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### 1. Union government's draft Broadcasting Services (Regulation) Bill mean for OTT platforms and content creators

#### Broadcasting Services (Regulation) Bill

The Union government's draft Broadcasting Services (Regulation) Bill, 2023, is designed to extend regulatory oversight to encompass OTT platforms and digital content. The bill aims to modernize regulations, introduce self-regulation mechanisms, and establish a three-tier regulatory framework.

#### Key Provisions of the Bill

- 1. Mandatory Registration:** All individuals and broadcasting companies must register with the government to provide services or operate a network.
- 2. Expanding Regulatory Scope:** The bill replaces the Cable Television Networks (Regulation) Act and includes provisions for cable, satellite, terrestrial, radio, IPTV, and OTT broadcasting services.
- 3. Exemptions for OTT Services:** Social media intermediaries and their users, as defined by the Information Technology Act, 2000, are excluded from the definition of OTT broadcasting services.

#### Content Quality and Accessibility

- 1. Programme and Advertisement Codes:** Yet-to-be-defined Programme and Advertisement Codes will apply to TV, radio, and online broadcasting, excluding digital copies of newspapers and commercial newspaper publishers.
- 2. Content Classification and Access Control:** Broadcasters must classify programs based on various criteria, and the classification should be prominently displayed.

Access control measures are mandated for restricted-viewing shows, particularly those with adult content.

- 3. Accessibility Guidelines:** Broadcasting network operators must enhance accessibility for persons with disabilities through measures like audio descriptions, sign language translations, subtitles, and accessible applications.

#### Three tier regulatory structure

### **1. Self-regulation by operators**

Broadcasters and broadcasting network operators will have to establish and maintain mechanisms for the filing and redressal of complaints. A grievance redressal officer will be appointed to handle complaints related to content and contravention of the programme and advertisement codes. In case the official is unable to decide in the prescribed period or the complainant is not satisfied with their decision, it can approach the self-regulatory organisation.

### **2. Self-regulatory organisations**

It is a proposed body of broadcasters, broadcasting network operators or their associations, which will guide their members to ensure compliance with the broadcasting rules and deal with grievances related to content violations not resolved within a specific time frame. They can also take up appeals against the decisions of broadcasters or network operators.

If a broadcaster is found guilty of any wrongdoing, the self-regulatory organisation to which it belongs has the authority to expel, suspend, or impose penalties in the form of advisories, censures, warnings, or monetary fines, not exceeding ₹5 lakh for each violation.

### **3. Broadcast Advisory Council**

The Centre will establish an advisory council, consisting of independent experts and government representatives, to oversee the implementation of the regulations. It will hear content violations complaints and accordingly make recommendations to the government.

The government will then, after due consideration, issue appropriate orders and directions. The Council can also form review panels to assist with its functions. These panels are assigned specific cases or appeals and provide their recommendations, considered as recommendations of the Broadcast Advisory Council as per the text of the Bill.

### **Inspection and Seizure of Equipment**

**1. Government Inspections:** The government can conduct inspections without prior notice, and operators must facilitate monitoring at their own cost.

**2. Equipment Seizure:** Equipment can be seized if violations are suspected, with liability on operators unless they prove a lack of knowledge or due diligence.

### **Penalties for Non-Compliance**

**1. Removal and Prohibition:** Penalties include removal of objectionable content, orders, apologies, off-air periods, or cancellation of registration.

Prohibition of transmission for reasons related to public interest, national security, or potential promotion of disharmony.

**2. Monetary Penalties and Imprisonment:** Monetary penalties and imprisonment for serious offenses, with penalty amounts depending on financial capacity.

### Main Concerns and Criticisms

**1. Scope and Impact on Digital Platforms:** Concerns raised about the broad scope of the bill and its potential impact on freedom of speech, especially for OTT platforms.

**2. Excessive Delegation and Uncertainty:** Criticisms regarding excessive delegation of rule-making to the Centre, leading to uncertainty for stakeholders.

**3. Threats to Creativity and Expression:** Concerns expressed by digital rights organizations and experts about potential over-compliance and self-censorship affecting creativity and expression in the digital space.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance

Source: The Hindu

### 2. Gangster Goldy Brar declared designated terrorist under UAPA: What this means



Figure 1 Goldy Brar is currently hiding in Canada

#### What happened?

Gangster Goldy Brar, the mastermind behind the murder of Punjabi singer Sidhu Moosewala, was declared a designated terrorist by the Centre under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA).

Amendments introduced in 2019 brought in provisions by which the Centre can declare individuals — not only organisations — as designated terrorists.

#### Who is a "terrorist"?



The words “terror” or “terrorist” are not defined, but the UAPA defines a “terrorist act” as any act committed 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 in the people or any section of the people in India or in any foreign country. While the original Act dealt with “unlawful” acts related to secession; anti-terror provisions were introduced in 2004.

The 2019 Bill sought to empower the central government to designate an individual a “terrorist” if they are found committing, preparing for, promoting, or involved in an act of terror. A similar provision already existed in Part 4 and 6 of the legislation for organisations that can be designated as a “terrorist organisation”. Home Minister Amit Shah, during a debate on the Bill in Lok Sabha, stressed on the need to designate individuals as terrorists to root out terrorism.

### **How are individuals declared terrorists?**

The central government may designate an individual as a terrorist through a notification in the official gazette, and add his name to the Fourth Schedule to the UAPA. The government is not required to give an individual an opportunity to be heard before such a designation.

At present, in line with the legal presumption of an individual being innocent until proven guilty, an individual who is convicted in a terror case is legally referred to as a terrorist, while those suspected of being involved in terrorist activities are referred to as terror accused. The 2019 amendment did not clarify the standard of proof required to establish that an individual is involved, or is likely to be involved, in terrorist activities.

### **What happens when an individual is declared a terrorist?**

The designation of an individual as a global terrorist by the United Nations is associated with sanctions including travel bans, freezing of assets and an embargo against procuring arms. The 2019 amendment, however, did not provide any such detail.

The amendment also gave the Centre the power to remove a name from the schedule when an individual makes an application. If an application filed by an individual declared a terrorist is rejected by the government, they have the right to seek a review within one month after the application is rejected.

Under the amendment, the central government set up a review committee comprising a chairperson (a retired or sitting judge of a High Court) and three other members. The review committee will be empowered to order the government to delete the name of the individual from the schedule that lists “terrorists”, if it considers the order to be flawed.

Apart from these two avenues, the individual can also move the courts challenging the government's order.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance

Source: The Indian Express

### 3. Why truck drivers across states are protesting against new law for hit-and-run cases

#### Introduction

The nationwide transportation strike entered its second day on January 2 with long queues at petrol pumps as fuel supply took a hit across the country. The three-day strike was launched by truck, bus and tanker drivers to protest against the stringent jail and fine regulations under the newly implemented Bharatiya Nyay Sanhita (BNS) for hit-and-run cases.



#### What does the new law on hit-and-run cases say?

Under the new law, which replaced the colonial era Indian Penal Code, drivers who cause a serious road accident by negligent driving and run away without informing the police or any official from the administration can face punishment of up to 10 years or a fine of Rs 7 lakh.

#### Why are truck, bus and tanker drivers protesting against it?

Private transport operators have claimed that the law discourages drivers and may lead to unjust punishments. They also claim that the drivers could be subject to mob violence when they attempt to transport the injured to hospitals and demand the repeal of the law.

### **What has been the impact of the strike?**

Since January 1, protestors have blockaded roads and highways across states like Gujarat, Rajasthan, Maharashtra, and Madhya Pradesh. This has affected vehicle movement and fuel supply.

For instance, a transporters' body claimed that the strike had impacted the movement of nearly five lakh vehicles in Madhya Pradesh. Lengthy queues formed at petrol pumps across states, including Himachal Pradesh and Maharashtra.

On Monday, protestors obstructed highways in several districts of Gujarat, including Kheda, Valsad, Gir Somnath, Bharuch, and Mehsana, by parking vehicles and setting up blockades.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance

Source: The Indian Express

### **4. A brothel 'customer' can be charged under ITP Act: What the Kerala HC has said**

#### **Introduction**

A customer in a brothel can be charged under the Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1956, the Kerala High Court ruled on December 21, 2023. In doing so, Justice P G Ajithkumar observed that a "consumer" comes within the purview of Section 5 of the 1956 Act, which punishes those who 'procure', 'induce', or 'take' people for prostitution.

#### **The ITP Act**

The ITP Act was passed on December 30, 1956 to prevent 'the commercialisation of vices' and the 'trafficking of females'.

Section 2 defines a "brothel" to include "any house, room, or place, or any portion of any house, room or place, which is used for purposes [of sexual exploitation or abuse] for the gain of another person or for the mutual gain of two or more prostitutes." The term "prostitution" is defined as "the sexual exploitation, or abuse of persons, for commercial purposes."

Section 5 penalises anyone who "procures or attempts to procure a person, with or without their consent, for prostitution purposes." It also punishes those "inducing persons to go from any place, for prostitution purposes, to become inmates of, or frequent, a brothel."

Causing or inducing persons to engage in prostitution is punishable with rigorous imprisonment for 3–7 years, along with a Rs 2,000 fine. However, if such an offence is

committed against a person's will or a child, the maximum sentence can be extended to fourteen years or life.

### **The current case**

In the present case, the petitioner was found as a customer in a brothel and arrested. Accused of offences under the ITP Act's Sections 3 (keeping a brothel or allowing premises to be used as one), 4 (living on prostitution earnings), 5 (procuring, inducing, or taking persons for prostitution), 7 (punishing prostitution in or around public places), the accused filed a plea before the Chief Judicial Magistrate, Alappuzha, seeking to be discharged.

The district court rejected the plea and directed that charges be framed against him. The aggrieved petitioner thus moved the Kerala High Court against the lower court's order.

### **What the Kerala HC ruled**

Noting that the term "procure" isn't defined in the 1956 Act, the court observed that the word must be understood in the context in which it's used, bearing in mind the Act's objective of suppressing immoral trafficking or preventing prostitution.

Although the word 'procure' refers to getting possession of or obtaining something, the court construed it to mean those getting or obtaining "domain over a person" for prostitution.

Therefore, the court upheld the lower court order and dismissed the petitioner's plea, concluding that a consumer also comes within the purview of Section 5.

### **What the ruling changes**

The Kerala High Court ruling has expanded the meaning of the term "procure" in Section 5 of the ITP Act, by adding that a customer will be held liable in addition to pimps/brothel-keepers who "hire" persons for prostitution.

Previously, high courts have expressed differing opinions on whether a brothel customer can be held liable under the ITP Act.

In December 2022, the Kerala HC in Mathew vs the State of Kerala ruled that a customer caught in a brothel can be prosecuted under the ITP Act. "Section 7(1) of the Act penalises two types of persons for indulging in prostitution within the areas specified. Those persons are (i) the person who carries on prostitution and (ii) the person with whom such prostitution is carried on," the HC said, adding that the act of immoral traffic cannot be perpetrated or carried on without a 'customer'.

Prior to that ruling, however, the Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka HCs in *Goenka Sajan Kumar vs The State Of AP* (2014) and *Sri Sanaula vs State Of Karnataka* (2017) ruled against prosecuting brothel customers under sections 3-7 of the ITP Act.

### **So, what does this mean?**

Importantly, the Kerala High Court ruling has not held the petitioner guilty under Section 5 of the ITP Act — it has simply held that he can be charged under it. He will now face trial. Notably, the petitioner was discharged of offences under Sections 3, 4, and 7 by the High Court.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance

Source: The Indian Express

## **5. What are VVPATs, and why has Jairam Ramesh written to EC about them?**

### **What happened?**

Congress leader Jairam Ramesh wrote to Chief Election Commissioner Rajiv Kumar on December 30, requesting that a team of INDIA group leaders be provided an opportunity to meet him and his colleagues to put forward their point of view on VVPATs.

In his letter to Rajiv Kumar, Jairam Ramesh said that on December 20, 2023, INDIA front leaders had requested an appointment with the ECI to “discuss and provide suggestions on the use of VVPATs” based on a resolution passed at a meeting of leaders of the bloc the previous day. The resolution had called for 100% verification of VVPAT slips.

### **What are VVPATs?**

When a vote is cast, the Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT) machine, which is attached to the ballot unit (BU) of the Electronic Voting Machine (EVM), prints out a slip of paper with the voter’s choice indicated on it. Though it remains behind glass, the printed slip is visible for seven seconds so the voter can see that the vote has been recorded correctly, before it falls into a box underneath.

### **Introduction of VVPATs**

The idea of the VVPAT machine first emerged in 2010, when the EC held a meeting with political parties to discuss the EVM and ways to make the polling process more transparent.

The Conduct of Elections Rules, 1961 were amended in 2013 to allow for a printer with a drop box to be attached to the EVM. The VVPAT was used for the first time in all 21 polling stations of the Noksen Assembly constituency of Nagaland in 2013, after which the EC decided to introduce VVPATs in a phased manner. From June 2017, 100% of



VVPATs began to be used in polls, and the 2019 Lok Sabha elections became the first general election to have 100% of EVMs being attached to VVPATs.

### **What percentage of VVPAT slips are counted as of now?**

When it came time to decide what percentage of the VVPAT slips should actually be counted to verify the accuracy, the EC asked the Indian Statistical Institute (ISI) in 2018 to come up with a “mathematically sound, statistically robust and practically cogent sample size for the internal audit of the VVPAT slips with electronic result of EVMs”, the EC affidavit said.

The EC also met political parties to discuss the issue, where demands for 10% to 100% counting emerged. In February 2018, the EC mandated the counting of VVPAT slips of one randomly selected polling station per Assembly constituency. This was increased to five polling stations per Assembly seat, following a Supreme Court judgment in April 2019 on a petition filed by TDP leader Chandrababu Naidu.

Meanwhile, the ISI report to the EC in March 2019 recommended that a random sample of 479 EVMs be selected for counting of VVPAT slips. “If for each of the selected machines, the EVM count matches with the VVPAT count, then it can be concluded with an extremely high statistical confidence (more than 99.993665752% confidence) that the proportion of defective EVMs is less than 2%,” the ISI report said.

### **Why does the INDIA alliance want 100% counting of VVPAT slips?**

In its resolution passed on December 21, the INDIA alliance stated: “Instead of the VVPAT slip falling in the box, it should be handed over to the voter who shall then place it in a separate ballot box after having verified his or her choice. 100% counting of VVPAT slips should then be done. This will restore full confidence of the people in free and fair elections”.

### **What has the EC said?**

Last year, the EC told the Supreme Court that verification of VVPATs of five randomly selected polling stations per Assembly seat, with more than 4,000 total Assembly seats in India, translated to 20,600 EVM-VVPAT systems – well above the ISI’s recommendation of 479.

In Lok Sabha and Assembly elections so far, the EC said, 38,156 VVPATs have been checked randomly. “Not a single case of transfer of vote meant for candidate ‘A’ to candidate ‘B’ has been detected,” the EC said. But, the EC did admit that “differences in count, if any, have always been traceable to human errors like non-deletion of mock poll votes” from the control unit of the EVM or the VVPAT.

