pertaining to age group and whether it's a first-time applicant or a renewal case.
- B1/B2 allows for multiple entries and is generally issued for a period of 10 years, where a person can stay for up to six months at a time.
- However, an individual on a visitor visa (B1/B2) is not permitted to accept employment or work in the US, even as searching for employment and interviewing for a position are permissible B-1 or B-2 activities.
- Before beginning any new employment, a petition and request for a change of status from B-1 or B-2 to an employment-authorized status must be approved, and the new status must take effect.

Switch from H1-B to B1/B2 & vice-versa

- In case someone loses a job while on H1-B status but wants to stay on in the US, he/she can file a change of status to B1/B2 and continue to look for the next H-1B sponsor.
- In case someone finds the next sponsor even before the B2 application is approved, she can withdraw the plea.
- However, a B1/B2 visa requires one to furnish ample financial evidence, to show the applicant can self-fund the entire stay in the US, and some proof of ties to one's home country.
- On the other hand, if someone has travelled to the US on B1/B2, and wants to convert it into H1-B upon getting a job offer, the person may be able to request a change in the non-immigrant status to another category.

Honduras cuts ties with Taiwan in favour of China

Relevance: Prelims & Mains Paper II; International Relations



Why in news?

- China and the Central American country of Honduras have established diplomatic ties.
- This comes after Honduras ended its diplomatic ties with Taiwan.
- This move of Honduras is connected to the “One China” Policy.
- It goes back to the origins of the country in 1949.

What is “One China” Policy?

- The idea of “One China” Policy is often mentioned by Chinese leaders. It basically refers to **the principle that Mainland China is one country, composing mainland China and the island of Taiwan.**
- Both are referred to separately in the first place because when China consolidated into a modern, unified state, it was composed of many kingdoms. There was disagreement over how the country would be governed.
- **There were two main political parties – the Mao Zedong-led Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the nationalist Kuomintang, led by Chiang Kai Shek.**
- **After the communist forces won the Chinese civil war in 1949, Chiang Kai-shek fled to Taiwan and set up the govt of the Republic of China on the island, and remained President until 1975.**
- **Taiwan called itself the Republic of China (ROC) and mainland China called itself the People’s Republic of China (PRC), both claiming to represent the ‘real’ China.**



PRC's recognition and Beijing's opposition!

- In the beginning, only a few countries recognized the PRC. It was much later in 1971 that **the PRC managed to enter the UN through Resolution 2758, which unseated ROC as the official representative of "China"**.
- But over time as PRC emerged out of a kind of isolation and gained economic and political influence, it made sense for countries to establish official relations with it.
- **Presently, only 13 countries recognize Taiwan.** They are Marshall Islands, Nauru, Palau, Tuvalu, Eswatini, Vatican City, Belize, Guatemala, Haiti, Paraguay, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines.
- **Beijing has never recognized the existence of Taiwan as an independent political entity, arguing that it was always a Chinese province.**
- Taiwan says that the modern Chinese state was only formed after the revolution of 1911, and it was not a part of that state or of the People's Republic of China that was established after the communist revolution.
- Taiwan, at present, **has its own elections and defence forces.**

What's the U.S. stand?

- **The US did not recognize the PRC till 1979, doing so only after it ended its ties with Taiwan.**
- As per a 1978 US-PRC joint statement, "The United States of America recognizes the Government of the People's Republic of China as the sole legal Government of China. Within this context, the people of the United States will maintain cultural, commercial, and other unofficial relations with the people of Taiwan."
- It added: "The Government of the United States of America acknowledges the Chinese position that there is but one China and Taiwan is part of China."
- **The US only has unofficial relations with Taiwan now.**

China, firm on reunification!

- For China, **there will be an eventual, full reunification with Taiwan.**
- In May 1955, Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai stated that “the Chinese people are willing, when conditions permit, to strive to liberate Taiwan by peaceful means.”
- Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping and other leaders have also mentioned the concept of Taiwan eventually returning to the mainland.

ECONOMICS

PM MITRA mega textile parks



Relevance: Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance

Why in news?

- The Centre has selected sites in Tamil Nadu, Telangana, Karnataka, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh to set up new textile parks, a year and a half after the PM Mega Integrated Textile Regions and Apparel (PM MITRA) scheme was announced.

About PM MITRA Scheme

- The scheme was announced in October 2021, and the parks will be set up by 2026-27.
- The total outlay for the project is ₹4,445 crore, though the initial allocation in the 2023-24 Budget is only ₹200 crore.
- The textile parks will function as centres of opportunity to create an integrated textiles value chain — from spinning, weaving, processing, dyeing and printing to garment manufacturing — all at one location.
- The textile industry has been unorganised. This increased wastage and logistical costs impact the competitiveness of country's textile sector. The cluster-based approach will solve several problems of the sector.

Expected benefits

- The textile parks will boost the textiles sector in line with 5F (Farm to Fibre to Factory to Fashion to Foreign) vision.
- The Centre envisages an investment of nearly ₹70,000 crore into the parks, with employment generation for about 20 lakh people.

All-in-one parks

The PM Mega Integrated Textile Regions and Apparel (PM MITRA) scheme was announced in October 2021

- The parks will come up by 2026-27

- The total outlay for the project is ₹4,445 crore, though the initial allocation in the 2023-24 Budget is only ₹200 crore

- States have offered to provide at least 1,000 acres, says Minister Goyal



- Spinning, weaving, processing/ dyeing, printing and garment manufacturing will be done at one location

- Effort is to reduce logistics cost of textile industry and make it globally competitive

Crypto assets under Prevention of Money Laundering Act



Relevance: Prelims; Economics

Why in news?

Details

Legal status of crypto in India

- The Union Finance Ministry's move to bring in virtual digital assets under the money laundering law is aimed at widening the taxation and regulatory net and giving teeth to agencies.

- On March 7, the government issued a notification bringing transactions involving crypto assets under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act.
- The measure is expected to aid investigative agencies in carrying out action against crypto firms.
- The Enforcement Directorate and Income Tax Department have either probed or are probing several cases against companies running cryptocurrency exchanges and transactions. ED, for instance, froze the bank balances of the popular WazirX exchange last year.

- In the Union Budget last year, even though the government brought in a tax for cryptocurrencies, it did not proceed with framing regulations.
- From April 2022, India introduced a 30 per cent income tax on gains made from cryptocurrencies. In July 2022, rules regarding 1 per cent tax deducted at source on cryptocurrency came into effect.

Concerns of industry



- Publicly, the cryptocurrency industry has largely welcomed the move. Internally, however, there are concerns that the notification does not offer entities time to adhere to the fresh norms.
- The industry is also concerned that in the absence of a central regulator, crypto entities could end up dealing directly with enforcement agencies like the ED.
- However, in the absence of regulators, enforcement agencies could directly take recourse of this amendment.
- Unlike banks, where there are regulators who have specified rules to comply with, for being compliant with PMLA requirements, the crypto exchanges have been relying on best practices to make sure these are taken care of.

Silicon Valley Bank collapse

Relevance: Prelims; Economics



Why in news?

- Silicon Valley Bank (SVB) was a commercial bank headquartered in Santa Clara, California.
- SVB was the 16th-largest bank in the United States at the time of its failure on March 10, 2023, and was the largest bank by deposits in Silicon Valley.
- Silicon Valley Bank, a lender to some of the biggest names in the technology world, became the largest bank to fail since the 2008 financial crisis.
- The move put nearly \$175 billion in customer deposits under the control of the Federal Deposit Insurance Corp (FDIC).

Concerns for other banks

- Silicon Valley Bank is small by comparison with the nation's largest banks. However, the most immediate concern late this week was that the failure of Silicon Valley Bank would scare off customers of other banks.

SWAMIH investment fund and its affordable housing push



Relevance: Prelims; Economics

SWAMIH investment fund

Why in news?

- The Special Window for Affordable and Mid-Income Housing (SWAMIH) Investment Fund I has raised Rs 15,530 crore so far to provide priority debt financing for the completion of stressed, brownfield and Real Estate Regulatory Authority (RERA)-registered residential projects that fall in the affordable, mid-income housing category.
- SWAMIH has so far provided final approval to about 130 projects with sanctions worth over Rs 12,000 crore.

- The Special Window for Affordable and Mid-Income Housing (SWAMIH) Investment Fund I is a social impact fund specifically formed for completing stressed and stalled residential projects.
- The Fund is sponsored by the Ministry of Finance, Government of India, and is managed by SBICAP Ventures Ltd., a State Bank Group company.
- Launched in November 2019, it has raised Rs 15,530 crore so far with an aim to provide priority debt financing for the completion of stressed, brownfield and RERA-registered residential projects that fall in the affordable, mid-income housing category.

Social Stock Exchange

Relevance: Prelims; Economics



Why in news?

- On February 22, the National Stock Exchange of India received the final approval from the markets regulator Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) to set up a Social Stock Exchange (SSE).

Social Stock Exchange

- The SSE would function as a separate segment within the existing stock exchange and help social enterprises raise funds from the public through its mechanism.
- It would serve as a medium for enterprises to seek finance for their social initiatives.
- Retail investors can only invest in securities offered by for-profit social enterprises (SEs). In all other cases, only institutional investors and non-institutional investors can invest in securities issued by SEs.

Eligibility

- Any non-profit organisation (NPO) or for-profit social enterprise (FPSEs) that establishes the primacy of social intent would be recognised as a social enterprise (SE), which will make it eligible to be registered or listed on the SSE.
- The seventeen plausible criteria as listed under Regulations 292E of SEBI's ICDR (Issue of Capital and Disclosure Requirements) Regulations, 2018 entail that enterprises must be serving to eradicate either hunger, poverty, malnutrition and inequality; promoting education, employability, equality, empowerment of women and LGBTQIA+ communities; working towards environmental sustainability; protection of national heritage and art or bridging the digital divide, among other things.

Conditions

- At least 67% of their activities must be directed towards attaining the stated objective.
- Corporate foundations, political or religious organisations or activities, professional or trade associations, infrastructure and housing companies (except affordable housing) would not be identified as an SE.
- Additionally, NPOs would be deemed ineligible if it is dependent on corporates for more than 50% of its funding.

Fund raising

- NPOs can raise money either through issuance of Zero Coupon Zero Principal (ZCZP) Instruments.
- ZCZP bonds differ from conventional bonds in the sense that it entails zero coupon and no principal payment at maturity. The latter provisions a fixed interest (or repayment) on the funds raised through varied contractual agreement, whereas ZCZP would not provision any such return instead promising a social return.
- Another structured finance product available for NPOs is the Development Impact Bonds.
- Upon the completion of a project and having delivered on pre-agreed social metrics at pre-agreed costs/rates, a grant is made to the NPO. The donor who makes the grant upon achieving the social metrics would be referred to as 'Outcome Funders'.
- Since the payment above is on post facto basis, the NPOs would have to also raise money to finance their operations. This is done by a 'Risk Funder' who alongside enabling the financing of operations on a pre-payment basis, also bears the associated risk with non-delivery of social metrics. S/he typically earns a small return if the metrics are delivered.

RBI's new pilot project on coin vending machines



Relevance: Prelims; Economics

Why in news?

- RBI Governor Shaktikanta Das had stated that RBI would be launching a pilot project to assess the functioning of a QR-code based coin vending machine.

