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1. Expulsion of Mahua Moitra from Lok Sabha

Introduction
Trinamool Congress member Mahua Moitra was expelled from the Lok Sabha on Friday following allegations of involvement in a cash-for-query scandal. The expulsion led to an Opposition walkout during parliamentary proceedings.

Resolution for Expulsion
Parliamentary Affairs Minister Pralhad Joshi moved a resolution stating that Moitra's continuance as an MP was untenable, citing her conduct as unbecoming of an MP. Allegations involved Moitra receiving bribes from Dubai-based businessman Darshan Hiranandani in exchange for posing questions in Parliament.

Ethics Committee's Decision
The Ethics Committee recommended expulsion, accusing Moitra of unethical conduct for sharing her user ID and password of the Lok Sabha Member's portal with unauthorized persons.

Moitra criticized the committee's decision as a result of a "kangaroo court" process. She asserted that the recommendation of expulsion solely based on sharing login details lacked a foundation in existing rules.

Defiant Response Outside Lok Sabha
Denied permission to speak inside the Lok Sabha, Moitra, alongside Opposition leaders, criticized the findings.

Moitra contended that the committee's conclusions were based on contradictory affidavits and lacked evidence of her receiving cash for posing questions.

Opposition Leaders' Support
Opposition leaders, including Rahul and Sonia Gandhi, and Farooq Abdullah, stood in support of Moitra outside the Parliament.

Moitra accused the Modi government of attempting to silence a woman MP in a Parliament that passed the women's reservation Bill.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance
Source: The Hindu

2. SC upholds Article 370 abrogation: What is Truth and Reconciliation Commission?

Why in news?
The Supreme Court, today, unanimously upheld the abrogation of Article 370 by the Centre in 2019. The five-judge bench delivered three, concurring opinions on the matter, holding that the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir effectively holds no special status in the Indian Union.

Justice Sanjay Kaul, in his opinion, recommended setting up a Truth and Reconciliation Commission to look into alleged violations of human rights by both state and non-state actors in J&K. It should be based on a dialogue and not become a criminal court, he added.

So, what is a Truth and Reconciliation Commission?
A Truth and Reconciliation Commission, also known as a 'truth and justice commission' or simply, a 'truth commission', is an official mechanism to not just acknowledge, but also reveal, wrongdoings by a government (or sometimes non-state actors or combatants) so that conflicts of the past can be addressed and resolved.

Which countries have had such commissions in the past?
The best known and most consequential commissions are considered to be the ones set up in South Africa, Australia, and Canada. In India's neighbourhood, truth commissions have been set up in Sri Lanka and Nepal.

The Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) provided those directly or indirectly affected by the legacy of the Indian Residential Schools system — in which some 150,000 indigenous children were removed from their families and communities to attend residential schools — with an opportunity to share their stories and experiences.

According to the official TRC website, the commission spent six years travelling to all parts of Canada and heard from more than 6,500 witnesses. Between 2007 and 2015, the Government of Canada provided about $72 million to support the TRC's work. The TRC created a historical record of the residential schools system; the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation at the University of Manitoba now houses all of the documents collected by the TRC.

In South Africa, the first post-apartheid government of President Nelson Mandela established a TRC in 1995 with the aim of uncovering the truth of human rights violations during the decades of apartheid, and to heal the country and bring about reconciliation with its history.

The TRC was focused on putting together information and evidence from both the victims and the perpetrators of violence, rather than on prosecution and punishment for crimes. Five volumes of the commission's report were released in October 1998, and two subsequent volumes in March 2003.

Authorised by Nelson Mandela (right) and chaired by Desmond Tutu, South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission was set up in 1996, after apartheid ended.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance
Source: The Indian Express

3. Article 370 abrogation upheld: How SC answered three key questions in the government's favour

Introduction
The Supreme Court in a 5-0 unanimous ruling upheld the Centre's abrogation of Article 370 of the Constitution.

Chief Justice of India (CJI) D Y Chandrachud and Justice Sanjay Kishan Kaul wrote two separate but concurring opinions. Here's what the SC ruled on three key issues in the petitions:

One, on the 'unique' and 'special status'of Jammu and Kashmir.
The SC held that J&K did not retain any element of sovereignty after its accession to India in 1947.

The court said that although Maharaja Hari Singh, the erstwhile ruler of the princely state, issued a proclamation that he would retain his sovereignty, his successor Karan Singh issued another proclamation that the Indian Constitution would prevail over all other laws in the state.

This in essence, had the effect of a merger like every other princely state that joined India, the court ruled.

The court emphatically concluded that Jammu and Kashmir has always been an integral part of India. CJI Chandrachud cited Section 3 of the J&K Constitution itself, apart from Article 1 and 370 of the Indian Constitution.

Article 3 of the J&K Constitution reads: "The State of Jammu and Kashmir is and shall be an integral part of the Union of India." The state's Constitution also provided that this provision cannot be amended.

Justice Kaul said that being the only state with its own Constitution also does not define a special status. "The purpose of J&K Constitution was to ensure everyday governance in the state and the purpose of Article 370 was to integrate the state with India," he said.

Two, is Article 370 a 'temporary' or a permanent provision of the Constitution?
The Supreme Court held that Article 370 is a temporary, transitional provision.

CJI Chandrachud took a textual approach and cited evidence of the historical context for the inclusion of Article 370 and the placement of Article 370 in Part XXI of the Constitution dealing with temporary provisions.

He also said that the "temporary" provision served a purpose in the war-like situation prevailing in the state in 1947.

Three, the questions relating to the effective abrogation of Article 370.
The Supreme Court upheld both the presidential proclamations of August 2019.
Apart from the larger federal issues and the debate around the special status of J&K, the key legal challenge was to the two Presidential proclamations in 2019 which in effect abrogated Article 370.

The Court upheld both the proclamations, including the one that gave a new meaning to "constituent assembly of Jammu and Kashmir", as "Legislative Assembly of Jammu and Kashmir."

The central issue was whether these actions could be taken by the Union assuming powers of the state when it is under President's rule. Here, the Supreme Court referred to the landmark 1994 ruling in 'SR Bommai v Union of India' which dealt with the powers and limitations of the Governor under President's rule.

CJI DY Chandrachud said that the Governor (President in J&K's case) can assume "all or any" roles of the state legislature and such action must be tested judicially only in extraordinary cases.

Relying on an interpretation of the Bommai ruling, the SC said that there is "no prima facie case that the President's orders were malafide or extraneous exercise of power."

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Polity & Governance
Source: Indian Express & The Hindu

4. What was the Bommai judgment, which the SC relied on in its Article 370 ruling?

Introduction
In upholding the abrogation of Article 370, the Supreme Court on Monday relied heavily on its landmark 1994 judgement in SR Bommai v Union of India.
What is this case, and how does it relate to the J&K challenge?

The case
In Bommai, a nine-judge bench of the Supreme Court interpreted Article 356 of the Constitution to define the contours of proclamation of President's rule. Article 356 contains provisions "in case of failure of constitutional machinery in States", including that for the imposition of President's rule.

Former Karnataka CM Bommai

While all nine judges unanimously upheld the provision, the Court ruled that the President's decision would be subject to judicial review. Bommai is still the settled law

on when and how President's rule can be imposed, and was invoked in recent cases challenging President's rule in Uttarakhand (2016) and Arunachal Pradesh (2016), both of which were overturned by the Supreme Court.

The background
In 1989, the Congress government at the Centre dismissed the Janata Dal-led Karnataka government by imposing President's rule.

After allegedly receiving 19 letters from MLAs withdrawing their support to Chief Minister SR Bommai's government, then Karnataka Governor P Venkatasubbaiah recommended to the President that he take over the state's administration.

He cited two reasons. First, that Bommai did not command a majority and, hence, "it was inappropriate under the Constitution," for him to continue. Second, that no other political party was in a position to form the government.

Controversial move
This move, however, was extremely controversial. The SC ruling would later note that "the Governor did not ascertain the view of Shri Bommai" before making his report to the President. In fact 7 out of the 19 legislators who allegedly withdrew support to Bommai's government would soon make a U-turn, complaining that their signatures on the aforementioned letters were obtained by misrepresentation.

Thus, the dismissed chief minister moved the Karnataka High Court, which dismissed his challenge against the Centre. Then, on appeal to the apex court, a nine-judge bench was constituted.

The verdict
The SC unanimously held that the President's proclamation can be subject to judicial review on grounds of illegality, malafide, extraneous considerations, abuse of power, or fraud. While the President's subjective appraisal of the issue cannot be examined, the Court said that the material relied on for making the decision can be reviewed.

The verdict also made Parliamentary approval necessary for imposing President's rule. Only after the proclamation is approved by both Houses of Parliament can the President exercise the power. Till then, the President can only suspend the state legislature. If the Parliament does not approve the proclamation within two months, then the government that was dismissed would automatically stand revived.

Importance of Judgement
The Bommai ruling, one of the first by the SC to scrutinise the conduct of the Governor's office, came at a time when President's rule was frequently imposed to dismiss state governments run by opposition parties.

The imposition of President's rule drastically decreased after the Bommai verdict. Between January 1950 and March 1994, President's Rule was imposed 100 times or an average of 2.5 times a year. Between 1995 and 2021, it has been imposed only 29 times or a little more than once a year.

The Kashmir reference
A key question in the Kashmir case was whether Article 370 could have been abrogated when the state was under President's rule. The erstwhile state had been under President's rule since 2018, and the question before the court was whether the President could give consent to the revocation of J&K's special status.

Here, the Supreme Court relied on the Bommai ruling to hold that the actions of the President are constitutionally valid. The Court said that the Bommai ruling held that the actions taken by the President after issuing a Proclamation are subject to judicial review, but the judges had adopted varying standards to test the validity of the executive (President's) orders.

The Court cited two standards — one by Justice PB Sawant, and another by Justice Reddy. Justice Sawant had set the standard of whether the exercise of power was mala fide or palpably irrational, while Justice Reddy observed that the advisability and necessity of the action must be borne in mind by the President.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance
Source: The Indian Express

5. ECI members to have same status as SC judges: Why Govt has chosen to make U-turn on proposed Bill

Why in news?
The Centre is expected to walk back a key change that it has proposed in the service conditions of members of the Election Commission of India (ECI).

A Bill that is now before Rajya Sabha has been criticised for "downgrading" the status of members of the ECI from that of a judge of the Supreme Court to that of the Cabinet Secretary.

The Bill was introduced in Parliament on August 10, but was not taken up for discussion in the Monsoon Session. It has now been listed for consideration and passing on Tuesday (December 12), along with key amendments that would 'restore' the status of the members of the ECI.

What is this Bill, and what did it propose?

On March 2 this year, a five-judge Constitution Bench of the Supreme Court had ruled that the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) and Election Commissioners (ECs) should be appointed by a committee comprising the Prime Minister, Leader of Opposition in Lok Sabha, and the Chief Justice of India (CJI).

The Constitution lays down no specific legislative process for the appointment of the CEC and ECs. As a result, the central government has a free hand in appointing these officials. The President makes the appointments on the advice of the Union Council of Ministers headed by the Prime Minister.

The Supreme Court, however, made it clear that its order would be "subject to any law to be made by Parliament". Consequently, the government brought The Chief Election Commissioner and Other Election Commissioners (Appointment, Conditions of Service and Term of Office) Bill, 2023, which proposed a committee comprising the PM, Leader of Opposition and, instead of the CJI, a cabinet minister nominated by the PM.

This Bill also proposed giving the CEC and ECs the same salary, perks, and allowances as that of the Cabinet Secretary. The Bill would replace The Election Commission (Conditions of Service of Election Commissioners and Transaction of Business) Act, 1991, under which the CEC and ECs have the same salary as that of a Supreme Court judge.

So why was the Bill criticised?
Some Opposition leaders criticised the Bill for replacing the CJI in the selection committee with a Cabinet Minister — which effectively means the government will at all times have the majority to ram through its choice of candidate.

But the main issue flagged by current and former ECI officials was the apparent downgrading of the status of the ECI.

While the salaries of a Supreme Court judge and the Cabinet Secretary are the same, there are differences in the allowances and perks. However, a group of former CECs wrote to the government objecting to the downgrade not on account of the change in perks, but because of the change of status.

They argued that the ECI currently has the status of a Supreme Court judge and can summon senior officials and even Ministers; if this status is changed to that of a government official, it would affect their ability to do so.

What happens now?
Since no vacancy has emerged in the ECI since the Supreme Court order of March, no appointments have been made through the mechanism laid down by the court. The

next vacancy is expected to arise in February 2024, when EC Anup Chandra Pandey will retire.

Meanwhile, the amendments that are set to be moved by Law Minister Arjun Ram Meghwal are expected to restore the equivalence with a Supreme Court judge.

According to the amendments proposed by the Minister, the status of the EC would be kept the same as that of a Supreme Court judge, with the same salary, dearness allowance and leave encashment rules.

6. All-India Judicial Service – still a non-starter

Government's view
Article 312 of the Constitution provides for the establishment of All India Judicial Service (AIJS), which shall not include any post inferior to that of a District Judge. The constitutional provision enables creation of the AIJS at District Judge level.

In Government's view, a properly framed All India Judicial Service is important to strengthen overall justice delivery system. This will give an opportunity for induction of suitably qualified fresh legal talent selected through a proper all-India merit selection system as well as address the issue of social inclusion by enabling suitable representation to marginalized and deprived sections of society.

Disagreements on the AIJS Proposal
The Union Law Minister disclosed that there is no consensus on the AIJS proposal, with only two High Courts supporting the idea while 13 opposed it. The existing system of recruiting district judges through High Courts and other subordinate judicial officers through public service commissions is seen as more conducive to ensuring diversity.

Issues with the Proposed All-India Judicial Service
While the AIJS may seem like a solution to diversify the judiciary, the current system allows for reservation and a better understanding of local practices and conditions. The absence of a clear consensus among states, the lack of uniformity in legal education, and the potential unattractiveness of a national judicial service to top-performing lawyers raise doubts about its effectiveness.

Constitutional Provisions
Article 312 provides for creation of All India Services including All India Judicial Services. If the Council of States has declared by resolution supported by not less than two thirds of the members present and voting that it is necessary or expedient in the

national interest so to do, Parliament may by law provide for the creation of one or more all India services (including an all-India judicial service) common to the Union and the States.

7. PM inaugurates 10,000th Jan Aushadhi Kendra at AIIMS Deoghar

Why in news?
The Prime Minister, Shri Narendra Modi today inaugurated the 10,000th Jan Aushadhi Kendra at AIIMS, Deoghar. The Prime Minister also launched the program to increase the number of Jan Aushadhi Kendras in the country from 10,000 to 25,000. On this occasion, the Prime Minister also launched the Pradhan Mantri Mahila Kisan Drone Kendra.

What is the Target?
The Government had set a target to increase the number of Jan Aushadhi Kendras to 10,000 by March 2024. However, it has achieved the target of opening of 10,000 Janaushadhi Kendras prior to its target. Prime Minister in his Independence Day speech, 2023 has announced for opening of 25,000 Pradhan Mantri Bhartiya Janaushadhi Kendras (PMBJKs) across the country. Now, with a view to augment the facility and provide the reach to whole of India, 25,000 Pradhan Mantri Bhartiya Janaushadhi Kendras (PMBJK's) are proposed to be opened across the Country by 31st March 2026.

Pradhan Mantri Bhartiya Janaushadhi Pariyojana
With an objective of making quality generic medicines available at affordable prices to all, Pradhan Mantri Bhartiya Janaushadhi Pariyojana (PMBJP) was launched by the Department of Pharmaceuticals, Ministry of Chemicals & Fertilizers. Under this scheme, there are already more than 9900+ functional Jan Aushadhi Kendras are across the country. The product basket of PMBJP comprises 1963 medicines and 293 surgical devices covering all major therapeutic groups.

8. Kerala transport body has challenged Centre's new permit rules for tourist vehicles

The state-owned Kerala State Road Transport Corporation (KSRTC) has moved the High Court, challenging the legal validity of the Centre's All India Tourist Vehicles (Permit) Rules, 2023, which came into effect from May this year. On November 29, the

Kerala State Transport Authority cancelled an All-India Tourist Permit (AITP) invoking powers vested with it under the Motor Vehicle Act, 1988.

Here is a look at how a new permit rule under the Union law could change the transport industry, and why Kerala is opposing it.

Contract carriage and stage carriage
In Kerala, bus permits are granted by the respective Regional Transport Authorities in various districts, under Section 72 of the Motor Vehicles Act, 1988. The Act provides for two types of permits for buses — contract carriage and stage carriage.

A contract carriage is a vehicle/bus hired by a passenger or groups of passengers to go from one point to another, regardless of the route, and without stopping to pick up or drop off passengers along the way. Tourist buses in Kerala mainly operate under this permit.

On the other hand, a stage carriage bus runs on a specific route with the fare fixed by the government. A stage carriage runs as a regular bus service, where the entire route is broken into various specified stages till the destination point. KSRTC comes under the state carriage category.

All India Tourist Permit
The central government earlier this year framed the All India Tourist Vehicles (Permit) Rules, 2023. This all-India permit enables a tourist vehicle operator to ply throughout the country on the strength of a permit fee paid under Rule 5. This fee would be distributed among the states and the Union Government under a sharing formula.

Kerala is opposed to this All-India permit, though it is also a beneficiary of this fee-sharing formula.

Earlier, tourist bus permits under Motor Vehicles (All India Permit for Tourist Transport Operators) Rules, 1993. The 2023 Rules have simplified the granting of the permit, and by obtaining a permit from one state, the operator can use their vehicle throughout India.

The issue
As per the rule 6 (2) of permit regulations 2023, an operator with AITP can enter into individual contracts with passengers and therefore can pick and drop them at different points en route. This in a way allows a tourist permit holder to operate like a stage carriage, whereas in Kerala, tourist vehicles operate as contract carriages. The changed system can eat into the revenue of state carriages.

Kerala's arguments

The state government has challenged the rules that allow a tourist vehicle to work as a state carriage, stating that they go against the provisions of the Motor Vehicles Act, 1988 and several Supreme Court verdicts. It has demanded that these rules be struck down.

The flashpoint

Many tourist vehicle operators have obtained the All-India Tourist Permit after the central law came into effect. But the issue heated up in Kerala after a bus operator named Robin Gireesh, with AITP, started operating an inter-state bus from Pathanamthitta to Coimbatore, with many stops enroute. The service was received well by passengers, but KSRTC, which has dominance in the inter-state sector, objected to it.

The Motor Vehicles Department (MVD) stepped in, slapping fines on the bus in many cities. The Tamil Nadu MVD also imposed a fine on the Robin bus, and its owner alleged this was at the behest of Kerala. The bus owner continued the service for a few more days, triggering debate over the new permit norms. The MVD suspended its permit on November 29. The operator then moved the HC, with KSRTC impleaded in the case. The court has orally raised doubts about challenging the new permit rules.

The worry for Kerala

Kerala's problem is that if private operators with AITPs start operating like a regular bus service, it would hit the revenue of the state transport entity, already running under huge losses.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance
Source: The Hindu

9. 4 factors behind the BJP win in Chhattisgarh, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh assembly elections

Why in news?

BJP has secured victory in the state Legislative Assembly elections in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Chhattisgarh. On the other hand, Congress has secured victory in only Telangana Legislative Assembly elections. With this, BJP has asserted its presence in three large states in northern India, in what is also called the 'Hindi heartland'.

Despite the exit polls predicting a tight contest in Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan, the BJP has managed to score an impressive margin ahead of the opposition Congress party. Further, it has gained a significant lead in Chhattisgarh, where it was seen as lagging behind the Congress during the campaign.

What are some of the factors that have helped move the results in the party's favour?

1. **Modi factor:** The BJP has gone to the polls with Prime Minister Narendra Modi as the face of the party. His popularity is still intact on the ground, helping push the party candidates ahead of the rival Congress in key constituencies.

2. **The woman voters:** According to BJP leaders, what worked in BJP's favour in Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh is the women voters' support. Focusing on this demographic, the party announced special schemes in the manifesto.

3. **BJP's organisational strength:** Unlike in the assembly elections in the past, where the voters differentiated between the Lok Sabha and the state elections to favour the opposition parties, the BJP has been able to translate the factors that play in its favour in the general election to assembly elections as well.

Despite the fatigue factor against the party in Madhya Pradesh, where it was in power for almost two decades, the party focussed on its organisational strength and coordination between the party and the government.

4. **The messaging:** BJP leaders said its attempts to present a combination of Hindutva, development and welfare politics to counter the Congress's welfare push through a larger message has worked well on the ground. They added that it helped counter the party's alleged "appeasement" towards certain communities.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance
Source: PIB

10. NMC logo: Why are doctors protesting now if it always had Dhanvantri's image?

Introduction

The logo of the National Medical Commission (NMC), with a colourful image of physician god Dhanvantri in the centre, has drawn criticism from doctors, with the Indian Medical Association (IMA) urging the the apex medical education regulator to take "corrective steps".

Officials from the NMC, however, maintained that the image of Dhanvantri had always been a part of its logo, albeit as a dark silhouette. The new logo colourises the image, while also replacing the word 'India' with 'Bharat'.

Why are doctors opposing the new logo?

Once the changes to the logo were highlighted last month, the IMA said it went against the "fundamental values" of doctors. Dr Sharad Agarwal, president of IMA, said: "Doctors take an oath to treat everyone irrespective of their caste, class, or religion. Why then should the logo of an institute that governs training of doctors have any religious connection?"

He added that while doctors can follow their faith at home, institutions must not do so.

Why has Dhanvantri been included?

With Dhanvantri considered to be the god of Ayurveda and medicine, officials from the NMC said it was an appropriate addition to the logo for a medical body. An official said: "If the logo for doctors can be Caduceus — the staff surrounded by two serpents — that is entrenched in Greek mythology, why can't we use symbols from our own mythology?"

Officials from both NMC and the Union health ministry emphasised that Dhanvantri has always been part of the logo. However, even the old logo was adopted only in 2022. The National Medical Commission took over from the former Medical Council of India in 2020. The logo was first approved in 2022, according to officials.

Is this the first-time doctors have raised such concerns?

There were similar protests from doctors when the NMC introduced the "Charak Shapath" as part of undergraduate medical training last year. While it was initially thought that the Shapath would replace the doctor's oath — which essentially says doctors should treat everyone and do no harm — the NMC later said the Charak

Shapth would be taken at the beginning of the course and the doctor's oath when the students graduate.

Mandatory inclusion of yoga as part of medical curriculum last year also faced similar resistance.

11. Advocates Amendment Bill, 2023: Simplifying Legal Reforms

Introduction
The Advocates Amendment Bill, 2023, recently passed in the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha, focuses on eliminating 'touts' from the legal system. This legislative move involves the repeal of the outdated Legal Practitioners Act, 1879, and amendments to the Advocates Act, 1961.

What does the now-repealed 1879 Act state?
The Legal Practitioners Act came into force in 1880, "to consolidate and amend the law relating to Legal Practitioners in certain provinces." The Act initially extended to areas in West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Assam, Orissa, and Delhi. Any state government could, by notification in the Official Gazette, extend it to their states.

Section 2 of the 1879 Act defined the term "legal practitioner" to include advocates, vakils, or attorneys of any High Court. It also introduced a new definition of the term "tout". A tout is someone who procures clients for a legal practitioner in exchange for payment.

Transition to the Advocates Act, 1961
The Advocates Act of 1961 was passed in independent India to create a single Act to regulate the legal profession. This Act repealed a majority of the 1879 Act but left behind provisions relating to its extent, definitions, and powers to frame and publish lists of touts.

What does the Advocates Amendment Bill, 2023, say?
The new provision, Section 45A, states that the Bill enables every HC and district judge to frame and publish lists of touts. However, no person's name will be included in any such list until they have had an opportunity to show cause against such inclusion.

If proven to be a tout, the person's name will be included in the list of touts that will be published by the authority and hung in every court. If proven to be a tout,

individuals may face imprisonment of up to three months, a fine that may extend to five hundred rupees, or both.

12. Recalling the case of Kerala's Hadiya, whose religious conversion led to SC judgement, NIA probe

Why in news?
Hadiya, a woman from Kerala whose religious conversion and marriage to a Muslim man in 2017 led to a high-profile legal case, has divorced her husband and re-married. In a recent video, she said her parents were aware of the decision. The video came two days after her father KM Ashokan moved a habeas corpus petition in the Kerala High Court, alleging that he could not trace his daughter. Ashokan said they used to speak with Hadiya over the phone but did not know where she was. The High Court said it will consider the plea next week.

A TIMELINE OF THE KERALA 'LOVE JIHAD' CASE

JAN. 2, 2016
Akhila leaves her home and moves to Satya Sarni, a Muslim educational organisation in Kerala

JAN. 3, 2016
Her parents file a habeas corpus with the Kerala High Court

JAN. 19, 2016
Akhila tells the court she has officially converted to Islam and assumed the name Hadiya

JAN. 25, 2016
Court dismisses her parents' petition

AUG. 2016
The court orders her to move to a hostel in Ernakulam

Her father files another petition claiming she was being transported to Syria

DEC. 19, 2016
Court hears Hadiya's case; the same day she marries a Muslim man Shefin Jahan

MAY 24, 2017
Kerala High Court annuls marriage; gives Hadiya's custody to her parents

AUG. 2017
Jahan challenges the HC order in the Supreme Court | SC orders NIA probe in the case

SEP. 20, 2017
Jahan approaches SC seeking a recall of its August order

OCT. 30, 2017
SC orders Hadiya's parents to present her in front of court to know if she had voluntarily converted

NOV. 27, 2017
SC allows Hadiya to resume studies

JAN. 23, 2018
SC says only Hadiya has the right to decide on her choices

MAR. 8, 2018 > SC sets aside Kerala High Court order annulling her marriage

Back in 2017, Hadiya's father had filed a habeas corpus petition in the HC, sometime after his daughter expressed her wishes to convert to Islam and marry a Muslim man. Here is what the case was about, why it went to the Supreme Court, and why the central government's counter-terrorism agency National Investigation Agency (NIA) stepped in.

What was the Hadiya case?
Born as KM Akhila in a Hindu family in Kerala's Kottayam, Hadiya enrolled in the Sivaraj Homeopathy Medical College & Research Institute in Salem, Tamil Nadu, in 2010. Here, after becoming friends with some Muslim students, her interest in the religion grew. She began listening to religious sermons on her phone and participated in some rituals, such as fasting during Ramzan.

In 2015, she made her first attempt to convert to Islam by getting an affidavit attested by an advocate in Kochi, saying she was living as a Muslim under no compulsion from anyone. Hadiya attempted to persuade her parents to convert but after their refusal, she left home in 2016 and began living with a friend.

Habeas corpus for Hadiya
On January 12, 2016, Ashokan moved the first habeas corpus petition in the Kerala High Court. A habeas corpus petition is a recourse in law that protects against illegal detention by ordering the person to be to be produced in court. However, once in court, Hadiya refused to go with her parents.

She went to Sathya Sarani, an organisation for religious learning, and eventually began looking at Muslim matrimonial sites to find a husband.

According to a police officer, this worried Ashokan. Having heard of a few Muslims in Kerala leaving India with their wives to join the terrorist group Islamic State, he moved a fresh writ petition in HC, alleging there was a plan to take his daughter to Syria.

In response to the plea, Hadiya was produced before the court. Following her continued refusal to live with her parents, the court sent her to a hostel in Kochi. Hadiya filed an affidavit in court saying she had embraced Islam of her will, and was later allowed to live with a friend.

In December 2016, she got married to Shefin Jahan. Both were introduced to each other through a matrimonial website. Two days after their wedding, Hadiya returned to court with Jahan. But the court sent Hadiya to the hostel again and ordered Jahan not to have any contact with her.

On May 24, 2017, the Kerala High Court annulled the marriage. Ordering a probe, it said, "A girl aged 24 is weak and vulnerable, capable of being exploited in many ways." It sent Hadiya back to her parents and put her under police surveillance.

When the NIA stepped in
The Supreme Court, acting upon a petition from Jahan, ordered an NIA probe into the case in August 2017. The three-judge bench, headed by then Chief Justice Dipak Misra and comprising Justices AM Khanwilkar and DY Chandrachud, said: "The NIA's involvement is necessary to ascertain if this is really an isolated case or is there something more... something wider..."

The apex court allowed Hadiya to resume her House Surgeoncy at the Homeo Medical College and appointed Dr G Kannan, the college principal, as her guardian. Hadiya was allowed to meet her husband here under CCTV surveillance.

What the Supreme Court ruled

In April 2018, the SC set aside the Kerala HC's annulment of Hadiya and Jahan's marriage. It also ruled that the NIA can continue to probe the issue of a "larger conspiracy" behind the alleged forced religious conversion of Hadiya and others in Kerala.

"We clarify that the investigations by the NIA in respect of any matter of criminality may continue in accordance with law," said the bench.

But Hadiya's choice of a husband cannot be questioned, it added. "She may be brainwashed, but what can we do? Whether the man to whom she is married is good or not is for her to decide. Whether it's an independent choice or not, only she knows. We can't get into it. If she comes to court and says she married by her choice, that's the end of it," the bench said.

"The right to marry a person of one's choice is integral to Article 21 (right to life and liberty) of the Constitution," the court held.

The SC also questioned the HC's decision to annul a marriage of consenting adults. "Can there be a roving inquiry into matrimonial relationship between two consenting adults to find if there was no consent," Chief Justice Dipak Misra had asked.

Ashokan had said he was pained to let his daughter go with a "terrorist", adding he would continue the legal battle. He claimed that the NIA was pursuing a probe because it was convinced that Jahan was a terrorist.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance
Source: The Indian Express

13. Kidney transplants in India: the law, the demand, the alleged rackets

Introduction

The government has ordered a probe into the findings of an investigation by The Telegraph published earlier this month, alleging that poor Myanmarese villagers were being lured into giving their kidneys to rich patients from that country, with the involvement of Delhi's Apollo hospital.

Organ donations and transplants in exchange for money are forbidden in India in order to protect poor and vulnerable donors from potential exploitation. Apollo has maintained that the transplants were performed only after receiving go-aheads from the authorisation committee, and a certificate from the Myanmar embassy certifying the donors as relatives.

Allegations of "kidney scams" have surfaced earlier too. Most alleged rackets rely on forged documents to establish a relationship between the donor and recipient.

India's transplant law

A transplant can be either from a pool of organs of deceased persons donated by their relatives, or from a living person the recipient knows. The Transplantation of Human Organs and Tissues Act, 1994 allows living donations, in most cases, from close relatives such as parents, siblings, children, spouse, grandparents, grandchildren. Altruistic donations from distant relatives, in-laws, or long-time friends are allowed after additional scrutiny to ensure there is no financial exchange.

For living donations from close relatives, involving Indians or foreigners, documents establishing their identities, family tree, documents, and pictures proving the donor-recipient relationship, and documents to show the financial standing of the donor have to be submitted. Donors and recipients are interviewed to establish the relationship.

For donations from unrelated persons, documents and photographic evidence showing their long-term association or friendship have to be submitted along with all other documents. Such cases are examined by an external committee to guard against illegal dealings.

Offering to pay for organs or to supply organs for payment, initiating/ negotiating/ advertising for such an arrangement, looking for a person to supply organs, and abetting in preparing false documents is punishable by jail up to 10 years and a fine of up to Rs 1 crore.

Kidney among most targeted

One, the demand is very high. Every year, an estimated 2 lakh Indians reach end-stage kidney failure. All of them need either a transplant or regular dialysis, but only around 12,000 kidney transplants take place in the country every year. It is also the transplant with the least risk to the donor.

Two, it is the cheapest and most accessible. A kidney transplant costs about Rs 5 lakh, which increases the pool of people who can undergo the procedure. More than 500 centres in India are trained to harvest or transplant kidneys, which provide more opportunities to people who want to undergo the surgery by getting around the law.

Three, the kidney is the organ that can survive the longest outside the body — 24-36 hours. In comparison, lungs remain viable only for 4-6 hours, and the liver for 8-12 hours.

Addressing supply gap

The pool of organs in India can be significantly increased by promoting deceased donations. Organs of only a small fraction of brain deaths are donated, even though they are the ideal candidates for organ donation.

To improve this percentage, the government has rolled out an Aadhaar-linked registry of donors so that their family members can be assured that it was their wish to donate if they die. Only 16% of the total transplants in the country use deceased organs. This, experts say, can be increased several-fold by increasing awareness.

There is also a need to reduce the number of people who require organ transplants.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance
Source: The Indian Express

14. Allahabad HC allows survey of Mathura Idgah: What is this plea in the Sri Krishna Janmabhoomi case

Introduction

Putting the focus back on the Sri Krishna Janmabhoomi-Shahi Idgah Masjid dispute, the Allahabad High Court allowed an application seeking the appointment of a commission to inspect the mosque complex.

The Hindu petitioners believe the mosque, built on the orders of Emperor Aurangzeb in 1670, was constructed atop the birthplace of Lord Krishna in Mathura. Today, it lies adjacent to the Krishna Janmasthal Temple, visited by millions of Hindu devotees each year.

Here is what you need to know about the latest plea, and the long-standing dispute.

The Shahi Eidgah Mosque with the Krishna Janmabhoomi Temple in front of it.

The latest plea
The latest application seeks a survey of the Shahi Idgah mosque — which was allowed by the HC.

The petition filed by the Hindu side says that "it is matter of fact and history that Aurangzeb ruled over the country... (and) had issued orders for demolition of large number of Hindu religious places and temples including the temple standing at the birth place of Lord Shree Krishna at Katra Keshav Dev, Mathura in the year 1669-70 (Sixteen Sixty Nine- Seventy) AD".

The petition also says that "the order (for demolition) passed by Aurangzeb finds place in the Official Court Bulletin (Akhbaraat) of January – February 1670 (Sixteen Seventy)".

The Muslim side's counterclaims
The lawyers, representing the UP Sunni Central Waqf Board and the Shahi Idgah mosque committee, contended that "the Shahi Idgah Mosque does not fall within the ambit of 13.37 acres land at Katra Keshav Dev".

"Place of birth of Lord Krishna does not lie beneath the Mosque. The claim of plaintiffs is based on guess work and is not substantiated by any documentary evidence," the lawyers submitted.

An age-old dispute
The mosque was built by Aurangzeb in 1670 on the site of an earlier temple. The area was regarded as nazul land — non-agricultural state land owned by the Marathas, and then the British. Before the mosque was built, Raja Veer Singh Bundela of Orchha had also built a temple on the same premises in 1618.

In 1815, Raja Patni Mal of Benaras bought the 13.77 acres in an auction from the East India Company. The Raja's descendants — Rai Kishan Das and Rai Anand Das — sold the land to Jugal Kishore Birla for Rs 13,400, and it was registered in the names of Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya, Goswami Ganesh Dutt, and Bhiken Lalji Aattrey.

The Shri Krishna Janmabhoomi Trust was set up by Birla, and it acquired the ownership rights over the Katra Keshav Dev temple. In 1951, the 13.77 acres were placed in the trust, with the condition that the "trust property will never be sold or pledged."

In 1956, the Shri Krishna Janmasthan Sewa Sangh was set up to manage the affairs of the temple. In 1977, the word 'Sangh' in the registered society's name was replaced with 'Sansthan.'

The case so far and Gyanvapi order

At least a dozen cases were filed in courts in Mathura by different petitioners. A common thread in all the petitions is a prayer for the removal of the mosque from the 13.77-acre complex. In May this year, the Allahabad High Court had transferred to itself all the suits on the Sri Krishna Janmabhoomi-Shahi Idgah Masjid dispute.

The latest Mathura order is similar to the one in Varanasi's Gyanvapi Mosque, also built adjacent to a venerated Hindu temple.

On May 16 last year, a videographic survey of the Kashi Vishwanath temple-Gyanvapi mosque was completed by a Commission appointed by the local court. During the survey proceedings, a structure which the Hindu side claimed was a "shivling", and the Muslim side claimed was a "fountain", was found to be inside the mosque premises.

Subsequently, a scientific survey of the Gyanvapi mosque complex was ordered by the Varanasi district court on July 21 this year. The survey was halted after the mosque committee approached the Allahabad High Court, and then the Supreme Court, seeking a stay on the survey. Both the courts cleared the decks for the survey which was resumed on August 4 amid tight security arrangements. The ASI teams have been surveying the campus since.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance
Source: The Indian Express & The Hindu

15. New Post Office Bill salient provisions

Introduction

After being passed in the Rajya Sabha on December 4, the Post Office Bill, 2023, was brought to the Lok Sabha for consideration. Seeking to repeal the 125-year-old Indian

Post Office Act of 1898, the Bill contains provisions that allow the Centre to intercept, open, or detain any item, and deliver it to customs authorities.

The Bill aims to "consolidate and amend the law relating to Post Office in India," which today provides many services beyond simply mail delivery. Mail delivery was the primary concern of the Indian Post Office Act of 1898. The Post Office network today has become a vehicle for delivery of different citizen-centric services, which necessitated the repeal enactment of a new law, the Bill states.

Post officers can "intercept" any item

Notably, Section 9 of the Bill allows the Centre to, by notification, empower any officer to "intercept, open or detain any item" in the interest of state security, friendly relations with foreign states, public order, emergency, public safety, or contravention of other laws. This provision also allows post officers to hand over postal items to customs authorities if they are suspected to contain any prohibited item, or if such items are liable to duty.

This is similar to Sections 19, 25, and 26 of the 1898 Act. Section 19(1) disallowed persons from sending by post "any explosive, dangerous, filthy, noxious or deleterious substance, any sharp instrument not properly protected, or any living creature which is either noxious or likely to injure postal articles" or postal service officers in the course of transmission.

Furthermore, the power to intercept any prohibited or restricted articles during transmission by post, or any postal article for public good during emergency or in the interest of public safety could also be exercised by the government and its officials under Sections 25 and 26 of the 1898 Act.

The Law Commission in 1968, while examining the 1898 Act, observed that the term emergency is not explicitly defined, thereby allowing significant discretion while intercepting goods.

The Post Office exempt from liability

Besides this, Section 10 exempts the Post Office and its officer from "any liability by reason of any loss, mis-delivery, delay, or damage in course of any service provided by the Post Office," except such liability as may be prescribed. The 1898 Act too exempted the government from liability for any lapses in postal service, except where such liability was undertaken expressly.

Moreover, the 2023 Bill removes all penalties and offences under the 1898 Act. For example, offences committed by post office officials such as misconduct, fraud, and theft, among others, have been deleted entirely. At the same time, if anyone refuses

or neglects to pay the charges for availing a service provided by the Post Office, such amount shall be recoverable "as if it were an arrear of land revenue due" from them.

Removes Centre's exclusivity

The present Bill has removed Section 4 of the 1898 Act, which allowed the Centre the exclusive privilege of conveying by post, from one place to another, all letters.