The EC said the VVPAT was “essentially an audit trail” so the voter could verify the vote at that instant, but following Supreme Court orders, the slips were being tallied on a

“statistically robust basis”. The EC said pressing for 100% verification was a “regressive thought and tantamount to going back to the days of manual voting using ballot system”. It said manual counting of all VVPAT slips would take time and introduce the potential of human error.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance

Source: The Indian Express

## **6. Justice Gavai nominated as SC Legal Services Committee Chairman: What law says on free legal aid in India**

### **Introduction**

Supreme Court judge Justice BR Gavai has been nominated as the Chairman of the Supreme Court Legal Services Committee (SCLSC), replacing Justice Sanjiv Khanna – the seniormost judge of the top court after the Chief Justice of India (CJI).

A notification issued by the Department of Justice on December 29, 2023, announced Justice Gavai's nomination.

### **What is the Supreme Court Legal Services Committee?**

The Supreme Court Legal Services Committee was constituted under Section 3A of the Legal Services Authorities Act, 1987, to provide “free and competent legal services to the weaker sections of society”, in cases falling under the top court's jurisdiction.

Section 3A of the Act states that the Central Authority (the National Legal Services Authority or NALSA) shall constitute the committee. It consists of a sitting SC judge, who is the chairman, along with other members possessing the experience and qualifications prescribed by the Centre. Both the chairman and other members will be nominated by the CJI. Further, the CJI can appoint the Secretary to the Committee.

### **Who does the SCLSC comprise?**

As of date, the SCLSC consists of chairperson BR Gavai and nine members nominated by the CJI. The Committee, in turn, can appoint officers and other employees as prescribed by the Centre, in consultation with the CJI.

Besides this, Rule 10 of the NALSA Rules, 1995, entails the numbers, experience, and qualifications of the SCLSC members. Under Section 27 of the 1987 Act, the Centre is empowered to make rules in consultation with the CJI, by notification, to carry out the provisions of the Act.

### **What is the need for legal services and how is it dispensed to the people?**

The need for providing legal services has been underlined in many provisions of the Indian Constitution. Article 39A states, “The State shall secure that the operation of the

legal system promotes justice, on a basis of equal opportunity, and shall, in particular, provide free legal aid, by suitable legislation or schemes or in any other way, to ensure that opportunities for securing justice are not denied to any citizen by reason of economic or other disabilities."

Moreover, Articles 14 (right to equality) and 22(1) (rights to be informed of grounds for arrest) also make it obligatory for the State to ensure equality before the law and a legal system that promotes justice based on equal opportunity.

Although the idea of a legal aid programme was earlier floated in the 1950s, it was in 1980 that a committee at the national level was established under the chairmanship of then SC judge Justice PN Bhagwati. The Committee for Implementing Legal Aid Schemes started monitoring legal aid activities throughout India.

### **What the Legal Services Authorities Act says**

In 1987, the Legal Services Authorities Act was enacted to give a statutory base to legal aid programmes. It aims to provide free and competent legal services to eligible groups, including women, children, SC/ST and EWS categories, industrial workers, disabled persons, and others.

Under the Act, NALSA was constituted in 1995 to monitor and evaluate the implementation of legal aid programmes and to lay down policies for making legal services available. A nationwide network has been envisaged under the Act for providing legal aid and assistance. It also disburses funds and grants to State Legal Services Authorities and NGOs for implementing legal aid schemes and programmes.

Subsequently, in every state, State Legal Services Authorities (SLSA) were established to implement NALSA's policies and directions, give free legal services to people, and conduct Lok Adalats. An SLSA is headed by the Chief Justice of the respective High Court and includes the senior HC judge as its Executive Chairman. While the HC Chief Justice is the patron-in-chief of the SLSA, the CJI is the patron-in-chief of NALSA.

Similarly, District Legal Services Authorities (DLSAs) and Taluk Legal Services Committees were established in districts and most taluks. Situated in the District Courts Complex in every district, each DLSA is chaired by the District Judge of the respective district.

The Taluka or Sub-Divisional Legal Services Committees are headed by a senior civil judge. Collectively, these bodies organise legal awareness camps, provide free legal services, and supply and obtain certified order copies and other legal documents, among other functions.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance

## **7. SC overturns remission given to Bilkis Bano's rapists: What happened, and what has the court ruled?**

### **What has happened?**

The Supreme Court has struck down the remission granted to 11 men convicted in the Bilkis Bano gangrape case of 2002.

The court has ruled that the Gujarat government's decision to remit their sentences and set them free was illegal. "Gujarat government had no jurisdiction to entertain the application for remission or pass the orders as it was not the appropriate government," the court said on.

### **Bilkis Bano case**

Bilkis was gangraped and seven members of her family were murdered during the Gujarat riots of 2002. The 11 convicts were released by the Gujarat government under its remission and premature release policy on August 15, 2022.

### **What was the issue before the court here?**

It was essentially whether Gujarat had the authority to issue the order for the remission of the sentences.

The crime had been committed on March 3, 2002 in Chapparwad village in Gujarat's Dahod district, but the trial took place in Mumbai, where a special court convicted and sentenced the accused in 2008.

The Supreme Court noted that the appropriate government to decide remission is the state within whose jurisdiction the accused were sentenced — and not the state within whose territorial limits the offence was committed or the accused were imprisoned.

Therefore, the court ruled that the competent government in this matter would be the Maharashtra government.

### **What is the law on remission of sentences?**

Under Articles 72 and 161 of the Constitution, the President and Governors of states can pardon a convict, and can also suspend, remit, or commute a sentence passed by the courts.

State governments too have the power to remit sentences under Section 432 of the Code of Criminal Procedure (CrPC). This is because prisons is a State Subject. (The CrPC is proposed to be replaced by the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha (Second) Sanhita. The

law has been passed by Parliament and has obtained the assent of the President, but is yet to come into force.)

However, Section 433A of the CrPC puts certain restrictions on these powers of remission. It says:

"Where a sentence of imprisonment for life is imposed on conviction of a person for an offence for which death is one of the punishments provided by law, or where a sentence of death imposed on a person has been commuted under Section 433 into one of imprisonment for life, such person shall not be released from prison unless he had served at least fourteen years of imprisonment."

### **And what are the grounds for remission?**

States set up a Sentence Review Board to exercise the powers under Section 432 of the CrPC. The Supreme Court has held that states cannot exercise the power of remission arbitrarily, and must follow due process. While the policy varies from state to state, broadly the grounds for remission considered by the Board are the same.

These factors to be considered while making a decision on granting remission are: seriousness of the crime, the status of the co-accused, and conduct in jail.

In 'Laxman Naskar v. Union of India' (2000) the SC laid down five grounds on which remission is considered:

- (a) Whether the offence is an individual act of crime that does not affect the society;
- (b) Whether there is a chance of the crime being repeated in future;
- (c) Whether the convict has lost the potentiality to commit crime;
- (d) Whether any purpose is being served in keeping the convict in prison; and
- (e) Socio-economic conditions of the convict's family.

Jail manuals contain rules that allow certain days of remission in every month for good behaviour of convicts. For those serving fixed sentences, the remission days are accounted for while releasing the convict. However, convicts serving life sentences are entitled to seek remission only after serving a minimum of 14 years.

### **So what happened in the Bilkis Bano case?**

One of the convicts, Radheshyam Shah, moved the Supreme Court in 2022 after he had completed 15 years and four months of the life term awarded to him by a CBI court in Mumbai.

Radheshyam Shah sought directions to the Gujarat government to consider his application for premature release under its 1992 remission policy.



Shah argued that the Gujarat HC had rejected his prayer on July 17, 2019 on the premise that since the trial had been concluded in Maharashtra, the application for premature release must also be filed in Maharashtra, and not in Gujarat.

In an order dated May 13, 2022, an SC Bench of Justices Ajay Rastogi and Vikram Nath asked the Gujarat government to consider Shah's application for premature release "within a period of two months", as per the state's 1992 remission policy.

Gujarat was the "appropriate government" to decide on questions like remission or premature release because it was there that "the crime was committed and not the State where the trial stands transferred and concluded for exceptional reasons under the orders of this Court", the SC said.

### **What is Gujarat's remission policy?**

The remission policy that was notified in 1992 — and which was in force at the time of the crime (2002) and conviction (2008) — permitted prisoners to apply for remission "on the basis that life imprisonment is an arbitrary or notional figure of twenty years of imprisonment".

But this policy was invalidated by the SC in November 2012. The court had said: "Before actually exercising the power of remission under Section 432 of the CrPC the appropriate Government must obtain the opinion (with reasons) of the presiding judge of the convicting or confirming Court. Remission can, therefore, be given only on a case-by-case basis and not in a wholesale manner."

Following the SC order and instructions issued subsequently by the Union Home Ministry to all states and Union Territories, the Gujarat government formulated a fresh policy in 2014. This contained an annexure listing cases where remission could not be granted — among them were those in which the prisoners were convicted for a crime that was investigated by an agency under the Delhi Special Police Establishment Act (CBI, which was in the investigating agency in the Bilgis case), and prisoners convicted for murder with rape or gangrape.

### **What happened after the remission was granted?**

There was outrage because the remission granted to convicted rapists was seen to represent a grave miscarriage of justice. This feeling was exacerbated after the convicts were feted and garlanded by local people.

Bilgis Bano challenged the remission order. She pleaded before the SC that "the en masse premature release of the convicts... has shaken the conscience of the society". She said the crime was "one of the most gruesome crimes this country has ever seen" and that she was "shell shocked, completely numb..." after the convicts were released.

## **8. Maharashtra Speaker gives verdict on Shiv Sena split: what was the case before him**

### **Introduction**

Maharashtra Speaker Rahul Narwekar on January 10 ruled that the Eknath Shinde faction was the legitimate and “real Shiv Sena”, having the support of the majority of the party’s MLAs.

He was pronouncing his verdict on 34 petitions, filed by the two rival Shiv Sena factions against each other, seeking the disqualification of 54 MLAs in total arising out of the party’s 2022 split.

### **The split**

The seeds of the conflict were planted when the Uddhav Thackrey-led (united) Shiv Sena joined the Maha Vikas Aghadi government along with traditional rivals Congress and the Nationalist Congress Party in 2019. While Uddhav became CM and Shiv Sena got a number of key ministries, many within the party felt that ditching the BJP for the MVA diluted the party’s identity and ideological position.

Things came to a head on June 21, 2022 when Eknath Shinde and a group of 34 Sena MLAs rebelled against Uddhav. Within hours, Uddhav’s side passed a resolution removing Shinde as leader of the party in the Maharashtra House, appointing Ajay Choudhari in his place. At the same time, the Shinde group also passed a resolution affirming Shinde’s leadership.

After being unable to placate Sena rebels, Uddhav resigned as Chief Minister on June 29 and his government fell. Shinde took oath as Maharashtra CM a day later, allied with the BJP.

### **Disqualification pleas before the speaker**

The very first set of pleas were filed by the Uddhav faction two days after the Sena split, seeking the disqualification of Shinde and 15 other MLAs who allegedly ignored party whips. Eventually, petitions would be filed for the disqualification of a total of 40 Shinde Sena MLAs.

However, the Shinde Sena claimed that the split was borne out of legitimate grievances held by Sena supporters against the direction that the party took under Uddhav, and

thus did not violate legislative rules inviting disqualification. It responded in seeking the disqualification of 14 MLAs of the Uddhav faction instead.

These petitions were challenged in the Supreme Court. Also, the decision of the Maharashtra Governor to call for a trust vote was challenged, the swearing-in of Eknath Shinde as the Chief Minister of the Government with BJP backing, and the appointment of Narwekar as new Maharashtra speaker.

### **The Supreme Court weighs in**

From June 2022, the Supreme Court began hearing a batch of petitions filed by leaders from the Thackeray and Shinde factions. In its verdict on May 11, 2023, the Supreme Court held that the Governor's earlier decision to order the floor test for the MVA government as well as the Speaker's decision to appoint Gogawale was incorrect.

With regards to the disqualifications, the SC ruled that Speaker must consider the version of the party constitution which was submitted to the ECI with the consent of both factions.

Notably, the court told Narwekar to not decide based on which faction possesses the majority in the Assembly, and not as per the Election Commission of India's interim order recognising the Shinde faction as a political party.

The Supreme Court also repeatedly pulled up Narwekar for not deciding on the petitions. It initially set a December 31 deadline, which was later extended to January 10.

### **Speaker backs Shinde, rejects both sets of disqualification petitions**

Narwekar held that the 1999 constitution was the last relevant constitution submitted to ECI. "I hold that the Shinde faction was the real political party when the rival faction emerged on June 21, 2022," Maharashtra Assembly Speaker Rahul Narwekar ruled. "Shinde faction had an overwhelming majority of 37 of 55 MLAs when rival factions emerged," he said.

Consequently, he rejected the disqualification petitions filed by Uddhav's faction against the Shinde Sena. However, he also dismissed the disqualification petitions against Shiv Sena (UBT) MLAs on procedural grounds. "Submissions by the Shinde faction that legislators from the UBT faction were liable to be disqualified cannot be accepted on the grounds that it is mere allegation and assertion that they had

voluntarily given up membership of the party. No material was given to substantiate," Narwekar said.

### **What this all means**

Effectively, this means that the Shinde Sena gets further legitimacy as a political party, after the Election Commission also recognised it. While no MLA was eventually disqualified, Uddhav's side is likely to take up the matter in court.

Politically, however, only time will tell how things will play out. While Shinde's supporters are celebrating the Speaker's decision, for the Uddhav faction, things might not be all too glum either. The decision only gives further ammunition to Uddhav and his supporters in their claims that the BJP is trying to "destroy the Shiv Sena."

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance

Source: The Indian Express

## **9. Centre and Opposition spar over rejection of R-Day tableaux: How tableaux are chosen for the Republic Day parade**

### **Why in news?**

India's Republic Day celebrations are incomplete without colourful tableaux cantering down Kartavya Path (formally Rajpath). Showcasing India's rich and diverse cultural heritage, they add colour to the grand event on January 26.



**Figure 2 Tableau of Uttar Pradesh during 2023 Republic Day Parade**

In the lead up to this year's Republic Day, however, the Centre and several Opposition-ruled states are at loggerheads over the rejection of their states' tableaux. So far, Punjab, Karnataka, Delhi and West Bengal have protested the rejection of their tableau.

Karnataka Chief Minister Siddaramaiah called the decision “an insult to Kannadigas”. Punjab CM Bhagwant Mann regarded it as a reflection of the Centre’s “anti-Punjab syndrome”.

The Centre, on its part, has stuck to its decision. Here is all you need to know about how Republic Day tableaux are chosen.