Project Details

- In simple words, the vending machines would dispense coins with the requisite amount being debited from the customer's account using United Payments Interface (UPI) instead of physical tendering of banknotes.
- Customers would be endowed the option of withdrawing coins in required quantities and denominations. The central idea here is to ease the accessibility to coins.
- The pilot is initially planned to be rolled out at 19 locations in 12 cities across the country. With particular focus on ease and accessibility, the machines are intended to be installed at public places such as railway stations, shopping mall and marketplaces.

Importance of Coins

- As per the latest RBI bulletin, the total value of circulation of rupee coins stood at ₹28,857 crore as of December 30,2022.
- The figure is an increase of 7.2% from the year-ago period. Circulation of small coins remained unchanged at ₹743 crore.
- For perspective, coins in India are issued in denominations of 50 paise, one rupee, two rupees, five rupees, ten rupees and twenty rupees.
- Coins of up to 50 paise are called 'small coins' while those of one rupee and above are called 'rupee coins'.

SC orders expert committee formation on Adani Group shares crash



Relevance: Prelims

Why in news?

- The Supreme Court ordered a panel of experts to be set up, headed by a retired Supreme Court judge, after a batch of PILs was filed on the recent Adani Group shares crash triggered by the US-based short-seller Hindenburg Research's allegations of fraud.
- Chief Justice of India (CJI) DY Chandrachud said the remit of this committee will be to suggest measures to strengthen frameworks and investigate the Adani issue.

Supreme Court order

- On February 17, the top court refused to accept the Centre's suggestion on a proposed panel of experts in a sealed cover, observing that it wanted full transparency for the protection of investors.
- The Central government had argued that the regulatory bodies in India needed monitoring by a panel may have some adverse impact on the flow of money into the country, and therefore, it said it would provide details such as names and the scope of the panel's mandate in a sealed cover.

Committee members

- The former Supreme Court Justice AM Sapre would head the six-member committee comprising OP Bhatt, Justice JP Devdhar, Nandan Nilakeni, KV Kamath and Somasekharan Sundaresan.
- *Justice Abhay Manohar Sapre, the chairperson of the committee, retired in August 2019 as a Supreme Court Judge.
- *Om Prakash Bhatt is a former Chairman of the State Bank of India (between 2006 and March 2011). He was also the Chairman of the Indian Banks' Association.

Committee members



- *Justice JP Devdhar, has worked as the Presiding officer of Securities Appellate Tribunal, a body that hears cases related to SEBI.
- *Nandan Nilekani, is a co-founder of Infosys. In 2009, he became the founding Chairman of the Unique Identification Authority of India (UIDAI) and played an instrumental role in the roll-out of Aadhaar.
- *Kundapur Vaman Kamath, ex head of ICICI bank. Shortly after his stint with ICICI Bank, Kamath was appointed as the Chairman of Infosys. He also headed the New Development Bank of BRICS countries.
- In 2021, the government appointed Kamath as the Chairperson of the RS 20,000 crore National Bank for Financing Infrastructure and Development (NaBFID).
- *Somasekhar Sundaresan is a Mumbai-based securities and regulatory lawyer.

Hallmark Unique Identification (HUID) number



Relevance: Prelims; Economics

Why in news?

- From April 1, the sale of gold jewellery will not be allowed without a Hallmark Unique Identification (HUID) number, the Union Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution said.
- In consumer interest it has been decided that after 31st March, 2023 sale of gold jewellery and gold artefacts hallmarked without HUID shall not be permitted.

HUID number on gold jewellery

- As mentioned on the website of the Department of Consumer Affairs, HUID number is a six-digit alphanumeric code.
- It is given to every piece of jewellery at the time of hallmarking, and is a unique identifier for each gold item.
- The jewellery is stamped with the unique number manually at the Assaying & Hallmarking centre.
- According to the department, the HUID makes it easy to trace the individual piece of jewellery, and is a guarantee of quality.

SVB collapse impact on Indian start-ups



Relevance: Prelims & Mains Paper III; Economics

Why in news?

- On March 10, banking regulators in the U.S. took control of the Silicon Valley Bank (SVB) headquartered in Santa Clara, which typically catered to start-ups, venture capitalists and tech firms, after it suffered a sudden collapse.
- In India, Union Minister of State for Information and Technology Rajeev Chandrasekhar met Indian start-ups to assess the impact on them and to try and help them tide over the situation.

U.S. government response

- The Joe Biden administration moved in quickly with the Federal Reserve, the U.S. Treasury Department, and the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC) deciding to guarantee all deposits at SVB.
- The US administration also seized another bank, New York's Signature Bank, which had a large exposure to investors in cryptocurrencies and the digital assets sector.

Assurance from US President

- "Your deposits will be there when you need them," President Biden said at the White House, an announcement aimed at reassuring the American public that the country's banking system was sound and had the backing of the administration.
- He also made clear that taxpayers would not have to foot the bill for the government's actions, and that the money would come from the fees that banks pay into the FDIC.

Impact on Indian Start-ups

- According to media reports, at least 21 start-ups in India had exposure to SVB, which had approximately \$209 billion in assets and about \$175.4 billion in total deposits as of December 31, 2022. India's start-ups collectively had about \$1 billion of their funds deposited in SVB.
- The start-ups have mentioned about the difficulties in carrying on their business due to blockages in international wire transfers (electronic transfer of funds via a banking network), lack of communication from U.S. agencies, limits on withdrawals and so forth.

Lessons learnt

- The recent crisis at SVB highlights the need for Indian founders to take treasury management seriously.
- Founders of all sizes must diversify their deposits across multiple banks and establish board-approved treasury plans that outline a clear strategy for managing funds.

Credit Suisse gets sold to UBS



Relevance: Prelims & Mains Paper III; Economics

Why in news?

- In a distress sale, Credit Suisse, Switzerland's 2nd-largest bank was sold to UBS for around \$3.2 billion. UBS is Switzerland's largest bank and a long-time rival of Credit Suisse.
- The deal was hurriedly brokered by the Swiss govt and regulators in a bid to not just contain the crisis of confidence in Credit Suisse, which reportedly faced withdrawals of close to \$10 billion last week, but also to stop this crisis affecting other banks.
- This is a spectacular collapse for the 166-year-old Credit Suisse. **Notably, it is the third major bank that has collapsed in just the past 10 days.**

About other failed banks

- On March 10, Silicon Valley Bank (SVB), US' 16-largest bank, collapsed after just a single day of stress following a classic bank run in which depositors demanded as much as \$42 billion in one go.
- **Another bank called Signature Bank** had to be seized after depositors demanded 20% of all its deposits.
- A lot of Signature Bank's dealing was in cryptocurrencies and regulators believed that unless it was closed down, the run on Signature Bank could spread further.

India's sugar exports surge to a new high



Relevance: Prelims; Economics

Why in news?

- India has now transformed from being a marginal player in raw sugar exports five years ago to No. 2 in the world. Currently, it is only behind Brazil.
- These exports soared from \$810.9 million to \$4.6 billion between 2017-18 and 2021-22. They could cross \$5.5 billion — or Rs 45,000 crore — in the fiscal year ending March 31.

CHART 1

INDIA'S SUGAR EXPORTS IN VALUE

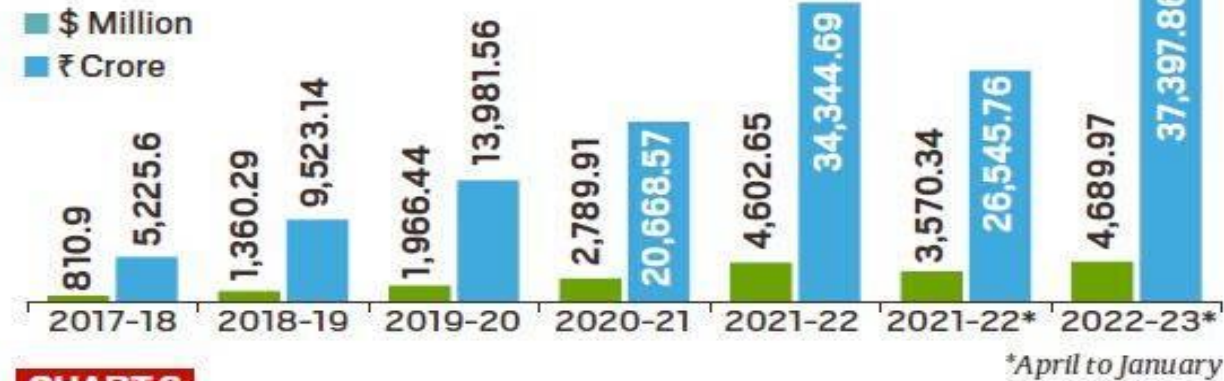


CHART 2

INDIA'S SUGAR EXPORTS IN LAKH TONNES

Sugar Year	Raw Sugar	White Sugar***	Total
2016-17	0	0.46	0.46
2017-18	0.47	5.73	6.2
2018-19	13.13	24.87	38
2019-20	17.84	41.56	59.4
2020-21	28.16	43.74	71.9
2021-22	56.29	53.71	110
2022-23**	19.13	30.91	50.04

Note: Sugar Year is from Oct-Sept

As on March 15; *Includes refined sugar

Grades of sugar

- **Raw sugar** is what mills produce after the first crystallisation of juice obtained from crushing of cane. This sugar is **rough and brownish in colour**, with an ICUMSA value of 600-1,200 or higher.
- ICUMSA, short for the **International Commission for Uniform Methods of Sugar Analysis**, is a measure of the purity of sugar based on colour. The lower the value, the more the whiteness.
- **Raw sugar is processed in refineries for removal of impurities and de-colourisation.** The end product is **refined white cane sugar** having a standard **ICUMSA value of 45**. The sugar used by industries such as pharmaceuticals has ICUMSA of less than 20.

India rejects J&J's attempt to extend monopoly on lifesaving TB drug



Relevance: Prelims & Mains Paper III; Economics

Why in news?

- In a victory for patients fighting for wider access to crucial anti-tuberculosis drug Bedaquiline, the Indian Patent Office rejected U.S. pharmaceutical giant Johnson & Johnson's (J&J) attempt to extend its monopoly on manufacturing the drug in India beyond July 2023.
- J&J's primary patents on Bedaquiline expire in July. It will clear the way for generic drug manufacturers to produce Bedaquiline.
- This will ensure cheaper and wider access to the drug. Currently, Bedaquiline tablets are priced at \$400 per six-month treatment course.
- Bedaquiline is a crucial drug in the treatment of multi-drug resistant TB patients for whom the first-line drug treatment — using Isoniazid, Rifampicin, Pyrazinamide and Ethambutol — has stopped working.

Patent Evergreening attempt

- Since 2007, J&J had indulged in Patent 'evergreening'. It is a strategy to extend the life of patents about to expire by making minor alternations, not enough to qualify for invention.
- The company filed for evergreening of its patent on fumarate salt (a formulation salt of Bedaquiline).
- J&J had sought a patent extension on the basis of its claim that it had invented the method for making a derivative of quinoline in its salt form.
- However, in its order, the Indian Patent Office has stated that the invention claimed was obvious and does not involve any inventive step. It is therefore non-patentable.

Grounds for rejection

- Section 3(d) of the Patents Act states that salt forms and derivatives of known substances are not patentable.
- The applicant cannot claim a patent on these methods and compositions of salt forms that have been known in scientific world.
- The order further stated that the claims of J&J's present application are liable to be rejected as the claimed compounds are mere admixtures, resulting in mere aggregation of properties and not a new invention under Section 3(e) of the Patents Act.