Effectively, this exclusivity was already lost by the 1980s, with the rise of private courier services. Since neither the Post Office Act of 1898 nor the Indian Post Office Rules, 1933 had defined the term "letter" anywhere, courier services bypassed the 1898 law by simply calling their couriers "documents" and "parcels", rather than "letters.".

The 2023 Bill, for the first time, regulates private courier services by bringing it under its ambit. While the government acknowledges its lack of exclusivity, it has also widened the ambit of the law in order to intercept and detain any postal article, as opposed to just letters.

Opposition highly critical of the Bill

Several members of the Opposition have vociferously criticised the Bill, saying that despite promising to update the Colonial law, it keeps the most draconian provisions that it contained.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance
Source: The Indian Express

16. What is Viksit Bharat Sankalp Yatra, and the Kashi Tamil Sangamam?

Why in news?

Addressing a Viksit Bharat Sankalp Yatra event in Varanasi, Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Sunday (December 17) said, "In a way, the Vikas Bharat Sankalp Yatra is a touchstone for me. I want to gauge if everything that I said and did, has it happened in the way I wanted to? Has it happened for those it was intended for?" The PM added, "Vikas Bharat Sankalp Yatra is a big dream, a big resolution, and we have to fulfill this resolution with our own efforts."

PM Modi is on a two-day visit to Varanasi, his Parliamentary constituency. On Monday, he will participate in the Viksit Bharat Sankalp Yatra programme at Barki Gram Sabha of Sewapuri development block. He will lay the foundation stone of 37 projects worth Rs 19,155 crore in Varanasi and the Purvanchal region.

The PM will also inaugurated the second edition of the Kashi Tamil Sangamam during his visit. What is the Viksit Bharat Sankalp Yatra? What is the Kashi Tamil Sangamam?

Viksit Bharat Sankalp Yatra

The Viksit Bharat Sankalp Yatra is a government initiative being undertaken across the country, to raise awareness about and track the implementation of flagship central schemes, such as Ayushman Bharat, Ujjwala Yojana, PM Surkasha Bima, PM SVANidhi, etc.

According to the scheme's websites, it has four aims: "reach out to the vulnerable who are eligible under various schemes but have not availed benefit so far; dissemination of information and generating awareness about schemes; interaction with beneficiaries of government schemes through their personal stories/ experience sharing; and enrolment of potential beneficiaries through details ascertained during the Yatra."

The programme is being undertaken with the active involvement of various Union ministries and state governments. The yatra was launched on November 15 from Khunti, Jharkhand.

According to the government's Press Information Bureau (PIB), "In a short span of just one month, the Yatra has reached more than 2.50 crore citizens across 68,000 Gram Panchayats (GPs) in the country. Further, nearly 2 crore individuals have taken Viksit Bharat Sankalp and over 2 Crore beneficiaries of Central Government Schemes have shared their experiences under 'Meri Kahani Meri Zubani' initiative." People can take

the 'Sankalp' (pledge) by filling out a form on the scheme's website, and then downloading a certificate.

Kashi Tamil Sangamam

Starting last year, the Kashi Tamil Sangamam is aimed at celebrating the many aspects of the historical and civilisational connection between India's North and South. This year, it will be held from December 17 to December 31. Various cultural groups from Tamil Nadu and Varanasi will perform in Kashi.

According to PIB, "The overarching objective of this people-to-people connect programme is to revive the living bonds between Kashi and Tamil Nadu — two important centres of learning and culture in ancient India. It aims to bring these two traditions of knowledge and culture closer together...The festival also has the objective of rediscovering and strengthening the ancient intellectual, cultural, spiritual and artisanal connect between the two cultures."

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance
Source: The Indian Express & The PIB

17. Telecom Bill 2023: What powers it gives the government for 'national security'

Introduction
The Telecommunications Bill, 2023 was introduced in the Lok Sabha by Union minister for Communications, Electronics & Information Technology Ashwini Vaishnaw.

Among its many significant provisions is one on national security, which allows the government to temporarily take control of telecom services in case of an emergency. Here's exactly what the Bill says about this.

What is the Telecommunications Bill, 2023?
The Telecommunications Bill, 2023 amends and consolidates the laws relating to "development, expansion and operation of telecommunication services and telecommunication networks; assignment of spectrum; and for matters connected therewith".

The new Bill seeks to replace the Indian Telegraph Act, 1885, the Indian Wireless Telegraphy Act, 1933, and the Telegraph Wires (Unlawful Possession) Act, 1950.

According to its statement of objectives and reasons, "Telecommunication sector is a key driver of economic and social development. It is the gateway to digital services. Security of our country is vitally dependent on safety of telecommunication networks. Therefore, there is a need to create a legal and regulatory framework that focuses on

safe and secure telecommunication network that provides for digitally inclusive growth."

It adds: "The nature of telecommunication, its usage and underlying technologies have undergone massive changes, especially in the past decade. Therefore, there is a need for enacting a legislation for telecom sector that serves the needs of our society."

What does the Telecom Bill say on national security?
The Bill allows the government to take over telecom services and intercept messages in the interests of national security and in case of emergencies.

The Bill says: "On the occurrence of any public emergency, including disaster management, or in the interest of public safety, the Central Government or a State Government or any officer specially authorised in this behalf by the Central Government or a State Government, if satisfied that it is necessary or expedient so to do, by notification— (a) take temporary possession of any telecommunication service or telecommunication network from an authorised entity; or (b) provide for appropriate mechanism to ensure that messages of a user or group of users authorised for response and recovery during public emergency are routed on priority."

It further says that "on the occurrence of any public emergency or in the interest of public safety", the central or state government, "in the interest of the sovereignty and integrity of India, defence and security of the State, friendly relations with foreign States, public order, or for preventing incitement to the commission of any offence", direct that messages "transmitted or received by any telecommunication service or telecommunication network, shall not be transmitted, or shall be intercepted or detained, or shall be disclosed in intelligible format to the officer mentioned in such order".

About press messages, it specifically says, "The press messages, intended to be published in India, of correspondents accredited to the Central Government or a State Government shall not be intercepted or detained, unless their transmission has been prohibited" under relevant rules.

Under the new Bill, the government can also ask telecommunication services to transmit specific messages. "If it appears necessary or expedient so to do in the public interest, the Central Government may direct any authorised entity to transmit in its telecommunication services or telecommunication network, specific messages, in such manner as may be specified," the Bill says.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance
Source: The Indian Express

18. Unprecedented Suspension of 78 MPs

Why in news?
On 18trh December, a historic suspension of 78 Members of Parliament (MPs) occurred, marking a total of 92 suspensions in the ongoing Winter Session. This move has intensified tensions between the Opposition and the government, prompting accusations of a "murder of democracy." The Rajya Sabha particularly witnessed a significant depletion, with almost 50% reduction in Opposition strength.

Chaotic Proceedings and Repeated Adjournments
The Lok Sabha witnessed chaotic proceedings leading to the suspension of 33 MPs, with repeated adjournments throughout the day. The suspension resolution was passed by a voice vote (not by Division vote), escalating the confrontations between the government and the Opposition.

Bills Passed Amidst Turmoil
Amidst the chaos, several Bills, including the Jammu and Kashmir Reorganisation (Second Amendment) Bill, 2023, and the Government of Union Territories (Amendment) Bill, 2023, were hurriedly passed in the Rajya Sabha within 15 minutes. The Opposition's demand for a debate on a recent security breach in the Lok Sabha remained unaddressed.

Opposition's Accusations of Autocracy
Opposition leaders, led by Mallikarjun Kharge, accused the government of being "autocratic" and criticized the suspension of MPs as an attack on democratic norms. The suspension of 78 MPs in a single day surpasses the previous record set in 1989, further fueling concerns about the state of democracy.

Implications for Parliamentary Proceedings
With a significant portion of the Opposition now suspended for the rest of the session, concerns are raised about the government's ability to push through legislation without meaningful debate. The suspension coincided with the introduction of important bills, including the Telecommunications Bill, 2023, and the passage of the Post Office Bill, 2023.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance
Source: The Hindu

19. Gyanvapi mosque case: What is the 1991 suit, why it was revived?

Why in news?

The Allahabad High Court Tuesday dismissed five petitions by the UP Sunni Central Waqf Board and the Gyanvapi mosque committee, holding that a suit filed in 1991 over the Varanasi mosque is not barred under provisions of the Places of Worship Act.

The case will now be heard by the Varanasi Civil Judge's court, which has been directed "to proceed with the matter expeditiously and conclude the proceedings" within six months.

The Waqf Board and the Gyanvapi mosque committee had challenged the maintainability of the original suit — Ancient Idol of Swayambhu Lord Vishweshwar and others vs. Anjuman Intezamia Masajid and another — filed in 1991, saying it was barred by the Places of Worship Act.

This suit is different from the case filed by Rakhi Singh and others, in which the Archaeological Survey of India recently submitted a 1500-page report to the Varanasi district court.

What is the title suit of 1991?
This is the original title suit in the Gyanvapi issue filed on behalf of the deity Adi Vishweshwar, like in the Ayodhya case.

In 1995, Civil Judge (Senior Division), Varanasi, had framed eight key issues to be adjudicated in the plea. Among these was the crucial aspect of whether the suit would be barred under the Places of Worship Act, 1991.
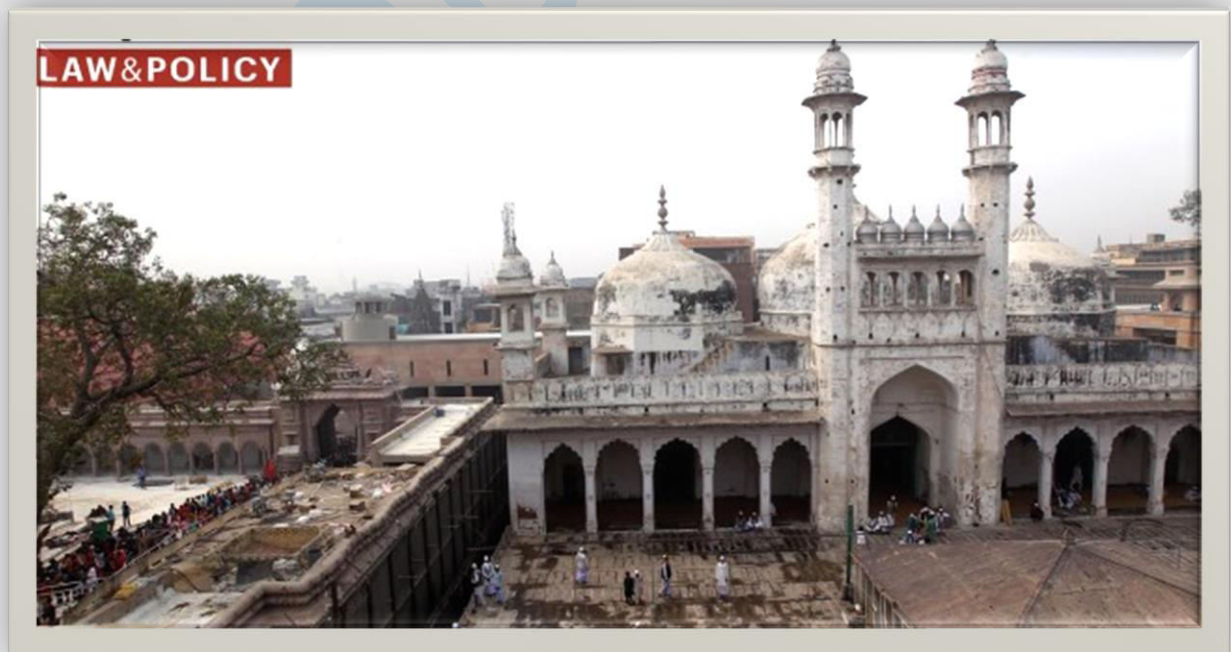
The Gyanvapi mosque in Varanasi

The trial court initially decided that the suit was barred under the 1991 Act. However, the Hindu side filed a revision application, and the revisional court set aside the trial court order and directed that the suit had to be decided on merits.

On appeal, the Allahabad High Court on October 13, 1998 stayed the revision order and effectively the suit, which meant that the proceedings were stalled. This prompted the petitioners to file several new pleas in 2021 to revive their claim over the Gyanvapi mosque. These pleas have been filed on behalf of other deities, including Maa Shringar Gauri, seeking the right to worship.

How has the suit now been revived?
In 2018, a two-judge Bench of the Supreme Court in the case of Asian Resurfacing of Road Agency P Ltd Director Vs CBI held that the interim order of stay granted by courts other than the SC itself will stand vacated automatically after six months unless they are specifically extended.

The ruling was aimed at ensuring that criminal and civil trials are not unduly delayed due to an indefinite stay. This judgement is now being reconsidered by a larger five-judge Bench since several instances of miscarriage of justice have been noticed when the stay is automatically vacated.

Relying on this 2018 verdict, the Hindu side argued that the stay was not in operation and that the case must be heard again. This was challenged by the Muslim side before the High Court.

What does the Places of Worship Act, 1991 say?
The Places of Worship Act states that the religious character of any place of worship as it existed on August 15, 1947, must be maintained. The long title describes it as "An Act to prohibit conversion of any place of worship and to provide for the maintenance of the religious character of any place of worship as it existed on the 15th day of August, 1947, and for matters connected therewith or incidental thereto."

Section 3 of the Act bars the conversion, in full or part, of a place of worship of any religious denomination into a place of worship of a different religious denomination — or even a different segment of the same religious denomination.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance
Source: The Indian Express

20. Indian Penal Code to Nyaya Sanhita: What's new, what is out, what changes

Introduction

From bringing terrorism and organised crime under the ambit of ordinary criminal law, introducing gender neutrality for offences pertaining to children, to repealing Section 377 that criminalised homosexuality, the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita Bill, 2023 makes several key departures from the Indian Penal Code it seeks to replace.

New offences

Promise to marry: The BNS introduces Clause 69 that seems to ostensibly tackle the "love jihad" narrative by criminalising "deceitful" promise to marry. The phrase "sexual intercourse not amounting to the offence of rape" essentially criminalises consensual sexual activity too.

"Whoever, by deceitful means or by making promise to marry to a woman without any intention of fulfilling the same, has sexual intercourse with her, such sexual intercourse not amounting to the offence of rape, shall be punished with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to ten years and shall also be liable to fine," the provision reads adding that "deceitful means" shall include the false promise of employment or promotion, inducement, or marring after suppressing identity.

Mob lynching: The BNS provisions codify offences linked to mob lynching and hate-crime murders, for cases when a mob of five or more individuals commits murder based on factors such as race, caste, community, or personal belief. The provision has punishment that extends from life imprisonment to death.

In its earlier version, the Bill had proposed a minimum sentence of seven years, but this was brought at par with murder. The Supreme Court in 2018 had asked the Centre to consider a separate law for lynching.

Organised crime: For the first time, tackling organised crime is brought under the realm of ordinary criminal law. There are several special state legislations for prevention and control of criminal activity by organised crime syndicates or gangs, the most popular being the Maharashtra Control of Organised Crime Act, 1999. These special laws prescribe vast powers of surveillance and relax standards of evidence and procedure in favour of the state, which is not found in ordinary criminal law.

Interestingly, in the new legislation, the punishment for attempt to commit organised crime and for committing organised crime is the same, but a distinction is drawn based on whether a death is caused or not by the alleged offence. For cases involving death, the punishment ranges from life imprisonment to death but where there is no death involved, a mandatory minimum sentence of five years is prescribed which may extend to life imprisonment.

A separate category of "petty organised crime" has also been brought in, which criminalises "theft, snatching, cheating, unauthorised selling of tickets, unauthorised betting or gambling, selling of public examination question papers."

Terrorism: Importing large parts of the language in defining "terror activities" from the stringent Unlawful Atrocities Prevention Act, the BNS brings terrorism under the ambit of ordinary criminal law. Crucially, the offence involving terror financing is broader in the BNS than in UAPA.

It is unclear how both the UAPA and the BNS will operate concurrently, especially when procedurally the UAPA is more stringent and the cases are heard in special courts.

Attempt to suicide: The BNS introduces a new provision that criminalises "whoever attempts to commit suicide with the intent to compel or restrain any public servant from discharging his official duty", and prescribes a jail term which may extend to one year with community service. This provision could be invoked to prevent self-immolations and hunger strikes during protests.

Changes in accidental death provisions: The BNS increased the imprisonment term for causing accidental death from 2 years to a maximum of 5 years. An additional clause has been introduced for incidents where the person at fault flees or fails to report the incident for which BNS allows imprisonment of up to 10 years.

Union Home Minister Amit Shah said in Parliament that the provisions for increased punishment will reduce cases of hit and run. He, however, added that as the clause is also used for cases of medical negligence, an amendment has been moved to exempt doctors from it.

As per the amendment, "If such act is done by a registered medical practitioner while performing medical procedure, he shall be punished with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to 2 years, and shall also be liable to fine." This means criminal cases can still be lodged for cases of deaths due to medical negligence, but the maximum imprisonment will be less than that of other cases such as road accidents.

Deletions
Unnatural sexual offences: Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, which criminalised homosexuality among other "unnatural" sexual activities, has been repealed under the BNS. However, the total omission of Section 377 has raised concerns, since the provision is still helpful to tackle non-consensual sexual acts, especially when rape laws continue to be gendered. The Supreme Court in 2018 read down the provision as unconstitutional only to the extent that it criminalised consensual homosexual relationships.

Adultery: The offence of adultery, which was struck down by the Supreme Court as unconstitutional in 2018, has been omitted under the BNS.

Thugs: The IPC under Section 310 criminalises those who have been "habitually associated with any other or others for the purpose of committing robbery or child-stealing by means of or accompanied with murder," and labels them a thug. This provision is criticised for attaching colonial notions of criminality for certain tribes. The BNS has fully omitted this provision.

Gender neutrality: While rape laws continue to operate only for women, the BNS has tweaked some other laws, especially those dealing with children, to bring gender neutrality.

The offences dealing with procuration of a girl (for "illicit intercourse", 366A of the IPC) has been made gender neutral. For the offence dealing with kidnapping of minors, the IPC (Section 361) prescribes different age limits: 16 years for male and 18 years for a female. The BNS makes it 18 for both.

For adults, the offence of outraging the modesty of women (354A of the IPC) and voyeurism (354C) now has gender neutrality for the accused under the BNS, which means that women can also be booked under the law.

Other tweaks
Fake news: The IPC currently contains Section 153B which deals with "imputations, assertions prejudicial to national integration." This, commonly referred to as the "hate speech" provision, criminalises, among other aspects, causing "disharmony or feelings of enmity or hatred or ill-will" between communities. The BNS introduces a new provision here which criminalises publishing false and misleading information.

Sedition: When the Sanhitas were first introduced in the Lok Sabha in August, Union Home Minister Amit Shah had said that the law on sedition had been repealed. However, the BNS introduces the offence under a new name and with a wider definition. Apart from a name change from 'rajdroh' to 'deshdroh', the new provision brings under its sweep aiding through financial means acts of "subversive activities", and those encouraging "feelings of separatist activities."

Mandatory minimum sentence: Section 303 of the IPC prescribed a mandatory death sentence for murder committed by a life-convict. In 1983, the Supreme Court struck down the provision as unconstitutional since it took away the discretion of judges in awarding a sentence. The BNS has now tweaked this provision to prescribe a punishment of "death or imprisonment for life, which shall mean the remainder of that person's natural life."

In several other provisions, mandatory minimum sentences are prescribed. While the prescription of a minimum sentence limits the scope for judicial discretion and arbitrariness, it is seen to be unfair to the convict, whose mitigating circumstances, such as if they are a first-time offender or the sole breadwinner in the family, are often overlooked.

Also, under the BNS, offences related to causing damage to public property now carry a graded fine, which means the fine corresponds to the amount of damage caused.

21. India's revised criminal law proposals

Why in news?
Union Home Minister Amit Shah introduced three revised Bills in the Lok Sabha to replace British-era criminal laws: the Indian Penal Code (IPC) will be replaced by the Bharatiya Nyaya (Second) Sanhita Bill, 2023; the Code of Criminal Procedure (CrPC) by the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha (Second) Sanhita, 2023; and the Indian Evidence Act by the Bharatiya Sakshya (Second) Bill, 2023. The Bills underwent review by a Parliamentary Standing Committee, leading to corrections of errors and over 50 recommended changes highlighted by Opposition MPs. Mr. Shah clarified that the revised Bills address suggestions and were introduced to avoid numerous official amendments.

Here are the key highlights of the revised Bills.

Bharatiya Nyaya (Second) Sanhita Bill, 2023
Section 113 of the revised Bill has modified the definition of the crime of terrorism to entirely adopt the existing definition under Section 15 of the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967 (UAPA). The UAPA, often labeled as draconian, is defined as a terrorist act 'with intent to threaten or likely to threaten the unity, integrity, economic security, or sovereignty of India or with intent to strike terror or likely to strike terror in the people or any section of the people in India or any foreign country.'

The earlier version of the Bill included within the ambit of a terrorist act, vague acts such as intimidating the general public or a segment thereof, disturbing public order, creating an atmosphere or spreading a message of fear; destabilising or destroying the political, economic, or social structures of the country, or creating a public emergency or undermining public safety. Accordingly, even non-violent speech could be categorised as a terrorist act under this definition.

However, the new definition differs from the UAPA's definition in one respect — UAPA includes the production or smuggling or circulation only of high quality counterfeit Indian paper currency, coin, or any other material within the ambit of terrorism, whereas the revised Bill widens this definition to cover the same activities concerning any counterfeit Indian paper currency, coin or of any other material.

Further, possessing property derived from or through a terrorist act is punishable only if held knowingly. Similarly, harbouring a terrorist is punishable if it is done both voluntarily and knowingly. The offence of recruiting and training persons to engage in terrorist acts has been introduced, mirroring sections 18A and 18B of the UAPA.

Notably, the Explanation to this section allows an officer not below the rank of Superintendent of Police to decide if the prosecution of a terrorist act should continue under the UAPA or section 113 of this Bill.

The offence is punishable by death or imprisonment for life. Those who conspire, abet, incite, or facilitate the commission of a terrorist act could face imprisonment ranging from five years to life.

Cruelty defined
Another addition to the revised Bill is that it proposes to define "cruelty" against a woman by her husband and his relatives, which is punishable with a jail term of up to three years. The newly inserted section 86 defines 'cruelty' as (a) wilful conduct likely to drive a woman to commit suicide or cause grave injury or danger to the life, limb, or health (whether mental or physical); or (b) harassment of a woman to coerce her or any person related to her to meet any unlawful demand for property or valuable security.

Although the offence has now been defined in a separate provision, Section 498A of the IPC and Section 84 in the original Bill defined cruelty using the same terms in their "explanation" clauses. Therefore, there is no new addition in effect in the revised Bill.

Court proceedings
The newly inserted section 73 stipulates that those who print or publish 'any matter' concerning court proceedings in rape or sexual assault cases without permission would be punished with a two-year jail sentence and a fine. The Explanation to this provision clarifies that reports on High Court or Supreme Court judgments would not amount to an offence within this provision.'

In an attempt to do away with regressive terminology, the earlier version of the Bill had replaced terms such as lunacy, mental retardation, and unsoundness of mind with 'mental illness.' However, the panel pointed out that the term 'mental illness' is too wide in its import and could even include mood swings and voluntary intoxication. As

a result, the revised Bill replaces the term 'mental illness' with 'unsoundness of mind' in a majority of the provisions. It has added the term 'intellectual disability' along with unsoundness of mind in section 367 (competence to stand trial).

The original Bill made mob lynching and hate crime a separate category of murder for the first time. The offence dealt with cases where murder is committed by five or more persons acting in concert with one another, on grounds of race, caste or community, sex, place of birth, language, personal belief, or any other ground. However, it was criticised by the panel for prescribing a lesser minimum sentence of imprisonment of 7 years as opposed to the offence of murder, where the minimum sentence is imprisonment for life. The revised Bill has now removed the minimum punishment of seven years and now penalises mob lynching at par with murder.

Ignored recommendations
Two crucial recommendations of the panel to include a gender-neutral provision criminalising adultery, and a clause that criminalises non-consensual sex between men, women, transpersons, and acts of bestiality has been left out in the revised Bill. In 2018, a Constitution Bench of the Supreme Court unanimously decriminalised adulteryfor being discriminatory and infringing upon a woman's autonomy. However, the panel reasoned that adultery should be criminalised in a gender-neutral manner since it is crucial to safeguard the sanctity of the institution of marriage.

The panel pointed out, "Section 377 IPC can still be invoked when there is a nonconsensual sex/rape of a man by another man. A woman can also initiate proceedings against her husband for unnatural sex under Section 377 IPC. If, as per the Nyaya Sanhita, these acts are not offences, it means that the victims of sodomy, buggery, etc. will have no remedy available under it. So if a man is 'raped' by another man, what is his remedy?" Thus, this leaves men and transgender persons with no legal remedy against sexual offences.

'Petty organised crime'
The revised Bill includes a more precise definition of 'petty organised crime': Whoever, being a member of a group or gang, either singly or jointly, commits any act of theft, snatching, cheating, unauthorised selling of tickets, unauthorised betting or gambling, selling of public examination question papers or any other similar criminal act, is said to commit petty organised crime.' The Explanation to this provision stipulates that theft would include trick theft, theft from a vehicle, dwelling house, or business premises, cargo theft, pickpocketing, theft through card skimming, shoplifting, and theft of an Automated Teller Machine.

Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha (Second) Sanhita, 2023
The original Bill introduced the concept of 'community service' as a form of punishment for petty offences such as an attempt to commit suicide, public servants

unlawfully engaged in trade, theft of property less than ₹5,000, public intoxication, and defamation. This punishment has now been defined under Section 23 of the revised Bill. Community service is 'work which the court may order a convict to perform as a form of punishment that benefits the community, for which he shall not be entitled to any remuneration.' Moreover, a Magistrate of the First or Second Class has been specifically empowered to impose this punishment, to encourage a more reparative approach to minor crimes.

Power of police

Section 43(3) of the original Bill permitted the use of handcuffs to prevent the escape of individuals accused of serious offences and ensure the safety of police officers and staff during arrests. However, the panel recommended that this should be restricted to select heinous crimes like rape and murder instead of extending its usage to persons who have been accused of committing 'economic offences.' In another change, the power of the police to use handcuffs has been expanded beyond the time of arrest to include the stage of production before court as well.

Conduct of court

The original Bill permitted the conduct of court proceedings through audio-visual means. However, certain types of proceedings mentioned in the earlier draft have been deleted, including inquiries, trials before court of sessions, trials in summary cases, plea bargaining, and trials before High Courts. Meanwhile, the provisions allowing the reading out of charge to the accused, hearing on discharge, examination of witnesses, and recording of evidence in audio-visual means have been introduced in the revised Bill in sections 251, 262, 266, and 308 respectively.

Police custody

The revised Bill has overlooked the concerns of the panel regarding a provision in the earlier version that allowed police custody beyond the initial 15 days of arrest.

Section 187(3) of the Bill, which corresponds to Section 167 (2)(a) of the CrPC, does not contain the phrase 'otherwise than in the custody of the police' — implying that the prescribed 15-day-period of police custody can now be an aggregate of shorter periods of custody sought over the entire period of an investigation lasting 60 or 90 days (depending on the nature of the offence.)

Since people, particularly those hailing from marginalised backgrounds, may be subjected to extreme custodial violence, the panel underscored that "there is a concern that this clause could be vulnerable to misuse by authorities, as it does not explicitly clarify that the custody was not taken in the first 15 days either due to the conduct of the accused or due to extraneous circumstances beyond the control of the investigating officer. The committee recommends that a suitable amendment be brought to provide greater clarity in the interpretation of this clause.

Accordingly, under the revised Bill, the detained person must now be produced before the Magistrate or released in petty cases within 24 hours.

Bharatiya Sakshya (Second) Bill, 2023

Section 61 of the original Bill allowed the admissibility of electronic evidence by underscoring that an electronic record shall have the same legal effect as a paper record. However, there was no requirement for a certificate under section 63 (corresponding to the requirement of a certificate under section 65B of the Indian Evidence Act). This provision has now been revised to state that the admissibility of an electronic record is subject to section 63.

22. Punishment to doctors for death due to negligence

Punishment under Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita

Union Home Minister's assurance on the floor of the Lok Sabha was at variance with the actual amendment on punishment for doctors in cases of death due to negligence. Amit Shah initially said: "If someone died due to medical negligence by doctors it was treated as culpable homicide not amounting to murder. I am bringing an amendment today. Doctors have been exempted from punishment [under this section]. The Indian Medical Association [IMA] had requested us [for the exemption]."

The amended Bharatiya Nyaya (Second) Sanhita Bill, 2023, passed since, however did not provide that blanket exemption to doctors. Instead, the amended Section 106(1) specifies that a registered medical practitioner (RMP) shall be punished with imprisonment up to two years and a fine. In effect, the punishment for doctors as specified under Section 304(A) of the Indian Penal Code that the BNSS replaces, has been retained.

With the IMA still thanking the government despite the status quo situation, a deft look behind the scenes reveals that a draft Bill submitted to the Parliamentary Standing Committee on the issue, actually suggested a seven-year imprisonment term for death due to negligence in case of an RMP. The IMA then submitted to the Standing Committee that there was no mens rea or criminal intent in the relationship between the patient and the doctor, and thus the increased punishment was not justified. The committee then reduced the imprisonment to five years, which finally rested at two years, as the law was passed.

SC guidelines

It is pertinent to look at the index case that defined guidelines relating to medical negligence — Jacob Mathew vs State of Punjab & Anr. (2005). The court held that the negligence should be 'gross', of a significantly high degree, and consequently, criminal liability would come up only if the physician's act can be demonstrated to be negligent or reckless, causing death. Even during prosecution, at various levels, the weight is on the opinion of a similarly qualified expert on whether negligence on the part of the doctor led to death. While it may be argued that doctors thus enjoy adequate protection under the law in the execution of their duties, the reality is that the incidence of violence against medical professionals is indeed increasing. To offer doctors refuge from fear of assault while discharging their duty, and to ensure that any decision made is not clouded or impaired from such fear is important. No one is above the law, but any attempt to demonise doctors for deaths that occur may cause them to hold back from giving patients the best available care. That, under no circumstances, is acceptable.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance
Source: The Hindu

23. What happens under the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita if your pet animal attacks someone?

Introduction
Under the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), aimed at replacing the Indian Penal Code (IPC), if your pet animal attacks a human, you can be fined upto Rs 5,000 along with imprisonment upto six months.

Titled "Negligent conduct with respect to animal," Section 291 of the BNS states: "whoever knowingly or negligently omits to take such measures with any animal in his possession as is sufficient to guard against any probable danger to human life, or any probable danger of grievous hurt from such animal, shall be punished with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to six months, or with fine which may extend to five thousand rupees, or with both."

On the other hand, Section 289 of the IPC, which has the exact same wordings as Section 291 of the BNS, imposed a fine of upto Rs 1,000, along with imprisonment upto six months.

SC judgement
In September 2022, the Supreme Court had held that if stray dogs (who are not technically "owned" by anyone), attacked someone, then the people who routinely feed them could be made liable to bear the costs.

National Crime Records Bureau Data

The latest NCRB Crime in India report reveals that animal attacks in 2022 rose by 19% from 2021. Another concerning trend was an increase in the number of people dying or getting injured in animal attacks.

The data shows that in 2022, 1,510 people in India died due to animal bites — 1,205 men and 305 women — this was a rise from 1,264 deaths in 2021.

According to a Rajya Sabha question answered by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare on December 15, around 27.6 lakh people in India got bitten by dogs in 2023 — this was a rise of 26.5% from 2022, when 21.8 lakh dog bites were reported all over India.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance
Source: Indian Express

24. Wrestlers return Padma honours: Looking back at 'award wapsi' during Indira Gandhi regime

Why in news?
Wrestler Bajrang Punia on December 22 said he was returning his Padma Shri, India's fourth-highest civilian award, to oppose the election of Sanjay Singh, a close aide of BJP MP and sexual harassment accused Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh, as president of the Wrestling Federation of India (WFI).

Punia, who has won multiple medals for India, was stopped by the Delhi Police at Kartavya Path when he tried to walk towards Prime Minister Narendra Modi's residence. "I will give the Padma Shri award to anyone who will take it to PM Modi," Bajrang said before he placed the award on the footpath and walked away.

This was followed by deaflympics gold medallist Virender Singh Yadav making a similar announcement, saying he would give up his Padma Shri in solidarity with wrestler Sakshi Malik, who quit the sport to protest Singh's election.

Award wapsi not new
Yadav and Punia join a long list of awardees who have returned their civilian honours in the past few years. However, "award wapsi" is by no means a recent phenomenon in India. One of the earliest examples of this goes back to 1919, when Rabindranath Tagore returned his knighthood (the tile of 'Sir'), granted by the British, in response to the Jallianwala Bagh massacre.

In post-independence India, too, many recipients have returned awards and honours granted by the government. This is not counting those who have refused to accept the awards.

Two notable examples of 'award wapsi' are from the Emergency period.

During the Emergency
When former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi imposed a state of Emergency on the country, several prominent civil society members rose up in protest. Two of them went as far as to return the civilian honours granted to them — writer K Shivarama Karanth from Karnataka returned his Padma Bhushan, while author Phanishwar Nath "Renu" from Bihar gave up his Padma Shri.

Apart from the Emergency
Renu and Karanth were not the only writers to give up their awards in protest against the Indira government.

In 1984, poet and novelist Khushwant Singh returned his Padma Bhushan, awarded in 1974, to protest Operation Blue Star at the Golden Temple.

In the same year, Kashmiri writer Akhtar Mohiuddin returned the Padma Shri, which he received in 1968, over the hanging of Kashmiri separatist Maqbool Bhat.

Relevance: GS Prelims; Indian Polity
Source: The Indian Express

25. The Wrestling Federation of India needs a complete overhaul

Why in news?
The Union Sports Ministry suspended the newly elected Wrestling Federation of India (WFI) in yet another twist in the nearly year-long saga afflicting Indian wrestling.

Brij Bhushan forced to give up control
In January 2023, Olympic medallists Sakshi Malik and Bajrang Punia, and World Championship medallist Vinesh Phogat, had accused the then WFI President Brij

Bhushan Sharan Singh and the coaches of the Federation of sexual harassment. The Bharatiya Janata Party parliamentarian was subsequently forced to relinquish control and was charged by the Delhi police for offences including stalking and harassment.

Loyalist appointed as President
Recently, his long-term loyalist, Sanjay Singh, was appointed the new president. Not only did Singh and his fellow Brij Bhushan confidants win 13 of 15 posts to which polls were held, not a single woman was chosen. The sight of Singh standing beside a heavily garlanded Brij Bhushan outside the latter's residence — which also doubled up as the WFI office — and the duo flashing the victory sign was enough indication of where the control lay.

Wrestlers disappointed
Such was the disappointment among the wrestlers that a tearful Sakshi announced her retirement while Vinesh warned that no woman will find wrestling safe in the current set-up. Bajrang decided to return his Padma Shri award in protest.

Embarrassment for government
Perhaps, it is this embarrassing turn of events that forced the government to finally act. The Ministry has also cited hasty and arbitrary decision-making on Singh's part, wherein he announced the revival of tournaments without taking into confidence the Secretary General (Prem Chand Lochab) as mandated by the WFI constitution. Lochab is one of two WFI office-bearers not considered close to Brij Bhushan.

Another reason was the running of Federation affairs from "the premises controlled by former office-bearers, also the alleged premises wherein sexual harassment of players has been alleged". In a nutshell, the mess has laid bare everything that plagues sports administration in India.

Even as the nation is diversifying its sporting excellence, the bureaucracy that runs sport still carries the unwelcome legacy of patronage politics. It also does not help that prominent athletes occupying positions of power are mostly deferential to the political masters who helped in their ascent.

In the wrestlers' case, the Indian Olympic Association led by the legendary P.T. Usha dithered in its initial response and the athletes' commission comprising iconic sportspersons was tongue-tied. Such was Brij Bhushan's clout that a first information report was registered only after the intervention of the Chief Justice of India. There is still room to wipe the slate clean and usher in reforms. The authorities should go the whole hog.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance
Source: The Hindu

Why in news?
The Delhi Consumer Dispute Redressal Commission (DCDRC) last month directed fashion brand Lifestyle to pay a customer Rs 3,000 for charging him Rs 7 for a paper carry bag.

Such a penalty is not rare. In October, a Bengaluru-based consumer court imposed a fine of Rs 3,000 on Ikea, a furniture company, for charging Rs 20 for a bag which had its logo. In January, a store in Chandigarh was asked to pay Rs 26,000 by a Chandigarh Consumer Court as it asked a customer to pay Rs 10 for a carry bag.

Despite these rulings, retailers have continued to argue that no law bans them from charging the customer for a carry bag.

How charging of bags started?
The roots of the problem go back to 2011, when the Centre brought out the Plastic Waste (Management and Handling) Rules which mandated that "no carry bags shall be made available free of cost by retailers to consumers".

Carry bags in this case meant plastic bags, and the rule was meant to curb the use of plastic bags. Retailers, however, exploited this rule and started charging for paper and cloth bags as well, which was not explicitly mentioned in the rules.

Moreover, civic bodies had to determine the price of the plastic carry bags first, taking into consideration the cost of inputs and the cost of waste management. But this didn't happen.

Amendment of rules
Noticing that retailers were charging for paper bags and civic bodies had failed to fix the cost of carry bags, the Union government amended these rules in 2016. It introduced a new section called "Explicit pricing of carry bags", which asked retailers selling plastic bags to pay a certain amount as a plastic waste management fee and also to put up notices in outlets stating that plastic bags would be provided only on payment.
However, even this didn't work. The government brought another amendment in 2018 which altogether omitted the 2016 section. The new rules didn't mention anything about the pricing of carry bags and, like previous rules, didn't say anything specific about paper carry bags.

What retailers say
Retailers argue that there is no law which explicitly states that carry bags have to be supplied for free to the customers. They say the Plastic Waste Management Rules do

not forbid the sale of all plastic carry bags by the stores to the customers, and there is no bar imposed on stores on charging money for carry bags. Since December 31, 2022, there has been a ban on the sale of plastic carry bags which are thinner than 120 microns.

Another point raised by retailers is a concept called 'polluters pay' — it requires that those who are responsible for pollution bear the costs of managing it to prevent damage to human health or the environment. Retailers hold customers as polluters and therefore, charge them for the plastic carry bags.

So can retailers legally charge customers for carry bags?
Yes, they can but several consumer courts have held that charging consumers for bags without informing them beforehand is illegal. For instance, in the recent Lifestyle case, the consumer court in Delhi held that providing information about carry bag charges during the payment process causes harassment to the customer. It also affects the consumer's right to make an informed decision to opt for a specific outlet or not, the court added.

Similarly, in 2021, a consumer court in Hyderabad ruled that the retailer, who was sued by a consumer, must provide free carry bags to all customers if the bags have the company's logo printed on them. However, the court also held that the retailer was at liberty to charge for the plain carry bags (without logos) with prior intimation and consent of the customers.