### **First, who can send tableaux to the Republic Day parade?**

According to a Ministry of Defence (MoD) circular dated October 30, 2023, each year, a select number of “State Governments/ UT Administrations/ Central/Ministries/ Departments” send their tableaux to the Republic Day parade. There is a rigorous application process which begins with interested parties submitting a concept note, along with design blueprints to the MoD. The deadline for submissions to participate in this year’s parade was November 10, 2023.

### **How does the selection process work?**

The tableaux proposals received are evaluated by a committee of experts appointed by the MoD, comprising prominent persons in the field of art, culture, painting, sculpture, music, architecture, choreography, etc. The selection process happens in a phased manner.

**STAGE 1** involves the assessment of the initial proposals and the design sketch/blueprint. The Committee sits alongside official representatives of the participants and suggests modifications, if necessary. A number of proposals may be rejected in this stage itself.

**STAGE 2** involves assessment of three-dimensional models of the proposals. If the Committee is satisfied with the model, then the tableau is selected and further sent for fabrication. The Committee can also suggest changes to models before selection.

Crucially, while the process is envisioned to be collaborative, the Committee has the final say on which tableaux are chosen, and can order any modifications they feel are required.

### **What is the basis of selection?**

As per the above-quoted document, “selection depends upon a combination of factors including but not limited to visual appeal, impact on the masses, idea/theme of the tableaux, degree of detailing involved in the tableaux, music accompanying the tableaux, local artists used etc.”

Each year, the MoD comes up with an overarching theme, under which, participants can showcase elements relevant to their respective state/UT/department in their



tableaux. This year's theme is "Viksit Bharat" (Developed India) and "Bharat: Loktantra ki Matrika" (India: the Mother of Democracy).

The Defence Ministry also shares the basic guidelines about what all the tableaux can or should include. The participating entities must engage "young qualified designers from renowned institutions", electronic display walls for a bright display of images or content, moving elements using robotics or mechatronics, 3D printing could be used for certain elements, use of augmented or virtual reality, and special effects to improve the optics and visual effects of the tableau. Extra weightage is given to tableaux which conform to these guidelines.

Importantly, the tableaux of two different states/ UTs must not be too similar, and eco-friendly material must be used for their construction.

### **So, why have tableaux from Opposition-ruled states been rejected?**

While no official reasons have been given, there could be many factors behind the Centre's decision.

MoD sources told news agency PTI that Punjab and West Bengal's tableaux were ultimately rejected due to them not aligning with the "broader theme". Punjab had reportedly submitted three proposals, including themes like "Punjab's history of sacrifices, women empowerment with Mai Bhago's story, and the state's rich cultural heritage". It is unclear what Bengal's proposal entailed.

With respect to Karnataka, BJP state president B Y Vijayendra on Wednesday (January 10) said that "As far as the tableau issue is concerned, Karnataka has had an opportunity for the last 14 years. Since every state has to get the opportunity, Karnataka has missed this time." He added that Karnataka would get an opportunity next year.

AAP spokesperson Priyanka Kakkar alleged that the Delhi government was not provided any reason for its exclusion. She said that Delhi CM Arvind Kejriwal wanted to present the state's model of governance to the country in the form of a tableaux.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance

Source: The Indian Express

## **10. What is the long-running legal dispute over AMU's minority character**

### **Why in news?**

A seven-judge Bench of the Supreme Court started hearing the matter pertaining to Aligarh Muslim University's minority character. This is a dispute that dates back almost 57 years and has been adjudicated upon multiple times by different courts.

### **What is the 'minority character' of an educational institution?**

Article 30(1) of the Constitution empowers all religious and linguistic minorities to establish and administer educational institutions. This provision reinforces the Union government's commitment to foster growth and development of minority communities by guaranteeing that it will not discriminate in giving aid on the basis of their being 'minority' institutions.



### **When and how was AMU set up?**

AMU's origins can be traced back to the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental (MOA) College, established by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan in 1875 to help Muslims overcome educational backwardness and prepare for government services. MOA not only imparted Western education but also emphasised Islamic theology. Sir Syed also advocated for women's education.

In 1920, the institution was conferred university status and all assets of MOA College were transferred to it.

### **When did the university's minority character come under dispute?**

The legal dispute over AMU's minority status dates back to 1967 when the Supreme Court (in *S. Azeez Basha and another versus Union of India*), led by then Chief Justice of India KN Wanchoo, was reviewing changes made in 1951 and 1965 to the AMU Act of 1920. These amendments affected how the university was run. For instance, originally, the 1920 Act said that the Governor General of India would be the head of

the University. But in 1951, they changed it to replace 'Lord Rector' with 'Visitor,' and this Visitor would be the President of India.

Further, a provision that said only Muslims could be part of the University Court was removed, allowing non-Muslims to join. Additionally, the amendments reduced the authority of the University Court and increased the powers of the Executive Council of AMU. As a result, the Court essentially became a body appointed by the 'Visitor'.

These alterations in the AMU's structure faced a legal challenge in the Supreme Court. The petitioners argued primarily on the grounds that Muslims established AMU and, therefore, had the right to manage it. It was while considering the challenge to these amendments that the top court held on October 20, 1967, that AMU was neither established nor administered by the Muslim minority.

The highest court determined that in 1920, Muslims could have set up a university, but that would not have guaranteed that the degrees from that university would be officially recognised by the Indian government. Hence, the court emphasised, AMU was established through a central Act to ensure the government's recognition of its degrees. So while the Act may have been passed as a result of the efforts of the Muslim minority, it does not imply that the University, under the 1920 Act, was established by the Muslim minority, the SC ruled.

Additionally, according to the 1920 Act, the SC stated, the university was not solely operated by Muslims. Instead, its administration was entrusted to the Lord Rector and other statutory bodies. Even the University Court, which had only Muslim members, was elected by an electorate which was not exclusively Muslim, the Supreme Court noted.

### **Minority Status**

The SC ruling triggered nationwide protests from Muslims. In response, political authorities yielded in 1981 and introduced an amendment to the AMU Act, explicitly affirming its minority status. The amendment introduced Section 2(l) and Subsection 5(2)(c), which stated that the university was "an educational institution of their choice established by the Muslims of India" and "subsequently incorporated" as the AMU.

### **Question over Reservation policy**

In 2005, the AMU implemented a reservation policy, reserving 50% of seats in postgraduate medical courses for Muslim candidates. This was challenged in the Allahabad High Court, which, in the same year, overturned the reservation and nullified the 1981 Act. The court reasoned that the AMU could not maintain an exclusive reservation because, according to the Supreme Court's verdict in the S. Azeez Basha case, it did not qualify as a minority institution. Subsequently, in 2006, a set of eight

petitions, including one from the Union government, contested the High Court's decision before the Supreme Court.

In 2016, the NDA government informed the SC that it was withdrawing the appeal filed by the government, saying, "as the executive government at the Centre, we can't be seen as setting up a minority institution in a secular state."

On February 12, 2019, a three-judge Bench presided by the then CJI Ranjan Gogoi referred the matter to a seven-judge Bench. The seven judge bench has started hearing the case.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance

Source: Indian Express & The Hindu

## **11. Supreme Court Declines Stay on Controversial Law Altering Chief Election Commissioner Appointment Process**

### **Why in news?**

The Supreme Court has refused to grant a stay on a recently enacted law that disregards a previous Supreme Court ruling. The law, known as 'The CEC and Other Election Commissioners (Appointment, Conditions of Service and Term of Office) Act, 2023,' replaces the Chief Justice of India (CJI) with a Union Cabinet Minister in the high-powered selection committee responsible for appointing the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) and Election Commissioners (ECs). The petitioner, Jaya Thakur, a Congress party leader, argues that this change dilutes the Supreme Court's earlier judgment.

### **Key Points**

- The Supreme Court declined to stay the new law, emphasizing the inability to stay a statute.
- Jaya Thakur's petition contends that the exclusion of the CJI from the selection committee undermines its effectiveness, making the Prime Minister and the nominated Cabinet Minister the decisive factors.
- The petition raises concerns about compromising free and fair elections and asserts that the law goes against the concept of the separation of powers.
- Senior advocate Vikas Singh argues that the law contradicts the principles of constitutional democracy by lacking an independent mechanism for appointments.



- Another petition by Gopal Singh calls for the implementation of an independent selection committee and seeks an injunction on the Gazette notification of December 28, 2023, which introduced the controversial law.
- The new law alters the appointment process, removing the CJI from the committee and giving the government primacy in the selection of CEC and ECs.
- The legal question at the center of the petitions questions whether the Parliament or any Legislative Assembly has the authority to nullify or amend a Supreme Court judgment, particularly one from a Constitution Bench. The petition emphasizes the constitutional implications of such legislative actions.

## Points of contention

**A look at what the Sections 7 and 8 of the CEC and Other Election Commissioners (Appointment, Conditions of Service and Term of Office) Act, 2023 say**



■ **Section 7 mandates the selection committee to consist of the Prime Minister, a Union Cabinet Minister, and the Leader of the Opposition or the leader of the largest Opposition party in the Lok Sabha**

■ **Section 8 allows the selection committee to regulate its own procedure in a transparent manner and consider persons other than those suggested by the search committee**

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance

Source: The Indian Express & The Hindu

## 12. Concerns Surrounding Digi Yatra: An Overview

### Unauthorized Facial Biometric Collection

During the peak holiday season in December 2023, reports surfaced regarding the unauthorized collection of facial biometrics at airport entry gates for the Digi Yatra



app. Security personnel and private staff were found to be gathering this data without the knowledge or consent of passengers.

### **Complaints from Air Travelers**

Passengers using various airports lodged complaints about the “coercive and deceptive” enrollment process for Digi Yatra. Complaints included allegations that CISF personnel at entry gates were scanning boarding passes and capturing photos without passengers’ explicit consent, enrolling them in Digi Yatra without proper permission.

### **Digi Yatra: Objectives and Implementation**

Digi Yatra, introduced by the Ministry of Civil Aviation in 2018, aims to facilitate paperless and seamless passenger movement through airport checkpoints. The initiative is voluntary and involves the use of a mobile app owned by the Digi Yatra Foundation consortium. Currently operational at 13 airports, the initiative is set to expand to 24 more airports in 2024.

### **Digi Yatra App and Enrollment Process**

The Digi Yatra app, not government-owned, requires passengers to register with their name, mobile number, email address, and Aadhaar document. Passengers also upload a selfie for facial recognition. This information creates a Digi Yatra travel ID. At airports, passengers scan their boarding passes and undergo facial recognition, creating a data set used for seamless processing at subsequent checkpoints.

### **Privacy Concerns and Data Protection**

Despite government assurances of decentralized data storage, concerns have been raised regarding data security and privacy. The Internet Freedom Foundation analyzed the Digi Yatra policy, revealing potential issues with compliance with the Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023. The Act, passed in August 2023, lacks framed rules, and the Digi Yatra policy grants broad powers to exempt government agencies from compliance. The policy also allows security agencies access to passenger data based on existing protocols, with the ability to adjust data purge settings based on security requirements.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance

Source: The Hindu

**13. A passenger attacked a pilot. How are airlines expected to respond?**

### **Why in news?**

IndiGo has initiated the process of putting on the no-fly list a passenger who assaulted a pilot after the flight was delayed for several hours amid heavy fog in Delhi on Sunday. The airline declared the passenger "unruly", and further action will be guided by the Civil Aviation Requirements (CAR) on "Handling of unruly passengers" issued by the aviation watchdog Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA).

The CAR lay down the procedure that airlines must follow with regard to unruly passenger behaviour of varying degrees at the time of the incident and subsequently.

Over the past few months, the DGCA has been prodding carriers to proactively report incidents of disruptive passenger behaviour on board aircraft, which the regulator feels could compromise operational safety.

### **How are airlines supposed to respond to incidents of unruly passenger behaviour?**

The airline should first inform the passengers concerned that in case their behaviour is deemed unruly as per the guidelines, they could be arrested.

Unruly behaviour includes (but is not limited to): consuming liquor or drugs resulting in unruly behaviour; smoking; not obeying the pilot's instructions; using threatening or abusive language against crew or other passengers; physically threatening and abusive behaviour; intentionally interfering with discharge of duties by the crew; and endangering the safety of the aircraft and those on board.

In the incident that took place at Delhi's IGI Airport, the aircraft was still on ground, so the passenger was handed over to airport security immediately. In cases of unruly behaviour in the air, the pilot is required to quickly assess if the cabin crew can control the unruly passenger, and accordingly inform the airline's central control on the ground.

If the pilots and the airline's central control believe that the unruly passenger cannot be brought under control by the cabin crew, they must land as soon as possible at the nearest available airport. Upon landing, airline representative shall lodge FIR (First Information Report) with the concerned security agency at aerodrome, to whom, the unruly passenger shall be handed over".

### **What is the procedure to be followed after the incident is over?**

When an airline receives a complaint of unruly passenger behaviour from the pilot-in-command, it must refer the complaint to an internal committee, which must include (i) a retired district and sessions judge as chairman, (ii) a representative of a different

airline and, (iii) a representative of a passengers' association, or consumer association, or a retired officer of a consumer disputes redressal forum.

The internal committee is required to decide the matter within 30 days, along with the categorisation of the incident in one of three defined category levels. The committee shall also decide the duration for which the unruly passenger will be banned from flying. The committee's decision shall be binding on the airline.

### **And what are the category levels of disruptive passenger behaviour?**

The levels define behaviour ranging from verbal harassment to murderous assault.

Level 1: Unruly behaviour, including physical gestures, verbal harassment, and unruly inebriation.

Level 2: Physically abusive behaviour, including pushing, kicking, hitting, and grabbing or inappropriate touching or sexual harassment.

Level 3: Life-threatening behaviour, including damage to aircraft operating systems, physical violence such as choking, eye gouging, murderous assault, and attempted or actual breach of flight crew compartment.

### **What penalties can unruly behaviour by a flight passenger attract?**

The airline can ban the unruly passenger for up to 30 days immediately after the incident.

"Pending decision of the Internal Committee, the concerned airline may ban such unruly passenger from flying, but such period may not exceed a period of 30 days. In case the Internal Committee fails to take a decision in 30 days, the passenger will be free to fly," the rules say.

Airlines are required to maintain a database of unruly passengers and share it with the DGCA and other airlines. The DGCA maintains a No-Fly List based on the data shared by carriers.

In addition to the airline on whose aircraft the incident occurred, other carriers also have the option of banning such passengers from flying for varying durations based on offence levels. For Level 1 and 2 offences, the ban on flying can extend to three months and six months respectively. For a Level 3 offence, the minimum ban should be for 2 years, with no upper limit.

An individual who is banned from flying can appeal within 60 days to an Appellate Committee constituted by the Ministry of Civil Aviation, and headed by a retired judge

of a High Court. An appeal against the appellate panel's decision shall be made to a High Court.