Thousands to benefit

- As per estimates, in 2019, over 55,000 patients who had developed multi-drug resistant TB could benefit from access to Bedaquiline.
- As of March 2020, only a little over 10,000 of these patients had accessed the drug.
- Notably, J&J continues to hold the patent on Bedaquiline in other major markets such as South Africa. It means that the Indian generic manufacturers will be unable to export the drug there.

Vital intervention

Bedaquiline, manufactured by J&J, is a crucial anti-TB drug



around \$400 for a six-month treatment regimen, the prices are likely to fall

- India has rejected J&J's appeal to extend its patent beyond July 2023

- Currently priced at

- After July, generic producers like Lupin and Macleods are likely to manufacture the drug

- Over 55,000 patients, in whom other drugs have stopped working, may benefit from Bedaquiline access

- Till March 2020, only a little over 10,000 patients received the drug

Proposed changes in taxing debt mutual funds to end Indexation benefit on LTCG



Relevance: Prelims & Mains Paper III; Economics

Why in news?	Present taxation regime	Impact
<ul style="list-style-type: none">- The govt has proposed changes in the taxation of debt mutual funds. The benefits of indexation for calculation of long-term capital gains (LTCG) on these funds will stand withdrawn for investments made on or after April 1, 2023.- The changes will be applicable on debt-oriented mutual fund schemes that invest a minimum of 65% of their corpus in debt securities, and only up to 35% in equities.- These funds will no longer have a tax arbitrage over bank fixed deposits, where the interest income is taxed at the marginal tax rate of the individual.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Until March 31, 2023, income tax laws allow taxation of these debt mutual fund schemes on the basis of a holding period.- If the debt mutual fund scheme unit is redeemed on or before the completion of 36 months (3 years), then the gains on the units are called short-term capital gains. These gains are taxed at tax rates applicable to the individual's income.- However, if the holding period exceeds 36 months, the gains are called long-term capital gains (LTCG). Long-term capital gains are taxed at 20% with an indexation benefit.- Indexation means adjusting the cost of funds after taking into account inflation in the purchase cost. It helps to calculate the new value of investment after considering inflation over the same period.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- The proposed changes are likely to bring investments in debt mutual funds at par with investments in bank fixed deposits.- Many feel that the removal of tax arbitrage and the creation of a consistent tax policy across all debt instruments is good news for banks looking to attract customers with higher interest rates, and to increase their borrowing and savings book sizes.

Reasons why India rejected J&J's patent on TB drug



Relevance: Prelims & Mains Paper III; Economics

Why in news?

- The Indian Patent Office recently **rejected an application by pharma giant Johnson & Johnson (J&J) to extend its patent on the drug bedaquiline beyond July 2023.**
- **Bedaquiline is a drug in tablet form used to treat drug-resistant tuberculosis (TB).**
- This opens the door for drug manufacturers to produce generic versions of bedaquiline which are expected to be more affordable and **contribute to India's goal of eliminating TB by 2025.**

What is drug-resistant TB?

- **As of 2017, India accounted for around 1/4th of the world's burden of multi-drug-resistant (MDR) TB and of extensively-drug-resistant (XDR) TB.**
- **MDR TB resists treatment by at least two frontline drugs in TB treatment, isoniazid and rifampicin.**
- **XDR TB resists these two drugs as well as fluoroquinolones and any second-line injectable drug. XDR TB is rarer than MDR TB.**
- TB incidence in India has been on the decline, but MDR TB and XDR TB endanger initiatives to locally eradicate the disease.

Treatment Procedure

- TB is **an infection of the bacterium Mycobacterium tuberculosis in the lungs, but often in other organs as well.**
- **It can be treated by strictly following the schedule of doses and frequencies of drugs prescribed by a physician.**
- **Deviations from this schedule can lead the bacteria to become drug-resistant.**
- **Drug-resistant TB is harder to treat. One important option for those diagnosed with pulmonary MDR TB is bedaquiline.** In 2018, the WHO replaced two injectable drugs for MDR TB with an oral regimen that included bedaquiline.
- **At this time, bedaquiline hadn't completed phase III trials. The recommendation was based on smaller studies.**



Bedaquiline's role

- Typically, bedaquiline needs to be taken for six months.
- Unlike second-line treatment options that are injected and can have severe side effects, like hearing loss, bedaquiline is available as tablets and is less harmful, **although it has potential side effects of its own.**
- Studies until 2018 found that it could be toxic to the heart and the liver. This is part of why **it is recommended only as a treatment of last resort.**
- India's Health Ministry has guidelines for bedaquiline use.

Why J&J's application got rejected?

- J&J's patent application was for a fumarate salt of a compound to produce bedaquiline tablets. Two groups opposed the patent: 1) Network of Maharashtra people living with HIV and 2) Nandita Venkatesan and Phumeza Tisile, both TB survivors, supported by Médecins Sans Frontières. They argued that **J&J's method to produce bedaquiline is "obvious, known in the art" and doesn't require an "inventive step".**
- **According to the Indian Patent Act 1970 Section 2(1)(ja), an 'inventive step' is an invention that is "not obvious to a person skilled in the art".**
- **The Patent Office rejected the application on these and other grounds, including Sections 3d and 3e of the Act.**
- **Section 3(d) pertain to "mere discovery of a new form of a known substance which does not result in the enhancement of the known efficacy of that substance" is insufficient ground of patent as it leads to evergreening. It is a strategy whereby a patent-owner continuously extends their rights and/or applies multiple patents for the same entity. Indian law disallows this.**
- **Section 3(e) pertain to "a substance obtained by a mere admixture resulting only in the aggregation of the properties of the components thereof", respectively, which are not patentable.**



Importance

- India has the largest population of people living with drug-resistant TB.
- J&J's patent on bedaquiline meant the drug cost \$400 (revised to \$340 in 2020) per person, plus the cost of other drugs.
- The rejection is expected to lower the cost of bedaquiline by up to 80%.
- So far, the Indian govt has directly procured the drug and distributed it through State-level TB programmes.
- After July 2023, manufacturers of generic drugs such as Lupin will be able to produce generic versions of bedaquiline.

Govt to set up mega textile parks to boost the textile sector



Relevance: Prelims & Mains Paper III; Economics

Why in news?

- The govt recently announced **the setting up of seven mega textile parks** under the **₹4,445-crore PM Mega Integrated Textile Regions and Apparel (PM MITRA) scheme**.
- These parks **will be set up in this scheme's first phase**.
- This scheme aims to bring **the textile value chain consisting of spinning, weaving and dyeing to printing and garment manufacturing into one ecosystem**.
- It is expected to generate investments worth **₹70,000 crores** and create **20 lakh jobs**.

Details

- Under the first phase of the PM MITRA scheme, large textile parks, **spread across at least 1,000 acres**, will come up in seven States — **Tamil Nadu (Virudhnagar), Telangana (Warangal), Gujarat (Navsari), Karnataka (Kalburgi), Madhya Pradesh (Dhar), Uttar Pradesh (Lucknow/Hardoi) and Maharastra (Amrawati)**.
- **They will house the entire textile value chain, from fibre to fabric to garments**. The parks will have plug-and-play manufacturing facilities and all the common amenities required.
- The Central govt's budget outlay for the scheme is to be spent till 2027-28. **Special purpose vehicles, with a 51% equity shareholding of the State government and 49% of the Centre, will be formed for each park**.
- The State govts will provide the land, be part of the SPV, and give the required clearances. The Central govt will provide Development Capital Fund of **₹500 crore** in two instalments for each of the seven facilities.

Different from previous schemes

- The textile and apparel sector has benefited from different programmes, such as the Apparel Park Scheme announced in 2002 and the Scheme for Integrated Textile Parks launched in 2005, which supported the development of common infrastructure.
- Under the PM MITRA scheme, the emphasis will be on large-scale production and provision of plug-and-play manufacturing centres.
- The textile parks, which will be open for foreign direct investments, will be located in states that have core strengths in the textile sector.
- Each park will have effluent treatment plants, accommodation for workers, skill training centres and warehouses too.

Focus on MSMEs

- The micro, small and medium enterprises (MSME) sector is said to control almost 80% of the textiles and apparel currently made in India.
- Cotton-based products make up approximately 65% of the total textile and apparel exports.
- With rising challenges such as the global geopolitical situation, and overseas buyers exploring China as well as other sourcing options, the past two years have seen notable shifts in supply chains.
- Manufacturers with vertically integrated facilities are at an advantage compared to smaller, standalone players.
- Indian textile and clothing exports have stagnated at around the \$40-billion mark over the past four years, and stood at \$44 billion last year; the aim is to achieve \$100 billion in exports and target a domestic business of \$250 billion by 2030.

ENVIRONMENT
&
BIODIVERSITY

Why most plastic can't be recycled



Relevance: Prelims & Mains Paper III; Environment

Why in news?

- With **only 9% of annual plastic waste recycled**, the myth that we can recycle our way out of a mounting plastic pollution crisis doesn't add up.
- **Around 85% of plastic packaging worldwide ends up in landfills.**
- With plastic production set to triple globally by 2060, plastics made primarily from oil or gas are a growing source of the carbon pollution fuelling climate change.
- Much is also ending up in oceans and severely impacting marine life.

Separating seven types of plastic doesn't work

- Most plastic packaging is produced from seven grades of plastic that are largely incompatible with each other, and are costly to sort for recycling.
- Apart from PET, or Polyethylene terephthalate, the world's most common plastic labelled with a #1, and high-density Polyethylene (HDPE), which carries the #2 symbol, five other plastic types might be collected but are rarely recycled.
- PET is the most recyclable plastic and there is a strong market for its byproduct used to make drink bottles, food containers or fibers for clothes.
- But the **harder plastics numbered 3-7 have a very small market since the value of the raw material is lower than the cost of recycling.**

Virgin plastic is too cheap

- The post-consumer plastic resin created from recycled material is being undercut by cheaper prime material, limiting the market for recycled plastics.
- While the price of virgin plastic is at the whim of fluctuating oil and gas prices, these fossil fuels are often subsidized. Thus, recycled plastic would be more competitive if fossil fuel subsidies were phased out.

Lightweight 'flexible' packaging booming but non-recyclable

- The lightweight packets or flexible packets made up of multi-layered plastic that keep food and snacks like chips or chocolate bars fresh, constitute around 40% of the world's plastic packaging.
- Much of this lightweight packaging is non-recyclable.
- Part of the problem is their multi-layered composition that is sometimes lined with foil, making it very expensive to separate into recyclable parts.
- The packaging industry claims that flexible packaging has environmental benefits as it's lighter than more rigid plastics and causes less transport emissions while also keeping food fresher for longer.

Bans a part of the solution?

- In a 2022 survey of over 23,000 people across 34 countries, nearly 80% would support banning types of plastic that cannot be easily recycled.
- This would include a global ban on products and materials made from hard-to-recycle plastics.
- The EU has made some steps in this direction, having banned 10 single-use plastics products that not only blight Europe's beaches but contravene a circular economy model via which all disposable plastics in the EU will be reusable or recyclable by 2030.

IPCC releases synthesis report, calls for urgent climate action



Relevance: Prelims & Mains Paper III; Environment

Why in news?