The District Consumer Disputes Redressal Forum in Chandigarh in a 2020 judgement called the practice of not providing prior information to the consumer about the cost of the paper bag 'arbitrary' and 'highhanded'.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance
Source: The Indian Express

27. How the PM JANMAN scheme can help Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups

Introduction
In November, the Union Cabinet approved the Pradhan Mantri Janjati Adivasi Nyaya Maha Abhiyan (PM JANMAN), aimed at providing PVTG households and habitations with basic facilities such as safe housing, clean drinking water and sanitation, improved access to education, health and nutrition, road and telecom connectivity, and sustainable livelihood opportunities.

In addition, saturation will also be ensured for schemes like Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (PMJAY), Sickle Cell Disease Elimination, TB Elimination, 100% immunisation, PM Poshan, PM Jan Dhan Yojana, etc. This initiative is part of the Pradhan Mantri-PVTG

Development Mission announced in India's 2022-23 Union Budget, allocating Rs 15,000 crore over three years to develop them.

Baiga tribe of Chhattisgarh

Who are PVTGs?
In 1960-61, the Dhebar Commission identified disparities among Scheduled Tribes, leading to the creation of the "Primitive Tribal Groups" (PTG) category. In 2006, this category was renamed Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs).

Initially identifying 52 groups, the category was expanded to include 75 groups in 22,544 villages across 18 states and one Union Territory of India, totalling about 28 lakh individuals. These groups, living mainly in Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Odisha, Andhra Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu, are characterised by pre-agricultural lifestyles, low literacy, small or stagnant populations, and subsistence economies. Population sizes vary significantly, from under 1,000 in some groups, such as the Great Andamanese (around 50) and the Onge (around 100), to over 1 lakh in others, such as Maria Gond of Maharashtra and Saura in Odisha. Some tribes in central India, like Birhor, face stagnation, while the Onge and Andamanese are experiencing a decline.

What are the challenges in their development?
PVTGs are severely marginalised due to their isolation, low population, and distinct socio-economic and cultural traits. They struggle with limited access to basic services, social discrimination, and vulnerability to displacement from development and natural disasters. They have little political representation, hindering their participation in decision-making.

Mainstream society often overlooks their traditional knowledge and practices, and stereotypes about their backwardness are prevalent.

They are also battling loss of traditional livelihoods and resource rights, lack of market knowledge for Non-Timber Forest Produce, and exploitation by middlemen, threatening their traditional occupations.

What schemes have been floated for them?
The Centre and state governments have introduced several initiatives to support PVTGs. The PVTG Development Plan provides education, healthcare, and livelihood opportunities while preserving traditional knowledge. The Pradhan Mantri Janjatiya Vikas Mission (PMJVM) focuses on market linkages and Minor Forest Produce (MFP) procurement at Minimum Support Prices.

Other significant schemes include the Pradhan Mantri Adi Adarsh Gram Yojana, Integrated Tribal Development Project (ITDP) and Tribal Sub-Plan (TSP), which collectively aim for the holistic development of tribal areas. Additional measures like Eklavya Model Residential Schools, land titles under the Forest Rights Act 2006, Support to Tribal Research Institute (STRI) scheme, the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act 1989, The Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act 1996, and direct recruitment through reservations further aid in education, self-governance, and protection against discrimination.

However, challenges in implementation, such as resource limitations, lack of awareness, and unequal treatment among different PVTG groups have affected the effectiveness of these schemes.

What does PM-JANMAN do differently?
Proper identification and recognition: The criteria for identifying PVTGs have been criticised for being outdated. Some PVTGs are not recognised as Scheduled Tribes in certain states, and the list containing repetitive names has led to confusion and exclusion.

A 2014 report by Dr. Hrusikesh Panda, Secretary of the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, and a 2015 report by Virginius Xaxa highlighted these concerns. The actual number of PVTGs is around 63, accounting for overlaps and repetitions, as per the publication 'The Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups of India — Privileges and Predicaments' by the Anthropological Survey of India.

Baseline surveys have only been conducted for about 40 PVTG groups, emphasising the need for targeted development planning. The government's initiative to create a Human Development Index for PVTGs is a significant step towards addressing these vulnerabilities.

Participatory bottom-up approach: To help PVTGs effectively, the scheme abandons the 'one-size-fits-all' approach in favour of customised strategies that respect their

unique needs and priorities. It actively involves PVTGs in decision-making, addressing land rights, social inclusion, and cultural preservation. This community-based strategy embraces their cultural practices, beliefs, and traditions, ensuring their participation in planning, implementing, and monitoring development projects.

Livelihood promotion: Providing skills training and resources, like land and credit, will help in sustainable livelihoods. Implementing the Forest Rights Act by granting land titles secures access to forest resources. Section 3(1)(e) of the FRA specifically supports the rights of primitive tribal groups and pre-agricultural communities. Additionally, encouraging traditional technologies and skill enhancement through industry partnerships will help maintain cultural heritage while promoting sustainable development.

Health, nutrition and education: Outreach strategies like Mobile Medical Health Units will be crucial for providing healthcare in remote areas. These strategies need to be tailored for specific health issues like teenage pregnancies and oral health, and overcoming language and cultural barriers through sensitised healthcare workers or hiring those from within the community. Collaboration with trusted traditional healers can also aid in addressing complex health issues.

Incorporating their culture and language into the curriculum, providing transportation, and training teachers about PVTG cultural contexts can enhance education accessibility. Additionally, incentives for personnel working in PVTG areas and special educational institutes focused on PVTG needs can further improve opportunities for these communities.

Infrastructure development: The habitations of PVTGs often don't meet the criteria for schemes such as the Pradhan Mantri Grameen Sadak Yojana, Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana and Jal Jeevan Mission due to factors like population requirements or lack of surveys.

Guidelines for infrastructure schemes, thus, have been relaxed to improve access to housing, water, sanitation, electricity, and connectivity. Adopting a tola-based (habitation) approach rather than a Gram Panchayat-based approach for development planning will better address these communities' specific needs.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance
Source: Indian Express

28. Press and periodicals Bill 2023: Why it was brought in, differences from 1867 Act

Why in news?

After being passed in the Rajya Sabha on August 3 amid uproar from the Opposition, the Press and Registration of Periodicals Bill, 2023, was passed in the Lok Sabha on December 21.

Seeking to repeal the Press and Registration of Books Act, 1867, the Bill contains a unique provision disallowing persons convicted of terrorist acts or unlawful activities, or those who have acted against state security, from publishing periodicals. A periodical means any publication, barring books or journals, that is printed at regular intervals and contains public news or comments on public news.

Why was this Bill brought in?
According to the Bill's Statement of Objects & Reasons, it has been passed for three reasons. The first is "ease of doing business." Second, it intends to remove "unnecessary procedural obstacles" for publishers. Finally, it seeks to "unburden" the publishers and printing press owners from furnishing a declaration before the District Magistrate (DM) and filing a revised declaration every time there's a change in its particulars.

Introducing the Bill in the Lok Sabha, Minister for Information and Broadcasting Anurag Thakur said efforts have been made to decriminalise the colonial-era statute by replacing conviction with financial penalties for certain violations.

Stressing the ease of doing business aspect, he added that the title registration process, which sometimes took 2-3 years, will now be done in 60 days.

How is this Bill different from the 1867 Act?
Books: The 1867 Act was enacted for the regulation of printing presses and newspapers, the preservation of copies of books and newspapers printed in India, and their registration. However, the 2023 Bill removes books from its ambit as they are under the HRD Ministry.

Penalties: The 2023 Bill seeks to decriminalise the colonial-era statute by replacing jail terms with fines, and providing for an appellate mechanism headed by the Chairman of the Press Council of India. The Appellate Board (Press and Registration Appellate Board) will comprise, alongside the PCI chairman, two PCI members and hear appeals against refusal of registration, imposition of penalties, suspension, or cancellation of registration.

The 1867 law included up to six-months imprisonment for offences like keeping a press without declaration, making false statements, and violating printing or publishing requirements under Section 3. The new law has replaced all such penal provisions with fines, barring one. Section 14(4) allows six-month imprisonment for anyone failing to

cease publication even after six months of the issuance of directions or those publishing without a certificate of registration.

The upper limit of fines has been hiked considerably — from Rs 2,000 to Rs 5 lakh.

Shift in power: The new Bill shifts all the power from the DM's hands to the Press Registrar General, a newly created position. Although the 1867 Act included a "Press Registrar" or a "Registrar of newspapers for India" appointed by the Centre, its powers were limited, unlike the PRG's under the new law.

Sections 5 and 6 of the Bill delineate the PRG's functions and powers, respectively. The PRG is entrusted with tasks like issuing certificates of registration to periodicals, maintaining records of registered periodicals, collecting application fees, and disbursing the Centre's funds for the Act's implementation, among others.

What is the process of declarations and registration?
The 1867 Act mandated a declaration specifying the printer or publisher be made to the DM, who then sent it to the Press Registrar, who issued a certificate of registration necessary for publication.

The process was deemed "time-consuming" and "onerous" under the new Bill.
Notably, publishers will no longer be required to file a declaration with the DM or the local authorities. Meanwhile, printing presses can simply give an online "intimation" instead of filing a declaration.

Another key change is that publishers and printers would not have to file separate applications as the Bill allows processing of the title allotment and registration applications simultaneously.

Once a registration application is filed, the "specified authority" must furnish its no-objection or comments on the application within 60 days before making an application to the PRG, who eventually decides the grant of registration.

Notably, this requirement for such authority's no-objection has been removed for registration of periodicals proposed to be published by the government.

What is the UAPA provision?
The proviso to Section 4 states that any person who has been convicted of a "terrorist act" or "unlawful activity" or has acted against the security of the state will not be allowed to publish a periodical. "Terrorist act" and "unlawful activity" shall have the same meaning assigned to them in clauses (k) and (o) of Section 2(1) of the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967.

While the former refers to any act done "with intent to threaten or likely to threaten the unity, integrity, security, economic security, or sovereignty of India or with intent to strike terror or likely to strike terror among people", the latter refers to any action by individuals or associations supporting any claim for secession, separatism, disruption of sovereignty or integrity, among others.

29. Is Pegasus spyware targeting journalists in India?

Introduction
The Washington Post and Amnesty International report claims that Pegasus spyware targeted journalists in India, including Siddharth Varadarajan of The Wire and Anand Mangnale of South Asia editor of the Organised Crime and Corruption Report Project (OCCRP). The intrusion was detected in October 2023 after Apple warned users, including MPs, of potential 'state-sponsored attacks' on their iPhones.

What has Amnesty International alleged?
After Apple issued a security notification to certain iPhone users, including MPs, in October, researchers at Amnesty International's Security Lab analysed the allegedly infected devices, including those belonging to Mr. Varadarajan and Mr. Mangnale. At the end of their examination, they reported finding traces of Pegasus's activity on their respective devices. Security Lab concluded that a message to facilitate a "zero-click exploit" had been sent to Mr. Mangnale's phone over his iPhone's iMessage app.

What is a zero-click exploit?
A zero-click exploit refers to malicious software that allows spyware to be installed on a device without the device owner's consent. More importantly, it doesn't require the device owner to perform any actions to initiate or complete the installation.

The specific exploit allegedly in use on the two devices is called BLASTPAST (previously identified as BLASTPASS). It plays out in two phases. In the first, the attack attempts to establish a link with the Apple HomeKit – which gives users a way to control multiple smart devices – on the target's device. In the second, some malicious content is sent via the iMessage app to the target. According to Amnesty, the purpose of the first phase – the 'outreach' – could be to determine how the device can be exploited or to keep it in sight for further exploitation in the future. The second phase is the one that delivers the full spyware "payload".

What has happened?
In the wake of the 'Pegasus Project' revelations, activists filed several petitions with the Supreme Court alleging a mass surveillance exercise by the government to muzzle free

speech and democratic dissent. In response, the top court asked the Centre to file a detailed affidavit vis-a-vis its use of Pegasus. The Centre refused to comply, however, contending that such an public affidavit would compromise the country's national security.

30. Security for 2002 Gujarat riots witnesses withdrawn: Everything you need to know about witness protection in India

Why in news?
The Supreme Court-appointed special investigation team (SIT) re-investigating nine 2002 Gujarat riots cases has withdrawn police and paramilitary protection to all the witnesses, including retired judge Jyotsana Yagnik.

The only exception has been made for Zakia Jafri, the widow of Congress MP Ehsan Jafri, who was killed inside the Gulberg Society along with 68 others and filed a complaint against then-CM Narendra Modi.

Who is a witness?
Although the term "witness" is widely used in criminal law, it hasn't been defined properly in the statute books.

However, Section 161 CrPC dealt with the examination of witnesses and allowed investigating police officers to orally examine anyone "supposed to be acquainted" with the case's facts and circumstances. It also said the witness is bound to answer all questions "truly" but needn't answer questions that expose them to criminal charges, penalties, or forfeiture.

Notably, Section 398 of the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita, which has replaced the CrPC, states that every state government shall prepare and notify a Witness Protection Scheme for the state to ensure the protection of witnesses.

Why is there a need to protect witnesses?
In Swaran Singh vs. State of Punjab (2000), the SC observed that a criminal case is built upon the edifice of evidence that is admissible in law, and for that, witnesses are of paramount importance.

And yet, witnesses in India are mistreated, given no facilities, and face the danger of bodily harm, death, abduction, and threats, besides other forms of mental and physical harassment.

Several witnesses also turn hostile. A hostile witness does not tell the truth at the instance of the party calling him. Parties expect witnesses to testify in their favour; however, some don't oblige. In cases like the Jessica Lal murder case or the Salman Khan hit-and-run case, the prosecution failed after witnesses turned hostile.

The Fourteenth Report of the Law Commission came out in 1958 and highlighted the tribulations commonly encountered by witnesses, like difficulty in accessing courts owing to expenses, travel, time, and frequent adjournments. Besides this, the Law Commission's 154th and 178th reports that came out in 1996 and 2001, respectively, also discussed various facets of witness protection.

Based on the suggestions made in the 178th Report, the Criminal Law (Amendment) Bill, 2003, was proposed.

What efforts have been made to protect witnesses?
The Criminal Law (Amendment) Bill, 2003's Statement of Object and Reasons said, "It is widely felt that criminal cases in the courts fail because statements by witness(es) are reneged either out of fear or allurement. To prevent the evil of witness turning hostile, it is proposed to amend sections 161, 162 and 344 of, and to insert new sections 164A and 344A in, the CrPC. The Bill didn't address the lack of power trial courts have in protecting witnesses but made it mandatory for police to record witness statements before a magistrate. However, nothing much happened regarding the Bill as the Vajpayee government fell out of power in 2004.

What is the Witness Protection Scheme?
Acting on PIL for the protection of witnesses in the Asaram Bapu case, a Bench of Justices AK Sikri and SA Nazeer observed in Mahender Chawla vs. Union of India (2019) that witnesses turned hostile due to inadequate protection by the state and directed the Centre, states, and UTs to "enforce" the scheme "in letter and spirit" until the Parliament enacts a law on it.

Consequently, the scheme was drawn up by the Centre with inputs from 8 states/UTs, legal services authorities of five states, civil society, high courts and police. It was finalised in consultation with the National Legal Services Authority.

How does this Scheme work?
First, an application is made by a witness, their family member, lawyer, or the concerned IO/SHO/SDPO/Jail Superintendent before "a competent authority through its Member Secretary" for a Witness Protection Order under the 2018 Scheme. Then, a "Threat Analysis Report" is prepared and submitted by the Head of the Police in the investigating district concerning the seriousness and credibility of the threat.

It contains details about the nature of threats faced by witnesses and their families and analyses the extent of the threat, the persons making it, their motives, and the resources to implement the same.

This report also categorises threat perception and suggests witness protection measures that should be taken.

The Scheme operates by identifying three categories of threat perceptions for witnesses. Category A includes cases where threats extend to witnesses or their families' lives during an investigation, trial, or after. Meanwhile, categories B and C relate to cases where threats extend to the witness's safety, reputation, or property during the investigation or trial, and cases where there is a moderate threat perception, like harassment or intimidation of the witness or their family, respectively.

Depending on the urgency, the 'competent authority' can pass orders for interim protection. However, the police can provide immediate protection in cases of grave and imminent threats to life.

The report also includes suggestive protective measures like ensuring witnesses and accused don't come face-to-face during the probe, protection of identity, relocation of witnesses, confidentiality and preservation of records, and recovery of expenses.

31. Uttarakhand CM forms panel to examine 2022 land law committee report: What is the issue — and what did the report say

Why in news?
Uttarakhand Chief Minister Pushkar Singh Dhami, a few days back, formed a five-member committee for a detailed study of a 2022 draft report that gave recommendations for amending the state's land laws.

This comes days after several social organisations announced a rally in Dehradun, demanding a stricter land law to curb the large-scale sale of land to "outsiders". The organisations also demanded for raising the minimum number of years required for non-Uttarakhand residents to get domicile certificates. They have claimed that "outsiders" easily getting domicile certificates is risking the future of the children of those who fought for a separate state.

What is the issue?
In 2003, then Chief Minister ND Tiwari (from the Congress party) introduced the first ever limit on land purchases in the hilly areas of the state by non-Uttarakhand

residents. He brought in two amendments to existing land laws that capped land purchase at 500 square metres. The move aimed to preserve local identity, while also focusing on inviting investments from outside. Subsequently, under the BJP-led government of BC Khanduri, this limit was reduced to 250 square metres.

Troubles, however, began in 2017, when then CM Trivendra Rawat (from the BJP) lifted these restrictions entirely after an investor's summit. Rawat said this would stimulate investments in the hills, and help foster economic progress. As more land was bought by the "outsiders", Uttarakhand residents got concerned about preserving their own culture, and demanded the reinstatement of strict regulations — a 250 square metre cap in municipal areas, and a complete ban on rural land sales.

Responding to the mounting pressure, BJP's Pushkar Singh Dhami formed a high-level panel to examine Uttarakhand's land laws, a month after being appointed the Chief Minister in 2021.

The committee's recommendations
The committee, headed by ex-chief secretary Subhash Kumar, submitted its report with 23 recommendations. It recommended that, unlike the current practice, the approval for the purchase of farmland should come from the government rather than from district magistrates.

The most important recommendation was the introduction of an 'essentiality certificate' just like Himachal Pradesh where it is an important requirement for non-agriculturists, or non-residents who wish to purchase land in the state.

As per the rules in Himachal Pradesh, an essentiality certificate is issued by the state government, verifying the "essentiality" or necessity of the purchase of land by a non-agriculturist or non-resident. Authorities examine the application to ascertain if the purchase is indeed essential for the applicant.

The committee also recommended strict action against those building illegal structures or religious places on rivers, forest areas, pastures, or public land. There should be a state-wide campaign against illegal possession of lands, it said.

In its 80-page report, the committee said that at present, district magistrates allow the purchase of farmland for related purposes, but in several cases, the land is misused by the construction of resorts or personnel bungalows on it. This is making the hill residents landless and is not creating new jobs.

In August 2023, Dhami said that the government is fully prepared and committed to implementing the land law, and informed that this proposal will be put up in the cabinet meeting soon. The recommendations, however, are yet to be implemented.

Instead, the Uttarakhand government has now formed a five-member committee for a detailed study of the report submitted by the panel.

Bilateral Relations and International Organizations

Introduction

An appellate court in Qatar has commuted the death sentence handed out to eight former Indian Navy officers earlier this year, allegedly over charges of espionage.

In October this year, a Qatari court sentenced the men to death, following which the MEA said it was "exploring all legal options". What was the case about, and why is this commuting of charges significant for India?

Who are the eight former Navy men in Qatar?

Eight former Indian Navy personnel — Captain Navtej Singh Gill, Captain Saurabh Vasisht, Commander Purnendu Tiwari, Captain Birendra Kumar Verma, Commander Sugunakar Pakala, Commander Sanjeev Gupta, Commander Amit Nagpal and Sailor Ragesh — were working in Qatar at Al Dahra Global Technologies and Consultancy Services, a defence services provider company.

Of them, Commander Sugunakar Pakala (Retd) served as an engineering officer in the Navy, holding the unique record of crossing the equator twice aboard INS Tarangini, a 500-tonne sailship. A decorated officer, he received a commendation from the commander-in-chief (C-in-C).

Another one of the men, Managing Director Commander Purnendu Tiwari (retd), was recognised in 2019 by the Indian government with the Pravasi Bharatiya Samman award. The prize recognises the contributions of Indian-origin people living abroad, and the MEA website lists Tiwari's field as 'Training and Simulation'.

Al Dahra Global Technologies and Consultancy Services's previous website said it provided training, logistics and maintenance services to the Qatari Emiri Naval Force (QENF). As per the new website, the company was called Dahra Global and there was no mention of the connection to the QENF. It also did not mention that most of the Indian officers had leadership roles. They had been working here for four to six years when the Qatari intelligence agency State Security Bureau's officials arrested them.

What were the charges against the men?

The men were arrested in August 2022. At the time, MEA spokesman Arindam Bagchi said that questions of charges of arrest "should be directed to the Qatari authorities". The family members and MEA officials also said that Qatar had not informed them of the charges.

Sources said the Indians had been working in their private capacity with Dahra Global to oversee the induction of Italian small stealth submarines U2I2. According to a report in the Financial Times at the time of the death sentences being announced, "A person briefed on the case confirmed… that the eight Indians had been charged with spying for Israel."

The men met India's Ambassador in Doha in October 2022 and received limited access to relatives via phone calls. It was later learnt that they were undergoing solitary punishment.

In March 2023, the last of multiple bail pleas filed for the veterans was rejected. The trial began later that month and on October 26, the death sentence was handed. External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar then met the family members of the sentenced men.

In November, the MEA announced it had filed an appeal and that its legal team had details of the charges. The Indian ambassador in Doha also met them in prison on December 3. This consular access came days after Prime Minister Narendra Modi met Qatar's Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani on the sidelines of the COP28 summit in Dubai on December 1.

What avenues have been available to India?
One has been the legal challenge, which has been admitted and helped reduce the sentence for now as a first step. At the same time, India has been employing diplomatic channels to reach out to the Qataris.
The families also filed a mercy plea with the Emir of Qatar, who is known to give out pardons during Ramadan and Eid. This was also being pursued by the Indian government's help.

Given the confidential nature of the case, and that the accused are former Indian defence personnel, India needed to secure a breakthrough. Further, Qatar is an important partner of India and the two countries enjoy a deep relationship. Qatar has around 8 lakh Indian migrants, who send remittances back home. In FY 2021-22, it sent the eighth-highest amount of remittances among all countries.

Apart from people-to-people ties, there are deep economic and defence links. India's total imports from Qatar in FY2022-23 were valued at $16.81 billion, of which LNG imports alone were worth $8.32 billion, or 49.5%, an analysis of official trade data shows.

The first big challenge to the relationship came in June 2022 over BJP spokesperson Nupur Sharma's derogatory references to the Prophet on a TV show, as the Qatari

government demanded a public apology from India. In this context, India needed another source of tension in the ties to be diffused.

2. Donkey routes: En route Europe, how Indians visit several countries to create 'travel history'

Introduction
Last year, Serbia had to change its visa rules under pressure from the European Union. This was because the Balkan nation was being used by many, including Indians, as an illegal transit route to Europe.

Serbia's visa-free regime for Indians — along with nationals from Turkey, Tunisia, Cuba and Burundi — was being exploited to get into the bordering Austria, Hungary and Romania, and ultimately to Italy and France. Reason: those travelling to EU countries from Serbia don't require a visa.

In October 2022, Serbia withdrew visa-free arrivals from the above-mentioned countries.

Creating a 'travel history'
The transit phenomenon came to light after European authorities recorded more than 1.3 lakh illegal immigrants in the first 10 months of 2022, many of whom were nationals of the countries allowed visa-free arrivals by Serbia.

In the case of Indians, to show a "considerable travel history" on their passports, the migrants (mostly men of 25-40 years of age, with a major chunk from Punjab) were asked by their agents to enter Serbia after visiting destinations such as Nepal, Dubai and Armenia, so that they came across as genuine travellers to the immigration authorities.

Passengers of a charter plane, grounded in France for four days, on their arrival in Mumbai on December 26.

The recent case of a flight carrying 303 Indian nationals being grounded in France, ahead of its departure for Nicaragua, seems to bring to light a similar pattern — of creating a travel history to come across as tourists to immigration authorities of the receiving country, Nicaragua in this case, even as visa mandate for Indians in the central American country isn't very clear.

Harsh journey, many tragedies

In most such cases, on arrival in the transit country, agents connect the migrants with the so-called 'donkers', or people smugglers, who help them enter their final destination illegally. The donkers charge exorbitant payment for such services. Incidentally, to evade border authorities, many of these migrants are transported in the harshest and most inhuman conditions, not just without food and water, but even gasping for breath, after being asked to hide in cramped containers and delivery vehicles.

One such case had come to light in 2021 — of a young man from Punjab who wanted to go to Italy, and was suggested the transit route of Dubai-Serbia-Romania-Hungary, through which he would have entered Italy in about six months.

He was transported to the Hungarian border from Romania in a delivery truck, tucked in a small box. However, he returned to India ultimately, as he could never reach Italy and was forced to continue working on a farm in Hungary.

A 2009 report by United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODOC) on Smuggling of Migrants from India to Europe highlights several cases of such migrants drowning in unsafe vessels, suffocating to death in overcrowded truck compartments and ships, or being victimised by smuggling gangs.

One of the biggest such tragedies was reported in 1996, when 283 migrants, most from Punjab, died when the overcrowded boat they were travelling on capsized in the Mediterranean, near Malta, on their way to Italy.

Those who reach their destination, too, find themselves locked in cycles of exploitation and abuse, which tend to go unreported because of the person's fear of arrest and deportation.

Destination Europe
Out of the records of immigration-related offences examined at the Delhi airport in 2005, 2006 and 2007, almost 47 per cent of them were related to destination countries in Europe. Of this, about 27 per cent were related to the UK. Most cases of irregular migration to the UK were via France, after landing there with a direct visa, or reaching France through an irregular donkey route.

For those headed to the US, the first step in the most popular donkey route from India is to reach a Latin American country. Countries like Ecuador, Bolivia, and Guyana have visas on arrival for Indian citizens. Some other countries, including Brazil and Venezuela, give tourist visas to Indians easily. Nowadays, many first go to Europe, and from there, directly to Mexico.

Definite numbers not available
As such, Indian Missions and Posts do not have reliable data on the number of Indians staying or working illegally in foreign countries. Apart from Punjab, irregular migration is also being reported in high numbers from Haryana, Himachal Pradesh and Jammu & Kashmir.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Indian Diaspora
Source: The Indian Express

3. Delhi declaration found middle path between promotion and regulation of AI

Why in news?
The Global Partnership on Artificial Intelligence (GPAI), an alliance of 29 members, has unanimously adopted the New Delhi declaration underscoring the need to mitigate risks arising from the development and deployment of artificial intelligence (AI) systems, and promoting equitable access to critical resources for AI innovation, including computing and high-quality diverse datasets.

The declaration stands out as a contrast from the agreement signed at the United Kingdom AI Safety Summit at Bletchley Park, Buckinghamshire, a month ago, where countries had committed to first tackle the risks emanating from AI systems.

The New Delhi declaration has attempted to find a balance between innovation and the risks associated with AI systems. While it is largely upbeat about the economic benefits that AI can bring, it also flags issues around fairness, privacy, and intellectual property rights that will have to be taken into consideration.

What does the GPAI New Delhi declaration on AI say?
The declaration said that a global framework for use of AI should be rooted in democratic values and human rights; safeguarding dignity and well-being; ensuring personal data protection; the protection of applicable intellectual property rights, privacy, and security; fostering innovation; and promoting trustworthy, responsible, sustainable, and human-centred use of AI.

GPAI members also promoted equitable access to critical resources for AI innovation including computing, high-quality diverse datasets, algorithms, software, testbeds, and other AI-relevant resources.

The declaration also agreed to support AI innovation in the agriculture sector as a new "thematic priority".

How does the New Delhi declaration contrast with the Bletchley declaration?
While the GPAI New Delhi declaration addresses the need to tackle AI-related risks, it largely supports innovation in the technology in various sectors, including agriculture and healthcare. The essence of the declaration can be summed up as follows: AI is inherently good and is a catalyst for economic growth, but some harms need to be mitigated along the way.

By contrast, the declaration that was signed at the UK AI Safety Summit last month put security and safety risks related to AI in the centre of the discussions. At the Bletchley Park meeting, 28 major countries including the United States, China, Japan, the United Kingdom, France, and India, and the European Union agreed to sign on a declaration saying global action is needed to tackle the potential risks of AI.

The declaration noted the "potential for serious, even catastrophic, harm, either deliberate or unintentional, stemming from the most significant capabilities of these AI models", as well as risks beyond frontier AI, including those of bias and privacy. "Frontier AI" is defined as highly capable foundation generative AI models that could possess dangerous capabilities that can pose severe risks to public safety.

Global Partnership on Artificial Intelligence
The Global Partnership on Artificial Intelligence (GPAI, pronounced "gee-pay") is an international initiative established to guide the responsible development and use of artificial intelligence (AI) in a manner that respects human rights and the shared democratic values of its members.

GPAI seeks to bridge the gap between theory and practice by supporting research and applied activities in areas that are directly relevant to policymakers in the realm of AI. It brings together experts from industry, civil society, governments, and academia to collaborate on the challenges and opportunities presented by artificial intelligence.

History
The partnership was first proposed by Canada and France at the 2018 44th G7 summit, and officially launched in June 2020 with fifteen founding members: Australia, Canada, France, Germany, India, Italy, Japan, Mexico, New Zealand, the Republic of Korea, Singapore, Slovenia, the United Kingdom, the United States, and the European Union. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) hosts a dedicated secretariat to support GPAI's governing bodies and activities. UNESCO joined the partnership in December 2020 as an observer. On November 11, 2021, Czechia, Israel and few more EU countries also joined the GPAI, bringing the total membership to 25 countries. Since the November 2022 summit, the list of members stands at 29.

Austria, Chile, Finland, Malaysia, Norway, Slovakia and Switzerland were invited. The seven, however, are pending membership approval.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; International Organisations
Source: The Indian Express

4. Maldives to not renew 2019 water survey pact with India

Introduction
The Maldives government has decided to not renew an agreement with India that allowed India to conduct hydrographic surveys in Maldivian waters.

The agreement was signed in 2019 during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to the islands, when President Ibrahim Solih was in power. The new government of President Mohamed Muizzu had earlier this year requested that India should pull out its military personnel deployed in the country.

What was the hydrographic survey pact?
Hydrographic surveys are carried out by ships, which use methods such as sonar to understand the various features of a water body. These surveys help "map out water

depth, the shape of the seafloor and coastline, the location of possible obstructions, and physical features of water bodies", to ensure the efficiency and safety of maritime transportation.

Prime Minister Modi travelled to the Maldives for a State Visit in June 2019, the first overseas visit of his second term. Various MoUs were signed during the visit, including one for Cooperation in the Field of Hydrography between the Indian Navy and the Maldives National Defence Force (MNDF).

Prime Minister Narendra Modi in a meeting with President of Maldives Mohamed Muizzu during the COP28, in UAE, Friday, Dec. 1, 2023.

What was planned as part of this pact?
The first meeting of the Joint Commission on Hydrography was held in the Maldives in September 2019. So far, three joint hydrographic surveys have been undertaken – in 2021, 2022, and 2023.

The surveys were done to generate updated Navigational Charts/ Electronic Navigational Charts of the areas, which would help sectors such as Tourism, Fisheries, Agriculture, etc.

The ship was to also carry out tidal observations to enable accurate tidal predictions.

Does India have such water survey pacts with other countries as well?
Yes. In 2021, India's oldest Hydrographic Survey ship, INS Sandhayak, was decommissioned. In its 40 years of service, it undertook more than 200 major hydrographic surveys along the Western and Eastern coasts of the Indian peninsula, and the Andaman Sea, as well as surveys in neighbouring countries including Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and Bangladesh.

The government has previously cited a UN study that says approximately 50 per cent of coastal states have no hydrographic capability and another 25 per cent have only

limited capabilities. Only the remaining 25 per cent, including India, have adequate hydrographic capabilities.

There is, therefore, immense scope for international co-operation in hydrography, particularly so, in Asia and Africa, where 36% and 64% of the waters respectively, are yet to be surveyed systematically. Indian survey ships have assisted Kenya, Mauritius, Mozambique, Maldives, Oman, Seychelles, Sri Lanka and Tanzania in the past.

So why does Maldives want to end the pact?
It has to do with the change of regime in the country following the elections in October this year. President Solih of the Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP), who was in power from 2018 to 2023, was seen as being more favourable to India, but his successor Mohamed Muizzu of the Progressive Party of Maldives (PPM) is being seen as more pro-China.

While the Maldives has traditionally been a part of India's sphere of influence, in recent decades China has sought to project its power aggressively in the Indian Ocean, including through massive investments in infrastructure projects under President Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

In 2020, an 'India Out' campaign began in Maldives, alleging that New Delhi had sent a large military contingent to the Maldives – a claim that the Solih government repeatedly denied. During the election campaign, Muizzu said agreements with foreign countries must be terminated unless their presence was beneficial to the Maldives. This was seen as a reference to India – the Indian military is known to operate two helicopters and assist in search and rescue operations for people stranded or facing calamities at sea.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Bilateral Relations
Source: The Indian Express & The Hindu

5. What's the latest blip in India-Maldives ties?

Why in news?
Earlier this month, the Maldives Cabinet decided against renewing a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with India for cooperation in hydrography. The agreement, which was signed in 2019, is due to expire in 2024. Coming soon after newly elected President Mohamed Muizzu's pledge to send back Indian troops currently stationed in the Indian Ocean archipelago, the move was yet another indication of his government's intention to reverse the former Ibrahim Mohamed Solih administration's 'India first' policy.

What is hydrography?

It is the science of studying oceans, seas, and other water bodies, by compiling and analysing data, maps, and charts. Branching off from applied sciences, it looks at measuring and describing the physical attributes of water bodies and predicting how they might change over time. While it is said to be undertaken primarily for safety of navigation, it also supports other activities, such as economic development, security and defence, scientific research, and environmental protection. Hydrographical measurements include tidal, current and wave information.

What is India's expertise?

India has been an active member of the International Hydrographic Organization (IHO) since 1955. The Indian Naval Hydrographic Department (INHD) was established in 1874 in Kolkata. It is the nodal agency for hydrographic surveys and has a fleet of indigenously built modern survey ships. India partners with many countries in the Indian Ocean Region and African and East Asian countries such as Mauritius, Seychelles, Tanzania, Maldives, Mozambique, Vietnam, Myanmar, Kenya, and Sri Lanka. According to the INHD, its role has broadened over time, owing to the heightening global character of hydrography and "its growing potential as a force multiplier" in terms of maritime diplomacy. Personnel from 39 countries have trained at the National Institute of Hydrography, functioning under the INHD.

Why was the 2019 MoU significant?

The MoU was signed in June 2019, during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's state visit to the Maldives. It was Mr. Modi's second visit to the Maldives since he participated at President Solih's swearing-in ceremony in 2018. Months before the time the MoU was inked, President Solih and the ruling Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) had secured a landslide win in the general elections. The two Indian Ocean neighbours, and their leaders, backed by a decisive majority, committed to close cooperation in development, defence and maritime security. The first meeting of the Joint Commission on Hydrography was held in the Maldives in September 2019. Following the agreement, the Maldives National Defence Force (MNDF) and the Indian Navy have carried out three joint hydrographic surveys in 2021, 2022, and 2023.

Why has the Cabinet decided against renewing the agreement?

While President Muizzu has not made a statement specifically on the MoU on the joint hydrographic survey, a senior official told Maldivian media that the decision was aligned to the current administration's pledge to terminate all agreements with foreign parties that are detrimental to or endanger the national security of the Maldives. "It is in the best interest of Maldivian sovereignty that this capacity is improved within our own military, entrusting them with the responsibilities of surveilling and policing our waters, and excluding the participation of any foreign party in such an endeavour," Under Secretary for Public Policy Mohamed Firzul told a media conference.

The message appeared to be in line with Mr. Muizzu's broad election campaign, pledging to remove Indian troops from the country and "restoring the Maldives's sovereignty". Once he assumed charge, the core demand of the 'India Out' campaign led by former President Abdulla Yameen, found mention in President Muizzu's first set of official announcements.

How has India responded?

In its first response yet to the Cabinet decision, the Ministry of External Affairs on Thursday said India had a "proven track record" in the field. "Let me just say that India has a proven track record in the field of hydrography. And we have also been cooperating with many countries in the Indian Ocean region on hydrography and various elements related to that. The benefits to partner countries are visible, I would like to just leave it at that," spokesperson Arindam Bagchi told the weekly media conference.

What does this mean for India-Maldives ties?

Going by recent developments, it appears as if New Delhi will have to brace for a challenging phase of its Male partnership. Maldives is a member of the Colombo Security Conclave, an initiative aimed at enhancing Indian Ocean maritime security, that includes India, Sri Lanka, and Mauritius. However, earlier this month, the Maldives skipped the latest round of the Conclave's NSA-level meet held in Mauritius. Notably, it coincided with Maldivian Vice-President Hussain Mohamed Latheef's visit to China, to attend the China-Indian Ocean Region Forum on Development Cooperation, where he said the Maldives was "eager to explore novel avenues of collaboration and cooperation with China". The MEA's response to the termination of the Maldives's joint hydrographic initiative with India, pointed to New Delhi's belief that its neighbours should tap the "benefits" of India's expertise. How it will navigate the choppy waters connecting its southern neighbour will be closely watched.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Bilateral Relations
Source: The Hindu

6. Pannun murder plot issue in India-US ties

Why in news?

India and the US are confronted with a major diplomatic challenge, as an Indian intelligence official stands accused of orchestrating a plot to kill Khalistan separatist Gurpatwant Singh Pannun in New York. The official in question has not been named in the US Justice Department's indictment, identified only as CC-1, the chief conspirator. According to the indictment, in or about May 2023, the Indian official recruited one Nikhil Gupta to kill Pannun.

This is one of the most direct charges made against an Indian government official, and has the potential to cast a shadow on the Indo-US ties.

Run-up to indictment
The Indian government, obviously anticipating the indictment, released a statement suo moto hours earlier, saying it had constituted a high-level inquiry committee on November 18 to probe "all the relevant aspects of the matter". This came days after Delhi said it was examining inputs provided by the US on the alleged plot to kill Pannun.

The constitution of the committee has not been made public, but it is likely to be high-powered and packed with Indian officials from intelligence, investigative and law-enforcement agencies, apart from a nominee of the Indian ministry of external affairs. The US indictment comes after months of diplomatic and intelligence-level conversations between Washington and New Delhi.

India's reaction
India's approach towards the US inputs is telling, considering the manner in which it has so far rejected similar Canadian allegations.