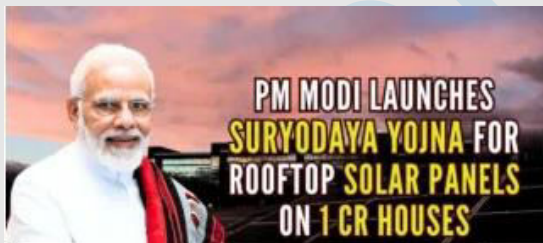


A passenger hits an IndiGo pilot when he was making an announcement regarding a delay in take-off at the Delhi airport.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance

Source: The Indian Express

#### 14. Pradhan Mantri Suryodaya Yojana



##### Why in news?

Prime Minister Narendra Modi recently announced the 'Pradhan Mantri Suryodaya Yojana', a government scheme under which one crore households will get rooftop solar power systems.

##### Earlier scheme

This isn't the first scheme for promoting the installation of rooftop solar power systems, though. In 2014, the government launched the Rooftop Solar Programme that aimed to achieve a cumulative installed capacity of 40,000 megawatts (MW) or 40 gigawatts (GW) by 2022.

However, this target couldn't be achieved. As a result, the government extended the deadline from 2022 to 2026. The Pradhan Mantri Suryodaya Yojana seems to be a new attempt to help reach the target of 40 GW rooftop solar capacity.

##### What is the Pradhan Mantri Suryodaya Yojana?

Essentially, it is a scheme that will involve installing solar power systems at rooftops for residential consumers.

The scheme would help not only reduce electricity bills of the “poor and middle class”, but also push India’s goal of becoming self-reliant in the energy sector.

### **What is India’s current solar capacity?**

According to the Ministry of New and Renewable Energy’s website, solar power installed capacity in India has reached around 73.31 GW as of December 2023. Meanwhile, rooftop solar installed capacity is around 11.08 GW as of December 2023.

In terms of total solar capacity, Rajasthan is at the top with 18.7 GW. Gujarat is at the second position with 10.5 GW. When it comes to rooftop solar capacity, Gujarat tops the list with 2.8 GW, followed by Maharashtra by 1.7 GW.

Notably, solar power has a major share in the country’s current renewable energy capacity, which stands at around 180 GW.

### **Why is an expansion of solar energy important for India?**

India is expected to 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).

To meet this demand, the country would need a reliable source of energy and it can’t be just coal plants. Although India has doubled down on its coal production in recent years, it also aims to reach 500 GW of renewable energy capacity by 2030.

Therefore, it is essential to expand solar power capacity — the country has increased it from less than 10 MW in 2010 to 70.10 GW in 2023, as mentioned before.

### **What is the Rooftop Solar Programme?**

Launched in 2014, the scheme aims to expand India’s rooftop solar installed capacity in the residential sector by providing Central Financial Assistance — the financial assistance to the eligible projects as per MNRE Guidelines — and incentives to DISCOMs (distribution companies).

The programme’s goal is to increase rooftop solar installed capacity to 40 GW by March 2026 and it is currently in its second phase. Owing to the scheme, the country’s rooftop solar has increased from 1.8 GW as of March 2019 to 10.4 GW as of November 2023.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance

Source: The Indian Express

## 15. Equal access to benefits for all SCs

### Why in news?

The Union government has formed a high-level committee of secretaries, chaired by the Cabinet Secretary, to evaluate and work out a method for the equitable distribution of benefits, schemes and initiatives to the most backward communities among the over 1,200 Scheduled Castes (SCs) across the country, that have been crowded out by relatively forward and dominant ones.

### Why this committee and why now?

This committee's formation is the result of a meeting Prime Minister Narendra Modi chaired in December, 2023, weeks after promising to look into the demand for sub-categorisation of Scheduled Castes as raised by the Madiga community in Telangana in the run-up to the Assembly elections there last year. The Madiga community constitutes at least 50% of the SC population in Telangana, where SCs comprise around 15% of the total population (2011 Census). For decades, the Madiga community has said that despite their numbers, they are crowded out of government benefits meant for SCs, including reservation, by the Mala community — another SC — which is dominant and relatively forward.

Like the Madiga community, SC communities in several States have said that they have been routinely crowded out of benefits meant for SCs by dominant and relatively forward communities in their category. Commissions formed by State and Union governments have also supported the argument that several SC communities often miss out on benefits. As a result, multiple States like Punjab, Bihar, and Tamil Nadu have tried to bring in reservation laws at the State level in a bid to sub-categorise SCs and decide on a separate quantum of reservation for these subcategories within the umbrella of SCs— all of which are held up in courts.

Consequently, this high-level panel of Secretaries has been formed with a strict mandate to look into "other ways of taking care of their grievances". While the committee's formation comes on the heels of the PM's promise to the Madiga community, sources have told that its "scope is larger than just one community in one State as it will be looking at ways to address similar issues faced by similarly-placed SC communities across the country".

### What will the panel do?

The Committee will consist of Secretaries from the Home Ministry, the Law Ministry, the Tribal Affairs Ministry, the Social Justice Ministry and the Department of Personnel and Training in addition to the Cabinet Secretary. With the question of breaking up the SC quota off the table, the panel will look into ways in which benefits of other government schemes and initiatives can be focused towards these SC communities.



This includes ways to design special initiatives for communities that need it and focusing existing programmes and schemes towards them to ensure a more even distribution of benefits. While it has not been given a specific deadline, the committee has been asked to present its findings at the earliest.

The panel will have to figure out on what basis SC communities are going to be shortlisted for special attention, find out the extent to which special initiatives need to be designed for each of them, and then find a way to deliver them. While sources have indicated that the panel has been instructed not to veer off into the question of breaking up the SC quota, nothing prevents it from forming an opinion on this matter for the government's consideration, if necessary.

### **Have there been attempts in the past?**

The demand of the Madigas was raised as early as 1994, which led to the Union government seeking legal options to do the same in 2005. At the time, the erstwhile Attorney General of India had opined that the sub-categorisation of Scheduled Castes was possible and that the Constitution could be amended to bring this about. But he had also stressed that this could happen only if there was "unimpeachable evidence to indicate a necessity" for it — suggesting that there needs to be a mechanism to gather empirical evidence to prove the necessity of sub-categorisation.

At the time, both the National Commissions for Scheduled Castes (NCSC) and Scheduled Tribes (NCST) had opposed the move to amend the Constitution, arguing that just setting aside a quota within the quota would not be enough and that making sure existing schemes and benefits reach them on priority basis was more urgent. However, even the NCST and NCSC had in 2005 maintained that nothing in the Constitution's Articles 341 and 342 explicitly prevented Parliament from sub-categorising SCs and STs.

These Articles vest the powers of notifying SC and ST lists with the President of India and of creating the lists with Parliament, with no specific instruction as to whether there can be sub-categorisation within these lists respectively. In fact, the Commissions had gone one step ahead and argued that Article 16(4) of the Constitution of India already provided for States to create special provisions for any backward classes it felt was under-represented.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance

Source: The Hindu

## **16. Why was FCRA registration for several NGOs cancelled?**



### **Why in news?**

The Foreign Contribution Regulation Act, 2010 (FCRA) registration of two prominent non-governmental organisations (NGOs) — Centre for Policy Research (CPR) and World Vision India (WVI) have been cancelled this month.

### **Who monitors the process?**

The Union Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) monitors the implementation of the FCRA. The registration of thousands of NGOs was due for renewal in 2020-2021. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the amendments to the FCRA Act in 2020, many NGOs could not complete the process. The MHA had given a relief up to September 30, 2021 to NGOs whose registration was expiring between September 29, 2020 and September 30, 2021 to apply for a renewal. The MHA has extended the deadline multiple times; the latest date being March 31, 2024.

Through the FCRA, the ministry regulates foreign donations to ensure that such funds do not adversely affect the country's internal security. It is compulsory to register under the Act, first enacted in 1976, if an association, group or NGO intends to receive foreign donations. The 1976 Act was repealed and replaced with a new legislation in 2010. It was further amended in 2020. The registration is valid for five years, after which the NGO has to apply for a renewal. It is mandatory for all such NGOs to register under the FCRA, initially valid for five years that can be renewed if it complies with all norms.

Registered groups can receive foreign contribution for social, educational, religious, economic and cultural programmes.

### **How many have lost registration?**

Since 2015, the FCRA registration of more than 16,000 NGOs have been cancelled on account of "violation." As on January 22, there were 16,989 FCRA-registered NGOs active in the country. The FCRA registration of nearly 6,000 NGOs had ceased to operate from January 1, 2022 as the MHA either refused to renew their application or the NGOs did not apply.

### **Why were CPR and WVI's registrations cancelled?**

The MHA alleged that CPR diverted foreign donations to fund "protests and legal battles against developmental projects" and misused funds to "affect India's economic interests." It alleged that the think tank engaged in production of current affairs programmes which violated FCRA norms. CPR had furnished a report on air pollution — "Overview on the Commission for Air Quality Management Act 2021, policy challenges for the new government etc." The MHA said publishing of current affairs programme using foreign funds is prohibited under Section 3 of the FCRA.

CPR said that the ministry's decision is incomprehensible and disproportionate, and some of the reasons given challenge the very basis of the functioning of a research institution. "This includes the publication on our website of policy reports emanating from our research being equated with current affairs programming," CPR said. The registration of WVI was cancelled for alleged FCRA violations from 2012-13 to 2020-21. WVI is the recipient of the highest amount of foreign donations among all NGOs registered under the Act in 1986.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance

Source: The Hindu

## **17. Bharat Ratna to Karpooori Thakur**

### **Why in news?**

The Centre recently announced it would award the Bharat Ratna posthumously to Karpooori Thakur, former chief minister of Bihar. This is the birth centenary year of Thakur, also known as 'Jannayak', or the leader of the people.

Prominent political parties of Bihar, such as the RJD and the JD(U), have regularly demanded the Bharat Ratna for Thakur, known for his struggle to secure dignity, self-respect, and development for the most disadvantaged sections of society.



Thakur's (January 24, 1924-February 17, 1988) political life was one of contrasts — he managed to emerge as the tallest backward caste leader in Bihar despite belonging to the minority nai (barber) caste himself, but the rise of the leaders he mentored, from numerically stronger castes (Lalu Prasad from the Yadavs, Ram Vilas Paswan among Dalits), took away his pole position. He was chief minister twice for short tenures, but his radical policy decisions had an outsized impact, and resonate even today.

### **Life and career**

Thakur was born in village Pitaunjhia (now known as Karpoori Gram), in the Samastipur district of Bihar. He participated in the freedom struggle and was also jailed for it. In independent India, he was voted in as an MLA in 1952. He remained an MLA till his death in 1988, except when he became an MP in 1977 and when he lost an Assembly election in 1984, amid the sympathy wave for Congress after Indira Gandhi's assassination.

### **Tenure as Minister**

Thakur was education minister of Bihar from March 5 1967 to January 28, 1968. He became the state's chief minister in December 1970 with the Samyukta Socialist Party, but his government fell after six months. He came to the post again in June 1977, but could not finish a full term, losing power in about two years. This happened due to a reservation policy he implemented, on which we'll elaborate later.

As a new crop of social justice leaders became more powerful in Bihar, Thakur slowly lost the pre-eminence he had enjoyed.

### **Clean image**

While his policy decisions were polarising, he was respected personally for his clean image and his refusal to enrich himself on government funds.

A popular anecdote about him is that when he first became an MLA in 1952, he was selected for an official delegation to Austria. He did not own a coat, and had to borrow a torn one from a friend. When Josip Tito, the president of Yugoslavia, noticed the torn coat, he gifted Thakur a new one. When Thakur died in 1988, after three decades in public life, his home was little more than a hut.

### **Major policy decisions**

Thakur is known for many of his decisions — removing English as compulsory subject for the matriculation examinations; prohibition of alcohol; preferential treatment for unemployed engineers in government contracts, through which around 8,000 of them

got jobs (this was when unemployed engineers were staging regular protests for jobs; one such protester was Nitish Kumar); and a layered reservation system.

It was this last decision that went on to have the loudest impact for Bihar as well as the country.

In June 1970, the Bihar government appointed the Mungeri Lal Commission, which in its report of February 1976 named 128 "backward" communities, 94 of which were identified as "most backward". The Janata Party government of Thakur implemented the recommendations of the Commission. The 'Karpoori Thakur Formula' provided 26% reservation, of which OBCs got a 12% share, the economically backward classes among the OBCs got 8%, women got 3%, and the poor from the "upper castes" got 3%.

This was much before the central government came up with the EWS quota, and demands of layered reservation gained momentum amid caste census demands.

In the short term, however, The 'Karpoori Thakur Formula' cost him dearly. His government fell, and he witnessed major opposition from upper castes.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance

Source: The Indian Express & The Hindu

## 18. Centre enhancing jurisdiction of BSF in Punjab

### Why in news?

Litigation concerning the territorial jurisdiction of the Border Security Force (BSF) in Punjab seems to be the result of the lack of effective consultation between the central and State governments on the issue. Punjab has filed a suit against the Union government under Article 131 of the Constitution, challenging the decision to increase the operational jurisdiction of the BSF from 15 km to 50 km.

### Rationale

The border State sees the Centre's move as a breach of federal principles and an encroachment into the law and order powers of the Punjab police. West Bengal has a similar view, and both States have got resolutions passed in their Assemblies against the expansion.

In this backdrop, the Supreme Court's decision to examine the questions that arise from the expansion of the BSF's area of operations acquires significance.

### Centre's notification

In October 2021, the Centre had issued a notification under the provisions of the BSF Act, standardising the area over which the BSF would have jurisdiction to operate. In



Punjab, West Bengal and Assam, the distance was raised from within 15 km from the border to 50 km, while it was reduced from 80 km to 50 km in Gujarat. For Rajasthan, it was kept unchanged at 50 km. The Union government said in a reply in the Rajya Sabha in December 2021 that the extension of the BSF's jurisdiction will help it discharge its border patrol duty more effectively.

### **Analysis**

While the Union government may have valid reasons for its move, it should not be seen as encroaching into the domain of the State governments, which have the constitutional responsibility to maintain public order and exercise police powers. The BSF mainly focuses on preventing trans-border crimes, especially unauthorised entry into or exit from Indian territory. It does not have the power to investigate or prosecute offenders, but has to hand over those arrested and the contraband seized from them to the local police. In practice, BSF personnel usually work in close coordination with the police and there ought to be no clash of jurisdiction.

It is possible to argue that the expanded jurisdiction merely authorises the BSF to conduct more searches and seizures, especially in cases in which the offenders manage to enter deep into the country's territory. However, it goes without saying that there ought to be strong reasons for the expansion of the jurisdiction of any central force. In this regard, the most relevant questions among those framed by the Supreme Court are whether the Centre's notification encroaches upon the State government's domain; and what factors ought to be taken into account while determining the "local limits of areas adjoining the borders of India".

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance

Source: The Hindu

## **19. Why Punjab govt moved Supreme Court against the expansion of BSF jurisdiction**

### **Why in news?**

The Supreme Court is set to hear the dispute over the expansion of the Border Security Force (BSF) jurisdiction in Punjab. On October 11, 2021, the Ministry of Home Affairs issued a notification expanding the jurisdiction of the BSF in Punjab, West Bengal and Assam. This was challenged by the Punjab government the following December.