- The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has released its Synthesis Report for the Sixth Assessment.
- The report emphasised the need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and adapt to human-caused climate change through “mainstream effective and equitable action” for a “liveable sustainable future for all.”

Details

- The Synthesis Report is a compilation of the main findings of the IPCC’s Sixth Assessment Report, based on results from three Working Groups (WGs):
 - • WG I evaluated the physical science basis of climate change,
 - • WG II evaluated the impacts, adaptation, and vulnerability, and
 - • WG III evaluated the mitigation
- The report highlights the urgency of drastically reducing the emission of greenhouse gasses and so limit rising global temperatures by 1.5 C from pre-industrial levels, set by the Paris Agreement.
- Despite the IPCC’s warnings in 2018, the increase in greenhouse gas emissions continued so much so that the global surface temperature has already warmed by 1.1 C over pre-industrial levels, leading to extreme and/or unpredictable weather events that risk human health, fortunes, and ecosystems.

Overall Suggestions

- The IPCC report which stressed on the need for financial resolution for a more equitable world proposes climate-resilient development. It will not only lessen the effects of climate change but also provide wider benefits.
- Access to clean energy, improving air quality to increasing employment opportunities, boosting healthcare through technology, and delivering equity are among the report's recommended goals to help adapt to climate change.
- The report also highlights the role of financial investments to achieve climate goals and encouraged public funding through central banks, govt and financial regulators to reduce emissions, scale up climate resilience, and protect low-income and marginalised communities.

Suggestions for India

- As per authors of this report, India, which has a large vulnerable population, needs to prioritise grants and policies that focusses on adapting to the effects of climate change.
- India's priority should be to minimise loss and damage in terms of lives, livelihood and biodiversity, and accelerate equitable action mitigation and adaptation.
- As a developing country, India can lower its per-capita emissions through energy efficiency policies already being implemented in almost every sector.
- It can also decarbonise the energy sector by using cleaner options like solar and renewable energy.

U.P resident sheltering Sarus crane gets booked under the Wildlife Protection Act



Relevance: Prelims; Environment

Why in news?

- Recently, Mohammad Arif, a 35-year-old man from Mandkha, Uttar Pradesh, was booked under the Wildlife Protection Act (WPA) 1972, for “illegally” keeping and nursing an injured Sarus crane (*Grus Antigone*) he found in his village.
- The Sarus crane is usually found in wetlands and is the state bird of Uttar Pradesh. Standing at 152-156 cm, it is the world’s tallest flying bird.

What is the Wildlife Protection Act?

- WPA came into force on Sept. 9, 1972, to “provide for the protection” of wild animals, birds and plants to ensure the “ecological and environmental security of the country.”
- It aims to conserve protected species in two main ways: firstly, by prohibiting their hunting and secondly by protecting their habitat through the creation and regulation of sanctuaries, national parks, reserves, etc.
- The Act prohibits capturing or hunting any species of animals listed under Schedules I-IV, barring a few exceptions such as hunting a diseased or dangerous animal or bird constituting a threat to human life or property or for scientific research or management.

Listed Schedules

- The Wildlife Protection Act protects wild and captive animals or birds which belong to a species listed under Schedules I-IV.
- Species falling under Schedules I and II are classified as “Strictly Protected Species.”
- Animals such as the Black Buck, Black-Necked Crane, Hooded Crane, Siberian White Crane, Wild Yak, and the Andaman Wild Pig fall under Schedule I.
- Whereas, the common Langur, chameleon, and King Cobra fall under Schedule II.
- Schedule III includes Chital, wild pigs, Hyaena hyaena, and the Nilgai. The Sarus crane falls under Schedule IV of the Act.

Provisions for protection

- Species mentioned under Schedules III and IV of the Wildlife Protection Act are governed by Sections 44, 48, and 49, which relate to the prohibition on dealings in trophy and animal articles without a license, purchase of animals by a licensee, and restriction on transportation of wildlife.
- Section 48 of the Act specifically states that any wild animal or animal article can be transported only after obtaining permission from the Chief Wildlife Warden or any other officer authorised by the State Government on their behalf.
- While no hunting is allowed of species listed under Schedules III, IV, and Part I of Schedule II, Section 44 provides for issuing licenses to taxidermists, eating houses (hotels or restaurants), and dealers in animal articles, preserved animal parts or trophies, uncured trophies (whole or any unpreserved part of an animal), captive animals, and snake venom of such species.

Penalties for violations

- As per **Section 51** of the WPA Act, **any person who contravenes any provision of this Act**, except those on trade, commerce, and taxidermy of certain animals and the prohibition on teasing animals in a zoo having separate penalties, **shall be punished with up to three years imprisonment or fine up to Rs. 25,000 rupees or both.**
- However, according to the **latest amendment to the 1972 Act enacted on August 2, 2022, which is yet to come into force**, the fine was increased to one lakh rupees. If the offence relates to animals under the first two Schedules, imprisonment can be between 3 to 7 years, with or without a fine of Rs 10,000, which will increase to Rs. 25,000 after the 2022 Amendment.

State govts' powers

- In 1976, with the advent of the 42nd Amendment Act, the subject of **"Forests and Protection of Wild Animals and Birds"** was transferred from State to **Concurrent List**. However, state govts still enjoy a host of powers under the WPA, 1972.
- Section 4 allows them to appoint a Chief Wildlife Warden alongside wildlife wardens, honorary wildlife wardens, and other officers and employees.
- In addition, Section 6 empowers them to constitute a State Board for Wild Life, consisting of the CM as chairperson, the Minister in charge of Forests and Wildlife as the vice chairperson, and at least three members of the State legislature, among others.
- State govts can also add or delete any entry to or from any Schedule or transfer any entry from one part of a Schedule to another, provided that any such alteration made by the State Government is done with the previous consent of the Centre, under Section 61.

The 2022 Amendment

- The 2022 amendment seeks to implement the provisions of CITES, an international agreement between governments ensuring international trade of wild animals and plant species does not threaten their survival.
- Importantly, the Amendment seeks to reduce the number of schedules from VI to IV, whereby Schedule V, for vermin or animals that destroy food crops, will be done away with.
- The revised Act also accords greater powers to the Centre concerning the export, import, regulation, prohibition, and trade of plant or animal species, through a designated Management Authority.
- Further, the exemption under Section 43 of the 1972 Act was amended to allow for the transfer of elephants for religious and other purposes, including commercial purposes, by a person having a valid certificate of ownership subject to terms and conditions as may be prescribed by the Central Govt.

SCIENCE
&
TECHNOLOGY

What is Biotransformation technology?



Relevance: Prelims & Mains Paper III; Science & Technology

Why in news?

- In an encouraging development, a UK-based startup claims to have developed a technology that could alter the state of plastics and make them biodegradable.
- The company calls the process “biotransformation”.
- It claims the technology would digest the plastic packaging waste naturally with the help of microbes and biodegrade the waste without leaving behind any microplastics.

Biotransformation tech

- This tech was co-developed by Imperial College, London and a Britain-based startup, Polymateria.
- Plastics made using this technology are given a pre-programmed time during which the manufactured material looks and feels like conventional plastics without compromising on quality.
- Once the plastic expires and is exposed to the external environment, it self-destructs and biotransforms into bioavailable wax. This wax is then consumed by microorganisms, converting waste into water, CO₂, and biomass.

Why do we need it?

- In 2019, plastic packaging waste from e-commerce firms was estimated at over a billion kg worldwide, according to Statista.
- As per a research, Amazon generated nearly 210 million kgs of plastic from packaging waste in 2019.
- Meanwhile, India is generating 3.5 billion kgs of plastic waste annually. The per capita plastic waste generation has doubled in the past five years. 1/3rd of it comes from packaging waste.

Generative AI, the technology behind OpenAI's ChatGPT



Relevance: Prelims & Mains Paper III; Science & Technology

What is generative AI?

- Like other forms of artificial intelligence, **generative AI learns how to take actions from past data.**
- **It creates brand new content** – a text, an image, even computer code – based on that training, instead of simply categorizing or identifying data like other AI.
- **The most famous generative AI application is ChatGPT, a chatbot that Microsoft-backed OpenAI released in 2022.**
- The AI powering it is known as a large language model because it uses a text prompt and from that writes a human-like response.
- GPT-4, a newer model that OpenAI announced recently, is “multimodal”. It can perceive not only text but images as well.

Benefits

- Businesses are already putting generative AI to work. It is helpful for creating a first draft of marketing copy.
- A company named CarMax has used a version of OpenAI's technology to summarize thousands of customer reviews and help shoppers decide what used car to buy.
- Generative AI can also take notes during a virtual meeting. It can draft and personalize emails, and can create slide presentations.

Concerns



- There is also some concern about AI's potential abuse.
- Schools have complained about students submitting AI-drafted essays. This eliminates the hard work required for them to learn.
- Cybersecurity researchers have also expressed concern that **generative AI could allow bad actors, even govts to produce far more disinformation than before.**
- **AI itself is prone to making mistakes. It makes factual inaccuracies called "hallucinations," and responses that seem inconsistent.** As a result, companies want to test this technology before making it widely available.
- **Elon Musk, one of the co-founders of OpenAI (he left the company in 2018) has also expressed concerns about the future of AI.**
- He has **asked for a regulatory authority to ensure the development of the technology serves public interest.**

NASA unveils a new spacesuit for its upcoming moon missions



Relevance: Prelims & Mains Paper III; Science & Technology

Why in news?

- For the upcoming Artemis missions, NASA's first attempt at landing astronauts on the moon since 1972, the spacesuit used will see a significant upgrade.
- The suit comes from Axiom Space, a private company based out of Houston, Texas, though it incorporates design elements used in previous suits by NASA.
- It will be worn during the Artemis III mission, the program's first moon landing, which is scheduled for 2025.
- It is called the AxEMU (Axiom Extravehicular Mobility Unit).

What does a spacesuit do?

- Without a spacesuit, humans will not survive for long in the harsh conditions of outer space.
- First, spacesuits protect the human body from the extreme temperature fluctuations of space. In absence of an atmosphere, areas which receive direct sunlight become extremely hot whereas areas in the dark are frigid.
- Second, spacesuits also provide astronauts with a constant supply of air and optimum air pressure around their body.
- Third, spacesuits protect astronauts from space radiation, as well as micrometeorites and other particles moving across space.
- On the lunar surface, suits also protect astronauts from lunar dust. It tends to corrode everything it comes into contact with and can potentially cause lung diseases.



Issues with older space suits

- The **Apollo missions (1961-72)** were a landmark achievement in space exploration. **The spacesuits worn in the mission were also revolutionary for the time.**
- For instance, They incorporated boots ideal for walking on the lunar surface. Infact, **little has changed in the fundamentals of suits** for spacewalking that are used in the International Space Station.
- However, **these suits are rigid and uncomfortable to be in.** Astronauts struggle against the stiffness. This is why Armstrong and Aldrin soon discovered that “skipping” was easier than “walking” on the lunar surface, as it did not require bending knees.
- Long handles were used in various tools as bending the waist was nearly impossible, though even holding things is difficult due to the gloves worn.