Canada's PM, Justin Trudeau, had alleged the hand of Indian government agencies in the killing of another Khalistan separatist, Hardeep Singh Nijjar. Delhi did not take this kindly, and even called Canada a "safe haven" for "terrorists, extremists and organised crime" — its sharpest choice of words for a Western country in recent years, a language usually reserved for Pakistan and Afghanistan.

But with the US, once the allegations became public, the approach has been much more cooperative. This shows that the government wants to contain the damage and not let it become a full-fledged diplomatic crisis. The MEA spokesperson's response to the indictment that it is a "matter of concern" and "is contrary to Indian government's policy" is an indicator of this approach.

After all, the Indian government is also keen to have Biden here for the Republic Day celebrations in January next year, along with other Quad leaders.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Bilateral Relations
Source: The Indian Express

7. Wooing Indian tourists with visa-free entry

Why in news?
Malaysia has become the latest country to extend the advantage of visa-free travel to Indian citizens. The facility will be extended to Indian travellers till December 31, 2024

and will be valid for 30 days from the date of entry. The initiative is aimed at ensuring hassle-free travel for Indians who have emerged as one of the major tourist groups visiting Malaysia in the recent past. According to industry sources, at present there are around 26 countries that extend visa-free entry to Indian citizens for various reasons.

What does the Malaysian decision imply?

Tourism has emerged as one of the key focus areas for Malaysia's post-COVID recovery strategy. Renowned for its scenic locations like the Langkawi beaches, Malaysia's tourism sector was hit hard during the COVID period when travel restrictions and visa problems nearly decimated its tourism industry. But under the Anwar Ibrahim government, Malaysia is taking serious steps to recover its leadership in the tourism sector. According to the Malaysia Tourism Promotion Board, 10.7 million visitors chose to visit the country in 2022 bringing in more than $28 billion to the economy. The recovery can be measured by the fact that during the peak COVID period of 2021, only 0.13 million tourists visited Malaysia. The visa-free facility to Indian (and Chinese) travellers is, therefore, aimed at making the country a more attractive destination for recreation seekers from two of the major Asian economies.

Which are the other countries extending visa-free travel to Indians?

Among the major regional tourism destinations, Sri Lanka and Thailand are the nearby economies that have also extended visa-free travel facility to Indians. Sri Lanka which was hit by a economic crisis in 2022 has a reason to make itself an attractive destination. Its visa-free policy for Indians is driven by both economic and political reasons.

What are the categories of visa exemption?

India has visa exemption agreements with many countries in the world that cater to multiple categories of visas. According to the Ministry of External Affairs, at least 34 countries across the world, have agreements with India that exempt visas for the holders of Indian diplomatic passports. These include Germany, France, Iran, Japan, Norway, Turkey and others. That apart there are at least 99 countries with which India has operational agreements for "diplomatic, service/official passport holders". According to the MEA, (un-updated list), there are 16 countries that offer visa-free travel facility for a certain period of time to ordinary Indian passport holders — this includes, Nepal, Bhutan, Fiji etc. The list, however, keeps changing as countries keep on experimenting with their visa policy. According to the latest estimate available in the Passport Index website, there are at least 26 countries at present that provide visa-free facility to ordinary Indian passport holders.

Is the visa-free facility permanent?

Countries extend visa-free facility to Indian tourists for a certain amount of time or for a period depending on their advantage. But there are factors on the ground that may also determine whether a particular tourist is suitable for such facilities.

8. George Santos Expelled from US House of Representatives Over Criminal Charges

Introduction
Republican George Santos faced expulsion from the US House of Representatives on December 1, with fellow lawmakers voting 311-114 in favor of immediate expulsion. This vote was well above the two-thirds majority required to oust one of its own. Santos, elected from New York's 3rd congressional district in 2022, was ousted due to criminal corruption charges and allegations of misusing campaign funds.

Santos' Tenuous Relationship with Truth
Santos, 35, claimed an impressive background, including false academic and professional achievements. Investigations revealed fabrications in his biography, such as false claims about his education, work experience, and ancestry.

Multiple Criminal Allegations
Santos faces various criminal allegations, including embezzlement of funds intended for animal welfare, card information skimming from ATMs, and involvement in a cheque-book fraud case in Rio de Janeiro. The Department of Justice charged him with wire fraud, money laundering, stealing public funds, and inflating campaign fundraising numbers.

Santos' Controversial Exit
Refusing to resign despite pressure, Santos introduced his own expulsion resolution against a Democrat and engaged in a heated clash on the House floor. As he left the Capitol building, Santos expressed disdain for the institution, concluding his tumultuous career with the remark: "To hell with this place."

9. What is Article 99 of the UN Charter, invoked for the first time in decades as Israel attacks Gaza

Amid Israel's ongoing military attacks on the Gaza Strip, particularly in its southern region, United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has invoked Article 99 of the UN Charter in a bid to establish a ceasefire.

What is Article 99 of the UN Charter?

The UN Charter is the founding document of the United Nations. Based on the powers conferred through it, the UN can take action on a wide variety of issues. The Charter is considered an international treaty, meaning UN Member States are "bound by it". However, in practice, there is little that member countries can be forced to do.

Article 99 states: "The Secretary-General may bring to the attention of the Security Council any matter which in his opinion may threaten the maintenance of international peace and security."

According to the UN, the President of the Security Council is under the obligation to call a meeting of the Council if the Secretary-General brings to the attention of the Council any matter under Article 99.

The Security Council (UNSC) comprises five permanent members – the United States, the United Kingdom, France, China and Russia – and 10 non-permanent members appointed for specific periods. On a rotational basis, each of these 15 countries holds the presidency for a month. The South American country of Ecuador is the President for December 2023.

When has Article 99 been invoked in the past?

The provision has been rarely invoked. Past examples include the upheaval in the Republic of the Congo in 1960 following the end of Belgium's colonial rule and a complaint by Tunisia in 1961 against France's naval and air forces launching an attack.

How has Guterres invoked Article 99?

In his letter to the UNSC President, Guterres wrote, "I am writing under Article 99 of the United Nations Charter to bring to the attention of the Security Council a matter which, in my opinion, may aggravate existing threats to the maintenance of international peace and security."

He then spoke of the "appalling human suffering, physical destruction and collective trauma across Israel and the Occupied Palestine Territory." Guterres said that he has repeatedly condemned the October 7 Hamas attacks on Israel that led to the deaths of more than 1,200 people, and called for the release of more than 130 people still held captive.

He added that since the start of Israel's military operation, more than 15,000 have been killed, with nearly 40 per cent being children. The collapse of the healthcare system, difficulties in extending humanitarian relief, and issues of displacement have been pointed to – as a result of the "constant bombardment by the Israel Defense Forces".

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; International Organisations
Source: The Indian Express

10. India votes in favour of UN resolution demanding Gaza ceasefire

Why in news?

India on December 13 voted in favour of a resolution in the UN General Assembly (UNGA) that demanded an immediate humanitarian ceasefire in the Israel-Hamas conflict and the unconditional release of all hostages. This was the first time India supported such a resolution since the war broke out more than two months ago.

The 193-member UN General Assembly overwhelmingly adopted the resolution at an emergency special session, with 153 nations voting in its favour, 10 voting against and 23 abstentions.

What was the UNGA resolution?

The resolution expressed "grave concern over the catastrophic humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip and the suffering of the Palestinian civilian population," and it said Palestinians and Israelis must be protected in accordance with international humanitarian law.

It put forward two key demands, including "an immediate humanitarian ceasefire" and "the immediate and unconditional release of all hostages, as well as ensuring humanitarian access".

The resolution also reiterated the demand that "all parties comply with their obligations under international law, including international humanitarian law, notably with regard to the protection of civilians".

Which notable countries opposed the resolution?
The resolution was opposed by 10 countries. These were Austria, The Czech Republic, Guatemala, Israel, Liberia, Micronesia, Nauru, Papua New Guinea, Paraguay, and the United States.

Can the resolution change the situation on the ground?
Probably not. Unlike Security Council resolutions, General Assembly resolutions are not legally binding. However, the overwhelming support for the resolution serves as an indicator of global opinion.

Moreover, it reflects the growing isolation of the US as it refuses to join demands for a ceasefire.

Why did India abstain from the previous UNGA resolution?
On October 27, India abstained in a UNGA vote on a resolution that called for an immediate humanitarian truce in the Israel-Hamas conflict. The country's decision was in line with the one that it has maintained in the other ongoing — and deeply polarising conflict — in the world: the Russia-Ukraine war.

While the circumstances, politics, and conditions of the two wars are vastly different and not comparable, the diplomatic toolkit of hedging and balancing between the warring sides has been a consistent feature of New Delhi's approach.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; International Relations
Source: The Indian Express

11. Resurgence in India-Italy ties

Why in news?
Last week, the hashtag #Melodi trended widely on social media, after Prime Minister Narendra Modi responded to a post on X by his Italian counterpart Giorgia Meloni. Meloni had posted a selfie with Modi, taken on the sidelines of the COP28 meet in Dubai, saying "Good friends at COP28". Meloni also added #Melodi, a combination of the two leaders' names.

Modi reposted the picture, writing: "Meeting friends is always a delight." The bonhomie and the hashtag represent the new harmony in India-Italy ties, coming after some rough years.

History

India and Italy are ancient civilisations with links going back 2,000 years. Italian port cities were important trading posts on the spice route. The Venetian merchant Marco Polo travelled to India in the 13th century and wrote about his experiences.

After Independence, political relations between India and Italy were established in 1947. Since then, there has been a regular exchange of visits at political and official levels between both countries, including several visits by Heads of States.

Decade of setbacks

The Italian marines case: The bilateral ties faced a setback in 2012, when two Italian marines were accused of killing two Indian fishermen in February that year.

The marines, Salvatore Girone and Massimiliano Latorre, were guarding an Italian oil tanker off the coast of Kerala when they fired on the boat carrying the fishermen. The marines said they mistook the fishermen for pirates, and Italy argued the fishermen failed to heed warnings to stay away from the MV Enrica Lexie tanker. The two were arrested and charged with murder.

They were moved from Kerala to New Delhi, and stayed at the Italian embassy complex while their trial was on. With the trial pending, the two men were allowed to return to Italy. In 2015, the two countries took the case to the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in Hague.

The PCA ordered Italy to pay compensation to India "for loss of life" and the cases were closed after Italy paid the agreed amount of Rs 100 million. Finally, the case was closed in 2021.

AgustaWestland allegations: Another controversy was the corruption allegations over the AgustaWestland deal.

In 2011-12, an investigation by the Italian attorney general's office into alleged unethical dealings by the state-backed defence major Finmeccanica widened to include corruption in an over Rs 3,500-crore deal signed with India by the group's subsidiary AgustaWestland.

The 2010 deal was a contract to supply 12 AW-101 helicopters to the IAF.

After the corruption allegations came to light, the issue quickly snowballed in India. Sonia Gandhi's Italian origins gave the BJP further ammunition to attack the Congress, already reeling under graft scandals.

After the cancellation of the contract and after winning a legal case in Italy in June 2014, the Indian government encashed guarantees to the tune of Rs 2,000 crore. The Italian courts in 2018 dismissed all charges, on grounds of insufficient evidence. This verdict was upheld by the Supreme Court in Italy in 2019.

The repair in bilateral ties
Work to repair the ties started 2018 onwards.
When then External Affairs minister Sushma Swaraj led an official delegation for the canonisation ceremony of Mother Teresa at the Vatican from September 2-5, 2016, she met her Italian counterpart Paolo Gentiloni, and the two sides decided to celebrate the 70th year of diplomatic ties. In 2018, this celebration was observed through a series of cultural events.

PM Modi and PM Conte co-chaired a Virtual Summit between India and Italy on November 6, 2020. At this, the 2020-2025 Action Plan was adopted, setting the ambitious agenda for an enhanced partnership between the countries.

Modi paid his first official visit to Italy in October 2021 to attend the G20 leaders' summit. On the sidelines of the Summit, he held a bilateral meeting with then PM Mario Draghi.

On March 2-3, 2023, PM Meloni paid a state visit to India following her election win in September 2022. This was the first high-level visit from Italy to India after a gap of 5 years.

During the visit, Meloni and Modi held discussions on promoting green economy, energy security and transition, defence co-production and co-innovation, and the blue economy.

The major outcome of the visit was the elevation of the bilateral relationship to the level of Strategic Partnership. A startup bridge between Indian and Italian startup companies was also established. She was also the Chief Guest and Keynote Speaker at the Raisina Dialogue 2023.

When Meloni visited again in September this year for the G20 leaders' summit, the two sides were on the same page for the India-Middle East-Europe economic corridor.

The stakes in ties
With Italy, India had a bilateral trade of USD 13.229 billion in 2021-22, a more than 50% increase over the previous financial year. Italy is India's 4th largest trading partner in the EU.

Over 600 large Italian companies are active in India, covering varied sectors. Italian brands such as Fiat and Piaggio to the recent Ferrero Roche, Kinder Joy, Tic Tac, etc. are household names in India.

Strategically, Italy wants to partner with India in the defence sector. The Italian Defence Minister conveyed Italy's desire to "reboot defence relations with India".

Rethink by Italy on China
India has opposed the BRI since its inception, since it violated India's territorial integrity by crossing through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir.

In 2019, during Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to Rome, Italy became the first G7 country to join the BRI, in the hopes of China serving as a market for Italian products and Chinese investment boosting Italian infrastructure.

But the BRI would not meet Italian hopes and expectations. "Since Italy joined the BRI, its exports to China have increased from 14.5 billion euros to 18.5 billion euros, while Chinese exports to Italy have grown far more dramatically, from 33.5 billion euros to 50.9 billion euros. Similarly, Chinese FDI in Italy also dropped from $650 million in 2019 to just $33 million in 2021.

For the past year, Meloni has indicated that joining the BRI was a "big mistake" that she intended to correct. With its five-year memorandum of understanding up for renewal in March 2024, Italy has officially conveyed its position to Beijing. Infact, Italy's move to pull out of China's Belt and Road Initiative has added a strategic dimension to the ties.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Bilateral Relations
Source: The Indian Express

12. Drone attack on a chemical tanker off Gujarat coast

The MV Chem Pluto, which was hit by a drone in the Indian Ocean

Chemical tanker MV Chem Pluto was hit by a drone strike on December 23, roughly 200 nautical miles (370 km) off the coast of Gujarat.

While a fire broke out on the ship, it was quickly extinguished. No casualties were reported. After the incident, the Indian Coast Guard Ship (ICGS) Vikram escorted Chem Pluto towards Mumbai.

What was the ship doing?
MV Chem Pluto is a Liberia-flagged, Japanese-owned, and Netherlands-operated chemical tanker. It had started its journey carrying crude from Al Jubail, Saudi Arabia, on December 19, and was expected to arrive in New Mangalore on December 25.

Why was it attacked?
A likely reason that the tanker was targeted is its Israeli affiliation. Its operator, Amsterdam-based Ace Quantum Chemical Tankers, is jointly owned by Israeli billionaire Idan Ofer, the eighth richest man in the world. Notably, Ofer recently resigned from the board of Harvard's Kennedy School of Management citing the board's weak response to anti-Israeli protests on the campus.

Who is behind the attack?
The Pentagon claimed that the ship was struck by "a one-way attack drone fired from Iran." Amidst the spate of recent maritime assaults, this is the first the US is directly blaming Iran.

However, Iran has vehemently dismissed these claims. If it is the Houthis (next section) who have carried out this attack (like all the previous ones), this would be the most distant ship targeted by the group till date.

What explains the recent attacks?
This spate of recent attacks on merchant vessels is a spillover of Israel's relentless assault on Gaza. Since last month, the Houthis from Yemen have constantly targeted Israel-linked ships, citing Israel's continued aggression in Gaza as the reason behind their actions.

Who are the Houthis?
The Houthis have been locked in a civil war with the official Yemen government for almost a decade. They are currently in control of much of northern and western Yemen, including the official capital Sanaa.

Experts believe that the Yemeni Civil War is a proxy war between Iran, backing the Houthis, and Saudi Arabia and the West, backing the official government. Thus, many have blamed Iran for the latest attacks, with the US saying that Iran was "deeply involved". Iran has, however, dismissed these claims.

Why are these attacks concerning?

Most of the attacks have taken place in the Red Sea area, and the Bab el-Mandeb straits off the Yemeni coast. The nearly 2,000-km Red Sea connects the Mediterranean Sea with the Indian Ocean via the narrow Suez Canal, accounting for around 12 per cent of global trade. Thus attacks on commercial shipping on this route can have a major impact on the global economy.

Companies such as shipping fleet operator AP Møller-Maersk and oil and gas giant British Petroleum paused their movements through this route in light of the attacks, and are taking a longer, more fuel-intensive and time-consuming route. Moreover, every ship plying on this route will attract a "war risk" surcharge.

How has the world responded?
US Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin on December 19 announced the establishment of Operation Prosperity Guardian, a multinational security initiative to thwart Houthi attacks. This operation will see the joint participation of the UK, Bahrain, Canada, France, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Seychelles, and Spain as well as several other countries, who thus far remain unnamed. It will see naval ships conducting joint patrols and providing an umbrella of protection to merchant vessels travelling on the route.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; International Issues
Source: The Indian Express

13. EU Achieves Milestone: World's First AI Regulation Deal

Introduction
European Commissioner Thierry Breton announced a historic achievement as the European Union (EU) secured a provisional deal on comprehensive laws to regulate the use of artificial intelligence (AI). The deal, reached after a marathon 37-hour negotiation between the European Parliament and member states, positions the EU as the first continent to establish clear rules for AI usage. The proposed AI Act is set for a parliamentary vote in early 2023, with enforcement expected by 2025.

Key Features of the EU Framework
The EU's groundbreaking legislative framework addresses the regulation of AI within its borders. It introduces safeguards, empowers consumers to file complaints against perceived violations, and imposes strict restrictions on facial recognition technology. The legislation also outlines penalties for companies violating the rules, with provisions for government use of real-time biometric surveillance only in specific high-threat scenarios.

EU's Vision for AI Development
European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen emphasizes that the AI Act is more than a rulebook; it serves as a launchpad for EU startups and researchers to lead

the global AI race. The legislation aims to promote technology development that prioritizes safety and individual rights, providing a unique legal framework for trustworthy AI.

Risk Classification and Regulations
The EU's legal framework categorizes AI applications into four risk classes. While some applications are largely banned, such as mass-scale facial recognition, others, like AI tools for self-driving cars, are permitted but subject to certification and public scrutiny of backend techniques. Medium-risk applications, such as generative AI chatbots, can be deployed with detailed documentation and transparency obligations.

EU vs. Global Approaches to AI Regulation
Europe has taken a leading role in tech regulation over the past decade, with significant laws on online privacy and curbing tech dominance. In contrast, the US and China are also vying for leadership in AI regulation. The US has introduced an executive order and a proposed AI Bill of Rights, while China has released its own measures. The EU's approach stands out for its detailed and use-case-specific regulations.

India's Unique Approach to AI
India positions itself as a country that effectively uses technology for governance solutions and aims to extend this approach to AI. Minister of State for Electronics and IT Rajeev Chandrasekhar underscores India's determination to have sovereign AI. The country plans to leverage its Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) model for AI, focusing on real-life applications in healthcare, agriculture, governance, language translation, and more to drive economic development.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; S & T
Source: The Indian Express and The Hindu

14. What led to the coup attempt in Sierra Leone?

Introduction
On November 26, unidentified gunmen targeted several police stations and correctional centres in Freetown (Capital of Sierra Leone). The Minister of Information and Civic Education declared the attacks in the capital as an unsuccessful coup attempt to overthrow the government. In August 2023, the Sierra Leone police had arrested several people, including senior military officers who were accused of planning violent attacks on government institutions. The recent attacks were an attempt to free the military officers.

What is happening in Sierra Leone?
Three specific factors play a role in the recent events in Sierra Leone.

First, is the political instability. The political climate in Sierra Leone has been unstable since President Julius Maada Wonie Bio's narrow re-election in June. The outcome was contested by the opposition, alleging that the election was manipulated.

Second comes the economic instability. The country is experiencing a high cost of living crisis and severe poverty.

Third is the aggression of the police. The prison riot of 2020 in the overcrowded Pademba prison was quelled by using live ammunition. Similarly, the protests of August 2022 left six police officers and 27 protesters dead. Resentment towards the government persists due to the lack of accountability towards protest casualties, as police aggression continues.

What has been the state response?
An indefinite curfew was immediately levied following the attack and was lifted on November 27, only for new curfews to be imposed. The Sierra Leone Civil Aviation Authority (SLCAA) informed airlines to reschedule flights according to the new nationwide curfew. A cash reward has been declared to anyone who could provide details about the coup leaders. President Bio declared that calm had been restored, but shots were fired in Murray town on November 26, amid security operations to capture the leaders of the attack.

Will the ECOWAS intervene?
Since 2020, six African countries have undergone nine coups and coup attempts. Countries including Niger, Guinea, Mali, Burkina Faso, Gabon and Sudan are under military rule. The growing antagonism of people towards democratically elected governments paved the way for the military to legitimise their takeovers. The Economic Community of West African States' (ECOWAS) intolerance towards unconstitutional takeovers was emphasised when the organisation threatened Niger with military intervention and levied economic sanctions.

Sierra Leone is a member country of ECOWAS and hence if any security concern arises in the future, ECOWAS and the member countries will step in to maintain constitutional order. The visit from the ECOWAS' delegates to the country highlights its commitment towards democracy. Sierra Leone is one of the poorest countries in the world and if a coup attempt is successful, the consequent ECOWAS intervention and sanction will be detrimental.

ECOWAS
The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS; also known as CEDEAO in French and Portuguese) is a regional political and economic union of fifteen countries located in West Africa.
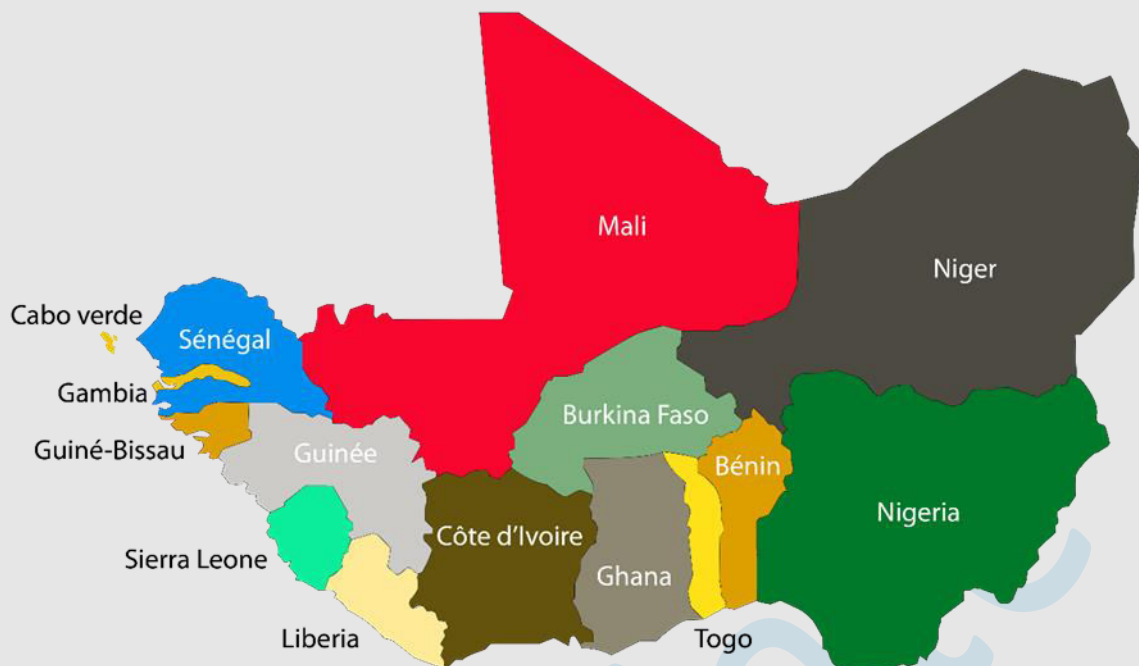
The union was established on 28 May 1975, with the signing of the Treaty of Lagos, with its stated mission to promote economic integration across the region.

ECOWAS also serves as a peacekeeping force in the region, with member states occasionally sending joint military forces to intervene in the bloc's member countries at times of political instability and unrest.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; International Issues
Source: The Hindu

15. Overview of the European Union's Artificial Intelligence Act

Introduction
The European Union's Artificial Intelligence (AI) Act is a significant legislative initiative aimed at regulating artificial intelligence technologies within the EU. With the growing influence of AI across various sectors, the EU seeks to strike a balance between fostering innovation and ensuring ethical and responsible AI development. The objectives of the EU AI Act are to create a regulatory framework for AI technologies, mitigate risks associated with AI systems, and establish clear guidelines for developers, users, and regulators. The act aims to ensure the responsible use of AI by protecting fundamental rights and promoting transparency in AI applications.

The strengths of the Act
One of the notable strengths of the EU AI Act is its risk-based approach. The legislation categorises AI applications into different risk levels, ranging from unacceptable to low. This approach enables tailored regulations, with higher-risk applications subject to

more stringent requirements. This flexibility acknowledges AI technologies' diverse potential impact on society. It also explicitly prohibits certain AI practices deemed unacceptable, such as social credit scoring systems for government purposes, predictive policing applications, and AI systems that manipulate individuals such as emotional recognition systems at work or in education. This prohibition reflects the EU's commitment to preventing the misuse of AI technologies.

The EU AI Act emphasises transparency and accountability in AI development and deployment. It requires developers to provide clear information about the capabilities and limitations of AI systems, enabling users to make informed decisions. Additionally, the legislation mandates that developers maintain comprehensive documentation to facilitate regulatory oversight. Moreover, to ensure compliance with the regulations, the EU AI Act introduces the concept of independent conformity assessment. Higher-risk AI applications like medical devices, biometric identification, and access to justice and services, must undergo assessment processes conducted by third-party entities. This approach enhances objectivity and reduces the risk of conflicts of interest, contributing to the credibility of the regulatory framework.

The limitations
One of the criticisms of the EU AI Act is the challenge in accurately defining and categorising AI applications. The evolving nature of AI technologies may make it difficult to establish clear boundaries between different risk levels, potentially leading to uncertainties in regulatory implementation.

Critics have also argued that the stringent regulations in the EU may hinder the competitiveness of European businesses in the global AI market. While the Act aims to ensure ethical AI practices, some fear that overly restrictive measures could stifle innovation and drive AI development outside the EU. Additionally, compliance with the EU AI Act may impose a significant burden on smaller businesses and start-ups. The resources required for conformity assessments and documentation may disproportionately affect smaller players in the AI industry, potentially limiting their ability to compete with larger, more established counterparts. Striking the right balance between regulation and fostering innovation is crucial, with critics arguing that the EU AI Act may lean too heavily towards stringent controls.

The potential implications
The EU AI Act is likely to have a global impact, influencing the development and deployment of AI technologies beyond the EU's borders. As a major economic bloc, the EU's regulatory framework may set a precedent for other regions, shaping the trajectory of AI development on a global scale, just like the MiCA (Markets in crypto-assets) regulation did for crypto-assets.

By prioritising ethical considerations and fundamental rights, the EU AI Act contributes to the establishment of global norms for AI development. And the impact on innovation and competitiveness will depend on the balance struck by the EU between regulation and fostering a conducive environment for AI development.

It encourages collaboration and cooperation between regulatory authorities, fostering a unified approach to AI regulation. International collaboration in regulating AI technologies is essential to address global challenges and ensure consistent standards across borders.

The administrative side
Any individual has the right to report instances of non-compliance. The EU member states' market surveillance authorities will be responsible for enforcing the AI Act. There will be specific limits on fines applicable to small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and start-ups. The EU will establish a centralised 'AI office' and 'AI Board.' In case businesses do not adhere to the EU AI Act, fines could range from $8 million to almost $38 million, depending on the nature of the violation and the company's size. For instance, fines may amount to up to 1.5% of the global annual turnover or €7.5 million for providing incorrect information, up to 3% of the global annual turnover or €15 million for general violations, and up to 7% of the global annual turnover or €35 million for prohibited AI violations.

The EU's AI Act represents a significant step towards regulating AI technologies responsibly and ethically. While it addresses key concerns associated with AI, such as transparency, accountability, and risk mitigation, there are challenges and potential drawbacks that need careful consideration. The global impact of the EU AI Act and its potential to shape international norms make it a landmark initiative in the ongoing discourse on the responsible development and deployment of artificial intelligence.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; International Issues
Source: The Hindu

16. The rarely invoked 14th Amendment of the US Constitution, used to disqualify Trump from holding office

Why in news?
The Supreme Court in Colorado ruled that Trump stands "disqualified from holding the office of President under Section Three of the Fourteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution".

The judgment was related to Trump's alleged role in the January 6, 2021 attacks on the US Capitol – the seat of the country's government. Trump supporters were protesting the election victory of Democratic candidate Joe Biden in 2020, claiming

the polls were rigged. They rioted and entered the premises of government offices in Washington DC. At least five people died in the aftermath and some were injured.

Trump has said he will contest the ruling and the case is then likely to go to the US Supreme Court. But what is Section 3 of the 14th Amendment of the US Constitution, under which Trump has been disqualified?

What is the 14th Amendment of the US Constitution?

According to the US government archives, the Amendment was passed and ratified by the US Congress between 1866 and 1868. It was brought in after the Civil War ended (1861-65) and "extended liberties and rights granted by the Bill of Rights to formerly enslaved people".

Section 3 of the amendment says:

"No person shall be a Senator or Representative in Congress, or elector of President and Vice-President, or hold any office, civil or military, under the United States, or under any State, who, having previously taken an oath, as a member of Congress, or as an officer of the United States, or as a member of any State legislature, or as an executive or judicial officer of any State, to support the Constitution of the United States, shall have engaged in insurrection or rebellion against the same, or given aid or comfort to the enemies thereof. But Congress may by a vote of two-thirds of each House, remove such disability."

Simply, it says that if any person previously elected to any government office took part in an insurrection or rebellion, they cannot hold office again.

How could it impact Trump's candidacy for 2024?

According to Reuters, Section 3 has "rarely been tested" in court. This marks the first time that it has been mentioned in relation to a former President.

The Supreme Court has a majority of conservative judges. In the US, Presidents appoint judges for a lifetime tenure and the appointments are largely based on party lines. The Reuters report added that even if the court agrees with the Colorado judgment, it would simply mean Trump cannot be voted for in that state in 2024. Traditionally, Colorado has seen the Democratic party's candidate win the state's electors, so the new ruling is not seen as particularly harmful to Trump's electoral prospects.

17. Sisi's Recent Re-election in Egypt

Why in news?
Abdel Fattah El-Sisi secures victory in the December 10-12 elections with 89.6% of the votes.

Political Landscape and Media Influence
Sitting Presidents traditionally win by large margins in Egypt; State-affiliated media played a significant role in promoting Sisi's achievements. Mohamed

Return to Authoritarianism
Despite the military's justification for toppling Mohamed Morsi, Egypt experienced a regression to the Mubarak era under Sisi's rule.

Mohamed Morsi was an Egyptian politician served as the fifth president of Egypt, from 2012 to 2013, when General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi removed him from office in a coup after protests in June.

Muhammad Hosni El Sayed Mubarak was an Egyptian politician and military officer who served as the fourth president of Egypt from 1981 to 2011.

Stability Projection and Infrastructure Projects
Sisi presents himself as a stabilizing force, emphasizing his role in combating terrorism. Noteworthy infrastructure projects, including a new capital city, were launched.

Economic Challenges
Hyperinflation at 35% has led to increased poverty. Egypt faces a substantial external debt of $162.9 billion, equivalent to 40% of the GDP, with talks underway for assistance from the IMF and other foreign creditors.

Geopolitical Pressures from Israel-Gaza Conflict

Israel's war on Gaza complicates matters for Sisi. Despite pro-Palestine sentiments in Egypt, Sisi treads carefully, condemning the bombardment but avoiding drastic measures that could strain relations with Israel.

If the conflict persists, Sisi may face pressure to allow Palestinian refugees into Egypt, posing economic and political challenges.

Relevance: GS Prelims
Source: The Hindu

18. Macron for Republic Day 2024: How India chooses its Republic Day chief guest

Why in news?

France's President Emmanuel Macron will be India's chief guest for its 2024 Republic Day celebrations. Here is a look at how India's Republic Day chief guest is chosen, why

it is an honour to be invited as the chief guest, and what is the significance of the invitation.

Why is being India's Republic Day chief guest an honour?
Being invited as the chief guest at Republic Day celebrations is the highest honour a country accords in terms of protocol. The chief guest is front and centre in many ceremonial activities which have over time become a part of the fabric of the event and the run-up to it.

They are given the ceremonial guard of honour at Rashtrapati Bhavan followed by a reception hosted by the President of India in the evening. They also lay a wreath at Rajghat, to honour Mahatma Gandhi. There is a banquet in their honour, a lunch hosted by the Prime Minister, and calls by the Vice-President and the External Affairs Minister.

The visit of the Chief Guest is full of symbolism — "it portrays the Chief Guest as participating in India's pride and happiness, and reflects the friendship between the two peoples represented by the President of India and the Chief Guest".

This symbolism serves as a powerful tool to forge and renew ties between India and the nation of its invitee, having greater political and diplomatic significance as well.

So how is the Republic Day chief guest chosen?
The process starts nearly six months in advance of the event. All kinds of considerations are taken into account by the MEA before extending the invitation.

The most central consideration is the nature of the relationship between India and the country concerned. Invitation to be the Chief Guest of the Republic Day parade is the ultimate sign of friendship between India and the country of the invitee. Political, commercial, military and economic interests of India are crucial drivers of the decision, with MEA seeking to use the occasion to strengthen ties with the country of the invitee in all these respects.

Another factor that has historically played a role in the choice of the Chief Guest is the association with the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) which began in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The NAM was an international political movement of newly decolonised nations to stay out of the squabbles of the Cold War and support each other in their nation-building journeys. The first Chief Guest of the parade in 1950 was President Sukarno of Indonesia, one of the five founding members of the NAM.

What happens after the MEA has zeroed in on its options?

After due consideration, the MEA seeks the approval of the PM and the President on the matter. After the MEA gets approval, Indian ambassadors in the concerned country try to discreetly ascertain the availability of the potential chief guest. This is crucial as it is not uncommon for heads of state to have packed schedules and unavoidable prior commitments. This is also a reason why the MEA doesn't just choose one option but a list of potential candidates. Discretion is of utmost importance as no formal invitation has yet been made by India.

After a candidate is finalised, more official communication takes place between India and the invitee's country. Territorial divisions in the MEA work towards meaningful talks and agreements. The Chief of Protocol works on the details of the programme and logistics. A detailed programme for the trip and the Republic Day ceremonies is shared by the Protocol Chief with his counterpart from the visiting nation.

The planning of the visit involves the Government of India, state governments which the foreign dignitary might visit, and the government of the concerned country.

The big picture of the chief guest's visit

The chief guest of the Republic Day is a ceremonial honour presented to the head of state of a country but its significance rises beyond purely the ceremonial. Such a visit can open new possibilities and go a long way in furthering India's interests in the world.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Bilateral Relations
Source: The Indian Express

Economics

1. IMF's sovereign debt risk assessment for India has spurred a sharp reaction

What is sovereign risk?
Sovereign risk is the potential that a nation's government will default on its sovereign debt by failing to meet its interest or principal payments. Sovereign risk is typically low, but can cause losses for investors in bonds whose issuers are experiencing economic woes leading to a sovereign debt crisis.

Role of IMF
The Finance Ministry recently issued a statement titled 'Factual position vis-à-vis IMF's Article IV consultations with India'. For context, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), under its Articles of Agreement, holds bilateral discussions with members, usually every year. IMF staffers collect economic and financial information, and discuss policies with top officials, before preparing a report that is discussed by the Fund's executive board.

Ministry's response
The Ministry statement, four days after the IMF released its latest India consultation details, noted that "certain presumptions have been made taking into account possible scenarios that does not reflect factual position". In particular, the Ministry was referring to an IMF view that adverse shocks could lift India's general government debt to, or beyond 100% of GDP in the medium-term (by 2027-28). The Ministry asserted this was only a worst-case scenario and not a fait accompli, and emphasised that other IMF country reports show much higher extreme 'worst-case' scenarios, for instance, at 160%, 140% and 200% of GDP, for the U.S., the U.K. and China, respectively.

The combined debt of central and State governments stood at 81% of GDP in 2022-23, from 88% in 2020-21. Under favourable circumstances, the IMF reckons this could even go down to 70% by 2027-28. The shocks faced by India so far in this century were global, and affected the entire world economy, be it the 2008 financial crisis or the pandemic, the Ministry pointed out.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; International Organisations
Source: The Hindu

2. Why has the Indian government criticised the methodologies of global credit rating agencies?

Why in news?

Recently, the Finance Ministry released a document titled Re-examining Narratives: A Collection of Essays, which Chief Economic Advisor V Anantha Nageswaran said was an "attempt to present alternate perspectives on diverse areas of economic policy that have long-term implications for India's growth and development priorities".

The first of the five essays in the document is a criticism of what the government calls the "opaque methodologies adopted by credit rating agencies to arrive at sovereign ratings".

The essay seeks to flag issues with the methodology adopted by the three main global credit rating agencies, and to show, based on calculations by the Finance Ministry, how these gaps affect India adversely.

Why do sovereign ratings matter?

Sovereign ratings are about the creditworthiness of governments. They provide a marker for investors around the world about the ability and willingness of governments to pay back debt. Just as an individual's credit rating is critical to whether she gets a loan and at what interest rate, sovereign ratings affect a country's ability to borrow money from global investors.

Sovereign ratings matter not just for the government but also for all businesses in that country. That's because the government is considered to be the safest bet in a country. If the sovereign rating of a country's government is low, the businesses of that country end up forking out an even higher interest rate when they borrow from global investors.

Which are the main rating agencies?

Sovereign credit ratings predate the Bretton Woods institutions, i.e., the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. There are three main globally recognised credit rating agencies: Moody's, Standard & Poor's and Fitch.

Moody's is the oldest; it was established in 1900 and issued its first sovereign ratings just before World War I. In the 1920s, Poor's Publishing and Standard Statistics, the predecessor of S&P, started rating government bonds.

What is the government's criticism?

The Finance Ministry has pointed out three main issues with the methodologies used by the rating agencies.

First, they "are opaque and appear to disadvantage developing economies" in certain ways. "For instance," the Ministry says, "the Fitch document mentions that the rating agency "takes comfort from high levels of foreign ownership" in the banking sector and that "public-owned banks have historically been subject to political interference"."

"Such an assessment", the government argues, "tends to discriminate against developing countries, where the banking sector is primarily run by the public sector". According to the government, such an assessment also ignores the welfare and development functions that public sector banks have in a developing country, including playing an important role in promoting financial inclusion.

Second, the government says, "the experts generally consulted for the rating assessments are selected in a non-transparent manner, adding another layer of opaqueness to an already difficult-to-interpret methodology".