### **Why was the BSF jurisdiction extended?**

The BSF was created after the enactment of the Border Security Force Act in September 1968. The BSF is meant to secure India's borders with its neighbouring nations and is empowered to arrest, search and seize under a number of laws, such as the Criminal Procedure Code, the Passports Act, the Passport (Entry into India) Act, and the NDPS Act, to name a few.



Section 139(1) of the BSF Act allows the central government, through an order, to designate an area "within the local limits of such area adjoining the borders of India" where members of the BSF can exercise powers to prevent offenses under any Acts that the central government may specify.

### **Extension of jurisdiction**

Prior to the notification issued in October 2021, the BSF could exercise its powers within 15 kilometres of the border in Punjab, West Bengal and Assam. The Centre expanded this to within 50 kilometres of the border.

The notification states that, within this larger 50-kilometre jurisdiction, the BSF can only exercise powers under the Criminal Procedure Code, the Passport (Entry into India) Act and the Passports Act. For other central legislations, the 15-km limit remains.

On December 7, 2021, the Minister of State for Home Affairs Nityanand Rai clarified in writing that this expansion was in response to the increased use of drones and Unmanned Aerial Vehicles, which have long-range capabilities and enable surveillance and the smuggling of arms and fake currency. He also highlighted the 'menace of cattle smuggling' and pointed out that smugglers often seek refuge outside BSF jurisdiction.

Solicitor General Tushar Mehta also claimed that the notification makes the BSF jurisdiction uniform across states, as the 50-kilometre limit was already in place in Rajasthan. The same notification reduced the jurisdiction in Gujarat from 80 km to 50 km.

### **Why has Punjab challenged this?**

The state of Punjab filed an 'original suit' against the central government in the Supreme Court in December 2021. The Supreme Court has 'original jurisdiction' in disputes between the central government and states under Article 131 of the Constitution, which means cases of this kind can only be heard for the first time at the SC "to the exclusion of any other court".

The Punjab government claimed that expanding the jurisdiction of the BSF would compromise the state's exclusive powers to legislate on matters involving the police and public order. These powers are provided in Entries 1 and 2 of the State List under Article 246 of the Constitution. They also claimed that the notification was issued without consulting with any of the states concerned. The Chief Minister of Punjab has called it "a direct attack on federalism".

Arguing before the SC in December 2023, Additional Advocate General for the state of Punjab, Shadan Farasat, claimed that in Punjab, a large number of cities and towns

would fall within this 50-kilometre jurisdiction, whereas in Gujarat and Rajasthan, most areas along the international border are sparsely populated, primarily containing marshlands or deserts.

### **Have other states joined the challenge?**

Currently, no other challenge is tagged with the Punjab government's, though the notification was met with pushback from West Bengal when it was released. Shortly after the October 2021 notification, the West Bengal Assembly had passed a resolution demanding its withdrawal.

### **What are the issues that the SC will consider?**

The court will decide if the notification expanding the jurisdiction of the BSF was arbitrary or backed by legitimate reasons. Further, the court will determine if this notification interferes with the powers of the local police and encroaches upon states powers under the Constitution.

The SC will also decide what factors have to be considered when deciding which areas are "within the local limits of such area adjoining the borders of India" and whether all states must be treated alike when determining these local limits. Finally, the court will decide if the notification can be challenged through an original suit under Article 131 of the Constitution.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance

Source: The Indian Express

## **20. Gyanvapi case: Law on places of worship, and the challenge it faces**

### **Why in news?**

The legal test before the civil court in Varanasi and the Supreme Court is whether a title suit can exist on the Kashi Vishwanath-Gyanvapi mosque disputed site since the Places of Worship (Special Provisions) Act, 1991, puts a constitutional bar on it.

Section 3 and Section 4 of the 1991 Act essentially declare that the religious character of a place of worship, barring the one at Ayodhya, shall continue to be the same as it was on August 15, 1947, and that no person shall convert any place of worship of any religious denomination into one of a different denomination or section. This is the constitutional bar under the Places of Worship Act, 1991 which forms the basis of deciding the title of the disputed site.

### **Supreme Court view**

While hearing a plea challenging the maintainability of the Gyanvapi suit, the Supreme Court had in May 2002 observed that "finding the nature of the religious place" is not barred under the 1991 law. "...the ascertainment of a religious

character of a place, as a processual instrument, may not necessarily fall foul of the provisions of Sections 3 and 4 (of the Act)...," it had said. Essentially, this ascertainment is limited to 1947 and not prior to the construction of the mosque itself.

The Supreme Court is, however, yet to hear final arguments to decide whether the 1991 Act bars even the filing of such a plea. So far, only oral observations have formed the basis of this argument but the Court is yet to conclusively rule on the issue.

Separately, a constitutional challenge to the 1991 Act is also pending in the Supreme Court. It had in 2019 indicated the case could be referred to a larger constitution bench. However, the Centre is yet to file a response in the case.

Though the voluminous Archaeological Survey of India report submitted to the Varanasi court, and to both the parties to the dispute now, suggests "there existed a Hindu temple prior" to the Gyanvapi mosque, it would be considered expert evidence that could be contested in Court.



Essentially, Courts will have to determine first whether the ASI report can be relied upon conclusively and then what does the existence of a Hindu temple mean to the religious character of the mosque on August 15, 1947.

A similar ASI report in 2003 was cited in the Babri Masjid-Ramjanmabhoomi suit. While pronouncing its order in November 2019, the Supreme Court had rejected the ASI report as inconclusive.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance

Source: The Indian Express

## **21. Union govt. makes it clear that Aadhaar card no proof of citizenship, birth date**

### **Not proof of citizenship or date of birth**

New Aadhaar cards and PDF versions of the identity document have started including a more explicit disclaimer that they are “a proof of identity, not of citizenship or date of birth”, signalling to government departments and other organisations not to use it for those purposes.

Aadhaar card has never been proof of citizenship as foreign nationals are also eligible to obtain one if they have been living in India for 180 days. However, different government departments accept it for purposes reserved for citizens or adults.

### **Need for authentication**

The IDs also include a warning that authenticating them offline needs to be done by scanning the QR code on the reverse side of the document, or by using an XML file issued to residents by the Unique Identification Authority of India (UIDAI), which administers Aadhaar.



### **2018 memorandum**

This invalidity of Aadhaar for use in determining the date of birth and citizenship has been the case for years — the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology clarified in a 2018 memorandum that Aadhaar is “per se... not a proof of date of birth”, as the date of birth is based on a different document given by applicants.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance

## 22. Fellowship programme called Vaibhav

### Why in news?

The Centre has announced the first set of recipients of a fellowship programme called Vaibhav (VAIshwik BHArtiya Vaigyanik). Scientists of Indian origin, or of Indian ancestry, can apply to spend up to three months in a year, for three years, at a host research laboratory in India. In that period, these researchers are expected to begin a project or technology start-up, build long-term connections with the institute, collaborate with the host faculty and bring in new ideas to the field, in Indian university and research settings.

As the programme gains momentum, officials say, new kinds of relationships could emerge: the Indian origin faculty could be encouraged to take on students, more associates and even supervise degrees that could lead to a genuine transfer of knowledge, innovation and work culture and perhaps optimistically, the non-resident Indian scientist even considering staying on in India.

### Similar earlier program

Vaibhav is not an original idea. During this government's tenure itself, the Department of Science and Technology (DST) conceived the VAJRA (Visiting Advanced Joint Research) Faculty Scheme with similar objectives. The differences in the two schemes are minor.

1. Vaibhav is exclusively for the Indian diaspora, while VAJRA can include other nationalities too.
2. VAJRA, though generous in the amount offered as fellowships, was restricted to one-year engagements, unlike Vaibhav which pays less but extends to three years.

The DST, which is in charge of both schemes, says that nearly 70 international faculty have spent time in India as part of VAJRA, though there have been concerns over the effectiveness of the scheme. Currently, officials say, both schemes will continue.

### Relevance of fellowship programmes

Short-term fellowships are useful in priming foreign faculty and researchers to the potential for science in India. They can also lay bare the challenges — the lack of funding for basic research, the lack of participation by private companies in core research and development and limits on academic freedom — and trigger changes in policy. The tremendous competition for tenured jobs in American and



European universities means that there is a vast pool of skilled scientific manpower, trained abroad, who can be brought back or retained in India.

Relevance: GS Prelims; Governance

Source: The Hindu

### **23. What are incestuous 'sapinda' marriages, and why has Delhi High Court reaffirmed the ban on them?**

#### **Why in news?**

Delhi High Court has recently rejected a challenge to the constitutionality of Section 5(v) of the Hindu Marriage Act, 1955 (HMA), which prohibits marriage between two Hindus if they are "sapindas" of each other — "unless the custom or usage governing each of them permits of a marriage between the two".

In its order passed on January 22 on a petition filed by a woman who had been trying for long to have this section struck down, the court said that "If the choice of a partner in a marriage is left unregulated, incestuous relationship may gain legitimacy."

#### **What is a sapinda marriage?**

A sapinda marriage is one between individuals who are related to each other within a certain degree of closeness. Sapinda relationships for the purposes of the HMA are defined in Section 3 of the Act.

"Two persons are said to be sapindas of each other if one is a lineal ascendant of the other within the limits of sapinda relationship, or if they have a common lineal ascendant who is within the limits of sapinda relationship with reference to each of them," Section 3(f)(ii) says.

Under the provisions of the HMA, on the mother's side, a Hindu individual cannot marry anyone who is within three generations of them in the "line of ascent". On the father's side, this prohibition applies to anyone within five generations of the individual.

In practice, this means that on their mother's side, an individual cannot marry their sibling (first generation), their parents (second generation), their grandparents (third generation), or an individual who shares this ancestry within three generations.

On their father's side, this prohibition would extend up to their grandparents' grandparent, and anyone who shares this ancestry within five generations.

If a marriage is found to violate Section 5(v) for being a sapinda marriage, and there is no established custom that allows such a practice, it will be declared void.

This would mean that the marriage was invalid from the very beginning, and will be treated as though it never took place.

### **Are there any exceptions to the prohibition against sapinda marriages?**

Yes — the sole exception can be found within the same provision. As noted above, it arises when the customs of each individual permits sapinda marriages.

The definition of the word “custom” is provided in Section 3(a) of the HMA. It states that a custom has to be “continuously and uniformly observed for a long time”, and should have gained enough legitimacy among Hindus in a local area, tribe, group, or family, such that it has obtained “the force of law”.

A custom may not be protected even after these conditions are fulfilled. The rule in question must be “certain and not unreasonable or opposed to public policy” and, “in the case of a rule [that is] applicable only to a family”, it should not have been “discontinued by the family”.

### **On what grounds was the law challenged?**

In 2007, the woman’s marriage was declared void after her husband successfully proved that they had entered into a sapinda marriage, and that the woman was not from a community where such marriages could be considered a custom. This ruling was challenged before the Delhi HC, which dismissed the appeal in October 2023.

The woman then approached the HC again, challenging the constitutional validity of the prohibition on sapinda marriages. She argued that sapinda marriages are prevalent even when there is no proof of custom. Hence, Section 5(v) which prohibits sapinda marriages unless there is an established custom, violates the right to equality under Article 14 of the Constitution.

The petitioner also argued that the marriage had received the consent of both families, which proved the legitimacy of the marriage.

### **What did the High Court say?**

The Delhi High Court found no merit in her arguments.

The Delhi HC also held that the choice of a partner in a marriage can be subject to regulation. With this in mind, the court held that the woman did not present any “cogent legal ground” to show that the prohibition against sapinda marriages was violative of the right to equality.

### **Are marriages similar to sapinda marriages allowed in other countries?**

In several European countries, the laws on relationships that are considered incestuous are less stringent than in India.

In France, the crime of incest was abolished under the Penal Code of 1810, so long as the marriage was between consenting adults. This Code was enacted under Napoleon Bonaparte, and was also enforced in Belgium. A new Penal Code was introduced in Belgium in 1867 to replace the French code, but incest remains legal. Portuguese law also does not criminalise incest.

The Republic of Ireland recognised same-sex marriages in 2015, but the law on incest has not been updated to include individuals in same-sex relationships. Under Italian law, incest is a crime only if it causes a "public scandal".

In the United States, incestuous marriages are banned in all 50 states, though incestuous relationships between consenting adults are allowed in New Jersey and Rhode Island.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper I; Indian Society

Source: The Indian Express

## 24. Judge vs judge: How a spat between two Calcutta HC judges reached the Supreme Court

### SINGLE JUDGE vs DIVISION BENCH

Supreme Court's 5-Judge Bench stays Calcutta HC's Single Bench order defying Division Bench stay on CBI Probe in Fake Caste Certificates Case



Dr. Justice DY Chandrachud • Justice Sanjiv Khanna,  
Justice B.R. Gavai • Justice Surya Kant • Justice Aniruddha Bose

**Why in news?**

The Supreme Court (SC) recently stayed all proceedings in the Calcutta High Court relating to a case of alleged irregularities in the admission of MBBS candidates in state-run medical colleges and hospitals in West Bengal.

A five-judge Bench of the Supreme Court led by Chief Justice of India (CJI) D Y Chandrachud held a special sitting to deal with an extraordinary situation in which two separate benches of the High Court have passed contradictory orders, and one judge, Justice Abhijit Gangopadhyay, has made allegations of serious misconduct against another judge, Justice Soumen Sen, accusing him of acting at the behest of a political party.

Such hearings are a rare occurrence at the SC, and this case is especially unusual as it concerns a Single Judge Bench refusing to acknowledge the validity of orders passed by a larger Bench of the same court, violating a number of past SC judgments.

### **Single judge bench order**

On January 24, a Single Judge Bench comprising Justice Gangopadhyay passed two orders in the case regarding alleged irregularities in MBBS admissions in West Bengal. In the first half of the day, he ordered the CBI to conduct an inquiry on account of the 'large picture of corruption' in the case. He highlighted the state policies' failure to arrest Shiekh Shahjahan after Enforcement Directorate (ED) officials were assaulted on January 5 during a raid at his residence in Sandeshkhali, necessitating CBI involvement.

In the order, he acknowledged that the petitioner did not seek a CBI inquiry in their plea, but stated that a thorough investigation is required. He directed all of the documents submitted by the Advocate General of the Calcutta High Court to be handed over to the CBI and directed the Registrar General to communicate with the CBI so an officer could appear later that day to receive the documents.

### **Division bench order**

The Advocate General (AG) immediately approached a Division Bench comprising Justices Soumen Sen and Uday Kumar, asking them to stay the CBI inquiry. The bench agreed, stating that "the right of the State to conduct fair and impartial investigation by its agencies cannot be lightly interfered with" and held that, without pleading for a CBI inquiry, the court could not order the same. The bench held that "there is no requirement to handover the documents to the CBI Officer, who was supposed to appear at 2:30 pm."