Improvements made in the new spacesuit

- The **most noticeable upgrade was in the mobility offered by the new spacesuits.**
- Furthermore, the **large clear bubble around the head provides a much wider range of visibility as well as lighting**, which will be important when astronauts step into shadowed craters near the lunar south pole, where NASA hopes to study water ice.
- The **headpiece also has a mount for a high-definition camera.**
- Another important feature of the suit is its **design which fits a broader range of body types** comfortably, with provisions to make more specific adjustments in fit.
- As far as protection goes, the increased mobility has not come at its cost. The AxEMU has been specifically **designed to better deal with lunar dust.**

Muscope: The world's smallest microscope



Relevance: Prelims; Science & Technology

Why in news?

- Researchers from Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), Hyderabad have developed Muscope, the world's smallest microscope, that will help in unravelling the mysteries of the microscopic world, including blood cells and disease-causing pathogens.

About Muscope

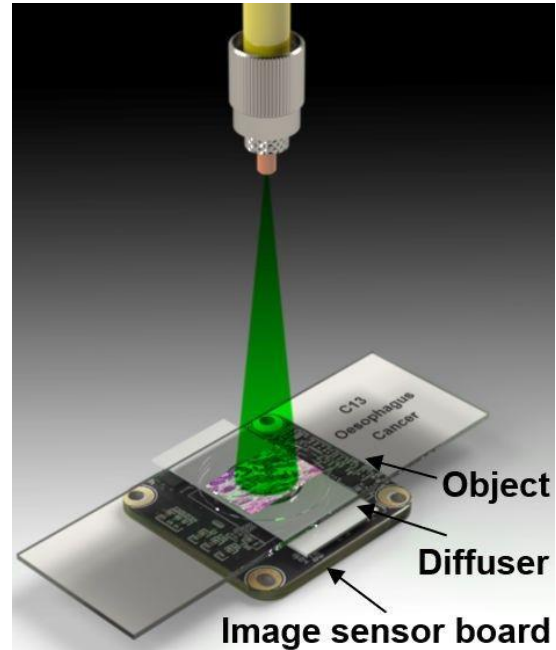
- Muscope is an on-chip microscope. It is the smallest microscope — extending a few millimetre — capable of high resolution imaging.
- It can image up to one milli micron diameter with off-the-shelf electronic components.
- It has no purely optical or mechanical components and can be assembled like a circuit board. All its operations can be done over electrical interfaces.
- It can be software controlled — locally or remotely — and can be tuned online.
- Also, because of its small size, multiple Muscopes can be embedded in a small area, and their sizes can be tuned according to the desired field-of-view.
- Muscope uses common off the shelf components, making it low cost and robust.

SMALL WONDER

- Muscope is an on-chip microscope
- It can image up to one milli micron diameter with just off-the-shelf electronic components
- Muscope is the smallest microscope — extending only a few millimetre (mm) in any direction — capable of high resolution imaging

How Muscope works

- Muscope works by replacing the extended light source with state-of-the-art micro LED displays.
- Micro LEDs are micron-size LEDs available in various colors.
- The underlying technology allows high brightness so that even a single micro LED is adequate for imaging.
- **Broadly, muscope comprises two electronic chips- image sensor chip and micro LED display chips. A driver board interfaces micro led display with a single board computer.**
- The display of muscope consists of micro LEDs arranged on a rectangular array. The micro LEDs can be individually switched on, and they are very bright.



Bio-computers'

Relevance: Prelims; Science & Technology



Why in news?

- Scientists at Johns Hopkins University (JHU) recently outlined a plan for a potentially revolutionary new area of research called “organoid intelligence”, which aims to create “biocomputers”: where brain cultures grown in the lab are coupled to real-world sensors and input/output devices.
- The scientists expect the technology to harness the processing power of the brain and understand the biological basis of human cognition, learning, and various neurological disorders.

Premise of technology

- Understanding how the human brain works has been a difficult challenge. Traditionally, researchers have used rat brains to investigate various human neurological disorders.
- While rats provide a simpler and more accessible system to study the brain, there are several differences in structure and function and obvious differences in the cognitive capacities of rodents and humans.
- In a quest to develop systems that are more relevant to humans, scientists are building 3D cultures of brain tissue in the lab, also called brain organoids. These “mini-brains” (with a size of up to 4 mm) are built using human stem cells and capture many structural and functional features of a developing human brain.
- Researchers are now using them to study human brain development and test drugs to see how they respond.

What is the new 'bio-computer'?



- The JHU researchers' scheme will combine brain organoids with modern computing methods to create "bio-computers".
- They have announced plans to couple the organoids with machine learning by growing the organoids inside flexible structures affixed with multiple electrodes (similar to the ones used to take EEG readings from the brain).
- These structures will be able to record the firing patterns of the neurons and also deliver electrical stimuli, to mimic sensory stimuli. The response pattern of the neurons and their effect on human behaviour or biology will then be analysed by machine-learning techniques.

'Safe harbour' in Digital India Bill

Relevance: Prelims; S & T



New law for the Internet

- Currently, the Information Technology Act, 2000 is the core framework that regulates entities on the Internet.
- However, the law needs an update since it was framed for an Internet era that looked very different from the Internet of today.
- Government has said that the core objectives of the new Digital India Bill are to ensure an open and safe Internet in the country to ensure users' rights and reduce risks for them online; accelerate the growth of technology innovation.
- The Government will hold extensive consultations before finalising the Bill. It is non-committal about timelines around when the Bill can be finalised.

Safe harbour

- Safe harbour – as prescribed under Section 79 of the IT Act, 2000 – is legal immunity that online intermediaries enjoy against content posted by users on their platforms.
- This is available as long as these platforms abide by certain due diligence requirements, such as censoring content when asked by the government or courts.
- The concept originally came from Section 230 of the United States' Communications Decency Act, which has been termed "one of the foundational laws behind the modern Internet".

Other aspects of Digital India Bill



- The proposed law will also regulate a range of crimes that the government thinks are unique to the online space.
- Government has said that “the weaponisation of misinformation” under the garb of free speech will not be entertained and will be regulated under the Bill. Other harms include cyberbullying, doxxing, and identity theft.
- An effective adjudicatory mechanism will also be explored under the Digital India Bill. The mechanism should be easily accessible, deliver timely remedies to citizens, resolve cyber disputes, and create cyber jurisprudence going forward, he said.

Relevance: Prelims & Mains Paper III; Science & Technology

Why in news?

- AI powerhouse **OpenAI** announced **GPT-4**, the next big update to the technology that powers **ChatGPT** and Microsoft Bing, the search engine using the tech.
- GPT-4 is supposedly **bigger, faster, and more accurate than ChatGPT**.
- So much so, that it **even clears several top examinations with flying colours**, like the Uniform Bar Exam for those wanting to practice as lawyers in the US.
- **Where GPT-3.5-powered ChatGPT only accepted text inputs, GPT-4 can also use images to generate captions and analyses**. But that's only the tip of the iceberg.

How is GPT-4 different from GPT-3?

- ***GPT-4 can 'see' images now:** GPT-4 is a large **multimodal model** created by OpenAI and announced on March 14, 2023. **Multimodal models can encompass more than just text – GPT-4 also accepts images as input.**
- Meanwhile, GPT-3 and GPT-3.5 only operated in one modality, text, meaning users could only ask questions by typing them out.
- ***GPT-4 can process a lot more information at a time:** ChatGPT's GPT-3.5 model could handle 4,096 tokens or around 8,000 words but GPT-4 pumps those numbers up to 32,768 tokens or around 64,000 words.
- ***GPT-4 has an improved accuracy:** It will be a lot harder to trick GPT-4 into producing **undesirable outputs such as hate speech and misinformation.**

How is GPT-4 different from GPT-3?

- ***GPT-4 is better at understanding languages that are not English:** GPT-4 is more multilingual and OpenAI has demonstrated that it outperforms GPT-3.5 and other LLMs by accurately answering thousands of multiple-choice across **26 languages**.
- ***Human Type performance:** OpenAI says that GPT-4 also “**exhibits human-level performance on various professional and academic benchmarks**.”
- The language model can pass a simulated bar exam with a score around the top 10 per cent of test takers and can solve difficult problems with greater accuracy thanks to its broader general knowledge and problem-solving abilities.

Can you try GPT-4 right now?

- GPT-4 has already been integrated into products like Duolingo, Stripe, and Khan Academy for varying purposes. While it's yet to be made available for all for free, a \$20 per month ChatGPT Plus subscription can fetch immediate access.
- The free tier of ChatGPT, meanwhile, continues to be based on GPT-3.5.

New data links Raccoon dogs to Coronavirus



Relevance: Prelims; Science & Technology

Why in news?

- A new analysis of genetic data collected from the Huanan Seafood Market in Wuhan, China, has linked coronavirus to raccoon dogs.
- This adds evidence to the belief that the pandemic might have originated from the infected animals sold at the site.
- The genetic data was gathered from swabs taken from in and around the market back in Jan. 2020, shortly after the Chinese government had shut down the market because of suspicions that it was linked to the outbreak of a new virus.

What are raccoon dogs?

- Raccoon dogs are neither dogs nor raccoons. They belong to the canid family and are closely related to foxes. They are the only canids that hibernate during the winter.
- These animals, weighing around 16 pounds on average, are omnivores and relish food sources such as rodents and berries.
- Raccoon dogs are originally from East Asia and are commonly found in parts of China, Korea and Japan, where they are known as tanuki.
- They are also found in Europe, where they were first brought in by fur traders in the 1920s.



Sold in Wuhan

- For decades, these animals have been farmed for their fur.
- Every year millions of them are killed in China, which is a leading producer of raccoon dog pelts. The US buys a huge share of the products.
- To meet this huge demand, sellers raise raccoon dogs in small and crowded facilities while transporting them in small cages, often stacked with those of other animals.
- This serves as a perfect breeding ground for the spread of different diseases.

Linked to other diseases

- Raccoon dogs and related mammals sold for food at a live animal market in China in 2003 were found to carry a coronavirus similar to the virus found in humans during a SARS coronavirus outbreak at the time.
- But this doesn't mean they are the natural reservoir for coronaviruses. Scientists believe there is a possibility that the tested raccoon dogs, including those in the Wuhan market, might have picked up the virus from bats or another species.

India sets its sights on developing a 6G network



Relevance: Prelims & Mains Paper III; Science & Technology

Why in news?

- PM Narendra Modi has unveiled a vision document for rollout of 6G communications technology in India by 2030.
- To fund research and innovation on 6G, the document recommended the creation of a corpus of Rs 10,000 crore.

What is 6G?

- While, technically, 6G does not exist today, it has been conceived as a far superior technology promising internet speeds up to 100 times faster than 5G.
- As opposed to 5G, which at its peak can offer internet speeds up to 10 gigabits per second, 6G promises to offer ultra-low latency with speeds up to 1 terabits per second.
- 6G use cases will include remote-controlled factories, constantly communicating self-driven cars and smart wearables taking inputs directly from human senses.
- However, while 6G promises growth, it will simultaneously have to be balanced with sustainability since most 6G supporting communication devices will be battery-powered and can have a significant carbon footprint.

India's immediate action plan

- The govt has set up a Bharat 6G project and appointed an apex council to oversee the project and focus on issues such as standardisation, identification of the spectrum for 6G usage, create an ecosystem for devices and systems, and figure out finances for research and development, among other things.
- The apex council will facilitate and finance research and development, design and development of 6G technologies by Indian start-ups, companies, research bodies and universities.
- Notably, South Korea, Japan and China have also outlined their plans to launch 6G in the next few years.