Third, the rating agencies do not convey clearly the assigned weights for each parameter considered. "While Fitch does lay out some numerical weights for each parameter, they do go on to state that the weights are for illustrative purposes only," the essay says.

3. Cabinet approves Terms of Reference for the Sixteenth Finance Commission

Introduction
The Union Cabinet has approved the Terms of Reference for the Sixteenth Finance Commission.

The Terms of Reference for the Sixteenth Finance Commission will be notified in due course of time. The 16th Finance Commission's recommendations, upon the acceptance by the government, would cover the period of five (5) years commencing April 1, 2026.

The Fifteenth Finance Commission was constituted on November 27, 2017. It made recommendations covering the period of six years commencing on 1st April, 2020 through its Interim and Final Reports. The recommendations of the Fifteenth Finance Commission are valid upto the financial year 2025-26.

Constitutional Provision
Article 280(1) of the Constitutions lays down that the modalities for setting up of a Finance Commission to make recommendation on the distribution of net proceeds of taxes between the Union and the States, allocation between the States of respective shares of such proceeds; grants- in-aid and the revenues of the States and measures needed to supplement the resources of the Panchayats during the award period.

Terms of Reference for the Sixteenth Finance Commission:

The Finance Commission shall make recommendations as to the following matters, namely:

i. The distribution between the Union and the States of the net proceeds of taxes which are to be, or may be, divided between them under Chapter I, Part XII of the Constitution and the allocation between the States of the respective shares of such proceeds;

ii. The principles which should govern the grants-in-aid of the revenues of the States out of the Consolidated Fund of India and the sums to be paid to the States by way of grants-in-aid of their revenues under article 275 of the Constitution for the purposes other than those specified in the provisos to clause (1) of that article; and

iii. The measures needed to augment the Consolidated Fund of a State to supplement the resources of the Panchayats and Municipalities in the State on the basis of the recommendations made by the Finance Commission of the State.

The Commission may review the present arrangements on financing Disaster Management initiatives, with reference to the funds constituted under the Disaster Management Act, 2005, and make appropriate recommendations thereon.

The Commission shall make its report available by 31st day of October, 2025 covering a period of five years commencing on the 1st day of April, 2026.

Background:
The Fifteenth Finance Commission (the 15th FC) was constituted on 27.11.2017 for making recommendations for a five-year period of 2020-21 to 2024-25.

The Finance Commission normally takes about two years to make their recommendations. As per the clause (1) of article 280 of the Constitution, the Finance Commission is to be constituted every fifth year or earlier. However, as the recommendations of the 15th FC cover the six-year period up to 31st March 2026, the 16th FC is proposed to be constituted now. In this context, it is pertinent to mention that there are precedents where the Eleventh Finance Commission was constituted six years after the Tenth Finance Commission. Similarly, the Fourteenth Finance Commission was constituted five years and two months after the Thirteenth Finance Commission.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Economics
Source: PIB

4. Why India will continue to rely on coal for foreseeable future

Introduction

With coal use set to be a key topic during the ongoing COP28 summit, India said it would continue to rely on coal for electricity generation for the foreseeable future, even as it rapidly expanded its renewable energy sources.

However, it stands in stark contrast to the country's ambitious plans of achieving net-zero — it has promised to meet 50% of its electricity requirements from renewable energy sources by 2030, and 100% by 2070.

So, why is India so heavily dependent on coal?
The power demand in India is surging. In 2022, the requirement grew about 8%. The primary reason for this increase is higher economic activity. Industrial and commercial activity are among the biggest consumers of energy in the country. Homes account for a fourth of India's power use and agriculture for more than a sixth in recent years.

Moreover, India will witness the largest energy demand growth of any country or region in the world over the next 30 years, according to the latest World Energy Outlook by the International Energy Agency (IEA). It also added that the country's requirement for electricity for running household air conditioners is estimated to expand nine-fold by 2050 and will exceed total power consumption in the whole of Africa today.

Coal, the only fix
The staggering levels of power demand have become a formidable challenge for India. As a result, it has doubled down on its coal production. It spiked from 778 million tons in 2021-22 to 893 million tons in 2022-23, a 14% growth, according to the coal ministry. India has also set a target of 1.31 billion tonnes of coal production for 2024-25 and aims to increase it to 1.5 billion tons by 2030.

But why is coal so essential to India's plan to meet the growing power demand?
Because coal is the only viable option for the country right now. There are four reasons for this.

First, although India has been trying to push up its renewable share of power generation in recent years, it's nowhere near meeting the requirement. Currently, out of the total energy produced in the country, only 22% of it comes from renewable sources. Fossil fuels, mainly coal, still provide 75% of India's power supply.

Second, renewables aren't a reliable source of power generation. Energy sources like solar and wind are variable as they rely on natural factors like sunlight, wind and water availability. To ensure a steady supply, India has to heavily invest in battery storage — it needs more than 60 GW of battery storage to fully utilise the potential of its 2030 renewables goal.

Third, hydropower, a key renewable energy source for India, has its own complexities. Numerous hydropower projects are under construction or in the planning stages in the Himalayan region, including in Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim. But they have come under fire as the projects have caused ecological damage and raised concerns about the potential conflicts over water resources in the area.

Fourth, the country's plans to generate energy with the help of nuclear power plants have not really taken off. During 2021-22, the plants produced about 3.15% of the total electricity generated in India.

What's next
India aims to reach 450 GW of renewable installed capacity by 2030, more than three times the current capacity of about 135 GW. However, given the constraints regarding renewable energy, it will continue to fall back on coal-generated electricity.

Infact, Union Minister of Power and New and Renewable Energy, R K Singh, said "As per the targets we have set for 2030, the fossil fuel capacity (in electricity generation) would come down from the current about 60% to about 35%. This is the phase-down. If you are talking in absolute terms, the numbers (installed capacity of coal) will go up because our demand (for electricity) is going up (between now and 2030). In percentage terms (as a share of overall production), it will come down".

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Economics
Source: The Indian Express

5. Mining for critical minerals: what is the auction process, and why is it important?

Introduction
Twenty blocks of critical minerals are currently on auction for commercial mining by the private sector. The mineral blocks contain lithium ore, which has use in batteries and electric vehicles, and another 10 of the 30 minerals that the government declared as "critical" in July.

The bidding process began on November 29, and bids can be submitted until January 22 next year. The total value of these blocks is estimated at Rs 45,000 crore, subject to further discoveries or revisions in inferred reserves.

This is the first time that rights related to the mining of lithium ore are being auctioned to private parties. Other minerals in the blocks include nickel, copper, molybdenum, and rare earth elements (REEs). All these minerals are utilised in key supply chains for vehicle batteries, energy storage devices, consumer electronics, and vital industrial processes.

Where are these critical mineral blocks, and what rights are being auctioned?
The Notice Inviting Tender (NIT) floated by the Ministry of Mines says the 20 blocks are spread over eight states. There are seven blocks in Tamil Nadu, four in Odisha, three in Bihar, two in Uttar Pradesh, and one each in Gujarat, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, and Jammu & Kashmir.

Only four of these 20 blocks are being auctioned for a Mining Licence (ML), which means that once the licence is granted, the licensee can begin mining operations after obtaining the requisite clearances.

Three of these four blocks are in Odisha, and contain deposits of nickel, copper, graphite, and manganese. The fourth block is in Tamil Nadu, and contains deposits of molybdenum.

And what sort of rights are being auctioned for the other 16 blocks?
The remaining 16 blocks are being auctioned for a Composite Licence (CL), which allows the licensee to conduct further geological exploration of the area to ascertain evidence of mineral contents.

Once the licensee collects sufficient information on mineral deposits, they can make an application to the relevant state government to convert their CL to an ML to begin mining operations pending requisite clearances. The licensee has three to five years to complete the prescribed level of exploration, failing which the licence will be withdrawn.

What are the estimated reserves of key critical minerals in these blocks?
The two blocks of lithium reserves, one each in J&K and Chhattisgarh, are up for auction for a CL.

According to the NIT, the J&K block has an inferred reserve of a 5.9 million tonne (mt) of bauxite column, which contains more than 3,400 tonnes of lithium metal content. This block also contains more than 70,000 tonnes of titanium metal content.

The block in Chhattisgarh contains lithium and REEs, but no drilling has been conducted yet to estimate total reserves.

Nickel ore reserves have been found in three blocks, one each in Bihar, Gujarat, and Odisha. While no drilling has been conducted for the blocks in Bihar and Gujarat, in the Odisha block, the NIT states an inferred value of 2.05 mt of nickel ore, which amounts to 3,908 tonnes of nickel metal content.

This Odisha block is being auctioned for an ML. It is also the only block among the 20 that contains deposits of copper — amounting to 6.09 mt of copper ore and 28,884 tonnes of copper metal content.

How does India currently get its supplies of these minerals?
Recently, India imported 2,145 tonnes of lithium carbonate and lithium oxide at a total cost of Rs 732 crore. Lithium carbonate contains up to 19 per cent lithium. Lithium oxide, which is usually converted to lithium hydroxide, contains 29 per cent lithium.

India also imported 32,000 tonnes of unwrought nickel at a cost of Rs 6,549 crore, and 1.2 million tonnes of copper ore at a cost of Rs 27,374 crore, in 2022-23.

India is 100 per cent reliant on imports for its lithium and nickel demand. For copper, this figure is 93 per cent.

What will happen after the ongoing round of auctions is over?
The bidding process began after the government declared 30 minerals as "critical", and amended a key law to allow for the mining of three critical minerals, lithium, niobium, and REEs, earlier this year. To attract bidders, the government also specified new royalty rates for critical minerals, matching global benchmarks.

The bid for each block will be awarded on the highest percentage of mineral dispatch value quoted by the bidder. After the ongoing auction is over, the process to auction a second tranche of critical mineral blocks is expected to begin. It is currently unclear if this second tranche would include new lithium reserves found in Rajasthan and Jharkhand.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Economics
Source: Indian Express

6. Food versus Fuel: What's happening with Centre's ethanol blending scheme

Banning Sugar Exports
The Centre has implemented measures to enhance domestic availability by restricting the use of sugarcane juice/syrup for ethanol production. This move follows the ban on sugar exports.

Ethanol Blended Petrol (EBP) Program
The EBP program, a significant accomplishment of the Narendra Modi government, involves blending 99.9% pure ethanol with petrol. The average ethanol blending with petrol has increased from 1.6% in 2013-14 to 11.8% in 2022-23.

Feedstock Diversification

The key to the success of the EBP program lies in diversifying feedstocks. Ethanol production has increased, especially after 2017-18, with mills using alternative substrates such as surplus rice, broken/damaged foodgrains, and maize.

Recent Setback
On December 7, the Ministry of Consumer Affairs directed mills not to use sugarcane juice/syrup for ethanol production, impacting companies relying on this method, such as Balrampur Chini Mills, Shree Renuka Sugars, Ugar Sugar Works, and Nirani Sugars.

Supply and Price Concerns
The Oil Marketing Companies have floated a tender for the supply of ethanol for 2023-24, but the recent directive may affect supplies from sugarcane juice/syrup. The Centre is yet to announce prices for ethanol from various feedstocks for 2023-24.

Sugar Supply Issues
The decision to restrict ethanol production is linked to concerns over sugar supply. The 2022-23 sugar year ended with low stocks, and uncertainties surround the production forecast for 2023-24, with Maharashtra and Karnataka expected to experience declines due to subpar rains.

Impact on Sugar Market
The December 7 order is anticipated to contribute approximately 15 lakh tonnes of additional sugar to the market, affecting the ethanol production through the cane juice/syrup route. This move prioritizes domestic supply over exports, consumers over producers, and food over fuel.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Economics
Source: The Indian Express and The Hindu

7. Surat Diamond Bourse, the world's biggest workspace

Introduction
Prime Minister Narendra Modi will inaugurate the newly-built Surat Diamond Bourse (SDB), claimed to be the world's biggest office space in a single project, in Gujarat. The complex has reportedly beaten the US's Pentagon in capacity by having 4,200 diamond trading offices.

What is the diamond bourse?

The Surat Diamond Bourse (SDB) has been planned to expand and shift the diamond trading business from Mumbai to Surat, the hub of cutting and polishing diamonds.

Surat's diamond trading market is located at present in Mahidharpra Hira bazaar and Varachha Hira Bazaar, where traders make transactions standing on the streets with almost no security measures. A major part of the diamond trading, however, happens in Mumbai at Bandra Kurla Complex (BKC), which has the amenities for international buyers.

Sources in the diamond industry say Mumbai has a space crunch and office real estate is pricey. Besides, a major chunk of the diamond traded in Mumbai is manufactured in Surat, from where local angadias carry them to Mumbai on trains, taking over 4.5 hours.

Biggest office space in the world

The SDB has been built on an area of 66 lakh square feet at DREAM (Diamond Research and Mercantile) city. It is bigger than the biggest office space in the world, The Pentagon in the United States.

Diamond businesses under one roof

The Surat Diamond Bourse has the capacity of about 4,200 offices ranging from 300 square feet to 7,5000 square feet each. The bourse has nine towers, each with ground plus 15 floors.

All diamond-related activities and infrastructure, such as sale of rough diamonds and polished diamonds, diamond manufacturing machineries, software used in diamond planning, diamond certificate firms, lab-grown diamonds, etc. will be available in the bourse.

Apart from this, 27 retail outlets of diamond jewellery will also be opened, for international and national buyers.

The governing body

The SDB core committee has seven members including Chairman. All of them are major diamond players. The construction started in December 2017 and was finished in just five years. The total project cost is Rs 3,200 crore.

The thematic landscaping is based on the 'panch tatva' theme, comprising the five elements of nature (air, water, fire, earth, and sky).

8. How Indian states fare on logistics: What the Centre's latest survey says

Introduction
At a time when India is increasingly pitching itself as a possible alternative to China, greater competitiveness in logistics could help the country fend off the challenge from competitors such as Vietnam and Indonesia and improve overall manufacturing competence. While the Centre has stepped up its spending on infrastructure, deep-seated problems in logistics continue to hurt Indian manufacturing and efforts to boost exports.

We take a look at the challenges in logistics and states performance flagged by the Logistics Ease Across Different States (LEADS) perception survey released by the Commerce and Industry Ministry.

How are landlocked states doing?
The government's perception survey based on responses from 7,321 respondents said that average scores across parameters such as quality of roads, terminal, cost of logistics and availability of skilled workforce have improved in landlocked states as compared to 2019.

However, official data shows that only five states namely Gujarat, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Maharashtra and Telangana continue to make up for 70 per cent of exports.

Over the years this has caused a widening gap in income and job generation between the landlocked states and coastal states.

How has the North-East Group performed?
The North Eastern states that have seen considerable social unrest during the last year contribute barely 2.8 per cent towards India's GDP and require the maximum logistics-related upliftment. The survey said that there has been a marked improvement in all parameters compared to the 2019 survey.

Odisha, West Bengal lag among coastal states

Indian coastal states including Andhra Pradesh, Goa, Gujarat, Karnataka, Kerala, Maharashtra, Odisha, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal account for 75 per cent of total exports from the country and have fared well in logistics historically. Gujarat accounts for 33 per cent followed by Maharashtra with 16 per cent and Tamil Nadu with 9 per cent share.

However, the survey showed that Goa, Odisha and West Bengal continue to perform below the average among coastal states. In the case of Odisha, the survey said that there has been an improvement in the overall perception of the state's logistics ecosystem since 2019 but despite this, the indicator averages for this year have remained below the Coastal Group average.

Relevance: GS Prelims; Economics
Source: The Indian Express

9. T+0, instant settlement cycle: What is the new SEBI proposal and its potential benefits for investors?

The Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) has proposed the introduction of a facility for clearing and settlement of funds and securities on T+0 (same day) and instant settlement cycle on an optional basis. The facility will be in addition to the existing T+1 (trade plus one day) settlement cycle in the secondary markets for the equity cash segment.

What is the current settlement cycle followed in the securities market?
In its endeavour to keep pace with the changing times and carry out its mandate of development of securities markets and investor protection, SEBI has shortened the settlement cycle to T+3 from T+5 in 2002 and subsequently to T+2 in 2003.

At present, the settlement of funds and securities happens on the T+1 cycle. It was introduced in 2021 in a phased manner and was fully implemented in January 2023. Under it, securities and funds are settled by the next day of the trade.

What has SEBI proposed now?
It said that for the equity cash segment, in addition to the existing T+1 settlement cycle, a shorter settlement cycle may be introduced as an option. It proposed to implement it in two phases – Phase 1: T+0 Settlement Cycle and Phase 2: Instant Settlement Cycle.

In Phase 1, an optional T+0 settlement cycle (for trades till 1:30 PM) is envisaged, with settlement of funds and securities to be completed on the same day by 4:30 PM.

In Phase 2, an optional immediate trade-by-trade settlement (funds and securities) may be carried out. In the second phase, trading will be carried out till 3.30 pm.

Why is SEBI planning to introduce a shorter settlement cycle?
Over the last few years, Indian securities markets have seen tremendous growth, both in terms of volumes, value, as well as number of participants. This increase in the participation of new investors puts a greater onus on the regulator to make markets more efficient and safer for its participants, with a special focus on retail participants. The average Indian has rapidly embraced UPI (Unified Payments Interface) and instant payment platforms. This flexibility can be extended to equity dealing as well.

In today's age, reliability, low cost and high speed of transactions are key features that attract investors to particular asset classes. To that extent, reducing settlement time and hence increasing the operational efficiency of dealing in Indian securities can further draw and retain investors into this asset class.

What would be the features of the proposed T+0 settlement mechanism?
It is observed that a high percentage of retail investors bring upfront funds and securities before placing an order. For the period June 2023, for around 94 per cent of delivery-based trades with value up to Rs 1 lakh per transaction, investors made early pay–in of funds and securities.

An instant settlement mechanism would enable instant receipt of funds and securities, vis-a-vis existing pay-out on T+1 day. It would eliminate the risk of settlement shortages since both funds and securities will be required to be available before placing the order.

It will strengthen investor protection by enhancing the control of the investor over the securities and funds as funds and securities would be credited into the client's account directly for those who are trading through blocked amounts using the UPI facility (UPI Clients).

Providing the option for instant settlement will help establish Indian equities as an asset class with the features of resilience, low cost and time for transaction, superior in all ways to emerging claimants of alternative asset classes.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Economics
Source: The Indian Express

Environment

1. Loss and damage fund approved at COP28 summit

Why in news?

On the opening day of the COP28 climate conference in Dubai, a loss and damage fund to help vulnerable countries cope with the impact of climate change has been officially launched. The initial funding is estimated to be $475 million — host UAE pledged $100 million, the European Union promised $275 million, $17.5 million from the US, and $10 million from Japan.

The loss and damage fund was first announced during COP27 in Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt, last year. However, it was not until a few weeks before COP 28 that rich and poor countries managed to iron out some of their differences and agree on key points of the fund.

What is the loss and damage fund?

The loss and damage fund is a global financial package to ensure the rescue and rehabilitation of countries facing the cascading effects of climate change. The term refers to the compensation that rich nations, whose industrial growth has resulted in global warming and driven the planet into a climate crisis, must pay to poor nations, whose carbon footprint is low but are facing the brunt of rising sea levels, floods, crippling droughts, and intense cyclones, among others.

How much damage has been caused by industrialisation?

The Industrial Era started in 1850, disrupting Earth's natural mechanism for the production and absorption of greenhouse gases. Today, the US, the UK and the EU are considered to be responsible for 50% of all emissions. Bring Russia, Canada, Japan, and Australia into the picture and it jumps to 65%, i.e. two-thirds of all emissions. Compared to them, India is responsible for only 3% of historical emissions. Meanwhile China, the world's biggest emitter in the last 15 years, is responsible for 30% of global emissions every year.

Greenhouse gases comprise methane, nitrous oxide, water vapour, and carbon dioxide (CO_2) — with CO_2 responsible for most of the global heating. Carbon particles are being released in extremely large quantities and they have the ability to linger in Earth's atmosphere seemingly endlessly, at least for a millennium or more, and warm it.

How much loss and damage is the world facing?

Research shows that 55 vulnerable countries have suffered $ 525 billion combined climate crisis-fuelled losses in the last 20 years. The number is estimated to reach $

580 billion per year by 2030. Losses and damages will increase in future as global warming continues to rise. It will be unequally distributed and impact developing nations the most and, in them, the socially and financially weaker sections.

How big is the fund and how will it operate?
The World Bank will oversee the loss and damage fund in the beginning, with the source of funds being rich nations, such as the US, the UK and the EU, as well as some developing countries. The scale or the replenishment cycle of the fund remains unclear, but the need of the hour is several trillion dollars.

Previously, the developing nations were not keen to have the World Bank manage the fund as they saw this as a means by which richer nations could have more control over the finances. They have accepted this term now.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Environment
Source: The Indian Express

2. Green Credits scheme

What is the Green Credits Programme?
The Green Credits Programme, launched by the Environment Ministry in October this year, is an effort to create a market-based incentive for different kinds of environment-positive actions, not just for carbon emission reductions.

Comparison with Carbon Credits
Such a market-based system already exists for carbon, at the national as well as international level, that allows trade in carbon credits. Companies, or nations, can claim carbon credits if they take action to reduce their carbon footprint. These credits can then be traded for money. Companies unable to achieve their emission standards pay to buy these credits and improve their performance.

Green Credits programme attempts to replicate this mechanism for other environmental actions, like water conservation or soil improvements. Methodologies and standards to measure and verify such actions are still being developed. The market would also need to be developed. As a starting point, it is envisaged that private companies would buy these green credits as part of their CSR obligations.

Unlike the carbon markets, which are more focused at industry and corporations, green credit programme can benefit individuals and communities as well.

Suggestion by PM Modi

At COP28, PM Modi offered the concept to the international community, in the hope to create a market for green credits at an international level, just like the one on carbon credits exists.

3. Why is COP-28 summit focusing on health?

Why in news?
On December 3, for the first time in 28 years of climate change negotiations, the climate-health nexus will take centre stage at the United Nations Conference of Parties (COP-28) summit in the UAE. Unabated greenhouse gas emissions are triggering extreme weather events, air pollution, food insecurity, water scarcity and population displacement, which in turn, are altering the trajectory of vector-borne diseases. And Africa, Asia, South and Central America, and small island states, which have contributed the least to climate change, are bearing the brunt. Addressing these issues, on December 2, 123 governments endorsed the COP-28 Declaration on Climate and Health.

Why is there a 'Health Day' at the summit?
The 'groundbreaking Health Day at COP-28', as COP-28 president Sultan Ahmed Al Jaber put it, is expected to pose two questions: how public health can become resilient to climate change, and who will finance this transformation. Health is not a stranger to climate change talks. The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) recognises the health impacts of climate change. Health events have been held at COP for several years, including at the WHO Health Pavilion, but this is the first time there has been an official 'Health Day'. This is also the first time there will be a health inter-ministerial meeting, with ministers of health, environment, finance and other types of ministries joining in.

What can we expect from the Health talks?
The COP-28 UAE Declaration on Climate and Health includes dialogue on mitigating emissions, health sector adaptation to climate change, mainstreaming of health into climate policies and the sticky question of climate financing for health.

The Declaration, however, doesn't mention fossil fuels. It recognises the need for climate mitigation, "strengthening research on the linkages between environmental and climatic factors and antimicrobial resistance"; and "intensifying efforts for the early detection of zoonotic spill-overs" to prevent future pandemics.

It does not mention pollution-related harms or identify 'fossil fuels' — coal, oil and gas — as a driver of health threats, or emphasise the need to end fossil fuel dependence.

Fossil fuels are seen as the largest contributor to global climate change. If we move from fossil fuels to renewable energy, for instance, we reduce preventable deaths of air pollution as well as reduce the risk of dangerous climate change.

Where does India stand?
In India, particulate air pollution is said to be the "greatest threat to human health", and heat-related deaths may kill an additional 10 lakh people annually by 2090, according to data. India scored 2/15 points in the 2023 GCHA (Global Climate and Health Alliance) scorecard that assessed India's inclusion of clean air in its national climate commitments.

About Global Climate and Health Alliance
The Global Climate and Health Alliance is an organisation which was formed in Durban (South Africa) in 2011 to tackle climate change and to protect and promote public health.

The Alliance is made up of health and development organizations from around the world united by a shared vision of an equitable, sustainable future.

Specifically, Alliance members work together to:
1. Ensure that health impacts are integrated into global, regional, national and local policy responses to climate change so as to reduce them as far as possible, with a particular focus on reducing health inequalities through mitigation and adaptation;
2. Encourage and support the health sector to lead by example, in mitigating and adapting to climate change;
3. Raise awareness of the health threats posed by climate change and the potential health benefits of well-chosen climate mitigation policies in areas such as energy, transport, food and housing.

The Alliance does this through:
1. Providing leadership
2. Advocating for health and climate
3. Policy and research
4. Engaging and informing

The Alliance was launched following the inaugural Climate and Health summit, which took place in 2011 during the 17th Conference of the Parties (COP17) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Environment
Source: The Indian Express

Why in news?
Sixty-three countries, including the US, Canada, and Kenya, signed up to the world's first-ever pledge to drastically cut cooling emissions at the ongoing COP28 climate. The Global Cooling Pledge commits the countries to reduce their cooling emissions by at least 68% by 2050 and outlines several strategies to tackle them.

These kinds of emissions now account for 7% of global greenhouse gas emissions and are expected to triple by 2050. The situation is set to get worse as rising global temperatures will lead to a large-scale cooling demand — the use of more ACs and refrigerators would cause more cooling emissions.

Here is a look at what are cooling emissions, how they are heating up the planet, and what needs to be done to tackle them.

Cooling emissions and global warming
Cooling emissions are essentially emissions generated from refrigerants, used in appliances like ACs and refrigerators, and the energy used for cooling.

Let's first focus on refrigerants, also known as coolants. They allow the refrigeration process to work due to their ability to quickly change their state. As they readily absorb heat from the environment, refrigerants turn from being a cool liquid into a gas. When they release that heat into the outside — it could be outside a building (in case of ACs) or outside a fridge — they transform back into liquid form and then are cycled back to start the cooling process again.

For the longest time, most of the cooling appliances used chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) as refrigerants. However, in 1985, scientists published a research paper, suggesting that increased levels of CFCs in the atmosphere were responsible for abnormally low ozone concentrations in Antarctica. This led to the 1987 Montreal Protocol — an agreement signed by nearly 200 countries to freeze the production and consumption of ozone-depleting substances, including CFCs, at then current rates.

In the following years, CFCs were largely replaced by two groups of chemicals, hydrofluorocarbons (HFCs) and hydrochlorofluorocarbons (HCFCs), but they presented a new problem. Although HFCs and HCFCs don't damage the ozone layer, they are powerful greenhouse gases — both of them can absorb infrared radiation, trapping heat inside the atmosphere rather than letting it escape back into space, generating a greenhouse effect that warms Earth. Notably, CFCs are also potent global warming gases.

But how are HFCs and HCFCs leaked into the atmosphere? They are released from damaged appliances or from car air conditioning systems. Ninety per cent of the refrigerant emissions occur at the equipment's end of life.
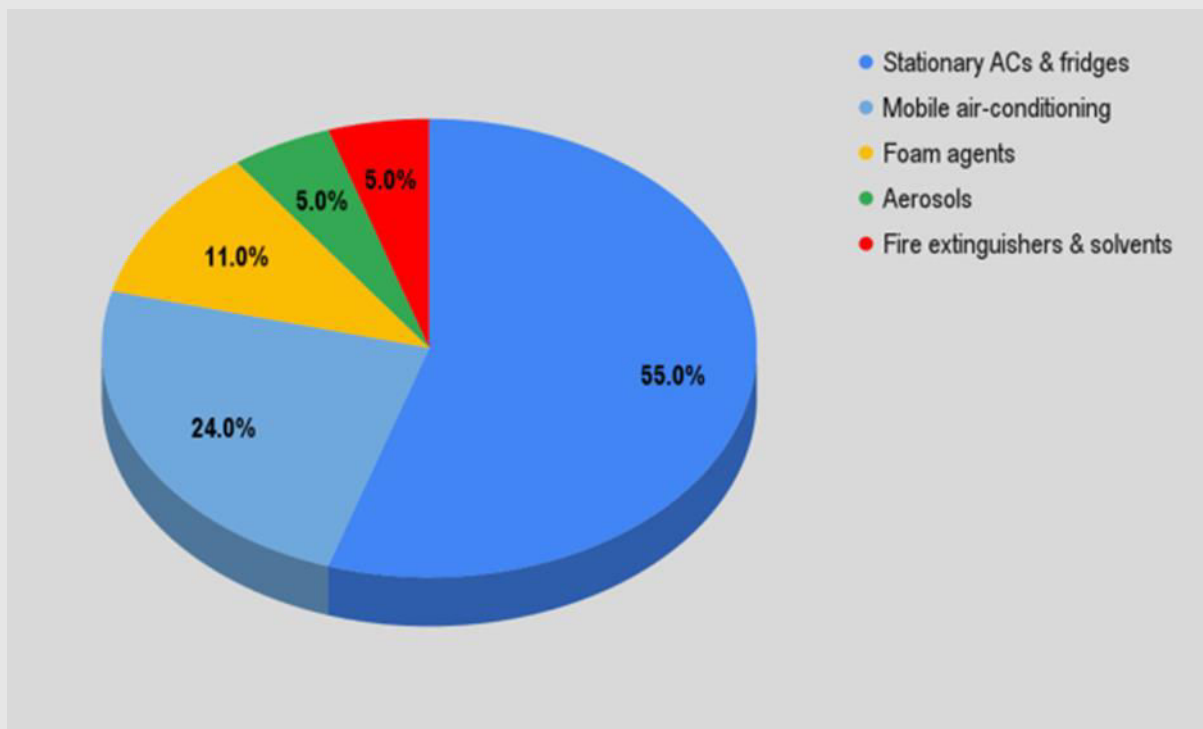
Sources of HCFs. Credit: Climate and Clean Air Coalition (CCAC)

The other source of cooling emissions is the electricity used to run the cooling appliances. A large section of this electricity is produced by fossil fuels across the world, especially in developing countries like India. Fossil fuels such as coal, oil and gas are by far the largest contributor to climate change, accounting for over 75% of greenhouse gas emissions and nearly 90% of all CO2 emissions.

A vicious cycle
Currently, cooling emissions aren't a huge proportion of global greenhouse gases. This would change soon due to soaring temperatures across the world. In October, scientists said they expect Earth is on track for global average temperatures to rise by up to nearly 3 degrees Celsius by the end of the century.

As global warming worsens, the demand for cooling will increase dramatically, which will create more warming in a destructive feedback loop. The greatest cooling demand will arise in Africa and Asia, where more than 1 billion people are at high risk from extreme heat due to a lack of cooling access.

The number of global cooling devices is expected to jump from 3.6 billion to 9.5 billion by 2050, according to a report by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the IEA. And if cooling is provided to everyone who needs it, and not just who can afford it, there is a need for 14 billion devices by 2050, the report added.
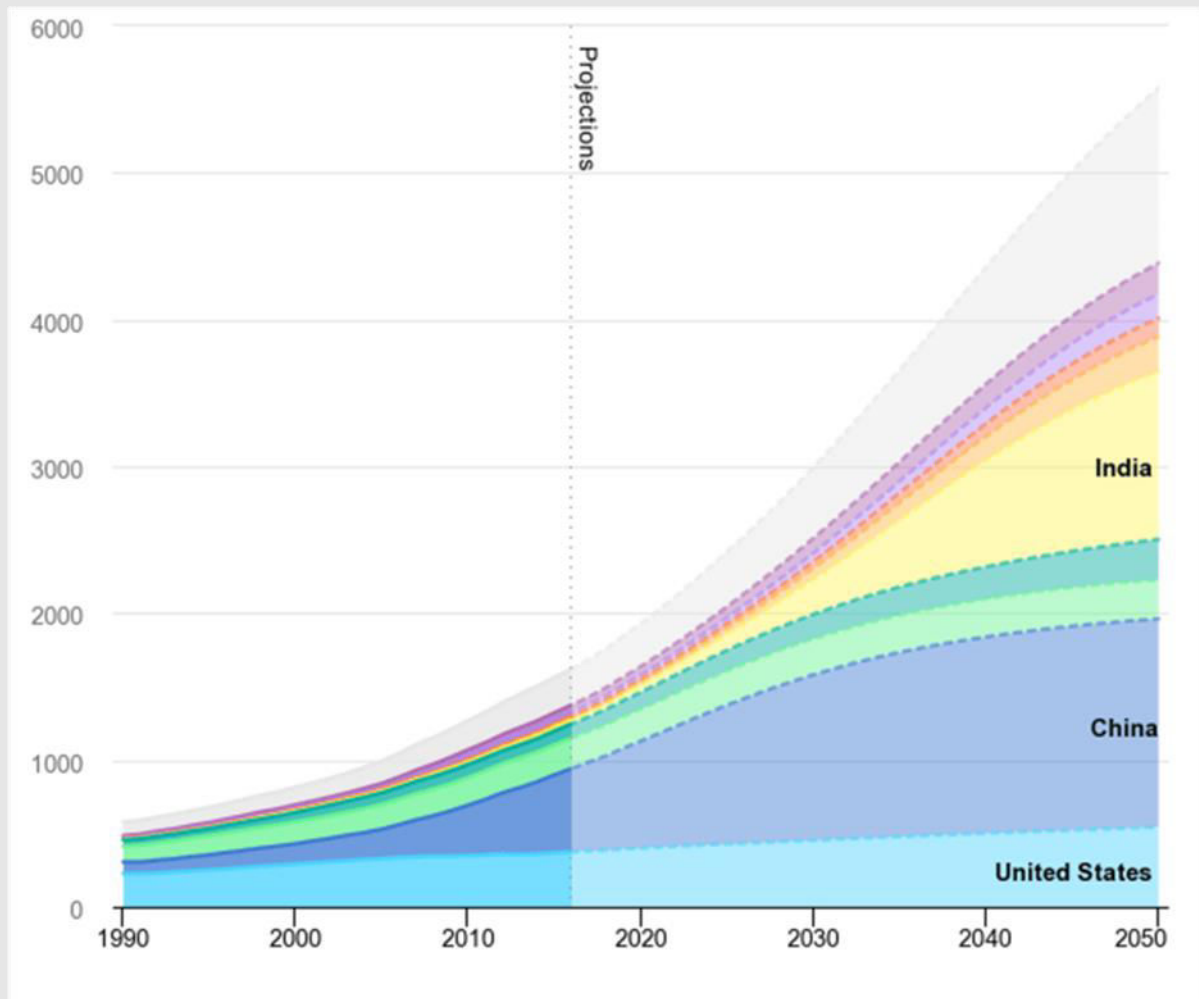
Global air conditioner stock, 1990-2050. Credit: IEA's 2018 The Future of Cooling report

The solutions

Countries are already cognizant of the harmful impact of HCFs. In 2016, over 150 countries signed the Kigali Amendment to the Montreal Protocol, agreeing to reduce HFC consumption by 80% by 2047. If achieved, this could avoid more than 0.4 degree Celsius of global warming by 2100.

The phasing-out of HFCs involves promoting the use of climate-friendly chemicals, also called natural refrigerants, such as ammonia, certain hydrocarbons, and CO_2 in cooling devices. These chemicals have lower or zero global warming potential.

Moreover, as most of the HFCs and HCFCs take place at the appliance's end of life, consumers and authorities need to dispose of them properly.

There is also a need to focus on ways to cool buildings without air conditioners. Improving insulation materials and constructing buildings with large openings for better ventilation can help reduce heat inside.

5. Global Renewables and Energy Efficiency Pledge at COP28

Introduction
On December 2, 118 countries signed a renewable energy pledge at the ongoing COP28 climate summit to triple the world's green energy capacity to 11,000 GW by 2030, thereby, reducing the reliance on fossil fuels in generating energy.

According to the "Global Renewables and Energy Efficiency Pledge", countries have to "double the global average annual rate of energy efficiency improvements from around 2% to over 4% every year until 2030".

Coming clean by 2050
Solar, wind, hydropower and biofuels are seen as the fuels of the future, even in developing countries. According to the pledge, the tripling of renewable energy is expected to practically eliminate fossil fuels as energy sources by 2050.

Status of India
Last year, India's Ministry of New and Renewable Energy said that the country was the world's third-largest producer of renewable energy, with 40% of its installed energy capacity coming from non-fossil fuel sources. India has announced its aim to meet 50% of its electricity demands from renewable energy sources by 2030 and reach net zero emissions by 2070.

India's stand
The pledge was spearheaded by the EU, the US and the UAE and supported by Brazil, Nigeria, Australia, Japan, Canada, Chile and Barbados. India and China have stayed away as the initiative calls for phasing down of coal and "ending the continued investment in unabated new coal-fired power plants". In September 2023, however, India had already supported, as part of the G20, a commitment to work towards tripling global renewable energy capacity by 2030. The announcement was one of the strongest declarations to come out of the G20.

6. What does 'unabated' fossil fuels mean?

Why in news?
At the ongoing COP28 climate summit, one phrase that has taken the centrestage is "unabated" fossil fuels.

For instance, the latest draft of a potential climate agreement at the meeting mentions "rapidly phasing down unabated coal" as one of the actions to slash greenhouse gas emissions.

What are 'unabated' fossil fuels?
When it comes to fossil fuels, "unabated" means doing nothing to reduce the carbon dioxide (CO2) and other greenhouse gases that are released from the burning of coal, oil, and natural gas.

Conversely, "abated" refers to the attempts to decrease the release of polluting substances to an acceptable level. However, there isn't any clarity on what this level is and how to get there.

Discussions around fossil fuel abatement largely revolve around CCS technologies — they capture emissions from power stations or industrial facilities and store them underground. But those discussions remain deeply polarised.

While Oil and gas-producing companies and countries see carbon capture as a key component in plans to cut greenhouse gas emissions, climate activists and experts suggest that its role is limited. In July, the European Union and 17 nations including Germany, France, Chile, New Zealand and climate-vulnerable island states, in a statement, said carbon capture technologies are no substitute for a drastic cut in fossil fuels and they shouldn't be overused.

How beneficial are carbon capture and storage technologies?
In its report, Carbon Capture, Utilisation and Storage, the International Energy Agency (IEA) said power and industrial plants that are equipped with modern CCS technologies capture around 90% of the CO2.

However, a 2022 study by the Institute for Energy Economics and Financial Analysis (IEEFA) — a global think tank that examines issues related to energy markets, trends, and policies — found that most of the 13 flagship CCS projects worldwide that it analysed have either underperformed or failed entirely.

Another analysis by Climate Analytics, a Germany-based climate science and policy institute, revealed that reliance on CCS could release an extra 86 billion tonnes of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere between 2020 and 2050.

Moreover, CCS technologies are also very expensive. It's cheaper to shut down a coal plant and replace it with some combination of wind, solar and batteries in comparison to attaching a carbon capture device to the plant.