### **Conflict**

Despite the order from the Division Bench, a CBI officer appeared before Justice Gangopadhyay that afternoon. At 3:30 pm, Justice Gangopadhyay passed a

second order and went ahead with the document handover, saying no one from the state had informed him of an appeal against the order for a CBI inquiry.

### **Justice Gangopadhyay defies the order of a larger bench**

Despite the well-established law of precedent which binds a Single Bench Judge to comply with the orders of a larger bench, Justice Gangopadhyay stated that he did not recognise the validity of the stay order passed by the Division Bench and directed the CBI to complete the investigation and submit a report within two months.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance

Source: The Indian Express

## **25. Why Centre plans to replace the Indian Stamp Act, 1899 with a new law**

### **Why in news?**

The Centre has proposed repealing the Indian Stamp Act, 1899 and bringing in a new law for the stamp duty regime in the country. Recently, the Ministry of Finance invited suggestions on the draft 'Indian Stamp Bill, 2023' from the public.

### **What is stamp duty?**

A stamp duty is essentially a government tax, which is levied to register documents, like an agreement or transaction paper between two or more parties, with the registrar. Usually, the amount specified is fixed based on the document's nature or is charged at a certain percentage of the agreement value stated in the document.

Stamp duties can be levied on bills of exchange, cheques, promissory notes, bills of lading, letters of credit, policies of insurance, transfer of shares, debentures, proxies and receipts.

Accepted as valid evidence in a court of law, stamp duties are levied by the Centre but appropriated by the concerned states within their territories under Article 268 of the Constitution.

### **Why is the Indian Stamp Bill, 2023 being proposed?**

According to the statement released by the Ministry of Finance, several provisions of the Indian Stamp Act, 1899 have now become "redundant" or "inoperative". For instance, there is a lack of provisions for digital e-stamping and a lack of uniform legislation for all Indian states regarding stamp duties — the 1899 Act extended to 30 states and Union Territories combined while six states followed their own stamp acts and rules.



Therefore, the ministry has proposed repealing the existing Act and substituting it with new legislation to “reflect the present realities and objectives.”

### **What are the notable provisions of the draft Bill?**

The draft Bill has introduced provisions for digital e-stamping. “Electronic stamp” or “e-stamp” means an electronically generated impression denoting the payment of stamp duty by electronic means or otherwise, according to Section 2 (18) of the Bill.

There are also provisions for digital signatures. Section 2 (17) of the Bill states that the words “executed” and “execution”, used for instruments, will mean “signed” and “signature” and include attribution of electronic records and electronic signatures, as defined under the Information Technology (IT) Act, 2000.

The IT Act defines “electronic records” as “data, record or data generated, image or sound stored, received or sent in an electronic form or micro film or computer-generated microfiche.” Meanwhile, digital or electronic signature refers to the authentication of any electronic record by a subscriber through an electronic method or procedure.

The draft Bill also proposes to raise penalties. It seeks to increase the maximum penalty amount from Rs 5,000 to Rs 25,000 for contravening any provisions of the law and impose Rs 1,000 per day for repeated offences.

### **What is the Indian Stamp Act, 1899?**

The Indian Stamp Act, 1899 is a fiscal or money-related statute that lays down the law relating to tax levied in the form of stamps on instruments recording transactions.

Under Section 2 of the Act, an instrument includes every document by which any right or liability is or purports to be, created, transferred, limited, extended, extinguished or recorded.

Meanwhile, a “stamp” has been defined as “any mark, seal or endorsement by any agency or person duly authorised by the State Government, and includes an adhesive or impressed stamp, for the purposes of duty chargeable under this Act”.

Section 3 of the 1899 Act prescribes that certain instruments or documents shall be chargeable with the amount indicated in Schedule 1 of the Act. These include bills of exchange or promissory notes.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance

Source: The Indian Express

### 1. Red Sea attacks and Op Prosperity Guardian

#### What happened?

The recent attacks on ships passing the Red Sea, a crucial trade route that connects the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean, have prompted many businesses to pause the movement of cargo through the region.



Yemen-based Houthis, a clan belonging to an Islamic sect, has claimed responsibility for the attacks – launched to protest Israel’s ongoing military strikes on the Gaza Strip. A ship passing by near the coast of Gujarat was also targeted via a drone last week in one such strike.

#### Operation Prosperity Guardian

The United States Secretary of State Lloyd Austin announced a joint maritime security initiative called Operation Prosperity Guardian on December 19 to aid the safe movement of ships. However, a few days on, many US allies have yet to commit to the operation.

Initially, it was reported that nine countries were joining the operation – the UK, Bahrain, Canada, France, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Seychelles and Spain. But missing

from the list are other major US partners, such as Australia and Japan, as well as most Arab nations, including Saudi Arabia. But why? There are multiple factors at play here.

**In the Middle East, it's about the stand so far on the Israel-Hamas conflict.**

Bahrain is the only Middle Eastern nation to have joined the operations. But this is no surprise: the small nation is home to the US Navy's 5th Fleet.

While other countries are losing money with the re-routing of ships away from the Red Sea and the Suez Canal, there is an apprehension towards taking a firm stance against the Houthis.

Joining a grouping that is decidedly against the Houthis's purported protest action against Israel would potentially open these countries to criticism over their prior stand.

**Why other partners are reluctant**

Among other countries too, there is some reluctance to fully commit to joining the mission. Spain's defence ministry has said, "We will not participate unilaterally in the Red Sea operation."

Italy is sending Virginio Fasan, a naval frigate, to the Red Sea to protect its national interests in response to specific requests made by Italian shipowners. It is not being done as part of the operation. Further, The Netherlands said it would send two staff officers and Norway said it would send 10 naval officers to Bahrain. Denmark said its participation would be in the form of sending one officer.

This general lack of enthusiasm perhaps also points to countries wanting to stay away from getting deeply embroiled in a global flashpoint, even as Israel continues its offensive.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; International Organisations

Source: The Indian Express

**2. What is the cipher case, in which former Pak PM Imran Khan has been sentenced to 10 years?**

**Why in news?**

Former Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan and ex-Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi were sentenced to 10 years in jail by a special court in the cipher case that pertains to the disclosure of a classified cable sent to Islamabad by Pakistan's ambassador in Washington in early 2022. Both Imran and Shah Mahmood have been found guilty of making the document public.

Although Imran has claimed that the cable is proof of a US conspiracy to push the Pakistani military to oust him in a parliamentary vote in 2022, he has denied revealing its content publicly — the former PM has said news outlets got the document from other sources.

### **What was the classified cable?**

The document at the centre of the controversy contained an account of a meeting that took place on March 7, 2022, between US State Department officials, and then Pakistani ambassador to US Asad Majeed Khan.

The complete text of the purported cable hasn't been disclosed yet as it is protected under Section 5 of the Official Secrets Act 1923 of Pakistan. However, in August 2023, American news organisation reproduced a section of the document — it said that it received the document from a source in Pakistan's military.

In the meeting, the US officials expressed their displeasure regarding Imran's neutrality on the Russian invasion of Ukraine — the then PM was in Moscow on February 24, 2022, when President Valmadir Putin announced the invasion of Ukraine.

The US official went on to say: "I think if the no-confidence vote against the Prime Minister succeeds, all will be forgiven in Washington because the Russia visit is being looked at as a decision by the Prime Minister". "Otherwise," he continued, "I think it will be tough going ahead."



Asad Majeed sent the details of the gathering to Islamabad through a cable, labelled "Secret". Notably, just a day after the meeting, on March 8, Imran's political rivals in Parliament moved forward with a key procedural step toward the no-confidence vote. More than a month later, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf chief was ousted from office

after the vote succeeded.

The US State Department on multiple occasions has denied that its officials encouraged their Pakistani counterparts to oust Imran.

### **What is the cipher case?**



Imran talked about the secret document for the first time on March 27, 2022, at a huge gathering in Islamabad, where he pulled out a 'letter' from his pocket, claiming it to be proof of an international conspiracy to remove him from the top job.

Since then, especially after his ouster, Imran has repeatedly brought up the classified cable and its content to claim that the US was behind the no-confidence vote against him. In response, in July 2023, the Pakistan Muslim League (N)-led government accused the former PM of "exposing an official secret document".

Pakistan's Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) registered an FIR against Imran under Section 5 of the Official Secrets Act 1923 for making the contents of the classified cable public. Offences under Section 5, if proved in a court of law, involve punishment of imprisonment from two to 14 years, and in some cases even a death sentence.

In August 2023, Imran was convicted and sentenced to three years in prison in the Toshakhana graft case. While that sentence was later suspended, he has remained behind bars due to other cases. He is also barred from running in the upcoming elections in February 2024.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; International Organisations

Source: The Hindu and Indian Express

### 3. Why a Bangladesh court has sentenced Nobel prize winner Muhammad Yunus to jail



#### What happened?

Nobel prize winner Muhammad Yunus was sentenced to six months in jail by a court in Bangladesh for violating the country's labour laws. The 83-year-old, credited with



pioneering the system of micro-finance loans to help impoverished people, was granted bail pending appeal.

While Yunus called the judgement “contrary to all legal precedent and logic”, his supporters said the case was politically motivated. The professor shares a frosty relationship with Bangladesh’s Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, who once accused him of “sucking blood” from the poor.

Currently, Yunus is facing a wide array of other charges involving alleged corruption and fund embezzlement.

### **Who is Muhammad Yunus?**

Born in 1940 in Chittagong, Yunus received his PhD in economics from Vanderbilt University in Tennessee, USA, in 1969 and subsequently, became an assistant professor at Middle Tennessee State University. After Bangladesh was formed in 1972, he returned to his homeland and was appointed head of the economics department at Chittagong University.

As Bangladesh struggled to stabilise its economy and tackle poverty in the post-independence years, Yunus came up with a unique idea to help the impoverished. He decided to provide small loans to entrepreneurs who wouldn’t normally qualify for bank loans, on terms suitable to them.

Following the success of an initial local experiment, Professor Yunus became confident that the model could work on a broader scale and went to set up microcredit projects in other parts of the country. Within seven years, the initiative took formal shape as the Grameen Bank in 1983.

Grameen Bank is credited with lifting millions from poverty — it has disbursed collateral-free loans of \$34.01 billion among 9.55 million people since its inception. The recovery rate of loans is 97.22%.

Owing to the grand success of Grameen Bank, banks based on this model operate in more than 100 countries today.

In 2006, Yunus and Grameen Bank jointly received the Nobel Prize in Peace “for their efforts to create economic and social development from below.” The professor came to be known as the “Banker to the Poor”.

### **Why does Yunus share a tumultuous relationship with Sheikh Hasina?**

Soon after winning the Nobel Prize, Yunus began to flirt with the idea of forming his own political party. This didn’t sit well with Hasina, who was in jail at the time under the charges of extortion.

In the following months, Yunus abandoned his plans, saying there wasn't enough support for his new political movement. Nonetheless, once Hasina returned to power in 2009, her government opened a host of investigations into Yunus' activities. The prime minister accused him of using force and other means to recover loans from poor rural women as the head of Grameen Bank.

### **Why has Yunus been sentenced to jail?**

The Third Court of Dhaka on Monday found Yunus' company, Grameen Telecom, which he founded as a non-profit, guilty of violating labour laws. According to the judgement, 67 of the company employees were supposed to be made permanent, which they were not, and the employees' participation and welfare funds were not created. Moreover, as per company policy, 5% of the company's dividends were supposed to be distributed to staff, which was not done.

The court convicted Yunus, as chairman of Grameen Telecom, and three other company directors, sentencing each to six months in jail. Grameen Telecom owns 34% of Bangladesh's largest mobile phone company, Grameenphone, a subsidiary of Norway's telecom giant Telenor.

### **What are the other cases against Yunus?**

Yunus is said to be facing more than 150 cases. In 2015, he was summoned by Bangladesh's revenue authorities over non-payment of taxes amounting to \$1.51 million. Two years before that, he was put on trial for allegedly receiving money without government permission, including his Nobel Prize award and royalties from a book.

In 2011, Yunus was removed as managing director of Grameen Bank for allegedly violating government retirement regulations.

The mounting litany of cases against Yunus has garnered concern globally. In August last year, 160 international figures, including former US President Barack Obama and ex-UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, signed a joint letter denouncing the "continuous judicial harassment" of Yunus.

The signatories, including more than 100 of his fellow Nobel laureates, said they feared for "his safety and freedom".

In response, Hasina said she welcomed international experts to assess the ongoing legal proceedings against Yunus.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; International Issues

Source: The Indian Express

#### 4. Baloch March to Islamabad: A Protest Escalation



**Figure 3 Yearning faces: Baloch activists hold portraits of their missing family members during their sit-in protest, in Islamabad**

##### **Why in news?**

In December 2023, Baloch activists marched to Islamabad, protesting enforced disappearances and killings in Balochistan. The death of Balaach Mola Baksh played a pivotal role in escalating the protest.

##### **Balaach Mola Baksh's Death and Protest Expansion**

Balaach Mola Baksh's death in October 2023 triggered the protest. Despite initial demands for an FIR and an impartial inquiry, the protest expanded to address broader issues like ending enforced disappearances and seeking justice for victims.

##### **Enforced Disappearances in Balochistan**

The Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances and the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan reported numerous cases of enforced disappearances in

Balochistan. Discrepancies between state and civil society numbers highlight the gravity of the issue.

### **Symbolism of Marching to Islamabad**

Protestors choose Islamabad as a symbolic venue to address the power dynamics between the federal and provincial governments. The capital represents the seat of power, conveying a message to the authorities while emphasizing their commitment to the federation.

### **Weak Political Representation in Balochistan**

Balochistan's weak political parties, divided along tribal lines, lack a strong voice in both provincial and national assemblies. The absence of influential leaders exacerbates the challenges faced by the Baloch people in seeking political representation.

### **The Larger Baloch Problem**

Enforced disappearances, extrajudicial killings, and protests are manifestations of a deeper conflict between the federal government and Balochistan. The struggle involves resource exploitation, manipulation, repression, and attempts to undermine Baloch identity using religion.

### **Challenges and Prospects**

In the short term, the state aims to silence dissent, manipulate leadership, and neutralize militants in Balochistan. However, civil society activism and growing societal resistance, fueled by women's participation, suggest potential shifts in Balochistan's political landscape.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; International Issues

Source: The Hindu

## **5. Iran bomb blasts leave 103 dead: How this can impact the Middle East**

### **What happened?**

Two blasts struck the city of Kerman in Iran on January 3, leading to the deaths of at least 103 people. Many had gathered at a cemetery to mark the fourth anniversary of the killing of senior military commander General Qassem Soleimani.

The attack is one of the deadliest to have hit the country in around half a century. The Middle East has been on the boil for a few months, with the Palestinian militant group Hamas's October 7 strikes on Israel, the Israeli military's ongoing offensive on the Gaza Strip that has killed more than 20,000 people, and attacks from Yemen-based Houthi rebels on ships passing through the Red Sea since November. What exactly happened in Iran and what ramifications does it have for the region at large?