SOCIAL ISSUES

India's stand on Same sex Marriage

Relevance: Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance



Why in news?

- On March 13, a Bench led by Chief Justice of India D.Y. Chandrachud referred petitions to legally recognise same-sex marriages to a Constitution Bench of five judges of the Supreme Court.
- The Court has listed the case for final arguments on April 18.

What is the case?

- **The Court has been hearing multiple petitioners' requests for legal recognition of same-sex marriages under a special law.**
- Initially, it took up the case of two partners who said the non-recognition of same-sex marriage amounted to discrimination that strikes at the root of "dignity and self-fulfilment" of LGBTQIA+ couples.
- The petitioners cited the Special Marriage Act, 1954, which provides a civil marriage for couples who cannot marry under their personal law, and appealed to the Court to extend the right to the LGBTQIA+ community, by making the "marriage between any two persons" gender neutral.

Need for recognition

- Even if LGBTQIA+ couples may live together, legally, they are on a slippery slope. **They do not enjoy the rights married couples do.**
- **For example, LGBTQIA+ couples cannot adopt children or have a child by surrogacy; they do not have automatic rights to inheritance, maintenance and tax benefits; after a partner passes away, they cannot avail of benefits like pension or compensation.**

View point of Courts

- The Courts, leaning on Article 21 that guarantees the right to life and liberty, have time and again ruled in favour of inter-faith and inter-caste marriages, directing the police and other rights organisations to give them protection when they were threatened by parents or society, pointing out that “all adults have the right to marry a person of their choice.”
- In Navtej Singh Johar (2018), when homosexuality was decriminalised, the Court said, “Members of the LGBT[QIA+] community are entitled to the benefit of an equal citizenship, without discrimination, and to the equal protection of law”; “The choice of whom to partner, the ability to find fulfilment in sexual intimacies and the right not to be subjected to discriminatory behaviour are intrinsic to the constitutional protection of sexual orientation.”
- Last November, the Court transferred same-sex cases pending before several High Courts to itself.

Centre's stand

- In its affidavit filed in the Supreme Court, the government said that the “notion of marriage itself necessarily and inevitably presupposes a union between two persons of the opposite sex. This definition is socially, culturally and legally ingrained into the very idea and concept of marriage and ought not to be disturbed or diluted by judicial interpretation.”
- The government also said that decriminalisation of Section 377 IPC does not give rise to a claim to seek recognition for same-sex marriage.
- After the K.S. Puttaswamy verdict (2017) which upheld the right to privacy and Navtej Singh Johar (2018) that decriminalised homosexuality, there was hope that same-sex marriages would be legalised, but that has not been the case, prompting many couples to move court.

Executive and judiciary on opposing sides

- With the government saying that the concept of marriage “ought not to be disturbed or diluted by judicial interpretation,” and the Court leaning towards granting equal rights, including marriage of same-sex couples, citing the Constitution and changing norms, it is clear that the two organs of the state are not in agreement on this.

Blood donation by gay, transgender people



Relevance: Prelims; Social Issues

Why in news?

- A member of the transgender community moved the Supreme Court seeking to strike down the prohibition on gay and transgender people donating blood in the country.
- The Centre justified their exclusion by asserting that their inclusion in the “at-risk” category for HIV, Hepatitis B, or C infections is premised on scientific evidence.
- The ban on blood donations by gay people was introduced in the 1980s — when information available on the detection and transmission of HIV/AIDS was much less than today.
- The ban applied to all sexually active gay men, as well as sexually active bisexual men and transgender women who had sex with men.

Guidelines

- In India, clause 12 of the ‘Guidelines for Blood Donor Selection & Blood Donor Referral, 2017’ mandates the donor to be free from diseases that are transmissible by blood transfusion, and not “at risk for HIV, Hepatitis B or C infections,” such as transgender, gay people, and female sex workers among others.
- The fitness of the individual for blood donation is determined by the medical officer.
- Moreover, another clause still permanently defers those “at risk for HIV infection”, including gay and transgender people, from donating blood in the country.
- Issued by the National Blood Transfusion Council (NBTC) and the National Aids Control Organisation in October 2017, these guidelines were approved in an attempt to bring in a Blood Transfusion Service which offers a “safe, sufficient and timely supply of blood and blood components to those in need”.

Arguments by both parties



- Member of transgender community argued that exclusion based on one's gender identity and sexual orientation is "completely arbitrary, unreasonable, and discriminatory and also unscientific.
- On the other hand, the Centre contended that these issues fall within the ambit of the executive and are required to be viewed from the perspective of public health, and not from that of individual rights.
- It is to be noted that the decision of the Supreme Court is pending on the matter.

INTERNAL SECURITY

NSA invoked against Amritpal and aides

Relevance: Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance



Why in news?

- National Security Act has been invoked in the case of Waris Punjab De chief Amritpal Singh.
- Amritpal Singh is absconding from the law. Raids have been conducted to apprehend and detain Amritpal Singh but he could not be detained so far and is absconding.
- Four aides of Singh – Gurmeet Singh Bukkanwala, Basant Singh, Bhagwant Singh alias Pardhan Mantri Bajek and Daljit Singh Kalsi – who were flown to a prison in Dibrugarh, Assam, have also been held under the Act.

National Security Act, 1980

- The National Security Act was passed by the Parliament in 1980. NSA “empowers the state to detain a person without a formal charge and without trial”.
- Under the Act, a person is taken into custody to prevent them from acting in any manner prejudicial to “the security of the state” or for “maintenance of the public order”.
- It is an administrative order passed either by the Divisional Commissioner or the District Magistrate (DM) – and not detention ordered by police based on specific allegations or for a specific violation of the law.

Detention without trial

- An individual can be detained without a charge for a maximum period of 12 months.
- The detained person can be held for 10 to 12 days in special circumstances without being told the charges against them.
- The law takes away an individual’s constitutional right to be produced before the magistrate within 24 hours, as is the case when the accused is in police custody.
- The detained person also does not have the right to move a bail application before a criminal court.

Grounds for detention

- NSA can be invoked to prevent a person from acting in any manner prejudicial to the defence of India, relations of India with foreign powers or the security of India.
- Among others, it can also be applied to prevent a person from acting in any manner prejudicial to the maintenance of supply and services essential to the community.

Protections available

- The Indian Constitution allows both preventive detention and the right of protection against arrest and detention in certain cases, enshrined under Article 22 of the Constitution.
- However, Article 22(3) provides that the rights available to an arrested person will not be applicable in case of preventive detention, thus an exception is carved out.
- One crucial procedural safeguard under the NSA is granted under Article 22(5), where all the detained persons have the right to make an effective representation before an independent advisory board, which consists of three members; and the board is chaired by a member who is, or has been, a judge of a high court.

India remains biggest arms importer



Relevance: Prelims & Mains Paper III; Internal Security

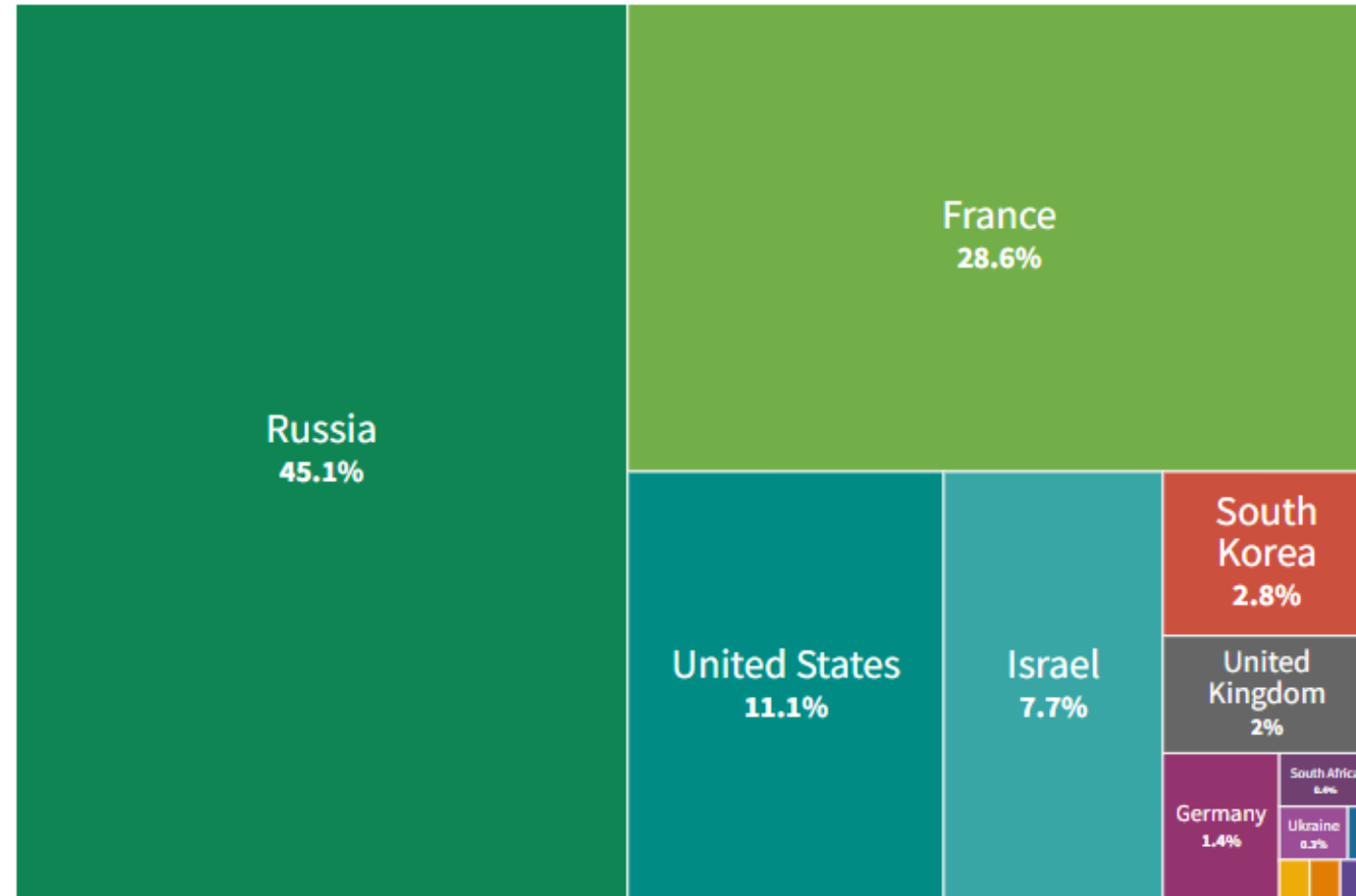
- With an 11% share of total global arms imports, India was the world's biggest importer of major arms in 2018–22, a position it has held for the period 1993–2022.
- It retained this position even though its arms imports dropped by 11% between 2013–17 and 2018–22, according to the Swedish Think Tank Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI).
- In terms of arms imports, India is followed by Saudi Arabia.

- Russia was the largest supplier of arms to India in both 2013–17 and 2018–22, but its share of total Indian arms imports fell from 64% to 45%.
- Russia was followed by France (29%) and the US (11%).
- At the same time, India was the third largest arms supplier to Myanmar after Russia and China accounting for 14% of its imports.