What happens now?
There is a chance that the COP28 meeting's final declaration might mention phase out or phase down of unabated fossil fuels. If this happens, many are concerned that it would allow countries and fossil fuel companies to continue to burn fossil fuels as long as they capture the emissions and store it underground.

7. COP28: What were the most important decisions, where they fell short

Introduction
The COP28 climate meeting delivered some important outcomes — a first-time acknowledgement of the need to move away from fossil fuels, a first promise to reduce methane emissions, operationalisation and capitalisation of the loss and damage fund, and an agreement on a framework for the global goal on adaptation.

However, like all previous COPs, it still remained an underachiever, unable to measure up to the expectations, particularly in galvanising more ambitious climate action in the immediate term.

The expectations
COP28 was being seen as possibly the last opportunity to ensure that the world had some hopes of keeping within the 1.5 degree Celsius warming threshold. The main agenda at COP28 was to carry out a Global Stocktake (GST), a comprehensive assessment of where the world was in its fight against climate change and what more needed to be done to meet the climate objectives. The GST is mandated by the Paris Agreement to be a periodic exercise, the first one in 2023 and every five years thereafter.

COP28 was being held at a time when global warming was breaking new records. The year 2023 is already confirmed to emerge as the hottest year ever. Several months this year set new temperature records. More than 80 days this year happened to be at least 1.5 degree Celsius warmer than pre-industrial times.

At the same time, every assessment showed that the world was not doing enough, and that the 1.5 degree target was rapidly slipping out of hand. COP28, therefore, was expected to use the GST to stimulate more ambitious climate actions, particularly between now and 2030.

The outcomes

However, COP28 disappointed on that front. There was little in the final agreement to accelerate climate action in the short term.

Fossil fuel phase-out: This was the most hotly contested issue at COP28, and the reason for a prolonged deadlock. The role of fossil fuels in causing global warming had never been even acknowledged in any earlier COP decision, but this was getting increasingly untenable. After much deliberations, the final agreement called upon countries to contribute towards "transitioning away" from fossil fuels, "so as to achieve net zero by 2050".

There were no time schedules and no targets. Some countries were extremely disappointed that the term "fossil fuel phase-out" had not been used. But even if it was, it would have a similar effect in the absence of any timeline. Production and consumption of fossil fuels are unlikely to be curbed significantly in the near term, but it is an important, rather unavoidable, measure in the 2050 timeframe.

Tripling of Renewable Energy: This was an expected outcome, and the only one that contributes to additional emission reductions between now and 2030. The COP28 agreement calls upon countries to contribute to tripling of global installed capacity of renewable energy, and doubling of annual improvements in energy efficiency. Together, these two measures have the potential to avoid emissions of about 7 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent between now and 2030, more than all the net result of all the other climate actions being currently taken. Tripling is a global target, and it is not incumbent on every country to individually triple its current installed capacity. It is thus not clear how this tripling would be ensured.

Phase-down of coal: Despite being a fossil fuel, just like oil or natural gas, coal has received a separate mention in the agreement. This is because coal was already singled

out for phase-down in the Glasgow conference (COP-26) in 2021. There was a move to stipulate that no new coal fired power plants could be opened without an in-built carbon capture and storage facility, but this was strongly resisted by India, China, South Africa and other countries. It was dropped, and finally the Glasgow language was reiterated. There is nothing about how this phase-down is to be measured, or from what baseline.

Methane emission cuts: The agreement talks about "accelerating and substantially reducing non-cabon-dioxide emissions globally, including in particular methane emissions by 2030". Methane is the most widespread greenhouse gas apart from CO2, accounting for nearly 25 per cent of all emissions. It is also about 80 times more potent than CO2 in causing global warming. Methane emission reductions can therefore bring substantial benefits. But several countries, including India, are extremely opposed to any mandate to cut methane emissions, mainly because one of the major sources happens to be agriculture and livestock.

Cutting methane emissions could involve tweaking agricultural patterns which could be extremely sensitive in a country like India. Possibly in deference to the concerns of such countries, the agreement does not mention any targets for methane emission cuts for the year 2030, although a group of about 100 countries had made a voluntary commitment, in Glasgow in 2021, to reduce their methane emissions by 30% by 2030.

Loss and Damage Fund: For the poor and vulnerable countries, this was the most important outcome. A decision to set up a Loss and Damage Fund had been taken last year in Sharm el-Shaikh but it had not been created, and no money had been promised. COP28 operationalised this fund on the opening day of the conference, and several countries, including hosts UAE, made funding commitments. By the end of the conference, commitments worth about US$ 800 million had been made. The money is meant to provide financial help to countries trying to recover from climate-induced disasters.

Global Goal on Adaptation: This was another important step developing countries had been waiting for. Historically, adaptation hasn't received enough attention, or resources, as compared with mitigation activities, mainly because adaptation is largely a local endeavour. Its benefits also are mostly local.

But developing countries had been arguing that a global framework for adaptation was necessary to bring more attention to it. Accordingly, the Glasgow conference had decided to set up a two-year work programme to define the contours of this framework. The work programme resulted in the identification of some common adaptation goals, important for the entire world. These included reduction in climate-induced water scarcity, attaining climate-resilience in food and agricultural production, supplies and distribution, and resilience against climate-induced health impacts.

COP28 adopted the framework, but much more needs to be done on this front, particularly in identifying the indicators to measure progress on each of the global goals. The adaptation agreement currently lacks financial provisions, and countries would need to continue working on it to strengthen it in the coming years.

8. Is the world closer to phasing out fossil fuel?

Why in news?
The 28th edition of the Conference of Parties (COP) concluded in Dubai this week with 198 signatory countries agreeing that the world must "transition" away from fossil fuels in a "just, orderly and equitable manner" to achieve net zero by 2050.

Does the wording of the agreement suggest that the end of fossil fuels is near?
Far from it. The Dubai Consensus, as this agreement is called, is significant only because this is the first time since 1995, when the first ever COP was held in Berlin, that there is a formal acknowledgement that emissions from fossil fuels are the main culprit driving global warming. So far, all agreements have only spoken of the need to stem "greenhouse gas emissions." This is despite it being common knowledge that three-fourth of such emissions and 90% of carbon dioxide are the result of burning coal, oil and gas. It was only in the 26th edition of the COP, in Glasgow in 2021, that countries agreed to tackle coal — the fossil fuel with the biggest global-warming footprint — by agreeing to "phase down" its use.

It's important to keep in mind here that "phase down" and "phase out" have no meaning on their own because they do not refer to any specific year by which the use of these fuels must terminate. Large, developing countries like India and China, have protested against the singling out of coal among fossil fuels, on the grounds that they need them for lifting their masses out of poverty and providing energy security. India, while rich in coal reserves, is still an importer of the product and has limited oil and gas reserves.

China is rich in both coal and gas. The United States, that derives about a fifth of its energy from coal, has usually been supportive of calls to phase out coal but being heavily dependent on oil and gas reserves, has never voiced any call to action to eliminate the latter two. However, now that all fossil fuels have been included in the Dubai Consensus, it brings parity among fuels and acknowledgement that they all need to be done away with for the world to have a chance at preventing global, average temperatures from rising 1.5 degree Celsius over pre-industrial levels. But

because there are no timelines yet, fossil fuels are going to be the mainstay of economies everywhere in the years to come.

Can fossil fuels be immediately replaced?
Nearly two centuries of industrialisation has meant that there is a well-oiled infrastructure system to extract, process and distribute coal, oil and gas to all kinds of power plants and convert them to electricity and combustible products, ranging from petrol and diesel to plastic. Then there is the infrastructure — transmission grids and pipelines — to channel these stores of energy to houses and vehicles. Unfortunately, power from natural sources of power such as solar and wind are not as easily available, on demand, as fossil fuel: the sun because of its unavailability at night and wind due to the temperamental nature of the ocean and atmosphere. The infrastructure to store all of the energy produced this way is grossly inadequate. India's National Electricity Plan, 2022-27, plans to add nearly 87,000 MW in this period in the form of fresh coal-fired capacity: 27,000 MW via under-construction power plants and 60,000 MW from new plants.

Oil production in the U.S. hit record levels this year. Since 2010, the number of oil barrels per day has tripled and gas production has risen two and half times in the country. At COP deliberations this year, one of the trickiest conundrums was the large presence of oil and gas manufacturers and of course, the hosting of a climate summit in a petro-state. The Dubai Consensus agreement stating that a transition from fossil fuel, while necessary, suggests that "transition fuels" could play a role in "facilitating the energy transition while ensuring energy security." Though there is no definition of what these fuels are, natural gas has been touted as one of the contenders. Even though natural gas production leads to methane emissions, estimates by the International Energy Agency proffer that in balance, switching from coal-to-gas reduces emissions by 50% when producing electricity and by 33% when providing heat. This of course invites criticism that such a framing of natural gas advantages countries which have natural production and distribution capabilities for this gas.

What does the Dubai Consensus say about methane?
Methane is a potent greenhouse gas and has several times more heat-trapping capabilities compared to carbon dioxide. It is a key component of natural gas and responsible for about a third of planetary warming just behind carbon dioxide. "Accelerating and substantially reducing non-carbon-dioxide emissions globally, including in particular methane emissions by 2030," is necessary for humanity to have a shot at keeping average temperatures from rising beyond 1.5 degree Celsius by the end of the century, the agreement notes. The Global Methane Pledge to cut methane emissions 30% of 2020 levels by 2030 was signed on by nearly 150 countries at the COP-27 summit in Egypt, last year. China and the U.S. have also agreed to address industrial methane emissions, that result from natural gas production.

India has resisted pressure to cut methane emissions on the grounds that most of its methane results from the agricultural sector. However, it has unveiled plans to make its energy production processes more efficient to reduce its release.

9. What was discussed about cities at COP-28?

Why special attention to urban areas?
When the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCC) initiated the COP in 1995, 44% of people lived in cities. Currently, 55% of the global population is urban and this is expected to reach 68% by 2050. The urban world today consumes nearly 75% of primary energy and is responsible for roughly 70% of CO_2 (76% of total GHG) emissions. Hence, the desired results of the Paris commitments are not possible without addressing urban issues.

Role to subnational governments in climate negotiations
At this year's COP, there was a special day dedicated to a ministerial meeting on urbanisation and climate change. This meeting convened Ministers of housing, urban development, environment finance, and other portfolios; local and regional leaders, financial institutions, non-government organisations; and other stakeholders. Such moves forced some of the city representatives and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), to raise their voice and emphasise on the principle — "nothing for us without us".

City representatives have been arguing for multi-level green deal governance and for revising the governance and regulation of energy and climate action. Likewise, some European city groups argued for formally recognising the role of subnational governments in global climate change negotiations, accelerating and scaling up climate action by working across all levels of governance and sectors, and providing direct financing and technical assistance to cities and regions. This will require an 'out of the box' imagination as it would mean transgressing the authorities of federal governments. Nevertheless, the moot point is that cities and regions are key actors in driving climate ambition forward and in creating green jobs, reducing air pollution, and improving human health and well-being. The efforts of city governments should be formally recognised in COP decision documents.

What can be done in the Global South?
The cities of the Global South are far more vulnerable than their western counterparts. The city leaders are hardly empowered, the major employment is in the informal sector, adaptation is key as most cities are vulnerable to climate induced disasters and the pent up drive to attract investments to cities has further widened the gap between the rich and the poor. In most countries, and in India particularly, 40% of the urban

population live in slums. Pollution is a major contributor in reducing life expectancies and social and economic inequities are quite inherent in their systems. So, to ensure fair participation in climate action plans and to claim loss and damage compensation, etc., there has to be a radical shift in the processes governing the cities.

One of the ways of achieving progress, even if that is too little, can be through creating a climate atlas of these cities, mapping them and identifying hotspots. Here, a major support system from existing financial architecture including the outcome of COPs is required.

This does not discount the fact that some cities like Chennai are spearheading their climate action plan and have decided to meet their zero emission targets by 2050, even before the Indian national government's stipulated time period of 2070.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Environment
Source: The Hindu

10. Outcomes of the COP-28 climate summit

Why in news?
The 28th session of the Conference of the Parties (COP) — an annual convening of countries signatory to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) — happened in Dubai this year, with high expectations that countries would take concrete steps to address the climate crisis. The negotiations encompassed mitigation efforts, adaptation strategies, financing mechanisms, and the role of developed countries versus developing nations in climate action. The summit ended with progress on certain fronts but lingering challenges on others.

What happened with respect to the loss and damage fund?
Following the agreement reached at COP-27 to create a 'Loss and Damage' (L&D) fund, the last year was dedicated to negotiations on fund-management and financing. In a historic decision, the fund was operationalised at COP-28.

However, only a meagre $790 million has been pledged so far, by a few nations, despite the corpus requiring $100 billion to more than $400 billion a year. Notably, the U.S., the largest historical emitter, committed only $17.5 million. Moreover, the World Bank was designated to oversee and administer the fund. However, there is also a prevailing sentiment among countries that the communities affected by climate-related disasters should be able to directly access funding. Moreover, the funds should be available in the form of grants and not loans.

What about the global stocktake?

This year's COP summit saw the first global stocktake (GST). According to the UNFCCC, the GST "enables countries and other stakeholders to see where they are collectively making progress towards meeting the goals of the Paris Agreement — and where they are not".

The decision of countries' at COP-28 to transition away from fossil fuels was coupled with the ambition to triple renewable energy capacity by 2030. More than 20 countries also pledged to triple their nuclear energy capacity. However, the transition from fossil fuels is restricted to energy systems alone; they can continue to be used in the plastics, transport, and agriculture sectors. The declaration also refers to 'transitional fuels', such as natural gas, for ensuring energy security. But this falls short of true climate justice as it allows industries to continue operating in the business-as-usual mode.

What about green finance?
The financial segment of the GST implementation framework explicitly recognises the responsibility of developed nations to take the lead in climate finance. There is also a reference to the private sector's role in addressing financial shortfalls and an imperative to supplement grant-oriented, concessional finance to enable equitable transition in developing countries. Nevertheless, specific information regarding the entities obligated to furnish this grant-based finance is lacking.

The COP-28 also witnessed the establishment of innovative global green-finance mechanisms to support developing nations in their transition to sustainable practices. The Green Climate Fund received fresh support of $3.5 billion, allowing it to finance adaptation and mitigation projects in vulnerable regions. An additional $188 million was pledged to the Adaptation Fund. New partnerships between public and private sectors were forged to mobilise investments in renewable energy, sustainable agriculture, and infrastructure. The COP-28 Presidency also introduced ALTÉRRA, an investment initiative with an ambitious goal to globally mobilise an unprecedented sum of $250 billion by 2030.

Despite these efforts, the available funds fall well short of the $194-366 billion annual funding requirement for adaptation, as estimated by the United Nations.

How did India fare at COP-28?
The UAE declaration on climate and health came into being at COP-28 through a partnership of the COP-28 Presidency with the World Health Organization. It recognises the growing health impacts of climate change and acknowledges the benefits of climate action, including a reduction in air pollution and lowering the cost of healthcare. The declaration, signed by 123 countries, has collectively committed $1 billion to address the growing climate-health crisis. However, India didn't sign this declaration because reducing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions in the health sector would mean reduction in emissions from gases used for cooling. As India's healthcare

infrastructure is still growing, such a commitment could compromise the healthcare requirements of a growing population, particularly rural.

The Global Methane Pledge launched at COP-26 received renewed attention at COP-28, with the Climate and Clean Air Coalition becoming the new secretariat and partners of the pledge announcing more than $1 billion in new grants for funding projects to reduce methane emissions from the agriculture, waste, and gas sectors. More than 150 countries signed the pledge to reduce methane pollution. India isn't a signatory to this pledge because it shifts focus from carbon dioxide to methane, a GHG with a lower lifetime.

Also, methane emissions in India are primarily from rice cultivation and enteric fermentation (livestock rearing), which support the livelihoods of small and marginal farmers.

What are the takeaways?

The COP-28 outcomes had a lot of firsts, such as the declaration on climate and health, acknowledgement of the role of nature-based solutions for biodiversity conservation and climate, and the need to transition away from fossil fuels. Some 134 countries also agreed to a landmark declaration to transition to sustainable and resilient food systems.

However, some challenges and differences between developed and developing countries remain to be addressed. One key issue of contention was fossil-fuel subsidies. While developed countries advocated for phasing them out, developing countries, including India, refused a phase-out over implications on economic growth and development.

Such a phase-out also has social implications: several communities rely on fossil fuels (coal, in India's case) for gainful employment. Moreover, emphasising the principle of common and differentiated responsibilities and the historical responsibility of developed countries for GHG emissions, developing countries argued for increasing the flow of climate finance and technologies to facilitate just job transitions and inclusive development.

In sum, COP-28 is a mixed bag of outcomes.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Environment
Source: The Hindu

11. How the hottest summer ever affected the Arctic: 5 things you need to know

Introduction

The 2023 summer was the warmest on record in the Arctic, which, due to climate change, has warmed nearly four times faster than the globe since 1979. Overall, the past year was the sixth-warmest year the Arctic had experienced since reliable record-keeping began in 1900.

These were some key findings of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA) annual Arctic Report Card.

The rising temperatures in the northern polar region contributed to unprecedented wildfires that forced communities to evacuate, a decline in sea ice extent, devastating floods, food insecurity, and a rise in sea level, according to the study.

Here is a look at the most severe consequences of the soaring temperatures in the Arctic.

1. THAWING OF SUBSEA PERMAFROST
Subsea permafrost is essentially frozen soil beneath the seabed that contains organic matter. While it has been gradually thawing for thousands of years, (now) warmer ocean temperatures are accelerating this process, making it a cause of concern for scientists.

Just as with permafrost on land, when subsea permafrost thaws, the organic matter it contains decays and releases methane and carbon dioxide – greenhouse gases that contribute to global warming and worsen ocean acidification.

To make matters worse, there isn't enough research to estimate how much greenhouse gases will subsea permafrost release in the following years and what will be its effect on global warming.

2. FOOD INSECURITY
Due to the impact of climate change on freshwater bodies and marine ecosystems, Western Alaska recorded another year of extremely low numbers of Chinook and chum salmon — 81% and 92% below the 30-year mean, respectively. The size of adult salmon has also decreased, according to the report.

It led to fishery closures, worsened user conflicts, and had profound cultural and food security impacts in Indigenous communities that have been tied to salmon for millennia.

3. RAGING WILDFIRES
Canada — 40% of its land mass is considered Arctic and Northern — was among the worst affected regions when it comes to wildfires. The country witnessed its worst

wildfire season on record with fires burning more than 10 million acres in the Northwest Territories.

This happened as high temperatures dried up vegetation and soil, coupled with below-average rainfall, creating perfect conditions for wildfires to burn more easily.

4. SEVERE FLOODING
Rising temperatures have led to dramatic thinning of the Mendenhall Glacier, located in Alaska, over the past 20 years. As a result, over the years, the meltaway water has annually caused floods in the region.

5. GREENLAND ICE SHEET MELTING
The NOAA report noted that the highest point on Greenland's ice sheet experienced melting for only the fifth time in the 34-year record. Not only this, the ice sheet continued to lose mass despite above-average winter snow accumulation — between August 2022 and September 2023, it lost roughly 350 trillion pounds of mass. Notably, Greenland's ice sheet melting is the second-largest contributor to sea-level rise.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Environment
Source: The Indian Express

Science & Technology

1. INS Imphal commissioned: Its capabilities, and the strategic significance of Visakhapatnam class of destroyers

Introduction
INS Imphal (Pennant D68), the third of four warships of Project 15B that together form the Visakhapatnam class stealth-guided missile destroyers, is commissioned into the Indian Navy recently.

What is Project 15B?
Between 2014 and 2016, the Indian Navy commissioned three guided missile destroyers of Kolkata class under a project codenamed '15A'. The Kolkata class included INS Kolkata, INS Kochi and INS Chennai. These ships were a step ahead of their precursor Delhi class of ships, which included INS Delhi, INS Mysore and INS Mumbai, built under Project 15 and commissioned between 1997 and 2001.

Mazagon Dock Shipbuilders Limited (MDSL), one of India's key Defence Public Sector Undertakings (PSUs), has built all these ships. A ship class signifies a group of ships built with similar tonnage, usage, capabilities and weaponry.

For building the advanced variants of the Kolkata class guided missile destroyers, a contract for construction under the project codenamed '15B' was signed in January 2011. The lead ship of Project 15B, INS Visakhapatnam (Pennant No D66), was commissioned into the Indian Navy in November 2021 and the second ship INS Mormugao (D67) in December 2022. The fourth ship, D69, which when commissioned will be christened INS Surat, was launched in May last year.

Designed by the Indian Navy's in-house warship design entity Warship Design Bureau, and built by MDSL in Mumbai, the four ships of Project 15B are christened after major cities from all four corners of the country — Visakhapatnam, Mormugao, Imphal and Surat. The class is identified by its lead ship, in this case INS Visakhapatnam.

Technological Characteristics and Armament of Visakhapatnam class
The four ships of the class are 163 meters long and 17.4m wide, with a displacement of 7,400 tonnes. To put it in perspective, India's first indigenous aircraft carrier INS Vikrant is 262 meters in length, 62 meters wide and displaces around 43,000 tonnes when fully loaded. The ship has a 'combined gas and gas' (COGAG) configuration integrating four gas turbines. The propulsion system allows the ship to reach a maximum speed of 30 knots and a maximum range of 4000 nautical miles.

Ships of Visakhapatnam class are operated by a crew of around 350, including 50 officers and 250 sailors.

Visakhapatnam class of destroyers have multiple fire zones, elaborate battle damage control systems and distributional power systems for improved survivability and reliability for operating in extreme operational and conflict scenarios. The class also has a total atmospheric control system (TACS) that offers protection to the crew from chemical, biological and nuclear threats.

They are also equipped with a state-of-the-art combat management system that can evaluate threats using analytical tools and create a tactical picture that includes available resources on board. This helps to allocate the resources based on the tactical picture compiled and the weapons package available on board. The class has a secure network to handle data from all the sensors and weapons systems.

Strategic Significance
Technically, destroyers are a category of warships that have high speed, manoeuvrability and longer endurance. They are designed to be part of naval formations like a fleet or a carrier battle group also known as carrier strike group.

The modern destroyers that are swift, sleek and difficult to detect, primarily protect the fleets and carrier battle groups from the short-range attackers from surface, air and sub-surface. The guided-missile destroyers are the destroyers that are armed with guided missiles for anti-aircraft warfare, anti-surface operations and anti-submarine warfare.

Because of the speed, manoeuvrability and striking capability, the guided missile destroyers are a key asset in various types of naval operations, mainly offensive. Being a follow-on of the Kolkata class, the Visakhapatnam class incorporates not just the feedback and suggestions from the Navy but also several new features. The state-of-

the-art stealth feature makes Visakhapatnam class have the radar signature of a very small ship. A very high indigenous component gives this platform a strategic edge.

Visakhapatnam class is arguably one of the most advanced classes of ships in the Indian Navy. It can operate as an independent offence platform even when not part of a large formation. With all its modern sensors and communication facilities, the class is a key asset in network-centric warfare, which denotes the use of information technology and computer networking tools to form networks of various force elements in play in a conflict scenario.

Relevance: GS Prelims; S & T
Source: The Indian Express

2. Will SLIM revolutionise lunar landings?

Introduction
At 1.21 pm IST on December 25, Japan's Smart Lander for Investigating Moon (SLIM) spacecraft entered into orbit around the moon after a months-long journey, and ahead of its planned moon-landing attempt on January 19. If the attempt succeeds, Japan will become only the fifth country to soft-land a robotic craft on the natural satellite, months after India succeeded with its Chandrayaan-3 mission in August. Perhaps more importantly, SLIM's success or failure will also affect the upcoming Chandrayaan-4 mission.

What is SLIM?
SLIM is a spacecraft built and launched by the Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency (JAXA) on September 7, 2023, from the Tanegashima spaceport. It weighed only 590 kg at launch, which is almost one-seventh of Chandrayaan-3, which weighed 3,900 kg at launch. Of course, the latter mission also carried a larger suite of instruments.

SLIM was launched together with XRISM, a next-generation X-ray space telescope, onboard an H-2A rocket. JAXA had planned to launch SLIM and XRISM together, so delays in readying XRISM pushed SLIM's launch date from 2021 to 2023.

On December 25, SLIM entered into an elliptical orbit around the moon over three minutes or so. Its apogee (farthest point) in this orbit is 4,000 km and perigee (closest point) is 600 km above the lunar surface.

Notably, JAXA launched SLIM only two weeks after the surface component of India's Chandrayaan-3 mission succeeded and Russia's Luna 25 spacecraft failed. SLIM will also mark the second Japanese attempt this year to soft-land on the moon: the HAKUTO-R M1 lander crashed in late April after its engines shut down too soon during the landing.

How did SLIM get to the moon?
SLIM is lighter because it carried much less fuel. Of Chandrayaan-3's 3.9 tonnes, the propulsion module alone weighed 2.1 tonnes. This is why the mission was launched on July 14 and could reach the moon less than a month later, by following a route called the Hohmann transfer orbit.

On the other hand, SLIM took four months because it followed a longer but more fuel-thrifty route based on weak-stability boundary theory.
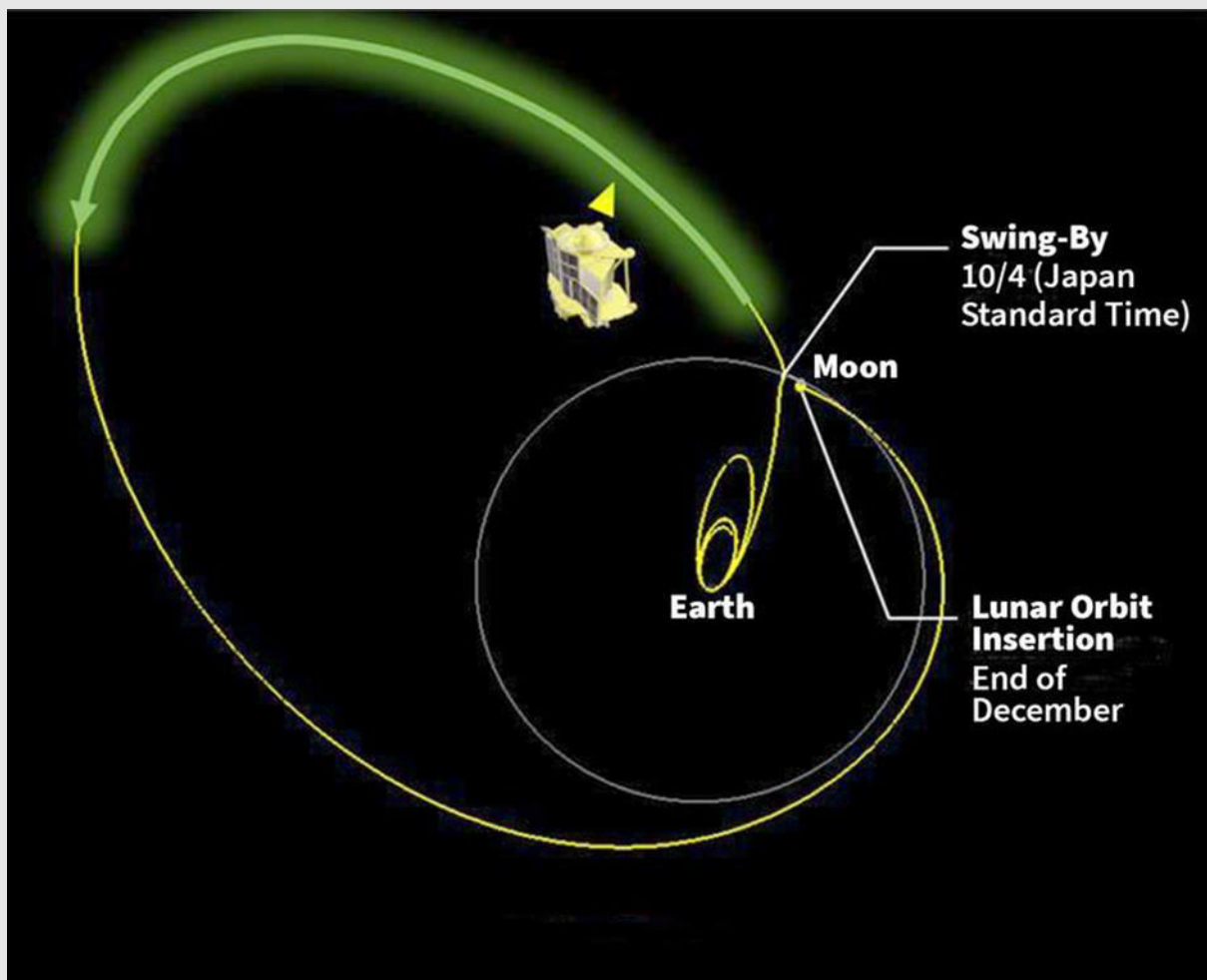
A diagram illustrating SLIM's path from the earth to the moon

Once it was launched into an orbit around the earth, SLIM swung around the planet multiple times, building up its kinetic energy with each swing. Once it was travelling fast enough, it shot up towards the moon's orbit. Chandrayaan-3 followed a qualitatively similar path until this point.

Once it got close to the moon, Chandrayaan-3 applied its brakes – which consume fuel in space – so that it could slow down enough to be captured by the moon's weaker gravity. But once SLIM got near the moon, instead of slowing down and being captured by the moon's gravity, it allowed itself to be deflected in the moon's direction even as

it shot past lunar orbit, deeper into space (see image above). This deflection is the result of the combined forces exerted by the earth and the moon.

What will SLIM do on the moon?
SLIM was subsequently on a larger, more loopy path that was designed to bring it back near the moon in December after it had slowed down further. By sacrificing some time, SLIM could be more fuel-efficient.

All this said SLIM's standout feature is its reputation as the "moon sniper" – a title derived from what it will do on the moon on January 19: it will try to land within 100 metres of its chosen landing site. This is an unusually tight limit given the history of moon-landing missions. For example, the 'Vikram' lander of Chandrayaan-3 was designed to descend in an elliptical area that was 4 km long downrange and 2.5 km

wide cross-range, and it eventually landed at a spot 350 metres away from a predetermined one.

NASA's hulking 'Curiosity' rover was tasked with landing at the centre of a 20 km x 7 km ellipse in Gale Crater on Mars on August 6, 2012, and it landed 2.4 km away. The most precise moon-landing in history was China's Chang'e 3 spacecraft: it landed 89 metres away from its chosen spot in the Mare Imbrium plain on the moon on December 14, 2013. However, it was still allowed to land anywhere inside an ellipse of 6 km x 6 km.

SLIM, in effect, will set the record on January 19 for attempting to soft-land with the smallest ever area tolerance on the moon.

How will SLIM affect Chandrayaan-4?

Scientists are interested in the moon's South Pole region at large because parts of some of the craters here are always in shadow, allowing the temperature there to drop very low as well as sparing them the effects of sunlight and diurnal temperature variations. We already know these parts contain water-ice, and a lunar surface mission could potentially explore these sites and attempt to extract water.

When the Indian Space Research Organisation successfully executed its Chandrayaan-3 mission by soft-landing a robotic craft on the moon's surface, on August 23, it also concluded the second phase of its lunar exploration programme. The first mission of its third phase is the Lunar Polar Exploration (LUPEX) mission, a.k.a. Chandrayaan 4.

LUPEX will be an Indian-Japan joint enterprise (however, while JAXA has approved LUPEX, India is yet to) with an earliest launch date in 2026. It will explore an area closer to the moon's south pole than Chandrayaan-3 did – and this makes all the difference. The terrain near either of the moon's poles is rocky, pocked with several craters, and full of steep slopes. The craft will have to land as close to the site as possible, if not at the site itself.

Relevance: GS Prelims; S & T
Source: The Indian Express

3. ISRO brought Chandrayaan-3's propulsion module back to Earth's orbit

Why in news?

The Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO) has successfully brought the propulsion module from the Chandrayaan-3 mission back to Earth's orbit. The Propulsion Module (PM) of Chandrayaan-3 was moved from an orbit around Moon to an orbit around Earth.

First, what is this propulsion module? How did it operate?

Unlike Chandrayaan-2, which had a full-fledged orbiter with major payloads and communications systems, Chandrayaan-3 featured a lighter propulsion module. For the lander's communications with Earth, the mission used the Chandrayaan-2 orbiter, which remains functional four years after the 2019 mission.

The main function of PM is to carry the LM (lander module) from launch vehicle injection till final lunar 100 km circular polar orbit and separate the LM from PM. Apart from this, the PM also has one scientific payload as a value addition. The only scientific instrument aboard was the Spectro Polarimetry of Habitable Planet Earth (SHAPE) — an experimental payload which studies the signatures that make Earth a habitable planet, in order to possibly identify habitable planets outside the solar system.

There were no plans to bring the propulsion module back to Earth, with ISRO stating that it simply wanted to operate the SHAPE payload for about three months — the mission life of the module.

So, how did ISRO manage this feat?

What helped was just how precise and efficient the Chandrayaan-3 Mission had gone thus far. To be precise, after over a month of operations, the PM continued to hold over 100 kg of fuel.

A mission plan was created to ensure the PM's return without crashing on to the lunar surface, or entering into a low Earth orbit. Considering the estimated fuel availability, and the safety to GEO spacecrafts, the optimal Earth return trajectory was designed.

What has ISRO learnt from this 'surprise' experiment?

Through these efforts, ISRO has been able to get an idea of "planning and execution of trajectory and maneuvers to return from the Moon to Earth," aiding the space agency's work in developing a software module for such a maneuver.

The experiment will also aid the planning and execution of a gravity assisted flyby across a planets/celestial bodies, as well as avoid "uncontrolled crashing of the PM on the Moon's surface at the end of its life" and prevent space debris creation.

What was the other 'surprise' experiment carried out during the Chandrayaan-3 mission?

This was Chandrayaan-3's second surprise experiment, after the previously-mentioned hop experiment carried out by the lander 11 days into its time on the lunar surface.

On command, it [the lander] fired the engines, elevated itself by about 40 cm, as expected, and landed safely at a distance of 30–40 cm away. Although a small jump, the hop experiment indicated ISRO's capability to get the lander to fire its engines and

produce the thrust needed to lift off from the lunar surface. In conjunction with the current experiment, these are seen as key for ISRO's ambitions conducting the Lunar Sample Return Mission (LSRM) — where a lander take-off from the lunar surface, dock with the orbiter, which will then make a return journey to Earth, all while carrying lunar soil samples.

ISRO is also working on technology for re-entry of space capsules to earth.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Science & Technology
Source: The Indian Express and The Hindu

4. New highly fluorescent material brings non-enzymatic approach for detection of anticancer drug Methotrexate known for toxicity at high dosage

Why in news?
A new highly fluorescent material with exceptional optical properties has been developed using phosphorene, cystine, and gold (Ph-Cys-Au) which can be used as a visual sensing platform for detecting anti-cancer drug MTX overdosage of which has toxic effect on lungs, stomach, and heart.

What is the need of monitoring?
Monitoring therapeutic drugs and their elimination is crucial because they may cause severe side effects on the human body. Methotrexate (MTX) is a widely used anti-cancer drug. The MTX value of more than 10 µM in blood plasma is hazardous if it remains in the system for more than 10 hours, resulting in poisoning effects on the lungs, ulcers of the stomach, and heart stroke. MTX is highly expensive, and the detection of unwanted overdoses using traditional procedures is time-consuming and involves complex instrumentation. Considering all these issues, the development of fast and sensitive detection using simple methodologies is required.

To address this issue, scientists of Institute of Advanced Study in Science and Technology (IASST), an autonomous institute of Department of Science and Technology (DST) have developed a highly fluorescent material using phosphorene, cystine, and gold (Ph-Cys-Au). The material has exceptional optical properties and thus can be used as a visual sensing platform for detecting the anti-cancer drug MTX. This non-enzymatic approach for the detection of anticancer drug Methotrexate can help cytotoxicity screening for therapeutic analysis.

Relevance: GS Prelims; Science & Technology
Source: PIB

5. Google DeepMind's AI breakthrough could revolutionise chip, battery development

Introduction

Artificial intelligence (AI) was used by these researchers to predict the structures of more than 2 million new materials, a breakthrough that could have wide-reaching application in sectors such as renewable energy, battery research, semiconductor design and computing efficiency.

With this DeepMind AI tool, known as Graph Networks for Materials Exploration or GNoME, the design and generation of potential recipes for new material looks far easier now.

Why is this significant?

In one shot, this AI-linked breakthrough increases the number of 'stable materials' known to mankind ten-fold. These materials include inorganic crystals that modern tech applications from computer chips to batteries rely on.

To enable new technologies, crystals must be stable — otherwise they can simply decompose. While these materials will still need to undergo the process of synthesis and testing, DeepMind has published a list of 381,000 of the 2.2 million crystal structures that it predicts to be most stable.

To put this in context, consider the ongoing search for solid electrolytes that could replace the liquid electrolytes that are currently found in Li-ion batteries. As a prerequisite, these electrolytes have to be stable, should have specific conduction properties, while being non-toxic and non-radioactive.

Relevance: GS Prelims; Science & Technology
Source: The Indian Express

6. Google Gemini

Introduction

Google Gemini, a new multimodal general AI model that the tech giant calls its most powerful yet, is now available to users across the world through Google Bard, some developer platforms and even the new Google Pixel 8 Pro devices. The new flexible AI model, which comes in three sizes — the yet-to-be-launched Ultra, Pro and Nano — is being seen as Google's answer to ChatGPT which has been ahead of the game so far when it comes to GenAI.

So, what is Google Gemini?

Gemini has been built from scratch as a collaborative effort by teams across Google. It is also multimodal, which means it is not limited to the type of information it can

process and can work understand and operate across text, code, audio, image and video. In contrast, ChatGPT cannot work on video at the moment.

Why does Gemini come in three sizes?
Gemini will be available in different sizes to scale it as per the need. Gemini Ultra, the largest and most capable model, will be meant for highly complex tasks. Since this model is still completing trust and safety checks, it is available now only to select customers, developers, partners and safety and responsibility experts for early experimentation and feedback.

Gemini Pro will be best at scaling across a wide range of tasks and is now available in Bard for regular users across the world.

Gemini Nano will manage on-device tasks and is already available on Pixel 8 Pro, powering new features like Summarise in the Recorder app and Smart Reply via Gboard, starting with WhatsApp.

So, is Gemini better than ChatGPT 4?
At the moment it is hard to say, but Gemini seems to be more flexible that GPT4 at the moment. Also it ability to work with video and on devices without Internet give it an edge. Another factor is that Gemini is now free to use while ChatGPT4 is only for paid users.

Relevance: GS Prelims; S & T
Source: Indian Express

7. Centre writes to states over new Covid variant - JN.1

Why in news?
With cases of Covid-19 on the rise in Kerala, the Union health ministry has written to states and Union Territories, asking them to monitor cases of influenza-like illnesses, conduct adequate testing, and send all positive samples for whole genome sequencing.