## Deadly blasts at commemoration for slain Iranian general



### Who was Qassem Soleimani?

A crowd was present to mark four years since the 2020 US-ordered killing of General Soleimani. Qassem Soleimani, 62, was in charge of the Quds Force of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). The IRGC is a wing of the Iranian military and is known to be responsible for undertaking foreign missions. It was designated as a Foreign Terrorist Organisation by the US in 2019.

Soleimani was known to have participated in the 1979 Islamic Revolution, which led to the overthrow of the Pahlavi dynasty and led to the establishment of a theocratic state in Iran. His profile rose in the early 2000s, for carrying out attacks in opposition to the American military presence in Iraq.

### Why did the US launch strikes against Soleimani?

In recent years, Soleimani was believed to be the chief strategist behind Iran's military ventures and influence in Syria, Iraq and throughout the Middle East. Around the time of his death, Iranian militias had struck an Iraqi military base, killing an American contractor in the process. The US retaliated with strikes in Iraq and Syria, in a bid to target militias.



### **How could the Iran attacks affect the current situation in the Middle East?**

The attacks in Iran came a day after a top Hamas leader, Saleh al-Arouri, was believed to have been killed in an Israeli drone strike in Lebanon. Israel is yet to claim responsibility for the attack but one Israeli and two US officials confirmed its role to the media.

Various players in the region are involved in the Israel-Hamas conflict, owing to long-existing regional, religious and ethnic alignments and rivalries. For instance, the Lebanon-based militant organisation Hezbollah has supported Hamas. Both Hamas and Hezbollah are believed to be backed by Iran, which has been engaged in a proxy war with Israel for decades.

Iran is also known to support the Houthis in Yemen and is against what it sees as Western interference in the region. This position puts it at odds with the US and its ally Saudi Arabia. As a result, cases of attacks in the neighbourhood have the potential to widen the ongoing conflict and include other groups and countries or elongate it.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; International Relations

Source: The Indian Express

## **6. Elections in Bangladesh: Everything you need to know**

### **Introduction**

Bangladesh goes to polls on January 7, with incumbent Sheikh Hasina of the Awami League set to cruise to victory as most opposition parties stage a boycott.



### **How elections work**

Bangladesh's unicameral Jatiya Sangsad has 350 members of which 300 are elected in national elections held every five years. Fifty seats are reserved for women appointed by the ruling party/ coalition.

Like India, Bangladesh follows a first-past-the-post system. The Prime Minister is the head of the government, and the most powerful person in the country.

### **Major parties**

While Bangladesh is a multi-party system, it has been a virtual duopoly since the 1990s — the two major parties being the incumbent Awami League and the main opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party. Since 1991, AL has enjoyed four terms in power, while BNP has led the government twice.

AL was founded in 1949 by Bangladeshi nationalists as an alternative to the Muslim League in East Pakistan. Under Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the AL led the struggle for Bangladesh's independence. Sheikh Hasina, who has been Prime Minister since 2009, is Mujib's daughter.

The BNP was founded in 1978 by Ziaur Rahman, a former army general. After Ziaur was assassinated in 1981, his wife Khaleda Zia led the party until 2018, when she was put in jail. She has been in house arrest since 2020. The BNP is currently headed by Khaleda's son Tarique Rahman, who lives in exile in London.

The BNP has been in disarray over the past several years and, despite a seeming resurgence since 2022 amidst a growing anti-Hasina sentiment, has been written off by many. The BNP is boycotting the elections; Tarique has called it a "sham" with a "predetermined outcome".

The third largest party in Bangladesh is the Jatiya Party (Ershad), which currently has 27 seats in the Jatiya Sangsad. It will contest the upcoming elections.

### **Rigged elections and Caretaker government**

In an election that most observers anticipate will be one-sided, the major issue is the fairness of the election process.

Elections under Bangladesh's partisan governments have always been controversial — from Mujib's victory in 1973 to the elections held under Ziaur in 1979, and then under H M Ershad in 1986 and 1988, to those held in 1996, 2014, and 2018.

This is why a caretaker government system was instituted in 1990, and the 1991 elections under the government of Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed were viewed as the fairest yet. Elections held in 1996 (after Khaleda's 12-day rule), 2001, and 2008, all under caretaker governments, were considered fair both domestically and internationally.

However, after the army-backed caretaker government far exceeded its remit in 2006-07 — sending hundreds of politicians, including Hasina and Khaleda, to prison on charges of corruption and abuse of power — Hasina decided to do away with the system in 2011. “We cannot allow unelected people to oversee national elections,” she had said.

But the opposition has alleged that this has only allowed her to continue to rig elections in Bangladesh, and stamp out all opposition. The BNP has been boycotting elections since 2014, and had run a campaign focussed on bringing back the caretaker system last year.

### **Financial conditions**

The state of the economy could be a factor in the elections as well. While Hasina has been credited with taking Bangladesh’s economy to a good place, the cost of living has jumped as the country struggles to pay for costly energy imports amid weakening domestic currency and depleting dollar reserves.

In December last year, the International Monetary Fund cleared the first review of the country’s \$ 4.7 billion bailout, providing immediate access of \$ 468.3 million.

What India wants

Despite Hasina’s autocratic tendencies, she remains a firm friend of India, and New Delhi’s preferred candidate to lead Bangladesh.

Her relationship with India dates back to the 1970s, when India was the biggest backer of Bangladesh’s liberation movement, led by her father Mujib. Her four terms in power have been extremely fruitful in furthering the India-Bangladesh relationship — most border issues have been sorted, economic cooperation has been furthered, and most importantly, Hasina has firmly supported India’s national security interests.

Crucially, the major alternative to Hasina, Khaleda Zia’s BNP, is an absolute no-no for India. During Khaleda’s reign, Bangladesh became a safe haven for terrorist and militant outfits with anti-India designs, as she let Islamist radicals share power. Supported by Pakistan’s ISI, these outfits terrorised Northeast India and the Bangladesh border.

Moreover, clashes at the Bangladesh border became increasingly frequent. In 2001, Bangladeshi paramilitary troops killed and mutilated 16 BSF guards in a border clash. Hasina, on the other hand, has been steadfast in her commitment to keep the ISI and Islamist radicals out of power in Bangladesh, especially since a 2004 assassination attempt which was orchestrated by radical Islamist outfits, including the Jamaat, which was a part of the BNP government at the time.

## 7. Bangladesh elections and India

### What happened?

As Bangladesh votes in national elections, India will be watching closely. The countries share a 4,100-km border and deep historical, cultural, and economic ties. A stable, prosperous and friendly Bangladesh is in India's best interests.

Thus, India stands firmly behind the incumbent Sheikh Hasina. Seen as one of India's closest friends and allies, she has over the years fostered a friendly and mutually beneficial relationship between the two countries.

### What is at stake for India in Bangladesh's elections?

**NATIONAL SECURITY:** Before Hasina came to power in 2009, the previous Bangladesh Nationalist Party-led government was quite hostile to India — and provided safe haven to numerous anti-India terrorist and militant groups. It allegedly also had links to Pakistan's ISI, and gave space to hardline Islamist radicals.

Hasina has been a very cooperative leader who has dramatically eased India's security burden on its very long eastern border. Her crackdown on anti-India elements and counter-terrorism cooperation with India has single-handedly improved India's overall security situation over the last decade or so.

Especially given the deteriorating situation in Myanmar, it becomes even more important that India and Bangladesh remain close security partners.

**DEEP ECONOMIC TIES:** One of the big changes in South Asia over the last few years is the economic rise of Bangladesh, which has replaced Pakistan as the second largest economy in the region. According to World Bank data, the GDP of Bangladesh was \$460 billion in 2022, more than Pakistan's \$375 billion.

In 2022-23, Bangladesh was the fifth largest export destination for Indian goods, after the United States, the UAE, the Netherlands, and China. It accounted for more than 2.7 per cent of all Indian exports, worth \$12.2 billion.

Under Hasina, Bangladesh is facilitating efficient connectivity to India's Northeast through overland transit and inland waterways.

Bangladesh is also crucial for economic integration within the subcontinent, especially since Pakistan refuses to support regional economic cooperation.

**REGIONAL COOPERATION:** Beyond the subcontinent, India would like Bangladesh to become a fulcrum for regional cooperation in the Bay of Bengal littoral linking South and South East Asia.

Dhaka hosts the secretariat of The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) that connects the eastern subcontinent with Myanmar and Thailand. In recent years, many of India's friends such as Japan have invested heavily in Bangladesh.

### **What about allegations of democratic backsliding in Bangladesh under Prime Minister Hasina?**

The political stability in Bangladesh since Hasina came to power has been very helpful for India, and thus, she remains India's best bet. She has kept radical extremist forces at bay, and rekindled India's relationship with Bangladesh.

Yes, there have been questions raised by some regarding Bangladesh's democratic backsliding under Hasina. But the alternatives to her are a bigger threat not only to democracy but also to peace and prosperity in the region.

### **Isn't Hasina's increasing 'proximity' to China a concern for India?**

This is somewhat overstated — it is not as if she is turning to China at the expense of India. It must be remembered that China is the second largest economy in the world, and located next door to South Asia. It has investments across the globe. To expect that India's neighbours will not do business with China is unrealistic.

In fact, compared to all other neighbours with the exception of Bhutan, Bangladesh has been far more careful in navigating the tensions between India and China.

At the end of the day, New Delhi's main consideration is that Bangladesh, or for that matter any neighbour, does not do anything that hurts India's security. That is the red line which Dhaka under Hasina has respected.

### **The US has been very critical of Hasina and her government. How does this impact India's interests, given its friendship with the US?**

There are historical reasons for Bangladesh's tense relationships with the US and the UK, given their proximity to Pakistan and their negative role in 1971. Sheikh Hasina unsurprisingly views them with great distrust.

The US' own record has been fairly inconsistent when it comes to calling out authoritarianism. While the Americans seldom talk about democracy in Pakistan, they tend to bully Bangladesh. Things eased up under the Trump administration, but under President Joe Biden, the US had gone back to its 'human rights agenda' in Bangladesh.



## 8. Turkey finally backs Sweden's NATO bid

### Why in news?

Sweden's attempt to join NATO cleared a major hurdle after Turkey's parliament supported its membership. For a new country to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), all the existing members have to approve it. Turkey and Hungary had been opposing Sweden's entry for almost the past two years.

### Why does Sweden want to join NATO?

Sweden has not fought a war in two centuries, staying neutral through the two World Wars and the Cold War. In recent years, while it joined the European Union and collaborated with NATO, it showed no intention of actually joining the military alliance its powerful neighbour, Russia, is hostile to.

However, this neutrality had to be abandoned after Russia invaded Ukraine. With public opinion increasingly in favour of joining NATO, both Sweden and Finland applied for membership in 2022. While Finland's bid was cleared, Sweden ran into stiff opposition from Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orban.

Once a country is a NATO member, an attack on its territory is considered an attack on the US-led alliance, and all 31 members are obliged to defend each other.

### Why was Turkey opposing Sweden's bid?

Turkey had accused Sweden of going soft on groups it sees as terrorists, such as the Kurdish militant outfit the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Quran-burning protests held in Sweden, which its government says are protected under freedom of speech laws, further soured its relationship with Turkey.

When Turkish legislators cleared Sweden's bid recently, Fuat Oktay, a senior member of Erdogan's party, told parliament that Sweden had tightened its anti-terrorism laws, cracked down on the PKK's activities, and lifted restrictions on arms sales to Turkey.

Erdogan had also linked Turkey's support to Sweden with the US agreeing to sell 40 F-16 fighter jets to Ankara. While the US had not said the deal would depend on Turkey's Sweden actions, the sale is expected to go through now.

### Why is Hungary opposed?

Hungary had been seen as following Turkey's lead in blocking Sweden. Its grievances with the country include Stockholm's negative remarks about the rule of law and state of democracy under Orban. Orban is also more friendly with Russia than other NATO nations. After Turkey's move, Orban said that he had invited Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson to Budapest to discuss "future cooperation in the field of security and defence as allies and partners."

### **What will Sweden bring to NATO?**

Once Sweden becomes a member, almost all of the Baltic Sea coastline, except that in Russia's control, will become NATO territory. This will provide the alliance strategic bases close to Russia, make supply lines more streamlined, and make it easier to defend assets in the sea.

Sweden's military, though numerically small, is modern and experienced in past NATO missions. Importantly, it has advanced aircraft and submarine capabilities.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; International Organisations

Source: The Indian Express

## **9. Why did the Islamic State attack Iran?**

### **What has happened?**

The Islamic State terror group claimed responsibility for Wednesday's bomb attacks at a memorial event in Kerman for Qassem Soleimani, the Iranian General who was killed by the U.S. in January 2020. Soleimani, commander of the Quds Force, an elite wing of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), was a sworn enemy of the Islamic State when he was alive. The Kerman bombing, in which at least 84 people were killed and over 200 injured, was the third major attack claimed by the Islamic State (IS) in the Islamic Republic of Iran, which shows the growing threat of terrorism Tehran is facing. The attack comes at a time when fears of a regional war, involving Israel and Iran, are on the rise in West Asia.

### **Why does the IS target Iran?**

The IS, which is a Sunni Salafi-Jihadist outfit, sees Iran, a Shia theocracy, as an ideological rival and battlefield enemy. The IS is notorious for its sectarian violence against the Shias, who they call the Rafidha (rejectionists — a derogatory term used by Sunni extremists to refer to the Shias. They say the Shia community has rejected the first three [Sunni] Caliphs of Islam, Abu Bakr, Umar and Uthman). For the IS, Shias are not real Muslims — they are apostates who follow shirk (idolatry). In the IS-controlled territories of Iraq and Syria (from 2014 to 2018), Shias faced systemic persecution and violence. Even after the IS lost the territories and shifted the focus of their operations

to the lawless lands of eastern Afghanistan, they continued to attack Afghanistan's Hazara Shia minority.

The IS also sees Iran as a formidable rival in the battlefield as Iran-backed militias played a key role in defeating the jihadists in parts of Syria and predominantly in Iraq. In March 2017, the Wilayat Diyala, the Iraq-based unit of the IS, had released its first propaganda video in Farsi, titled 'Persia between yesterday and today', urging Iranian Sunnis to declare allegiance to the 'Caliphate' and rise against — and topple — the Iranian regime. Since then, the IS has carried out high-decibel propaganda in Persian. The IS wanted to expand their sphere of operations from Afghanistan to "other nearby lands", primarily Iran. In three months after the video was released, the IS carried out a coordinated attack on Iran's Parliament and the mausoleum of Ayatollah Khomeini, killing at least 17 people. It was a declaration of war by the Islamic State on the Islamic Republic.