- India's tensions with Pakistan and China largely drive its demand for arms imports.
- The fall in India's imports can be attributed to several factors including India's slow and complex arms procurement process, efforts to diversify its arms suppliers, and attempts to replace imports with major arms that are designed and produced domestically.
- India's arms imports from France, which included 62 combat aircraft and four submarines, increased by 489% between 2013–17 and 2018–22.
- France therefore displaced the USA to become the second largest supplier to India in 2018–22.

- For the same period, arms imports by Pakistan increased by 14% between 2013–17 and 2018–22 and accounted for 3.7% of the global total with China supplying 77% of Pakistan’s arms imports in 2018–22.
- Overall, the U.S. share of global arms exports increased from 33% to 40% while Russia’s fell from 22% to 16%.

India's arms imports (2018 - 2022)



Source: SIPRI • THE HINDU GRAPHICS

GEOGRAPHY

The moon may get its own time zone



Relevance: Prelims; Geography

Time on the moon

- Since the dawn of the Space Age, the answer has been: It depends. For decades, lunar missions have operated on the time of the country that launched them.
- But with several lunar explorations heading for the launchpad, the European Space Agency (ESA) has deemed the current system unsustainable. The solution, the agency said last week, is a lunar time zone.

Need for time zone on moon

- The main objective of establishing a universal timekeeping system for the moon is to streamline contact among the various countries and entities, public and private, that are coordinating trips to and around the moon.
- The ESA said that a universal timekeeping system for the moon is needed, but that many details remain to be worked out. One of the questions that has yet to be settled, the agency said, was whether lunar time should be set on the moon or synchronized with Earth.
- Time on Earth is precisely tracked by atomic clocks, but synchronizing time on the moon is tricky because clocks run faster there, gaining around 56 microseconds, or millionths of a second, per day.
- Once a new lunar time zone is established, the methods used to create it will be useful for future space exploration.

Planned lunar missions



- The M1 lunar lander built by the Japanese company Ispace is set to arrive on the moon in April, when it will try to deploy a rover built by the United Arab Emirates; a robot built by Japan's space agency, JAXA; and other payloads.
- A six-legged cylindrical robot called the Nova-C lander, built by the Houston-based company Intuitive Machines, is expected to launch on SpaceX's Falcon 9 and land on the South Pole of the moon in June. Additional uncrewed missions will land by the end of the year.
- Those missions are happening as NASA prepares to send four astronauts into orbit around the moon next year. That mission will pave the way for the first crewed moon landing since Apollo 17 in December 1972, currently planned for 2025.

DISASTER MANAGEMENT

ISRO releases the Landslide Atlas of India



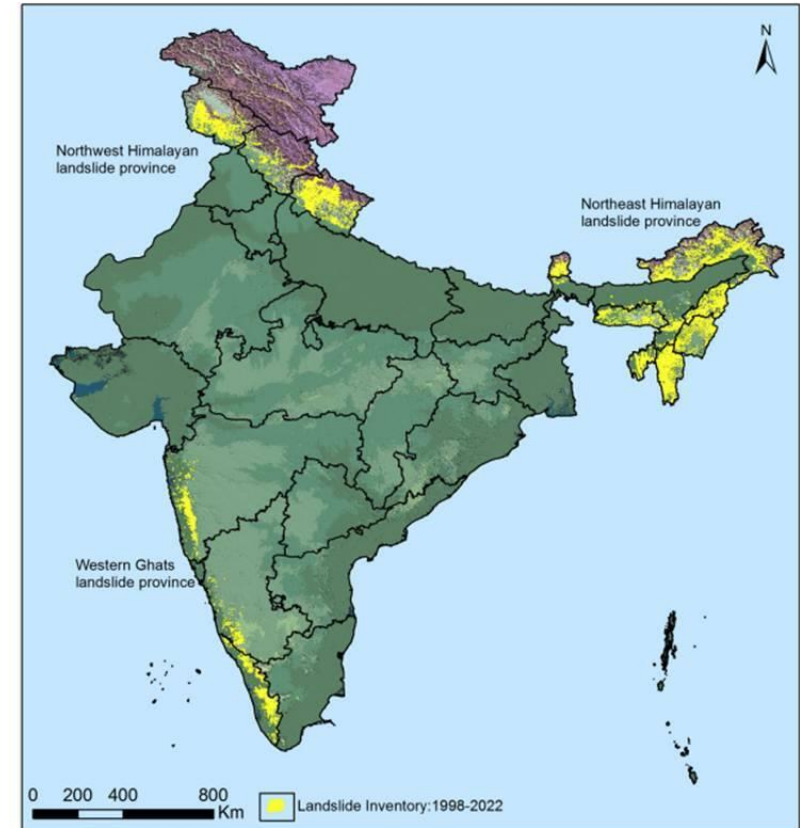
Relevance: Prelims & Mains Paper III; Disaster Management

Why in news?

- Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) recently released the Landslide Atlas of India, a detailed guide identifying landslide hotspots in the country.

What causes landslides?

- Landslides are natural disasters occurring mainly in mountainous terrains where there are conducive conditions of soil, rock, geology and slope.
- A sudden movement of rock, boulders, earth or debris down a slope is termed as a landslide.
- Natural causes that trigger it include heavy rainfall, earthquakes, snowmelting and undercutting of slopes due to flooding.
- Landslides can also be caused by anthropogenic activities such as excavation, cutting of hills and trees, excessive infrastructure development, and overgrazing by cattle.
- In India, rainfall-induced landslide events are more common.



Landslides classification

- Landslides are broadly classified based on the type of materials involved (rock, debris, soil, loose mud), type of movement of the material (fall, topple, slide, rotational slide or translational slide), and type of flow of the material.
- ISRO's National Remote Sensing Centre (NRSC), Hyderabad, has created a database of landslide-prone regions of India based on events during 1998 – 2022, primarily along the Himalayas and the Western Ghats.
- In addition to aerial images, high resolution satellite images were used to study the landslides over the past 25 years.

Proneness of India

- India is considered among the top five landslide-prone countries globally, where at least one death per 100 sq km is reported in a year due to a landslide event.
- Rainfall variability pattern is the single biggest cause for landslides in the country, with the Himalayas and the Western Ghats remaining highly vulnerable.
- Excluding snow covered areas, approximately 12.6 per cent of the country's geographical land area (0.42 million sq km) is prone to landslides.
- Uttarakhand, Kerala, Jammu and Kashmir, Mizoram, Tripura, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh reported the highest number of landslides during 1998 – 2022.

Rank	District, State	Rank	District, State
1	Rudraprayag, Uttarakhand	16	Mandi, Himachal Pradesh
2	Tehri Garhwal, Uttarakhand	17	Udhampur, Jammu and Kashmir
3	Thrissur, Kerala	18	Idukki, Kerala
4	Rajauri, Jammu and Kashmir	19	Chamoli, Uttarakhand
5	Palakkad, Kerala	20	West district, Sikkim
6	Poonch, Jammu and Kashmir	21	Uttarkashi, Uttarakhand
7	Malappuram, Kerala	22	Cachar, Assam
8	South districts, Sikkim	23	Garhwal, Uttarakhand
9	East district, Sikkim	24	Kottayam, Kerala
10	Kozhikode, Kerala	25	Hamirpur, Himachal Pradesh
11	Imphal west, Manipur	26	Kannur, Kerala
12	Kodagu, Karnataka	27	Pulwama, Jammu and Kashmir
13	Wayanad, Kerala	28	Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala
14	Jammu, Jammu and Kashmir	29	Dehradun, Uttarakhand
15	Ernakulam, Kerala	30	Bilaspur, Himachal Pradesh

MISCELLANEOUS

Rising Flu cases

Relevance: Prelims



Why in news?

- With cases of influenza on the rise, the Centre took a review meeting last week. The cases are due to the H3N2 subtype of influenza virus.
- As many as 3,038 laboratory-confirmed cases of influenza were reported across the country till March 9. This is not unusually high.
- The actual numbers, however, are likely to be higher because not everyone gets tested for flu and the result of everyone who does isn't always reported to the government.

Reasons for hike

- Officials and experts have attributed the current increase in cases to a number of reasons.
- One, this is the flu season. India usually sees two peaks every year – once between January and March and again post-monsoon between August and October. Changing seasons create the perfect environment for the virus to spread.
- Two, fewer flu infections during the pandemic have left large sections of the population with lowered immunity.
- Three, the flu virus is very prone to changing its structure. This change means that we see an increase in flu cases usually every other year.
- Four, India has a huge burden of chronic conditions like diabetes and heart disease even among the young, which are risk factors for severe disease.
- And, unlike Covid-19, the yearly flu shot is not readily available in government set-ups and not many take it.

Can people die of flu?

- Just like Covid-19, it causes mild symptoms like fever, cough, and runny nose in most, but **can lead to complications like pneumonia and acute respiratory distress syndrome that can kill.**
- **Very young children, old people, people with co-morbidities** such as heart disease, diabetes, and kidney disease, pregnant women, and **those with a weakened immune system**, like people who have undergone transplants, **are at a higher risk of getting severe disease.**

What is H3N2?

- There are **two main sub-types of Influenza viruses – Type A and Type B.** Influenza A encompasses sub-types such as H1N1 and H3N2, while there are **two lineages of Influenza B** called Victoria and Yamagata.
- Usually, **Influenza A is associated with more severe disease** and deaths than type B.

Is it new Virus?

- No, it is one of the sub-types of Influenza virus and **has been known to cause seasonal infections**, just like the 2009 pandemic sub-type H1N1 that has been in circulation since.
- In fact, the sub-type H3N2 had caused a flu pandemic in 1968.

Flu shot updated every year

- The sub-types to be included in the yearly **flu shot are updated** by the World Health Organisation **twice a year depending on the types in circulation.**
- There is a need to continuously update the vaccine because of the constantly **evolving nature of influenza viruses.**
- It can undergo an “**antigenic drift**” to **acquire mutations** that change the part that cause the body to illicit an immune response.
- It can also undergo “**antigenic shift**”, where there is an **abrupt, major change that leads to a new protein structure of the virus.** This results in a new virus from the same family infecting humans or a virus that infects animals to jump over to humans.
- These shifts **can lead to pandemics** such as the one in 2009 or even the Spanish flu of 1918.
- The **flu vaccine usually contains four sub-types – two influenza A (with H1N1 and H3N2 recommended for 2022-23) and two Influenza B.**

Steps to prevent infections

- Influenza **spreads when people inhale infected droplets released by a patient when they cough or sneeze.** These droplets can also survive on surfaces and can spread if a person touches the surface and then touches their eyes, nose, or mouth.
- The transmission can be prevented by **ensuring that the mouth and nose are covered when you sneeze or cough and washing your hands frequently.**
- It is **best to remain home when sick and drink plenty of fluids.**
- **Masks may also be used** in crowded places to prevent infection.

H3N2 virus

Relevance: Prelims



Why in news?

- India has recorded deaths of two people, one each in Karnataka and Haryana, due to the Influenza A subtype H3N2 virus.
- It added that around 90 cases of this virus have been reported across the country.

H3N2 virus

- Influenza viruses, which cause the infectious disease known as flu, are of four different types: A, B, C and D. Influenza A is further classified into different subtypes and one of them is the H3N2.
- Its symptoms are similar to that of any other flu. They include cough, fever, body ache and headache, sore throat, a runny or stuffy nose and extreme fatigue. Nausea, vomiting and diarrhoea have been seen in very few cases.
- According to the Indian Medical Association (IMA), an infection caused by H3N2 generally lasts for five to seven days and the fever starts going away after three days. However, the coughing can persist for up to three weeks.