What do we know about JN.1?
The sub-variant JN.1 is a descendant of the BA.2.86 variant, commonly referred to as Pirola, and is not exactly new. The first cases of this variant were detected in the United States in September and the first case globally was detected as early as January this year.

While JN.1 contains only one additional mutation on the spike protein as compared with Pirola, it has been on the watch-list of researchers because Pirola contains more than 30 mutations on the spike protein. Mutations on the spike protein of Sars-CoV-2

matter because they are the ones that attach to receptors on a human cell and allow the virus to enter it.

Can it lead to a surge, or more severe symptoms?
There is no evidence to suggest that JN.1 can cause worse symptoms or spread faster than the variants already in circulation. Initially, there were concerns that the high number of mutations could mean that Pirola would evade immune response more easily and spread rapidly. That, however, hasn't happened.

In fact, an assessment by the WHO Technical Advisory Group on COVID-19 Vaccine Composition showed that Pirola and JN.1 were both effectively neutralised by serum from humans who had had the infection and vaccination.

While Pirola and JN.1 are considered to be Variants of Interest (variants that are less effectively neutralised in labs by antibodies from infection or vaccination and have a potential to spread), they have not been designated as Variants of Concern (variants that result in increased transmission, severe disease leading to hospitalisation, and reduce effectiveness of vaccines).

What has led to the current concerns?
There is definitely an increase in the number of cases being caused by Pirola and its close relative JN.1 globally. Cases have been detected in the USA, some European countries, Singapore, and China.

How can you protect yourself?
Experts say that while new variants of Sars-CoV-2 will keep emerging, protective measures against a respiratory virus remain the same. Doctors suggest masking up in crowded areas, especially enclosed ones, if the number of cases is increasing locally. Remaining in well-ventilated spaces reduces the spread of the infection. Also, washing hands frequently prevents the infection.

Relevance: GS Prelims; S&T
Source: The Indian Express & The PIB

8. India set to man its Arctic base around the year with new expedition

Why in news?
Maintaining a constant human presence in one of the coldest regions of the world has been a difficult task for long. However, starting this week, India will have around-the-year manning of the Arctic with the launch of the first-ever winter expedition in this region. With this, India's Himadri will be only the fourth research station in the Arctic to be manned around the year.

Why is the Arctic region being studied?

The region above the Arctic Circle, north of latitude 66° 34′ N, includes the Arctic Ocean. Scientific evidence has shown that the Arctic ice and the sea ice have the potential to affect humans outside the Arctic region, as sea levels rise, and to influence atmospheric circulations.

Climate experts have found that on average, temperatures in the Arctic region have risen by 4 degrees Celsius over the last 100 years. The Arctic sea-ice extent (the ice formed by the freezing of seawater) is declining at a rate of 13 per cent per decade. At this rate, the Arctic Ocean could go ice-free sometime during the summer of 2040.

Studies have demonstrated that the increased Arctic sea-ice loss could lead to a greater tropical sea surface temperature, increased precipitation in the tropics, and a shift in the position of the Inter Tropical Convergence Zone (the region of the Earth where northeast and southeast trade winds converge). There are also high chances for an increase in extreme rainfall events.

With such unprecedented changes owing to global warming, the Arctic could become a more habitable and less hostile place. In no time, there could be a rush to explore and exploit the region's resources and minerals, and to gain supremacy over the trade, navigation and other geo-economic and strategic sectors.

Himadri, India's research station in the Arctic

Why are expeditions to the Arctic challenging?

First, there are challenges related to the environment. At the research base Ny-Ålesund in Svalbard, Norway, the mean temperature in February – the year's coldest month – is minus 14 degrees Celsius. On the other hand, the mean temperature during the warmest month, July, is 5 degrees Celsius.

Due to such a hostile environment, performing both outdoor and indoor scientific observations or sampling has remained largely limited to the summer months. So far, only three research stations have had permanent staff deployment in the Arctic round-the-year.

Further, Eight Arctic countries – Canada, the Kingdom of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden and the USA – form the Arctic Council. It is an intergovernmental forum of Arctic countries for promoting cooperation. India has 'Observer' status here.

However, with multiple state jurisdictions in the Arctic, there is limited space available for establishing independent research stations. Geopolitical tensions, such as amid the ongoing Ukraine-Russia war, could cut off the Arctic regions from explorations.

How have India's interests in the Arctic evolved?
India signed the Svalbard Treaty in Paris in 1920. This allowed it to operate in the Svalbard archipelago, which is under the sovereign control of Norway. But there was no concrete research taken up in the Arctic region till the turn of the century.

In 2007, the first Indian expedition comprising five scientists visited the International Arctic Research Facilities at Ny-Ålesund. The visit aimed at initiating studies in the fields of Arctic microbiology, atmospheric sciences and geology.

Following a successful visit, Himadri was established and would be manned only for 180 days a year. This station has, so far, hosted over 400 Indian researchers across 200 visits since its operations began in July 2008.

In 2014, a multisensory moored observatory named IndArc was established in Kongsfjorden, part of the Svalbard archipelago. India's northernmost atmospheric laboratory, the Gruvebadet Atmospheric Laboratory, was established in 2016 in Svalbard to study atmospheric sciences.

In May 2022, India released its Arctic Policy, which details six pillars – science and research, climate and environment protection, economic and human development, transportation and connectivity, governance and international cooperation and national capacity building.

Further, India is a member of the Ny-Ålesund Science Managers Committee, the International Arctic Science Committee, the University of Arctic and the Asian Forum for Polar Sciences.

Which countries are studying the Arctic?

In 1990, the National Institute of Polar Research, Japan, was the first to establish a research station in Ny-Ålesund.

Located 2,100 km north of Norway's capital Oslo, Ny-Ålesund has ten countries: China, Germany, France, India, Italy, Japan, Netherlands, Norway, South Korea and the United Kingdom. They have set up eleven permanent research stations. Of these, only three stations have human presence around the year, until now.

Geography

1. Cyclone Michaung - an unusual storm

Introduction

Tropical cyclone Michaung crossed the Andhra Pradesh coast in Bapatla district between the cities of Nellore and Machilipatnam on December 5. The storm, which was centred around 80 km southeast of Nellore and 120 km north-northeast of Chennai, moved northwards along the Andhra Pradesh coast and has brought heavy rain to most of Tamil Nadu, parts of Andhra Pradesh, and southern Odisha.

An unusual cyclone

Due to unfavourable ocean conditions, storms that develop over the North Indian Ocean in December don't usually attain destructive intensities. High-intensity cyclones — packing high speeds and bringing heavy and widespread rain — such as Michaung are not common at this time of the year.

The IMD had initially predicted that Michaung would remain a 'tropical cyclone' (wind speeds of 62 kph to 87 kph) until it crossed the Andhra Pradesh coast. However, the IMD upgraded it to the intensity of a 'severe' storm (wind speeds of 88 kph to 166 kph).

Such intensification of a December cyclone is unique. The above-normal value of the heat index off the southern Andhra Pradesh coast led to the strengthening of Michaung.

Indian tropical storms

Climatologically, about five cyclones develop in the North Indian Ocean basin — comprising the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea — every year. Of these, an average of four cyclones develop over the Bay of Bengal and one over the Arabian Sea. However, Arabian Sea storms often reach higher intensities and carry the potential to cause widespread damage.

The North Indian Ocean basin is most prone to cyclone development during the pre-monsoon (April-June) and post-monsoon (October-December) months. Due to favourable ocean conditions, cyclones that form in May and November usually reach higher intensities than storms that form at other times.
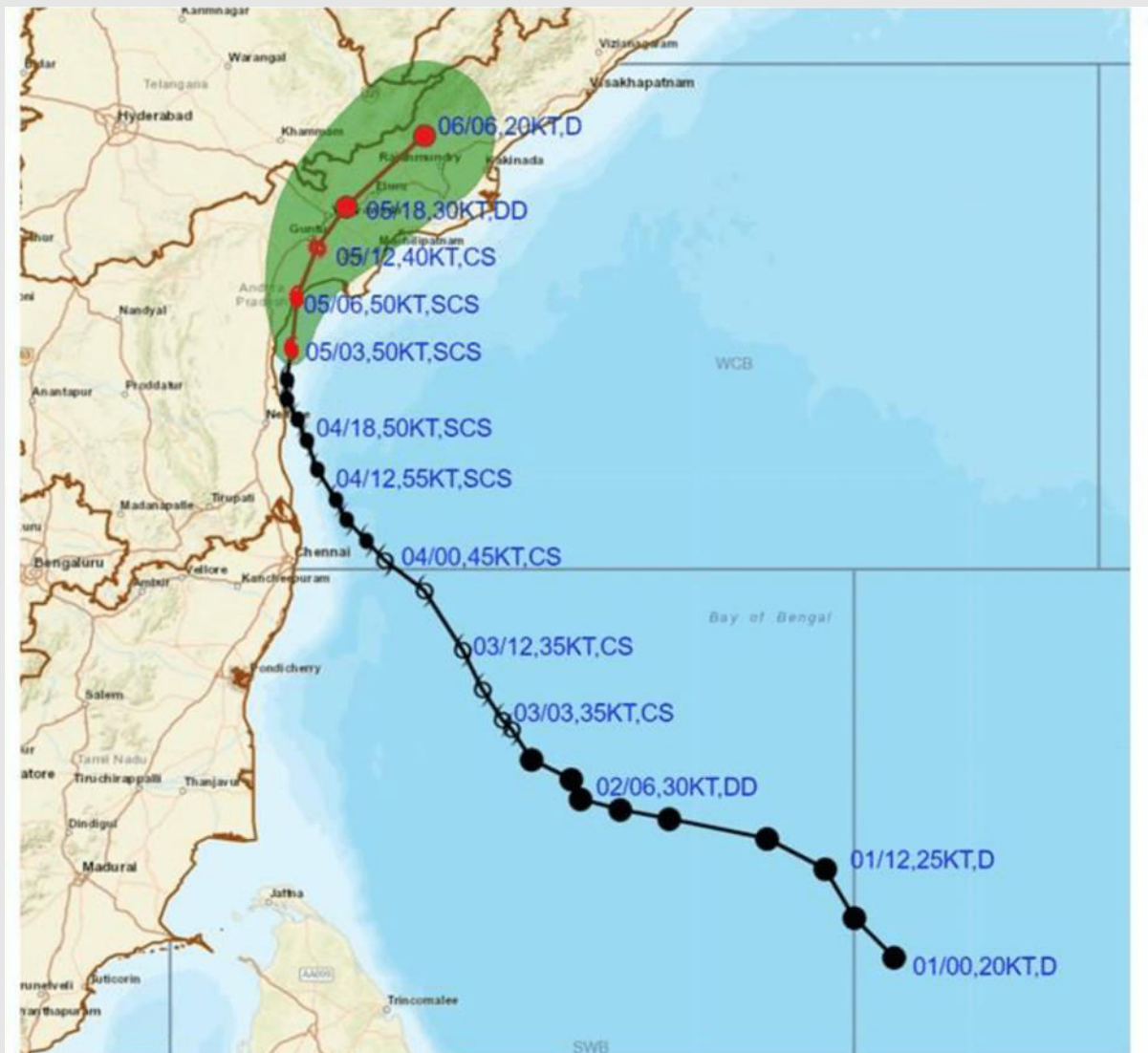
Storm intensification

Tropical cyclones are fueled by ocean heat (in addition to other factors). Ocean temperatures of 26 degrees Celsius or more, prevailing at depths between 50 metres and 100 metres, are conducive for cyclogenesis, which refers to the processes that lead to the development and strengthening of a cyclone.

Warm oceans contribute to a cyclone's rapid intensification while at sea. An oceanographic parameter called the Tropical Cyclone Heat Potential (TCHP) is considered an important factor in cyclone genesis, intensification, and propagation.

The intensification process is highly complex, and is also influenced by a combination of various favourable atmospheric conditions including boundary layers (the fluid layer adjacent to a bounding surface), wind shear (changes in wind direction and/or speed over a vertical or horizontal distance), convection (transfer of heat within a fluid), Rossby waves (which occur in rotating fluids), upper ocean circulation, and air-sea interaction.

Indian Society

1. Karni Sena chief killed: Who was Sukhdev Singh Gogamedi, and what was the outfit he headed?

Introduction
Sukhdev Singh Gogamedi, president of Shri Rashtriya Rajput Karni Sena (SRRKS), was shot dead in Jaipur by three assailants, one of whom was also killed in retaliatory firing. The incident took place at Gogamedi's home in Jaipur's Shyam Nagar.

Reports have claimed that a member of the Lawrence Bishnoi gang purportedly took responsibility for Gogamedi's killing. Bishnoi is a gangster from Punjab currently lodged in Tihar jail.

Why was the Shri Rashtriya Rajput Karni Sena formed?
SRRKS is a splinter group of the Shri Rajput Karni Sena (SRKS). The Shri Rajput Karni Sena was formed in 2006 by the late Lokendra Singh Kalvi. Gogamedi was once close to Kalvi and was the state president of the Karni Sena, but was expelled from the SRKS by Kalvi in 2015. This was when he floated the SRRKS.

Over the last few years, the SRRKS had gained prominence, often through violent opposition to various issues. It was specially in the news during the protests against the Bollywood movie 'Padmaavat'. It was the SRRKS that assaulted director Sanjay Leela Bhansali in January 2017 during the film's shooting at Jaigarh fort in Jaipur.

More recently, in April this year, they had demanded an increase in EWS quota for general castes from 10 per cent to 14 per cent.

And why was the Shri Rajput Karni Sena formed?
The SRKS was founded following the Rajputs' struggle with their traditional rivals, the Jats, in 2006. That year, Anandpal Singh, a Ravana Rajput and then Rajasthan's most notorious gangster, killed Jivan Ram Godara and Harphool Ram Jat in Didwana, allegedly over control of the illicit liquor business. As Jats protested, they got support from a wide spectrum of political leaders, and the police allegedly detained any Rajput man who could be linked to Anandpal.

To resist the "hounding" of Rajputs, the SRKS was founded on September 23, 2006, with 11 declared aims, including opposing political or social malice against Rajputs and the misrepresentation of history or historical figures, and promoting Rajput unity. The outfit was named after Karni Mata, a goddess revered across Rajasthan, but whose principal seat is at the famous rat temple in Deshnok near Bikaner.

2. International School of Peace and Happiness to Bloom in Assam's Bodoland Territorial Region

Why in news?
In a groundbreaking initiative, the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) plans to establish the International School of Peace and Happiness in the Bijni area of Chirang district, western Assam. The project, scheduled to commence in January 2024, is the result of a year-long planning effort by the BTC, aimed at fostering humanity and societal well-being.

Addressing Historical Conflicts
Pramod Boro, Chief Executive Member of BTC, highlighted the historical conflicts in the Bodoland Territorial Region, drawing parallels with the challenges faced by Manipur. The region, encompassing five districts, has witnessed decades of ethnic tensions, particularly between the Bodos, the largest plains tribe in the northeast, and migrant communities. The proposed school is a proactive measure to address and mitigate such conflicts.

Bodoland Territorial Area Districts

1 Kokrajhar
2 Chirang
3 Baksa
4 Udalguri
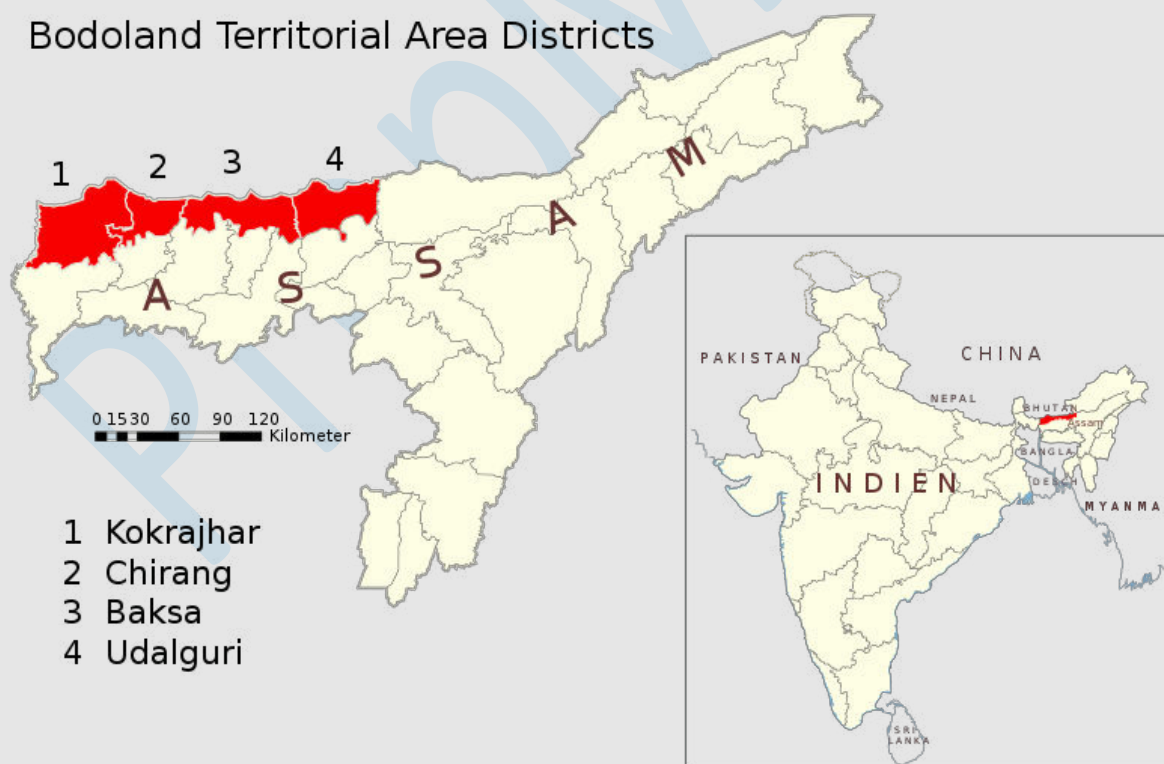
Catalyst for Positive Change
The vision behind the school is to instill human values and promote co-existence. By providing formal education on peace-building and happiness, the school aspires to cultivate a generation of peace ambassadors capable of resolving conflicts at both micro and macro levels.

Historical Context and Regional Significance

The BTR areas have a tumultuous history, marked by extremism and communal clashes, resulting in significant displacement and loss of life. The International School of Peace and Happiness aims to break this cycle by equipping youth and community leaders with the skills and values necessary for fostering harmony in a region characterized by diverse faiths, cultures, languages, and ethnicities.

As the foundation is laid in the coming weeks, the school represents a beacon of hope for a region striving to build a future grounded in peace, understanding, and coexistence.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper I; Indian Society
Source: The Hindu

Internal Security

1. UNLF, a Meitei insurgent group, signed peace deal with Centre

Why in news?
Union Home Minister Amit Shah recently announced the signing of a peace agreement with the Meitei separatist group United National Liberation Front (UNLF) in Manipur, terming it a "historic milestone." The details of the peace agreement have not been made public.

The Home Minister also expressed the hope that this would encourage other valley-based insurgent groups (VBIGs) to participate in a peace process.

What is the UNLF?
The UNLF was formed on November 24, 1964, and is the oldest valley-based insurgent group — distinct from the insurgent groups active in the state's Naga-dominated and Kuki-Zomi dominated hills. It was formed with the demand of secession from India under the leadership of Arembam Samarendra Singh, who was the general secretary of the group.

The UNLF is believed to have received its initial training from the NSCN (IM), the largest Naga insurgent group. Its armed wing, the Manipur People's Army, was formed in 1990 and over the years, it has carried out multiple attacks targeting Indian security personnel.

Support in Myanmar
A proscribed group, banned under the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act, it has largely been functioning from camps and training bases in Myanmar's Sagaing Region, Chin state, and Rakhine state with the patronage of the Myanmar military. However, it is now on the backfoot there, with mounting attacks against the military junta by various Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAOs) and People's Defence Forces (PDFs).

Recent Resurgence
While the UNLF has weakened over the years, pushed across the border to Myanmar, there have been concerns about its increased activity, along with other VBIGs, during the course of the ongoing ethnic conflict in Manipur. The UNLF is believed to have trained around 500 new recruits in the past months.

What about the other groups?
While the UNLF is the oldest of such groups, several other Meitei insurgent groups have come into being in subsequent years. The UNLF is one of the seven "Meitei Extremist Organisations" banned by the Union government.

2. CISF set to take over Parliament security: All you need to know about the force

Introduction

The Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) has asked the Central Industrial Security Force (CISF) to take security charge of the Parliament building from the Delhi Police. The CISF will first conduct a survey of the premises prior to the deployment of its security and fire wing.

This comes a week after the December 13 Parliament security breach, in which two individuals jumped into the Lok Sabha chamber from the visitors' gallery, and opened canisters emitting yellow smoke.

1. Established in 1969 after a fire in Ranchi's HEC

In June 1964, a devastating fire had broken out in Ranchi's Heavy Engineering Corporation plant, with reports suggesting sabotage. This led to the appointment of the Justice Mukherjee Commission which recommended the establishment of a dedicated industrial protection force. Thus, the CISF was set up by an Act of Parliament on March 10, 1969.

2. Provides security to India's industrial undertakings

As the name suggests, the CISF was created "for the better protection and security of Industrial undertakings." It was first inducted at the Fertilizer Corporation of India manufacturing plant in Trombay, Maharashtra, on November 1, 1969. Initially, its remit was restricted to protecting government-owned industries, but this was expanded to include joint-ventures and private undertakings in 2009. It also provides consultancy services to the private sector.

3. One of seven Central Armed Police Forces

It is one of seven Central Armed Police Forces (CAPF) under the MHA — the other six being the Border Security Force, the Indo-Tibetan Border Police, the Sashastra Seema Bal, the Assam Rifles, the National Security Guard, and the Central Reserve Police Force.

4. Has a dedicated fire wing

'Security' also includes fire coverage, especially given CISF's origin story. The first fire wing unit with a strength of 53 personnel was Inducted in Cochin's FACT on April 16, 1970. Eventually a separate fire service cadre within the force was set up in 1991, which today is India's largest, and best trained and equipped fire fighting force. It is also the only CAPF with a dedicated fire-fighting wing.

5. Expanding role over time

Over the years, CISF's strength and remit has significantly evolved to include much more than simply guarding factories and industrial premises. Today, the force is deployed in over 350 locations across the country, in diversified areas such as atomic energy and space installations, sea-ports, steel plants, coal fields, hydro-electric and thermal power plants, defence production units, fertiliser and chemical industries, RBI's note-printing mints, heritage monuments such as the Taj Mahal, more than 60 airports, Delhi Metro, and other important government buildings. Notably, it is a compensatory cost force — which means that it bills its clients for the services it provides.

6. Has a sanctioned strength of 1,80,000

The CISF operates with a sanctioned strength of 1.8 lakh personnel. This is exponentially more than the force's strength at the time of inception, which was roughly 3,000 personnel only. Headquartered in Delhi, it is headed by an Indian Police Service officer with the rank of Director-General. The force is divided into nine sectors (Airport, North, North-East, East, West, South, Training, South-East, Central), in addition to its Fire Service Wing.

7. Women power

CISF has the largest percentage of women in its force, in comparison to all other CAPFs. The first batch of women constables was inducted in 1987, and the first woman officer joined as Asstt. Comdt in 1989. CISF is currently headed by Special DG Nina Singh, the first woman to occupy the post.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Internal Security
Source: The Indian Express

3. Pilatus PC-7 Mk II crash: 5 things to know about the trainer aircraft

Introduction

Two Indian Air Force (IAF) pilots were killed on December 4 after their Pilatus PC-7 Mk II trainer aircraft crashed during a routine training sortie from the Air Force Academy at Dundigal, Telangana.

The aircraft which took off from the Dundigal Air Force station in the morning, was found completely charred some 40 km away. A Court of Inquiry has been ordered to ascertain the cause of the accident.

This is the first crash involving the aircraft since it was inducted into the Air Force almost a decade earlier, having clocked around 2 lakh hours of flying time since then.

What is a trainer aircraft?

A trainer is a class of aircraft designed specifically to facilitate flight training of pilots and aircrews. Modern military aircraft are notoriously difficult to master for rookie pilots. Hence, they must first be trained on other, more basic aircraft. Trainer aircraft are far more forgiving than the aircraft military pilots will eventually fly — they fly slower, have less complex systems, and are designed to be resistant to and recoverable from stalls and spins, a common challenge for rookie pilots. They are also much cheaper, allowing air forces to buy them in bulk to train cadets.

How many types of trainer aircraft does the IAF have?
Currently, there are 75 Pilatus PC-7 Mk II aircraft in service with the IAF (including the one which crashed today. These are used for basic training, the first stage in a rookie cadet's flight training.

After this, cadets graduate to the HAL Kiran, an intermediate jet-powered indigenously developed trainer aircraft, followed by the BAE Hawk, a British jet-powered advanced trainer aircraft. Currently, the IAF has 78 Kiran and 102 Hawk aircrafts in its fleet.

In addition to this, the IAF, Navy, and National Cadet Corps also operate the Pipistrel Virus, as a basic trainer for Flight Safety and Air Wing Cadets. Currently, 194 of these aircraft are in service, with 72 with the IAF.

What kind of an aircraft is the Pilatus PC-7 Mk II?
Pilatus Aircraft Ltd is an aerospace manufacturer located in Stans, Switzerland, which specialises in producing short take-off and landing aircraft, as well as trainer aircraft for air forces across the world.

The PC-7 is a low-wing, turbo-prop aircraft with tandem seating (the cadet sits in the front, the instructor behind him). While the original aircraft has been in service since the 1970s, the Mk II version was introduced in the 1990s, with a newer airframe and more advanced avionics. Powered by a Pratt & Whitney turbo-prop engine, it has a maximum speed of 412 km/h and can fly to a height of slightly more than 10,000 m. It has a range of 1,200 km without external tanks, which translates to slightly more than 4 hours of flying time.

It is (or has been in the past) used as the ab initio (literally, the first aircraft a cadet flies after training on simulators) trainer by over 20 air forces in the world. Moreover, the likes of Chad, Iran, and Mexico have used the aircraft for combat operations as well.

Why did the IAF obtain the PC-7 Mk II?
The IAF procured 75 of these aircraft under a contract signed in 2012, to meet the critical shortage of trainer aircraft urgently needed to carry out the basic flying training for its pilots. The shortage emerged after the indigenously developed HPT-32 aircraft

were grounded in 2010, after fatal crashes which killed multiple IAF pilots, including two experienced instructors.

All the 75 Pilatus aircraft were delivered between 2013 and 2015 by the Swiss manufacturer, with the IAF having an option to make an additional purchase of 38 more aircraft. However, this contract was not signed after the Defence Ministry blacklisted the Swiss firm for a year in 2019, on corruption charges, which the Ministry claimed was crucial to Pilatus bagging the Rs 2,800 crore deal in 2012. This ban was partially lifted a few months later, to allow the IAF to maintain its fleet of 75 basic trainer aircraft.

Will the PC-7 Mk II be replaced by the IAF anytime soon?
In March, the Defence Ministry signed a contract with Hindustan Aeronautics Ltd to procure 70 HTT-40 at a cost of over Rs 6,800 crore.

Designed indigenously at HAL's Aircraft Research & Design Centre, the HTT-40 is a basic trainer aircraft powered by a four-bladed turbo-prop engine (PC-7 is three-bladed). The aircraft will have an air-conditioned cockpit, modern avionics, hot refuelling (with engines running), and zero-zero ejection seats. The aircraft are scheduled to be delivered over a period of six years.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Internal Security
Source: The Indian Express

4. NCRB 2022 report on crime in India

Introduction
The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) released its annual report recently on crime in India for the year 2022.

The report is a compilation of data on reported crime from across the country, and provides the big picture of broad trends in crime registration. Reports by the NCRB, which functions under the Union Ministry of Home Affairs, include statistics on offences ranging from crimes against women to economic and financial crimes.

How are the data for NCRB reports compiled?
The NCRB was established in January 1986 as a body mandated to compile and keep records of data on crime. It also acts as a "national warehouse" for the fingerprint records of Indian and foreign criminals, and assists in locating interstate criminals through fingerprint search.

For the NCRB's flagship annual Crime in India reports, information is obtained from the police forces of 36 states and Union Territories. Similar data are furnished for 53

cities with populations exceeding 10 lakh each as per the 2011 Census, by respective state-level crime records bureaus.

The information is entered by state/UT police at the level of the local police station, and is validated at the levels of the district and state, and finally, by the NCRB.

What does the 2022 NCRB report say?

The data cover overall crimes, and separately note crimes against women, Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs), cyber crimes, etc. Here are some takeaways from the latest report:

* In 2022, a "total of 58,24,946 cognizable crimes comprising 35,61,379 Indian Penal Code (IPC) crimes and 22,63,567 Special & Local Laws (SLL) crimes were registered". This was a decline of 4.5% in the registration of cases over the second pandemic year, 2021.

* The crime rate, or crimes registered per lakh population, has declined from 445.9 in 2021 to 422.2 in 2022. This is seen as a better indicator, since absolute numbers on crime increase as the population increases.

* 4,45,256 cases of crime against women were registered in 2022. This was an increase of 4% over the 2021 numbers. The largest share of crimes against women under IPC sections was registered under 'Cruelty by Husband or His Relatives' (31.4%), followed by 'Kidnapping & Abduction of Women' (19.2%), and 'Assault on Women with Intent to Outrage her Modesty' (18.7%).

* Reporting of cyber crime increased significantly by 24.4 percentage points compared to 2021, to 65,893 cases. Around 64.8% of registered cases were of fraud, followed by extortion (5.5%), and sexual exploitation (5.2%).

* An increase of 4.2% was observed in suicides reported during 2022 (1,70,924 suicides) as compared to 2021. 'Family Problems (other than marriage-related problems)' (31.7%), 'Marriage Related Problems' (4.8%) and 'Illness' (18.4%) have together accounted for 54.9% of total suicides in the country during the year 2022. The overall male-to-female ratio of suicide victims was 71.8:28.2.

What are the headline trends in state-wise data in the report?

The states/ UTs reporting the highest charge sheeting rate under IPC crimes are Kerala (96.0%), Puducherry (91.3%), and West Bengal (90.6%). This is the percentage of cases in which the police reached the stage of framing charges against the accused, out of the total true cases (where a charge sheet was not laid but a final report submitted as true, plus the total cases chargesheeted).

Does this mean that these states are more crime-prone than others?

Not necessarily. The NCRB report underlines that the data record the incidence of registered crime, not the actual occurrence of crime.

This is an important distinction — and also an acknowledgement of the fact that there are limitations to the data. So, when reported crimes against women in Delhi rose significantly in the aftermath of the 2012 bus gangrape case, it may have been a reflection of increased awareness about the need for registering crimes, both among those affected and the police, rather than an actual increase in the incidence of crime against women.

Is that the only issue with the data?

The NCRB follows what is known as the 'Principal Offence Rule'. This means that among the many offences registered in a single FIR, the crime that attracts the most severe punishment is considered as the counting unit. Thus, 'Murder with Rape' would be counted as 'Murder', not rape — which would result in an undercounting of the crime of rape.

Also, since the NCRB report is only a compilation of data submitted at the local level, inefficiencies or gaps in data at that level have an impact on the accuracy of the report.

Because of a range of reasons, including the fear of an uncooperative or a hostile response from the police, certain groups may not be willing to come forward and register cases. And a shortage of police officers or unfilled vacancies in the relevant posts at the local level may hinder the collection of data.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Internal Security
Source: The Indian Express and The Hindu

5. Security Breach in Parliament

Introduction

On the 22nd anniversary of the Parliament attack, two individuals triggered chaos in the Lok Sabha by releasing yellow smoke canisters, prompting a major security breach.

Intruders Apprehended Amidst Chaos

Parliamentarians took swift action to apprehend the intruders, beating them before handing them over to security staff. Delhi police identified six individuals involved in the incident and detained five, including those who set off the canisters.

Political Protest with No Terror Links

Authorities clarified that the incident appeared to be a political protest rather than a terror attack. Despite ongoing investigations, no affiliations with any political party have been established.

Visitor Entry Suspended

As an immediate response, Speaker Birla suspended the entry of visitors into Parliament. He reassured that the smoke emitted from the canisters was not poisonous, and no MPs or security staff were injured during the incident.

Intruders' Identification and BJP MP's Involvement

The two men who breached the Lok Sabha were identified as Sagar Sharma and D. Manoranjan, entering on visitor's passes endorsed by BJP MP Prathap Simha. Other suspects involved in the incident were also identified and detained by the police.

Tribute Ceremony and Absence of Top Leaders

Earlier in the day, leaders, including Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Home Minister Amit Shah, paid tribute to the 2001 Parliament attack victims. However, neither Modi nor Shah were present in the House when the security breach occurred.

LS handbook on visitors' passes for Parliament

The guidelines were in the spotlight after two persons jumped into the Lok Sabha chamber from the public gallery in a major security breach.

According to the Lok Sabha handbook for members, all MPs requesting visitor passes must give a declaration that they know the guest personally and take full responsibility for him or her.

In the application form submitted by MPs for visitors, they need to provide details such as visitor's name in full, age, father's or husband's name, nationality and passport number (for foreigners only) and details of occupation, among other things.

Visitors' cards for the public gallery are issued for the guests of Lok Sabha members on the day before the visit on applications from members on yellow forms available in the Centralised Pass Issue Cell.

Not more than four visitors' cards will be issued to a member for a particular day for fixed hour(s) and complete particulars of the visitors may be furnished in the application forms for issue of visitors' cards, failing which the visitors' cards may not be issued.

Visitors' cards on same-day applications from members on red forms available in the Centralised Pass Issue Cell are issued subject to observance of certain conditions.

The applications for same-day visitors' cards should be made to the secretary general as early as possible on the date for which they are required and such applications should be delivered at the Centralised Pass Issue Cell.

For getting same-day passes issued, the Deputy Leader or the Whip of the Party, whosoever is authorised by the Party, should recommend the issue of same-day passes on the application form.

The member is also required to take the visitor to the concerned joint secretary or additional secretary. When a member requires a same-day visitors' pass, he may have his guests seated in the Reception Office or the MP Waiting Room Centralised Pass Issue Cell.

Same-day visitors' cards are delivered to the member, who is required to sign the register maintained for this purpose.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Internal Security
Source: The Hindu & Deccan Herald

6. ULFA peace accord: history of its 44-year-long insurgency, peace talks

Why in news?
The pro-talks faction of the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) recently signed a historic tripartite peace deal with the Government of India and the state government of Assam. Here is the story of the outlawed insurgent outfit established in 1979.

Roots in Assamese anxieties
Assamese people have their own, unique culture and language, and a strong sense of identity. Starting in the 19th century, however, as the region's tea, coal and oil economy attracted migrants from all over, the indigenous population started to feel insecure. This was further exacerbated by the Partition, and the subsequent exodus of refugees into the state from the erstwhile-East Pakistan.

The competition for resources skyrocketed, resulting in a six-year long mass movement. Eventually, the Assam Accord, seeking to "find a satisfactory solution to the problem of foreigners in Assam" was signed in 1985.

However, amidst all this, a group of more radical thinkers, led by Bhimakanta Buragohain, Arabinda Rajkhowa, Anup Chetia, Pradip Gogoi, Bhadreshwar Gohain and Paresh Baruah formed ULFA on April 7, 1979.

Four decades of bloodshed
The founders of ULFA wanted to establish a sovereign Assamese nation through an armed struggle against the Indian state. For over 44 years, this 'struggle' has been chequered with kidnappings and extortion, executions and bomb blasts, leading to tragic loss of life in Assam and beyond.

At the same time, the Indian state's response has also been unsparing. In 1990, the Centre launched Operation Bajrang, leading to the arrest of 1,221 ULFA insurgents. Assam was declared a 'disturbed area', President's rule was imposed, and the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) was invoked.

The government has also allegedly supported certain factions of ULFA, which has almost always been plagued with differences of opinion. In 1992, one faction, later christened as Surrendered ULFA (SULFA), offered to surrender and engage in dialogue with the government. Later, SULFA would allegedly carry out "secret killings" of ULFA insurgents and their family members, on behalf of the state government.

Yet, the ULFA has survived, in some part due to help from outside India. It still has camps Myanmar, and previously had camps in both Bangladesh and Bhutan. Lying deep in jungles and hilly areas, these camps act as launchpads for cross border operations, as well as shelter after the fact. Insurgents also use them as training bases for new recruits.

ULFA has links to other insurgent outfits in the Northeast and Myanmar, as well as Islamic terror outfits like Harkat-ul-Jihad-e-Islami, and Al-Qaeda. Paresh Baruah, ULFA's self-styled military chief, reportedly met Osama Bin Laden, the mastermind of the 9/11 attacks.

It also has links to Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), which has reportedly trained ULFA insurgents in the past. ULFA openly supported Pakistan in its monthly newsletter Swadhinata during the Kargil War.

Towards peace
In 2005, the ULFA formed an 11-member 'People's Consultative Group' (PCG) comprising noted intellectuals and Jnanpith awardee author late Indira Raisom Goswami. The committee mediated three rounds of talks before the ULFA walked out of the discussions and unleashed a new wave of terror.

Some ULFA commanders like Arabinda Rajkhowa, 2008 onwards, would again strive for peace talks with the government. However, Paresh Baruah was staunchly opposed to talks, and consequently "expelled" Rajkhowa from the outfit in 2012. The Rajkhowa-led pro-talk ULFA faction also "expelled" Baruah, paving the way for the last major split in ULFA. While Baruah floated his own ULFA (Independent), the majority of the outfit joined the peace talks under Rajkhowa.

The pro-talks faction, in 2012, submitted a 12-point charter of demands to the central government, which was finally responded to earlier this year. This was followed by a round of discussions between Rajkhowa's faction and the Centre in April, and the tripartite peace agreement recently.

An incomplete peace?
"This peace deal is certainly a step in the right direction and will contribute to the peace and development of Assam.

While it is not clear on how "complete" the deal is, as major question marks remain on how exactly it would work out. Assam CM Himanta Biswa Sarma has said he is keen on engaging with the anti-talks faction as well, but Baruah remains steadfast on his demand for Assam's sovereignty.

Yet, after signing the agreement, Union Home Minister Amit Shah was confident that a "complete solution" had been negotiated. "This tripartite agreement is the beginning of a new age of peace for Assam," he said.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Internal Security
Source: Indian Express

Miscellaneous

1. Ayodhya airport named after Valmiki

According to Ramayana's Uttarakanda, Maharishi Valmiki became the guru of Lord Ram's twin sons Lav and Kush.

Why in news?

With less than a month to go for the grand opening of the Ayodhya Ram Temple, Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurated the newly built Maharishi Valmiki Airport in Ayodhya on December 30.

The airport is named after Maharishi (great sage) Valmiki, hailed as the author of the oldest version of Ramayana — the story of Lord Ram. Here are 5 interesting facts about the legendary poet-sage.