Risk and Prevention

- As per the IMA, this virus usually preys on individuals below the age of 15 years or above 50 years of age.
- Children and those with co-morbidities like asthma, diabetes, heart disease, weakened immune systems and neurological or neurodevelopmental conditions are at a higher risk.
- Self-hygiene is the best way to thwart the spread of H3N2. Washing hands before eating or touching your face, nose or mouth, carrying pocket sanitiser, and avoiding people already infected with the virus or any other seasonal flu are some of the steps one can take to make sure they don't fall sick due to the H3N2 infection.

NITI Aayog's new CEO



Relevance: Prelims

- Shri B.V.R. Subrahmanyam joined as Chief Executive Officer of NITI Aayog recently.
- An Indian Administrative Service Officer of 1987 batch (Chhattisgarh cadre), Shri Subrahmanyam has held important assignments over the last three decades in Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, and Jammu & Kashmir, along with a stint at The World Bank.
- He has been Secretary in the Ministry of Commerce & Industry, Chief Secretary, Jammu & Kashmir, Principal Secretary, Government of Chhattisgarh, and has held positions in the Prime Minister's Office.

Indonesia moving its capital from Jakarta to Borneo



Relevance: Prelims

Why in news?

- Jakarta is congested, polluted, prone to earthquakes and rapidly sinking into the Java Sea. Now the government is in the process of leaving, moving Indonesia's capital to the island of Borneo.

Reason for moving Capital

- Jakarta is home to about 10 million people and three times that number in the greater metropolitan area.
- It has been described as the world's most rapidly sinking city, and at the current rate, it is estimated that one-third of the city could be submerged by 2050.
- The main cause is uncontrolled ground water extraction, but it has been exacerbated by the rising Java Sea due to climate change.
- Its air and groundwater are heavily polluted, it floods regularly and its streets are so clogged that it's estimated congestion costs the economy \$4.5 billion a year.

New capital

- President Joko Widodo's plan to establish the city of Nusantara — an old Javanese term meaning “archipelago” — will entail constructing government buildings and housing from scratch.
- Indonesian officials say the new metropolis will be a “sustainable forest city” that puts the environment at the heart of the development and aims to be carbon-neutral by 2045.

Environmental impact

- Environmentalists warn that the capital will cause massive deforestation, threaten the habitat of endangered species such as orangutans and imperil the homes of Indigenous communities.
- For instance, Skeptics worry, however, about the environmental impact of building a sprawling 256,000-hectare (990-square-mile) city down in Borneo's East Kalimantan province, which is home to orangutans, leopards and a wide array of other wildlife.
- Also, **At least five villages with more than 100 Indigenous Balik people are relocating because of the construction**, with more villages expected to be uprooted as the building site expands.



US approves Willow oil drilling project in Alaska



Relevance: Prelims; Environment

Why in news?

- The United States President Joe Biden's administration formally approved a controversial oil drilling project in Alaska known as Willow, drawing fierce criticism from environmentalists and climate change activists.
- Analysts suggest that the formal approval came due to a variety of reasons, including the global energy crisis aggravated by the Russia-Ukraine war, and the project is an opportunity to usher in prosperity in the state.

Willow project

- Led by oil giant ConocoPhillips, the Willow Master Development Plan is an \$8 billion proposal to drill oil and gas in Alaska's National Petroleum Reserve — a 23 million-acre land owned by the federal government of the US.
- The project would yield more than 600 million barrels of oil over 30 years, a volume nearly 1.5 times the current supply in the US Strategic Petroleum Reserve.
- ConocoPhillips claims that the plan could generate up to \$17 billion for the federal, state and local governments and create as many as 2,500 jobs.

Environmental impact

- The "proposed site as "critical" to local wildlife, supporting "thousands of migratory birds".
- Moreover, the project termed a "carbon bomb", would create about 260 million tons of greenhouse gases over its lifespan, the equivalent of developing around 70 new coal-fired power plants.

Oscar win for 'The Elephant Whisperers'



Relevance: Prelims

Why in news?

- Indian documentary **The Elephant Whisperers** emerged as the winner in the Best Documentary Short category at the **95th Academy Awards**, among the five films nominated.
- Directed by **Kartiki Gonsalves** and produced by **Sikhya Entertainment**, the film premiered on November 9, 2022, and was **released on Netflix** December 8, 2022.

About documentary

- The documentary shows the lives of **Bomman and Bellie**, two Indigenous people entrusted with the care of two orphaned baby elephants, **Raghu and Ammu**. It portrays the bond between the elephants and the couple as they nurture the calves.
- The film also **highlights the stunning beauty of Tamil Nadu's Mudumalai National Park** and gives a peek into the lives of the **Kattunayakan**, an indigenous community that inhabits parts of South India.

Why it matters

- Using the national park and the **Theppakadu Elephant camp** as the backdrop, **the film delves into themes of conservation, human-animal conflict and coexistence between nature and humans.**
- It also emphasises the importance of involving indigenous communities in the process of conservation.
- The documentary also sheds light on the incessant human-animal conflict, with **Raghu losing his mother to electrocution and Bellie losing her partner to a tiger attack.**
- The film is also the **first Indian production that has won an Academy Award for the Documentary Short category.**

Naatu Naatu, The Elephant Whisperers bring home 2 Oscars



Relevance: Prelims

Why in news?

- Naatu Naatu, a Telugu song composed by M.M. Keeravaani and penned by Chandrabose, won an Oscar for Best Original Song, becoming the fourth non-English song to do so.
- The Elephant Whisperers, a documentary short film by Kartiki Gonsalves and Guneet Monga, won an Oscar for Best Documentary Short, marking India's first win in the category.
- All That Breathes, a climate change documentary set in Delhi, was nominated for Best Documentary Feature but lost to Canada's Navalny.

Importance

- The wins showcase the growing might of the Indian non-feature segment and demonstrate Indian cinema beyond Bollywood.
- This is the first time two India-made productions have won Oscars in the same year. It was the 95th edition of the Academy Awards this year.

About Oscar Awards

- The Academy Awards, better known as the Oscars, refers to the Hollywood ceremony, as well as the actual awards that are given to honour artistic and technical merit in the film industry.
- The awards are regarded by many as the most prestigious, significant awards in the entertainment industry in the United States and worldwide.
- The Academy Awards are presented annually by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (AMPAS), in recognition of excellence in cinematic achievements as assessed by the Academy's voting membership.

About Oscar Awards (Contd.)

- The Academy Awards ceremony was first broadcast by radio in 1930 and was televised for the first time in 1953.
- It is the oldest worldwide entertainment awards ceremony and is now televised live worldwide.
- It is also the **oldest of the four major annual American entertainment awards; its equivalents – the Emmy Awards for television, the Tony Awards for theater, and the Grammy Awards for music – are modeled after the Academy Awards.**

Previous Oscars by Indians

Year	Nominee(s)/recipient(s)	Film	Category
1983 (55th)	Bhanu Athaiya	Gandhi	Best Costume Design
2009 (81st)	Resul Pookutty	Slumdog Millionaire	Best Sound Mixing
	Gulzar (Lyrics)		Best Original Song (For "Jai Ho")
	A. R. Rahman (Music)		Best Original Score
2023 (95th)	M. M. Keeravani (Music) Chandrabose (Lyrics)	RRR	Best Original Song (For "Naatu Naatu")
	Kartiki Gonsalves Guneet Monga	The Elephant Whisperers	Best Documentary (Short Subject)

PM Modi inaugurates global conference on millets



Relevance: Prelims

Why in news?

- PM Modi recently inaugurated a two-day global conference on millets at, IARI Campus, PUSA New Delhi.
- He spoke about the numerous benefits of **including millets (also called 'Shree Anna')** in one's diet.
- **Eating these "high-fibre foods" is not just a way to regulate food habits but to conserve water, resources, chemical-free produce, and more agricultural produce for the farmers.** Millets can be grown easily in adverse climatic conditions and without chemicals and fertilisers.
- **Notably, 2023 is being celebrated as the International Year of Millets.**
- On March 5, 2021, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) declared 2023 as the International Year of Millets (IYM), accepting India's proposal.

Tigers from India may be sent to Cambodia



Relevance: Prelims

Why in news?

Extinction in Cambodia

Translocation from India

- After African Cheetahs were successfully translocated to India recently, the government is considering sending some tigers to Cambodia, where the big cat has gone extinct.
- India signed a memorandum of understanding with Cambodia in November to assist it with “all technical details and knowledge” regarding the reintroduction of the tiger in the country.

- Habitat destruction and poaching is the main reason behind extinction of tigers in Cambodia.
- Tigers need large habitats to roam in and a significant prey base to hunt.
- Smaller habitats meant more competition for prey, more inbreeding, and more human-animal conflict.
- Also, tigers were killed for their valuable body parts.
- The last tiger spotted on a camera trap in Cambodia was in 2007. In April 2016, Cambodia announced that tigers were “functionally extinct”, meaning no breeding populations of the animal were left in the country.

- India translocates tigers within the country, but has never done so internationally.
- One of the possible sites of tiger reintroduction is the Cardamom Rainforest Landscape in Cambodia.
- These protected areas include the Southern Cardamom National Park, Tatai Wildlife Sanctuary and Phnom Samkos Wildlife Sanctuary.

Marburg virus disease outbreak kills five in Tanzania



Relevance: Prelims

Why in news?

- Five people have died and three others are infected with the Marburg virus – a highly infectious, Ebola-like disease – in Tanzania's Kagera region.
- The cases in Tanzania have come just over a month after another African country, Equatorial Guinea, reported its first case of the Marburg virus disease.

What is the Marburg virus disease?

- Marburg virus disease (MVD), earlier known as Marburg hemorrhagic fever, is a severe, often fatal hemorrhagic fever.
- Marburg, like Ebola, is a filovirus; and both diseases are clinically similar.
- Rousettus fruit bats are considered the natural hosts for the Marburg virus. However, African green monkeys imported from Uganda were the source of the first human infection.
- MVD was first detected in 1967 after simultaneous outbreaks in Marburg and Frankfurt in Germany; and in Belgrade, Serbia.
- This disease has an average fatality rate of around 50%. However, it can be as low as 24% or as high as 88% depending on virus strain and case management.

Symptoms

- After the **onset of symptoms**, which can begin anytime between **two to 21 days**, MVD can manifest itself in the form of **high fever, muscle aches and severe headache**.
- Around the **third day**, patients report **abdominal pain, vomiting, severe watery diarrhoea and cramping**.
- In this phase, the **appearance of patients has been often described as “ghost-like” with deep-set eyes, expressionless faces, and extreme lethargy**.
- **Between days five and seven**, patients report **bleeding from the nose, and gums and blood appearing in vomit and faeces**.
- **Severe blood loss leads to death, often between eight to nine days after symptoms begin**.

Diagnosis and treatment

- It is difficult to clinically distinguish MVD from diseases such as malaria, typhoid fever and other viral haemorrhagic fevers.
- However, it is confirmed by lab testing of samples, which like Coronavirus and Ebola are extreme biohazard risks.
- **There is no approved antiviral treatment or vaccine for MVD as of now**. It can be managed with supportive care.
- According to the WHO, **rehydration with oral or intravenous fluids, and treatment of specific symptoms** can help prevent death.