1. He is known as the Adi Kavi

Valmiki is referred to as Adi Kavi, or the "first/original poet" in Sanskrit. This is because he is credited to having composed the Ramayana, believed to be the first epic poem in the Sanskrit literary tradition. "It is frequently described as the first consciously literary composition, the adi-kavya, a description not used for any other epic."

However, literary analysis of the text indicates that Mahabharata, credited to the sage Vyasa, might actually have been older. "The language of the Ramayana is more polished and its concepts more related to later society, although it is traditionally believed to be the earlier of the two." Historian Romila Thapar dates the text to roughly mid-first century BCE, although scholars such as Robert Goldman do date it to as far back as the eighth century BCE.

2. Valmiki himself appears in the Bala and Uttara Kandas

Valmiki's Ramayana is divided into 7 cantos or kandas, each telling a different part of Lord Ram's story. Valmiki himself makes an appearance in the Bala and Uttara Kandas, the first and last chapters of the epic.

The Bala Kanda begins with Valmiki asking sage Narada if there is a righteous man still left in the world, to which Narada responds with the name Ram. Valmiki then begins his narration. In Uttara Kanda, after Lord Ram exiles his wife Sita, she finds refuge in Valmiki's ashram. There she gives birth to twin boys Lava and Kusha, who then become his disciples. In Bala Kanda, the story of Ramayana is framed as a narration by Valmiki to Lava and Kusha.

3. Tulsidas's Ramcharitmanas is far more popular

There are many versions of the Ramayana, from across India and beyond, each with its distinctive style and version of events. While most people recognise Valmiki as the original author of the story of Lord Ram, Tulsidas's Ramcharitmanas is far more popularly known today.

A 16th century Bhakti poet, Tulsidas's version is composed in the vernacular Awadhi rather than scriptural Sanskrit. This is key to its present-day popularity — while indeed an impressive work of literature, Valmiki's Ramayana remains inaccessible to most people. The Ramcharitmanas made available the story of Ram to the common man, and is most associated with the tradition of Ramlila, a dramatic enactment of the text. Some believe that Tulsidas was actually a reincarnation of Valmiki.

4. Debate surrounding Valmiki's caste

There is a prevailing, highly contested debate surrounding the caste of Sage Valmiki. A number of scheduled castes, across the country, trace their lineage to the sage. At the same time, certain scriptural sources identify him as a Brahmin. There are numerous competing versions detailing Valmiki's caste and origin.

5. From robber to saint

One reason behind the contested caste identity of Valmiki is his popular origin story. Prior to becoming a sage, Valmiki was known as Ratnakar, and was a feared dacoit and hunter. While some versions of the story claim that he was actually born to a Brahmin before getting lost in the forest and adopted by a hunter couple, more subaltern versions of the story claim that he was born to a Bhil king. Either way, he would make a living by robbing villagers and travellers.

One day, he encountered Sage Narada, and his life changed. Unlike others, Narada did not appear to be scared of Ratnakar, and instead spoke to him gently, making him realise what he was doing was wrong and he must mend his ways. Ratnakar prayed to

the saint to forgive him and help him atone for his misdeeds. Narada gave Ratnakar a simple mantra to recite — the name of Lord Ram.

Thus began Ratnakar's transformation. He closed his eyes and entered and kept chanting. Slowly, he lost consciousness of his own existence. As time passed, an anthill (valmika) grew around him. Yet Ratnakar did not stop until Narada himself returned and awakened him from his penance. He was named Valmiki, after the anthill, which grew around him and given the honour of being a Maharishi or a great sage.

2. Halal certificate ban in U.P.

Why in news?

On November 18, the Uttar Pradesh Government's Food Security and Drug Administration banned the "manufacture, sale, storage and distribution of halal-certified products with immediate effect". Halal, an Arabic term, means 'permissible', as opposed to notions of haram (prohibited) in Islam. A halal certificate means the product is fit to be consumed by followers of the faith. It is particularly relevant for meat items and is considered essential while exporting meat to Muslim countries. Following the order, units of police raided various malls across U.P. to seize any halal products.

Why was it banned?

The quick action to raid malls followed a complaint lodged in Lucknow by an office bearer of the youth wing of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) wherein the complainant accused several halal certifying outfits of issuing "forged" certificates to "increase their sale among a certain community". They, in the process, violated "public trust" and created "social animosity", it was alleged. Though many read in the government's step, yet another action aimed at marginalising the State's Muslim community, the government insisted it had acted according to the law and fair trade practices.

How are halal certificates issued?

Halal certificates are given by the Jamiat Ulama-i-Hind's Halal Unit and the Halal Shariat Islamic Law Board, both of whom have been cleared by the National Accreditation Board for Certification Bodies. While the Shariat Islamic Law Board enjoys permission for certifying food products, the Jamiat's unit can certify only meat.

These agencies have slammed the decision to ban Halal-certified products. Leading the way, the Jamiat claimed the government had not sent "any notice or circular before the move" and dubbed it "ridiculous and unfortunate".

What about export products?

Significantly, the ban was imposed only on sales, manufacture and storage within Uttar Pradesh and not meant for export products. Meanwhile, the retailers, whose business was thrown into a chaos due to the hastily imposed ban, revealed that while many vegetarian food items carry Halal certificates when exported to Muslim countries, at times, the packages exceeded the number of export items. Those extra packages were at times used in the domestic market. The products were vegetarian anyway, and hence unlikely to hurt anyone's sentiments.

3. What the World Malaria Report says about India

Introduction

The recently released World Malaria Report, recently released by the World Health Organization (WHO), shows that the number of cases and deaths due to the mosquito-borne infection India have continued to decline. With an estimated 33.8 lakh cases and 5,511 deaths, India saw a decline of 30 per cent in malaria incidence and 34 per cent in mortality in 2022, compared to the previous year.

Behind India's success story

A focus on providing primary healthcare to the remotest areas, surveillance that is now being backed by digital data, and better handling of extreme weather events such as cyclones have been key to India's success as per experts.

Good preventive practices, use of effective tools to keep the mosquito population in check, use of point of care tests for quick diagnosis, and good management of the malaria cases have been key to reducing cases and deaths due to malaria over the years.

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4 TAKEAWAYS FROM THE REPORT
• India saw a 30% decline in malaria cases and 34% decline in deaths in 2022 as compared to the previous year
• Globally there were 5 million additional malaria cases in 2022 as compared to the previous year, totalling to 249 million
• Of the 5 million additional cases, the highest 2.1 million was from Pakistan that had a flood in 2022
• India accounted for 1.4% of total malaria cases in the world

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Climate change and malaria

The malaria parasite and mosquito are both extremely sensitive to temperature, humidity, and rainfall, leaving experts worried about expanding reach of the disease.

The report says that climate change can not only directly increase geographies for malaria spread, but also indirectly affect the impact of the disease by reducing access to healthcare facilities and timely treatment.

Example of Pakistan
Almost half of the five million additional malaria cases reported globally in 2022 — 2.1 million — were from Pakistan that witnessed an extreme flood. The report said that the standing water after the floods became ideal breeding ground for mosquitoes and led to a five-fold increase in malaria cases in the country. With increasing frequency of such extreme weather events, the annual report for the first time focused on climate change and malaria.

Challenges ahead for India
While India is doing well when it comes to malaria, issues such as resistance may derail it from its target of elimination by 2030.

Another challenge is vivax malaria, which accounts for over 40 per cent of malaria cases in India. The vivax plasmodium is known to hide in the liver and cause recurrent infections. To treat, a 14-day course of therapy has to be taken. Experts say the challenge with that is many do not complete the treatment and stop taking the drug once they feel better.

Relevance: GS Prelims
Source: The Indian Express and The Hindu

4. Vaishali and Praggnanandhaa, first brother-sister duo to become Grandmasters

Why in news?
Indian chess player Vaishali Rameshbabu became a Grandmaster by crossing 2,500 International Chess Federation (FIDE) ranking points. She is only the third Indian woman player to achieve the title, besides Koneru Humpy and Harika Dronavalli.

With this development, Vaishali and her younger brother, Rameshbabu Praggnanandhaa, have become the first-ever Grandmaster brother-sister duo in history.

A Grandmaster
Grandmaster is the highest title or ranking that a chess player can achieve. The Grandmaster title — and other chess titles —are awarded by the International Chess Federation, FIDE (acronym for its French name Fédération Internationale des Échecs), the Lausanne-Switzerland-based governing body of the international game.

The title is the badge of the game's super-elite, a recognition of the greatest chess talent on the planet, which has been tested and proven against a peer group of other similarly talented players in the world's toughest competitions.

Other (lesser) titles
Besides Grandmaster, the Qualification Commission of FIDE recognises and awards seven other titles: International Master (IM), FIDE Master (FM), Candidate Master (CM), Woman Grandmaster (WGM), Woman International Master (WIM), Woman FIDE Master (WFM), and Woman Candidate Master (WCM).

Titles are for life
All the titles, including that of Grandmaster, are valid for life, unless a player is stripped of the title for a proven offence such as cheating.

Relevance: GS Prelims
Source: Indian Express and The Hindu

5. India's first Pompe disease patient passes away: What is this rare genetic disorder?

Introduction
Nidhi Shirol, India's first Pompe disease patient, passed away last month at the age of 24 years after battling the disease. She spent the last six years in a semi-comatose state.

In 2010, her father Prasanna Shirol started the Organisation for Rare Diseases India (ORDI), the first NGO in the country for rare diseases.

What is Pompe Disease?
Also known as Glycogen Storage Disease Type II, Pompe disease is a rare genetic disorder caused by a deficiency of the enzyme acid alpha-glucosidase (GAA). This enzyme is crucial for breaking down glycogen into glucose within the lysosomes of cells.

Its prevalence estimates range from 1 in 40,000 to 1 in 300,000 births. It occurs across diverse ethnicities and populations. The age of onset and severity can vary, leading to a spectrum of clinical presentations.

How does Pompe disease affect an individual?
The severity of the condition and the progression of symptoms may differ among individuals. Some key symptoms are:

*__Muscle weakness:__ Progressive muscle weakness is a primary feature of Pompe disease. It affects both skeletal and smooth muscles, leading to difficulties in mobility and daily activities. Weakness in the respiratory muscles can result in breathing difficulties, especially during physical exertion or even while lying down.

*__Motor skill delay:__ Children with the disease may experience delays in achieving motor milestones, such as sitting, crawling, and walking. The degree of motor skill delay can vary, and some individuals may never attain certain motor milestones.

*__Degenerative impact on bones:__ Prolonged muscle weakness and reduced mobility can have a degenerative impact on bones, leading to joint contractures and skeletal deformities.

*__Respiratory complications:__ The weakening of respiratory muscles, including the diaphragm, can have an impact. Patients may experience shortness of breath, respiratory infections, and in severe cases, respiratory failure.

*__Cardiac involvement:__ In some cases, Pompe disease can affect the heart muscles, leading to complications. Symptoms such as heart palpitations, fatigue, and chest pain, may manifest.

*__Hypertrophic cardiomyopathy:__ Pompe disease can cause hypertrophic cardiomyopathy, characterised by the thickening of the heart muscle walls. This can lead to impaired heart functions and cardiovascular symptoms.

*__Implications for daily living:__ Patients may face challenges in performing daily activities independently due to muscle weakness and respiratory limitations. Assistive devices such as wheelchairs and respiratory support equipment may become necessary.

How is Pompe disease diagnosed?

Diagnosing Pompe disease involves a multi-faceted approach. Enzyme assays are conducted to measure the activity of acid alpha-glucosidase (GAA), the deficient enzyme. Genetic testing identifies mutations in the responsible GAA gene.

Clinical evaluations consider the patient's symptoms and medical history. Enzyme tests, often performed on blood or skin cells, provide crucial insights into GAA deficiency. Genetic analysis confirms the presence of specific mutations associated with Pompe Disease.

The combination of these diagnostic tools enables healthcare professionals to accurately identify and confirm the disease, helping achieve timely intervention and management.

Is Pompe disease curable?

While there is currently no cure for Pompe disease, there are treatment options available to manage symptoms and improve the patient's quality of life. Enzyme Replacement Therapy (ERT) is a standard treatment, involving the infusion of the missing enzyme to alleviate glycogen buildup.

6. History of the Krishna Janmasthan temple in Mathura

Why in news?

The Supreme Court on December 15 declined to stay an order issued by the Allahabad High Court a day earlier allowing a survey of the Shahi Idgah mosque in Mathura, believed to have been built at Krishna Janmasthan, the site where Lord Krishna was born.

The mosque was built in the 17th century during the reign of the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb. The application filed by Hindu petitioners who asked for the survey said that "it is a matter of fact and history that Aurangzeb...issued orders for demolition of a large number of Hindu religious places and temples including the temple standing at the birth place of Lord Shree Krishna..."

Here's the history of the site and the mosque, based on what the historical record says.

The first temple at the site was built 2,000 years ago, in the 1st century CE.

Located in the heart of Braj, along the banks of the Yamuna, Mathura assumed importance as a trading and administrative hub during the time of the Mauryas (4th to 2nd centuries BCE).

For pilgrims, the most important site in Mathura was the Krishna Janmasthan, the birthplace of Lord Krishna. The historian A W Entwistle recorded that the first Vaishnava temple at the Krishna Janmasthan site was probably built in the 1st century CE, and a grander temple was constructed during the reign of Chandragupta II, also known as Vikramaditya, around 400 CE

Alexander Cunningham (1814-93), the first archaeologist of British India and founder director general of the Archeological Survey of India (ASI), believed that the site originally contained Buddhist structures that were destroyed, and some of the material was used to build the Hindu temple. Excavations in the area have uncovered remains of a large Buddhist complex.

Through the first millennium CE, the temple at Krishna Janmasthan attracted devotees from across the subcontinent. Buddhist and Jain sites appear to have existed alongside, and ancient Mathura remained a major Buddhist and Jain centre till the end of the first millennium CE. Chinese pilgrims Fa Hien/ Faxian (337-422 CE) and Hiuen Tsang/ Xuanzang (602-664 CE), and even later Muslim chroniclers described stupas and monasteries in Mathura.

The temples were attacked several times, but they could not be destroyed.
Mahmud of Ghazni, sultan of the Persianate Ghaznavid empire from 998 to 1030 CE, made a series of plundering raids into India from the beginning of the 11th century. In 1017 or 1018 CE, Mahmud showed up in Mathura and, according to the account of the historian Mahomed Kasim Ferishta (1570-1620), stayed for about 20 days. During this time, "the city suffered greatly from fire, besides the damage inflicted by pillage," Ferishta wrote.

The Jain and Buddhist centres, which were already in decline, did not survive the onslaught by Mahmud. But the worshipers of Krishna — referred to as Vasudeva by the Khwarizmian historian and polymath Al-Biruni (973-c. 1050 CE) — were more resilient. Writing a few years after Mahmud's pillage, Al-Biruni mentioned Mathura as one of the foremost places of pilgrimage in India, "crowded with Brahmins".

An inscription in Sanskrit dated to about 1150 CE records the foundation of a Vishnu temple at the site where the Katra Keshavdev temple now stands. This temple at the Krishna Janmasthan was "brilliantly white and touching the clouds", says the inscription.

This magnificent temple would eventually be knocked down by Sikandar Lodhi (1458-1517), the sultan of Delhi. This was part of a pattern of destruction seen during the Delhi Sultanate (1206-1526), Entwistle wrote — almost everything "that was built by Buddhists, Jains, and Hindus was either abandoned and left to collapse into ruins, or was destroyed by Muslim iconoclasts."

Interestingly, it is this decline that contributed to the emergence of a new form of Vaishnavism in the region. The likes of "Nimbarka, Vallabha, and Chaitanya are thought to have inspired the reclamation of Braj," Entwistle wrote.

These Vaishnava Bhakti saints from southern and eastern India preached an intensely emotional and personal form of Krishna worship, and the general understanding of Vaishnavism today is rooted in their teachings, the existence of numerous sectarian differences notwithstanding.

The temples of Mathura saw a resurgence under the early Mughal rulers.

The defeat of Ibrahim Lodhi at the First Battle of Panipat in 1526 led to the foundation of the Mughal dynasty. The Mughals' tenuous hold over power under Babur and Humayun in the early decades, along with the aforementioned religious movements, led to a spurt in religious activity in Braj. While no large temples were not built, mostly for economic reasons and the absence of rich royal patrons, numerous smaller shrines to Lord Krishna came up in Mathura and nearby Vrindavan.

Things improved further during the long reign of Akbar (1556-1605). Historians Tarapada Mukherjee and Irfan Habib (among others) have written about a number of land and revenue grants that the emperor made to temples of various Vaishnavite sects in Mathura ('Akbar and the Temples of Mathura and its Environs', Proceedings of the Indian History Congress, 1987).

Akbar, who had a liberal and tolerant outlook towards other religions and showed great curiosity about them, personally visited Mathura and Vrindavan on at least three occasions, and is supposed to have met religious figures such as Swami Haridas (1483-1573). Rajputs and other Hindus in high positions in the Mughal administration helped build new temples and restore old ones.

In 1618, during the reign of Akbar's son Jahangir, Raja Veer Singh Deo, the Rajput ruler of the Orchha kingdom that was a vassal state of the Mughal Empire, built a grand temple at the Katra site in Mathura.

This temple, which was described by the French traveller Jean-Baptiste Tavernier who visited Mathura in 1650, was octagonal in shape, and built with red sandstone. The Venetian traveller Niccolao Manucci, who visited Mathura in the late 1650s, wrote that the temple was "of such a height that its gilded pinnacle could be seen from Agra".

Dara Shikoh, Jahangir's grandson and the eldest son of Shah Jahan, who was a great champion of religious coexistence in the empire, ordered renovations to the site, including the installation of a stone railing around it.

But the temple was ultimately destroyed by the order of Aurangzeb.
Dara, the heir apparent of Shah Jahan, was declared an apostate and killed in 1659 by Aurangzeb, who had seized power by then. Aurangzeb was a stern, austere, and devout Muslim, quite the opposite of Dara in religious personality.

In 1660, Aurangzeb appointed Abdul Nabi Khan, who was intensely unpopular with the Hindu subjects of the empire, the governor of Mathura. In 1661-62, Khan built the Jama Masjid at the location of the temple that had been destroyed by Sikandar Lodhi. In 1666, he destroyed the railing built by Dara Shikoh around the Keshavdev temple.

In 1669, Aurangzeb issued a royal farmaan ordering the destruction of all Hindu schools and temples, across the Mughal Empire. The Kashi Vishwanath temple in Kashi was destroyed after the farmaan was issued.

In 1670, he specifically ordered the destruction of Mathura's Keshavdev temple, and sponsored the construction of the Shahi Idgah in its place. Jadunath Sarkar, author of the monumental five-volume History of Aurangzib, wrote that the temple's deities were taken to Agra and buried.

Historian-activist Audrey Truschke, author of Aurangzeb: The Man and the Myth (2017), sought to find an explanation for Aurangzeb's actions that went beyond just religious intolerance and bigotry: "Mathura Brahmins may have assisted with Shivaji's 1666 flight from Agra. Moreover, the Keshava Deva Temple had been patronised by Dara Shukoh, Aurangzeb's major rival for the throne. More immediately, Jat uprisings in the region in 1669 and 1670 dealt the Mughals heavy casualties [including the murder of Abdul Nabi Khan in 1669]."

The major temples of Mathura today were finally built after Independence.
By 1803, Mathura passed under the control of the British East India Company. In 1815, the Company auctioned 13.37 acres of land at the Katra Keshavdev site to Raja Patnimal, a wealthy banker from Varanasi. It is this piece of land that is the subject of the ongoing litigation, with the Hindu side claiming that it included the Shahi Idgah mosque while the Muslim side saying that it did not.

Raja Patnimal wanted to build a temple at the site, but was prevented by a lack of funds. Subsequently, his descendants were slapped with a number of lawsuits centred on the land. In 1944, they ended up selling the land to industrialist Jugal Kishore Birla who, in 1951, formed the Shri Krishna Janmabhoomi Trust to facilitate the construction of a temple at the site.

Construction started in 1953, and was funded by industrialists and business families of India. Construction was completed in 1983, when the temple took its present shape, adjacent to the Shahi Idgah mosque.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper I; Culture
Source: The Indian Express & The Hindu

7. Kejriwal skips ED summons for Vipassana: What is Vipassana

Introduction
Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal will once again skip a summons by the Enforcement Directorate in the Delhi excise policy case, this time to attend a 10-day Vipassana meditation retreat in Punjab.

Here is all you need to know about the ancient Buddhist meditation technique which saw a resurgence, and subsequent global proliferation, in the 20th century.

1. What is Vipassana?
Vipassana, literally "super-seeing" or "seeing things as they really are" in Pali, is an ancient meditation technique, derived from the teachings of the Buddha. It "is the essence of what he practiced and taught during his forty-five year ministry," Vipassana Research Institute's website says.

2. What is the goal behind this technique?
In simple terms, Vipassana is a way of self-transformation through the process of self-observation. The idea is to "Know Thyself", not just at an intellectual or emotional level, but "to experience the truth about yourself, within yourself, at the experiential level," VRI's website says. This, its practitioners believe, helps achieve true "peace of mind", and thus lead a "happy, useful life."

3. When, and how, did Vipassana originate?
"Vipassana is the oldest of Buddhist meditation practices... coming directly from the Satipatthana Sutta, a discourse attributed to the Buddha himself," renowned Buddhist scholar BH Gunaratna wrote for Tricycle: The Buddhist Review. Buddha is said to have "rediscovered" an even older practice of meditation, roughly 2500 years ago. Since then, it has been handed down, to the present day, by an unbroken chain of teachers belonging to the Theravada tradition, the oldest extant school of Buddhism.

4. How exactly does the popular 10-day course work?
The most popular course, which Arvind Kejriwal will be taking, is a 10-day residential course conducted at Vipassana centres, during which students are meant to have zero contact with the outside world. Moreover, students must refrain from reading and writing, any sensual entertainment, and intoxicants, and observe "noble silence" by not communicating with fellow students (though they are allowed and encouraged to ask questions to teachers). A strict Code of Discipline must be followed at all times.

5. What are the 3 steps to the training?
First is the practice of sila or morality. This involves abstaining from actions which cause harm — killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying and the use of intoxicants. Second is Anapana meditation, focussing attention on one's breath. This helps gaining control over one's unruly mind, and is practised for the first three-and-a-half days. Third is the actual practice of Vipassana, where one "penetrates one's entire physical and mental structure with the clarity of panna (wisdom, insight)."

Relevance: GS Prelims
Source: The Indian Express

1. Consider the following statements about Fifteenth and Sixteenth Finance Commissions:
1. The fifteenth finance commission gave recommendations for six-year period.
2. The recommendations of the Fifteenth Finance Commission are valid upto the financial year 2025-26.
3. The Sixteenth Finance Commission has been given responsibility to review the present arrangements on financing Disaster Management initiatives.
How many of the above statements are correct?
(a) Only one
(b) Only two
(c) All three
(d) None

2. How many of the following Statements about 'Loss and Damage Fund' are correct?
1. The loss and damage fund was first announced during COP28 in Dubai.
2. As India is responsible for 3% of historic emissions, it is required to contribute to Loss and Damage fund.
3. IMF will oversee the loss of damage fund during the initial years.
Select the correct answer using the code given below:
(a) Only one
(b) Only two
(c) All three
(d) None

3. Pradhan Mantri Bhartiya Janaushadhi Pariyojana (PMBJP) is a scheme launched under which of the following Union Ministries?
(a) Ministry of Chemicals & Fertilizers
(b) Ministry of Health
(c) Ministry of Social Justice
(d) Ministry of Rural Development

4. The ongoing COP-28 has special focus on health. Which of the following initiatives pertaining to health has been taken in this conference?
1. Declaration of Official Health Day at COP-28
2. Inter-ministerial meeting to discuss climate impacts on health
3. Creation of Health Fund to compensate loss of health in developing countries
How many of the above statements are correct?
(a) Only one
(b) Only two
(c) All three

(d) None

5. How many of the following statements about National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) are correct?
1. The NCRB was established in January 1986 as a body mandated to compile and keep records of data on crime.
2. It also acts as a "national warehouse" for the fingerprint records of Indian and foreign criminals.
3. It releases the annual crime report in India.
Select the correct answer using the code given below:
(a) Only One
(b) Only Two
(c) All Three
(d) None

6. Consider the following statements in context of India's efforts to eliminate Malaria:
1. India accounted for less than 5 per cent of total malaria cases in the world in year 2022.
2. Extreme climate events such as Floods contribute to malaria cases.
3. India has a target of malaria elimination by year 2030.
Select the correct answer using the code given below:
(a) 1 only
(b) 1 and 2 only
(c) 2 and 3 only
(d) 1, 2 and 3

7. Why Cyclone Michaung which hit the coast of India in 2023 is regarded as 'unusual'?
(a) This cyclone emerged in Arabian Sea.
(b) This cyclone emerged in Bay of Bengal.
(c) This cyclone had high intensity.
(d) This cyclone travelled from South to North direction.

8. The logo of National Medical Commission recently in news consists of the silhouette of
(a) Charvaka
(b) Saraswati
(c) Bhrahma
(d) Dhanvantri

9. What is Article 99 of the UN Charter, invoked in decades as Israel attacks Gaza?
(a) It is invoked by UNSC and it requires the UN States to declare ceasefire during the ongoing war.

(b) It is invoked by Secretary General of UN and it requires member states to not kill civilian population even during war time.

(c) It is invoked by Secretary General to bring attention of UNSC on any matter which is crucial for international peace and security.

(d) It is invoked by UNGA to give status of full-fledged member state to a territory.

10. Which of the following is the correct stand of Italy towards China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)?
(a) Italy has shown interest in joining BRI.
(b) Italy is a member of BRI.
(c) Italy has moved out of BRI.
(d) Italy has initiated alternate global infrastructure development initiative to BRI.

11. Which of the following is the most appropriate purpose behind setting Truth and Reconciliation Commission?
(a) To look into communal troubles in a society
(b) To look into alleged wrongdoings by State
(c) To look into prevalent caste discriminations
(d) To look into causes behind wars

12. Which of the following statements is incorrect regarding 'Global Renewables and Energy Efficiency Pledge'?
(a) 118 countries have signed the pledge including India.
(b) Nations are required to triple the world's green energy capacity to 11,000 GW by 2030.
(c) Nations are required to double the global average annual rate of energy efficiency improvements from around 2% to over 4% every year until 2030.
(d) According to the pledge, the tripling of renewable energy is expected to practically eliminate fossil fuels as energy sources by 2050.

13. The status of members of Election Commission of India is same as that of the
(a) Cabinet Secretary
(b) Cabinet Minister
(c) Supreme Court Judge
(d) High Court Judge

14. How many of the following statements about the Transplantation of Human Organs and Tissues Act, 1994 are correct?
1. Organ donations from close relatives is legally allowed.
2. Donations from distant relatives are not allowed in any case.
3. Donations for financial exchange is not allowed.
(a) Only One
(b) Only Two

(c) All Three
(d) None

15. Consider the following statements regarding outcomes attained in recently held CoP - 28 at Dubai?
1. CoP-28 agreed to phase out fossil fuel by 2040.
2. CoP-28 agreed to triple global renewable energy capacity by 2030.
3. CoP-28 agreed to eliminate Methane emissions by 2050.
How many of the above statements are correct?
(a) Only One
(b) Only Two
(c) All Three
(d) None

16. Consider the following statements about Global Partnership on Artificial Intelligence (GPAI)?
1. OECD hosts a dedicated secretariat for GPAI.
2. GPAI was officially launched in 2020.
3. India is one of the founding members of GPAI.
How many of the above statements are correct?
(a) Only One
(b) Only Two
(c) All Three
(d) None

17. Which is the largest office building in the world?
(a) Surat Diamond Bourse, India
(b) Pentagon, USA
(c) Chrysler World Headquarters and Technology Center, USA
(d) The Exchange 106, Malaysia

18. What is Viksit Bharat Sankalp Yatra?
(a) It is an initiative from people to contribute towards the cleanliness of their surroundings.
(b) It is an initiative from Government to address regional imbalances in development.
(c) It is an initiative from northern states to undertake social and economic development so as to arrest population growth rate.
(d) It is a government initiative to raise awareness about and track the implementation of flagship central schemes.

19. ECOWAS is an international organisation consisting of
(a) West Asian Nations
(b) West African Nations

(c) West European Nations
(d) Western democratic states

20. Which of the following statements is incorrect regarding Himadri, India's research station in the Arctic?
(a) The research station falls under sovereign territory of Norway.
(b) India is allowed to set up the research station as per the Svalbard Treaty in Paris in 1920.
(c) GoI has decided to operate the research station throughout the year.
(d) India is the only country to have permanent research station in Svalbard which is operational throughout the year.

21. Which of the following is the correct descending order of States in terms of export performance?
(a) Gujarat, Maharashtra and Tamil Naidu
(b) Maharashtra, Gujarat and Tamil Naidu
(c) Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra and Gujarat
(d) Tamil Nadu, Gujarat and Maharashtra

22. Bhartiya Nayaya samhita has provision to deal with how many of the following offences:
1. Sexual intercourse through deceitful means
2. Mob lynching
3. Organised Crime
4. Terrorism
(a) Only One
(b) Only Two
(c) Only Three
(d) All Four

23. In the 28th session of Conference of the Parties held at Dubai, India has agreed to how many of the following declarations?
1. Triple renewable energy capacity by 2030.
2. Declaration on Climate and Health
3. Global Methane Pledge
(a) Only One
(b) Only Two
(c) All Three
(d) None

24. Who has been chosen as Republic Day guest for 2024?
(a) British PM
(b) French President

(c) German Chancellor

(d) Japanese PM

25. How many of the following have returned their Padma honours?

1. Writer K Shivarama Karanth from Karnataka

2. Author Phanishwar Nath "Renu" from Bihar

3. Poet and novelist Khushwant Singh

(a) Only One

(b) Only Two

(c) All Three

(d) None

26. Rebel group Houthis is believed to be backed by

(a) Iran

(b) Saudi Arabia

(c) Lebanon

(d) Israel

27. What is the punishment to the owner under Bhartiya Nyaya Sanhita if pet animal attacks a human?

(a) Fine upto Rs 100,000

(b) Fine upto Rs 100,000 and imprisonment of upto 1 year

(c) Fine of Rs 50,000 and imprisonment upto 6 months

(d) Fine of Rs 5,000 and imprisonment upto 6 months

28. Japan's Smart Lander for Investigating Moon (SLIM) is better than Chandrayaan-3 Mission in how many of the following respects:

1. SLIM carried much less fuel to reach moon than Chqandrayaan-3.

2. SLIM reached faster on the moon than Chandrayaan-3.

3. SLIM is expected to land more precisely on the moon's surface than Vikram lander of Chandrayaan-3.

(a) Only One

(b) Only Two

(c) All Three

(d) None

29. What is a Zero Click Exploit?

(a) It refers to the internet usage by the electronic device even if internet is not actually used on it.

(b) It refers to the e-waste generated by electronic devices which have never been put to use.

(c) It refers to malicious software that allows spyware to be installed on a device without the device owner's consent.

(d) It refers to division in the society between those who have access to internet and those who do not.

30. The illegal route adopted for international migration is called 'Donkey roue' after
(a) Human smugglers
(b) Travel like animals
(c) High chances of Fraud
(d) Low chances of survival

Answer Key

1.(c)	2.(d)	3.(a)	4.(b)	5.(c)
6.(d)	7.(c)	8.(d)	9.(c)	10.(c)
11.(b)	12.(a)	13.(c)	14.(b)	15.(a)
16.(c)	17.(a)	18.(d)	19.(b)	20.(d)
21.(a)	22.(d)	23.(a)	24.(b)	25.(c)
26.(a)	27.(d)	28. (b)	29.(c)	30.(a)

Explanations

1. (c) All the three statements are correct.

2. (d) Statement 1 is incorrect: The loss and damage fund was first announced during COP27 in Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt.

Statement 2 is incorrect: India is not required to contribute to Loss and Damage Fund.

Statement 3 is incorrect: The World Bank will oversee the loss and damage fund in the beginning.

Thus, none of the statements are correct.

3. (a) With an objective of making quality generic medicines available at affordable prices to all, Pradhan Mantri Bhartiya Janaushadhi Pariyojana (PMBJP) was launched by the Department of Pharmaceuticals, Ministry of Chemicals & Fertilizers.

4. (b) Statement 1 is correct: Health events have been held at COP for several years, including at the WHO Health Pavilion, but this is the first time there has been an official 'Health Day'.

Statement 2 is correct: This is also the first time there will be a health inter-ministerial meeting, with ministers of health, environment, finance and other types of ministries joining in.

Statement 3 is incorrect.

Thus, only two statements are correct.

5. (c) All the three statements are correct.

6. (d) All the given statements are correct.

7. (c) The IMD had initially predicted that Michaung would remain a 'tropical cyclone' (wind speeds of 62 kph to 87 kph) until it crossed the Andhra Pradesh coast. However, the IMD upgraded it to the intensity of a 'severe' storm (wind speeds of 88 kph to 166 kph).

Such intensification of a December cyclone is unique. The above-normal value of the heat index off the southern Andhra Pradesh coast led to the strengthening of Michaung.

8. (d) The New logo of the National Medical Commission (NMC) has a colourful image of physician god Dhanvantri in the centre.

9. (c) Article 99 states: "The Secretary-General may bring to the attention of the Security Council any matter which in his opinion may threaten the maintenance of international peace and security."

10. (c) In 2019, during Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to Rome, Italy became the first G7 country to join the BRI, in the hopes of China serving as a market for Italian products and Chinese investment boosting Italian infrastructure.

But the BRI would not meet Italian hopes and expectations. With its five-year memorandum of understanding up for renewal in March 2024, Italy has officially conveyed its withdrawal from BRI.

11. (b) A Truth and Reconciliation Commission, also known as a 'truth and justice commission' or simply, a 'truth commission', is an official mechanism to not just acknowledge, but also reveal, wrongdoings by a government (or sometimes non-state actors or combatants) so that conflicts of the past can be addressed and resolved.

12. (a) Option (a) is the incorrect Statement.
The pledge was spearheaded by the EU, the US and the UAE and supported by Brazil, Nigeria, Australia, Japan, Canada, Chile and Barbados. India and China have stayed away as the initiative calls for phasing down of coal and "ending the continued investment in unabated new coal-fired power plants".

13. (c) The status of the EC members is same as that of a Supreme Court judge, with the same salary, dearness allowance and leave encashment rules.

14. (b) Statement 2 is incorrect: Donations from distant relatives, in-laws, or long-time friends are allowed after additional scrutiny to ensure there is no financial exchange.

Remaining two statements are correct.

15. (a) Statement 1 is incorrect: Fossil fuel phase-out was the most hotly contested issue at COP28, and the reason for a prolonged deadlock. However, nations could not agree to time schedules and targets.

Statement 3 is incorrect:The agreement talks about "accelerating and substantially reducing non-cabon-dioxide emissions globally, including in particular methane emissions by 2030".

Thus, Statement 2 is the only statement, which is correct.

16. (c) GPAI was first proposed by Canada and France at the 2018 44th G7 summit, and officially launched in June 2020 with fifteen founding members: Australia, Canada, France, Germany, India, Italy, Japan, Mexico, New Zealand, the Republic of Korea, Singapore, Slovenia, the United Kingdom, the United States, and the European Union.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) hosts a dedicated secretariat to support GPAI's governing bodies and activities.

Thus, all the three statements are correct.

17. (a) Surat Diamond Bourse is the largest office building in the world with the floor area of 660,000 sq. metre.

18. (d) The Viksit Bharat Sankalp Yatra is a government initiative being undertaken across the country, to raise awareness about and track the implementation of flagship central schemes, such as Ayushman Bharat, Ujjwala Yojana, PM Surkasha Bima, PM SVANidhi, etc.

19. (b) The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS; also known as CEDEAO in French and Portuguese) is a regional political and economic union of fifteen countries located in West Africa.

20. (d) Option (d) is incorrect. Located 2,100 km north of Norway's capital Oslo, Ny-Ålesund in Svalbard island has ten countries: China, Germany, France, India, Italy, Japan, Netherlands, Norway, South Korea and the United Kingdom. They have set up

eleven permanent research stations. Of these, only three stations have human presence around the year, until now.

Remaining statements are correct.

21. (a) Gujarat accounts for 33 per cent followed by Maharashtra with 16 per cent and Tamil Nadu with 9 per cent share.

22. (d) All the four offences are covered under Bhartiya Nayaya Samhita.

23. (a) Statement 2 is incorrect: The UAE declaration on climate and health came into being at COP-28. India didn't sign this declaration because reducing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions in the health sector would mean reduction in emissions from gases used for cooling. As India's healthcare infrastructure is still growing, such a commitment could compromise the healthcare requirements of a growing population, particularly rural.

Statement 3 is incorrect: The Global Methane Pledge launched at COP-26 received renewed attention at COP-28, with the Climate and Clean Air Coalition becoming the new secretariat and partners of the pledge announcing more than $1 billion in new grants for funding projects to reduce methane emissions from the agriculture, waste, and gas sectors. More than 150 countries signed the pledge to reduce methane pollution. India isn't a signatory to this pledge because it shifts focus from carbon dioxide to methane, a GHG with a lower lifetime.

Thus, only one statement is correct.

24. (b) France's President Emmanuel Macron will be India's chief guest for its 2024 Republic Day celebrations.

25. (c) When former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi imposed a state of Emergency on the country, several prominent civil society members rose up in protest. Two of them went as far as to return the civilian honours granted to them — writer K Shivarama Karanth from Karnataka returned his Padma Bhushan, while author Phanishwar Nath "Renu" from Bihar gave up his Padma Shri.

In 1984, poet and novelist Khushwant Singh returned his Padma Bhushan, awarded in 1974, to protest Operation Blue Star at the Golden Temple.

26. (a) The Houthis have been locked in a civil war with the official Yemen government for almost a decade. They are currently in control of much of northern and western Yemen, including the official capital Sanaa.

Experts believe that the Yemeni Civil War is a proxy war between Iran, backing the Houthis, and Saudi Arabia and the West, backing the official government.

27. (d) Under the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), aimed at replacing the Indian Penal Code (IPC), if your pet animal attacks a human, you can be fined upto Rs 5,000 along with imprisonment upto six months.

28. (b) Statements 1 and 3 are correct.
Statement 2 is incorrect. SLIM took 4 months ro reach moon. On the other hand, Chandrayaan-3 reached moon in 40 days.
Thus, Only Two Statements are correct.

29. (c) Option (c) is the answer.
A zero-click exploit refers to malicious software that allows spyware to be installed on a device without the device owner's consent. More importantly, it doesn't require the device owner to perform any actions to initiate or complete the installation.

30. (a) Option (a) is the correct answer.

In most such cases, on arrival in the transit country, agents connect the migrants with the so-called 'donkers', or people smugglers, who help them enter their final destination illegally.