### **How does Iran look at the IS?**

Iran sees in the IS a bid to revive the deadly conflict of the early years of Islam between the Sunnis and the Shias. With their anti-Shia propaganda and violence, the IS wants to whip up sectarian passions among hardline Sunnis and trigger a wider war, targeting both Shia communities in Sunni majority countries as well as Iran. It also saw the IS as an immediate security threat. Unsurprisingly, Iran was the first country that rushed aid to Iraq when the IS started gaining territories in Iraq. In June 2014, immediately after the IS captured Mosul, Iraq's second largest city, and surrounding areas, Iran despatched IRGC units to protect Baghdad and the holy Shia cities of Najaf and Karbala. By December 2014, well before the Western-backed counter-attack against the IS began, Iran had started carrying out air strikes on IS areas in Iraq. Iran's state organs frequently called the IS a "terrorist organisation" or Taqfiris (those who excommunicate fellow Muslims and mostly use violence against them).

In the medium term, Iran formed a strategy of fighting the IS through Shia mobilisation units. It recruited, trained and dispatched militias to Syria where the regime of Bashar al-Assad was fighting a civil war against a host of rebels and jihadists, including al-Qaeda and the IS. In Iraq, the Shia militias fought alongside the Iraqi army and the Kurdish Peshmerga militias, under American air cover, against the IS. They played a critical role in defeating the IS's physical structures and liberating Iraqi cities from the jihadists. The man behind these anti-IS operations was Major General Qassem Soleimani.

### **Who was Qassem Soleimani?**

Soleimani, who was a soldier during the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq war, became commander of the Quds Force, the foreign operational wing of the IRGC, in 1998. Always a defender of the Islamic Revolution, Soleimani was instrumental in shaping Iran's forward defence doctrine, which sought to build regional strength through a network of Shia militia

groups across West Asia. Iran helped create Hezbollah, a Lebanese Shia movement, in the 1980s and it continued to nurture good ties with Iraqi Shia organisations throughout the regime of Saddam Hussein. In recent years, Iran built stronger ties with Yemen's Shia rebels Houthis, as well as Hamas and the Islamic Jihad, Palestinian Sunni militant groups that are fighting Israel's occupation of Palestinian territories.

Soleimani, as the head of the IRGC's foreign operations wing, left a deep imprint on Iran's ties with these groups over the years. This relationship came handy for him to stitch together an anti-IS coalition when Iraq and Syria fell into chaos in the 2010s. The U.S. helped the Shia coalition fight the IS in Iraq, but it also accused Soleimani of supporting terrorism, given his close ties with foreign Shia militias. Inside Iran, he enjoyed cult status. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the Supreme Leader of Iran as well as the commander of Iran's armed forces, once called him "the living martyr of revolution". On January 3, 2020, a U.S. air strike in Baghdad, ordered by President Donald Trump, assassinated Soleimani, the primary enemy of the IS. And on the fourth anniversary of his assassination, the IS attacked a memorial event that took place near his qabar in Kerman.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; International Relations

Source: The Indian Express

## **10. Muizzu asks India to withdraw troops by March 15: Why are Indian soldiers in Maldives?**

### **Why in news?**

Maldivian President Mohamed Muizzu has asked India to withdraw its military personnel from his country by March 15. Maldives and India have set up a high-level core group to negotiate the withdrawal of troops. The group held its first meeting at the Foreign Ministry Headquarters in Male. The Indian government did not immediately confirm the media report or comment on it.

### **How many Indian troops are in the Maldives?**

Contrary to what the 'India Out' rhetoric in Maldives may suggest, no large contingent of Indian soldiers is present on the archipelago. According to the latest government figures, there are 88 Indian military personnel in the Maldives.

Indian soldiers have been sent to the Maldives at various points for training Maldivian troops, in both combat and reconnaissance and rescue-aid operations. Yet, there is a strong fear among sections in the Maldives about Indian troops spreading across the island.

### **Why are India's troops in Maldives?**

India and the Maldives have a long history of cooperation in a variety of areas, including defence. The one time India's soldiers entered the island for an actual military operation was in November 1988 — to thwart an attempted coup, at the request of the government of then President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom. In a quick operation, Indian troops managed to secure the President and capture the rebels. In the three decades since, Maldives has generally appreciated India's role in this episode.

The 'India Out' campaign began much later, sometime in 2020. The resentment had been building ever since Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom of the Progressive Party (PPM), with a pro-China tilt, became president in 2013.

### **What are the five major factors behind the fear and suspicion?**

1. One of the major triggers for this was the long-standing controversy over two Dhruv Advanced Light Helicopters (ALH) given by India to the Maldives in 2010 and in 2015, both of which were used for ocean search-and-rescue operations, maritime weather surveillance and for airlifting patients between islands, and were based in Addu Atoll and at Hanimaadhoo.

According to the terms of bilateral agreements between the two countries, Indian officers had been sent to the Maldives to train the Maldives National Defence Force, under whose command these helicopters operate.

These helicopters were for humanitarian purposes only, but some in the anti-India constituency, particularly Yameen's party PPM, were trying to portray that by gifting these helicopters, India was creating military presence in the country because they were military choppers.

2. Another major cause of grievances within Maldives was the Solih government's perceived lack of transparency about its dealings with India.

3. Then there is the fact that Maldives does rely heavily on India for maritime security.

4. Maldives' new police academy, built with India's help and housing the National College of Policing and Law Enforcement is another issue. The opposition's [now in power] mistrust stems from the sheer size of the building and surrounding complex. One rumor making the rounds implies that the only reason the academy is so large is to house Indians associated with the academy and their families, supposedly rendering it an opportune place to bring more Indians into the country.

5. A fifth factor is the UTF Harbour Project agreement signed between India and the Maldives in February 2021, under which India was to develop and maintain a coastguard harbour and dockyard at Uthuru Thilafalhu, a strategically located atoll near the capital Malé.



Sections of Maldivian media had speculated that the UTF project would be turned into an Indian naval base. However, then Maldivian chief of defence forces had clarified even before the agreement was signed that while the Indian government had indicated it would provide grant assistance for the project, there were no plans of any Indian naval base in the country.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Bilateral Relations

Source: The Indian Express

## **11. Why has South Africa taken Israel to the International Court of Justice?**

### **Why in news?**

Starting January 11, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) will hold a two-day hearing to decide whether it will order “provisional measures” (the equivalent of seeking urgent interim relief in pending cases in Indian courts) in a case that South Africa has filed against Israel for violating its obligations under the Genocide Convention in relation to Palestinians in Gaza.

### **First, what is the International Court of Justice?**

The ICJ is the principal judicial organ of the United Nations that settles legal disputes between States in accordance with international law. It is not a criminal court, and it does not try individuals. That is the role of the International Criminal Court (ICC). Both courts are in The Hague, the Netherlands.

The ICJ cannot automatically decide all cases involving breaches of international law. It can only decide cases that are brought before it by States that consent to its jurisdiction.

This consent can be expressed in different ways. In this case, the consent stems from an article in the Genocide Convention that states that disputes between parties relating to the interpretation, application, or fulfilment of the Convention, including disputes relating to the responsibility of a State for genocide, shall be submitted to the ICJ at the request of any of the parties to the dispute.

Both South Africa and Israel are parties to the Convention.

### **And what is the Genocide Convention?**

The Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide is an international human rights treaty that codified the crime of genocide for the first time. The Genocide Convention was the first human rights treaty adopted by the UN General Assembly on December 9, 1948, and has been in effect since January 12, 1951.

The Convention defines genocide as five acts — (i) killing members of a group; (ii) causing serious bodily or mental harm; (iii) inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about their physical destruction; (iv) imposing measures intended to prevent births within a group; and (v) forcibly transferring children of the group to another group — committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group.

There are, therefore, two elements: the physical acts; and the specific intent “to destroy, in whole or in part” a specific group. Committing these acts, however widespread, is not enough to make a claim of genocide. The specific intent to destroy (*dolus specialis*) is what distinguishes genocide from war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity.

Also, the commission of war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity do not provide an avenue for States to approach the ICJ because the court does not have automatic jurisdiction over those crimes.

### **What is South Africa’s case against Israel?**

South Africa alleges that Israel has committed several of these acts, and that the evidence of Israeli State officials’ specific intent (*dolus specialis*) to commit and persist in committing genocidal acts or to fail to prevent them has been significant and overt since October 2023. This, when combined with the level of killing, maiming, displacement and destruction on the ground, together with the siege “evidence an unfolding and continuing genocide”.

South Africa has set out nine pages of statements by senior Israeli Officials, including its President, Prime Minister, and Ministers, to show the existence of specific intent. Also, South Africa states, Israel has failed to prevent genocide and to prosecute the direct and public incitement to genocide, and that it “has engaged in, is engaging in and risks further engaging in genocidal acts against the Palestinian people in Gaza”.

### **So what is South Africa asking for?**

South Africa argues that urgent relief is necessary to protect against further, severe, and irreparable harm to the rights of the Palestinian people which continue to be violated, and to prevent any aggravation or extension of the dispute.

Accordingly, it has asked the court to order Israel to immediately suspend all military operations in Gaza; abide by its obligations under the Convention to prevent genocide; desist from expulsion and forced displacement, the deprivation of access to adequate food and water, access to humanitarian assistance, medical supplies and assistance, and the destruction of Palestinian life in Gaza.

It has also asked the court to direct Israel to not commit any further acts, including engaging in direct and public incitement to commit genocide, conspiracy, attempt to commit, or complicity in genocide, and to prevent the destruction of evidence, including by not denying access to fact-finding missions.

It wants Israel to report on the measures taken to implement the court's order, and to refrain from acts which might aggravate the dispute.

### **What will happen now?**

South Africa's case appears to meet the threshold for the court to make a provisional measures order. The Court must be satisfied it has *prima facie* jurisdiction; there is a "plausible" link between the rights asserted by South Africa and the measures it requests; and a risk of irreparable harm and urgency.

That order will come within weeks, and will have legal significance for all States that are parties to the Genocide Convention because such an order is binding on all States, even though the court lacks enforcement mechanisms.

Israel has called the case "baseless" and a "blood libel", and called on the international community to reject it. The United States, Hungary, and Guatemala have done so.

Palestine has welcomed South Africa's case, as have the 57 Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) countries, Malaysia, Turkey, Jordan, Bolivia, Venezuela, Mexico, Bangladesh, Namibia, Nicaragua, and some others.

France has stated that it will support the court's decision. India has not issued a statement.

### **How often do such cases come before the ICJ?**

This is not the first case the court will hear under the Genocide Convention. In 2022, Ukraine filed a case against Russia, and in 2019, the Gambia filed a case against Myanmar with respect to the Rohingya.

The Myanmar case was the first time that a State invoked the court's jurisdiction to seek redress for genocidal acts committed against the citizens of another state. The court agreed that the Gambia had standing to bring the case.

Like the Gambia, South Africa has based its jurisdiction under obligations *erga omnes partes* — that is, as a party to the Convention, it can bring this case because of its community interest in preventing genocide.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; International Organisations

Source: Indian Express

## 12. ICJ says Israel must prevent genocide in Gaza but fails to order ceasefire

### Why in news?

The International Court of Justice (ICJ) recently ruled that Israel must “take all measures within its power” to prevent genocidal acts in Gaza, but stopped short of ordering a ceasefire.

At this stage, the World Court did not rule on the core of the case brought by South Africa, that is, whether Israel is committing genocide in Gaza. But an overwhelming majority of the 17 judges presiding over the case voted for emergency measures to be implemented.



### World Court's interim ruling

Delivering its interim ruling, the ICJ ordered following provisional measures:

- A 15:2 majority of the court said that Israel must take all steps in its power to prevent the commission of all acts under Article 2 of the United Nation's 1948 Genocide Convention. Article 2 defines "genocide" as "acts committed with intent to destroy, wholly or partly, a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group". This not only includes

killing and causing bodily and mental harm, but also preventing births within a group and inflicting conditions of life calculated to bring about a group's physical destruction.

- The World Court also said that Israel must prevent its military from committing any genocidal acts "with immediate effect".
- The court also directed Israel to provide humanitarian assistance and other basic services to the Palestinians in Gaza, referring to Palestinians as a protected group under the Genocide Convention.
- Lastly, by a 15:2 majority, the court also asked Israel to submit its report to the ICJ on measures taken to implement the ruling within one month.

### **Decision on jurisdiction**

At the outset, the World Court clarified that it does have jurisdiction to consider the present case.

"The Court finds that the aforementioned elements are sufficient, at this stage, to establish the prima facie existence of a dispute between the parties relating to the application of the Genocide Convention", the court said referring to provisions of Article 9.

Article 9 of the Genocide Convention says that disputes between parties relating to the interpretation, application, or fulfilment of the Convention, including disputes relating to the responsibility of a State for genocide, shall be submitted to the ICJ at the request of any of the parties to the dispute.

The court observed that South Africa had publicly made multiple comments suggesting Israel may have acted contrary to its obligations under the Convention, while Israel had dismissed all notions of genocide in Gaza as "morally repugnant". The court thus concluded that the parties held opposite views concerning Israel's obligations under the convention, and that this indicated a "dispute" between the two parties.

### **No call for ceasefire**

Notably, the ICJ stopped short of ordering a ceasefire. South Africa's plea before the court had asked it to order Israel to immediately suspend all military operations in Gaza, as an interim measure.

While many sympathetic to the plight of Gazans have been left disappointed by the court falling short of ordering a cessation of hostilities, experts say that this was very much expected.



While the court's rulings are legally binding, it has no way to enforce them. Nonetheless, its opinions carry weight with the UN and other international institutions. The ICJ will eventually decide whether Israel is committing genocide or not, but that process may take years.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; International Organisations

Source: Indian Express

### **13. Gabriel Attal: Who is the new PM of France, what changes with his appointment**

#### **Why in news?**

France's President Emmanuel Macron appointed a new Prime Minister. Gabriel Attal, 34, the youngest person to ever hold the post. In France, the President is the head of State with the real powers and the Prime Minister is the head of the government.

Before Attal, the Socialist leader Laurent Fabius was the youngest French PM, appointed at the age of 37 by President François Mitterrand in 1984. Attal's appointment comes after sitting PM Elisabeth Borne resigned a day earlier, following a tumultuous term in office.

#### **Why a new PM?**

The appointment of a fresh face as the PM seems to be part of Macron's attempts to infuse new life into his government ahead of the European Union Parliament elections in June, where his ratings are trailing. Macron was re-elected as French President in 2022 and the going has not been great for him since — his government lost parliamentary majority the same year. Getting policies through parliament has been a major challenge for his government. In the midst of all this, Attal is a popular face appreciated in Opposition circles too. He also happens to be France's first openly gay Prime Minister.

#### **Who is Gabriel Attal?**

Attal held the education portfolio in previous government. He has been polled the most popular minister in the outgoing government.

As education minister, Attal was in the news for banning abayas (long, loose robes worn by Muslim girls), for pushing a proposal for mandatory uniforms in schools, and for efforts to stamp out bullying, something he says he has been a victim of.

#### **What changes with Attal's appointment?**

Not much. In France's political system, the President is the one with the greater powers. The Prime Minister is appointed by the President and is in charge of implementing domestic policy.

Relevance: GS Prelims

Source: The Indian Express & The Hindu

## **14. India-Maldives ties: Amid row, why the two countries need each other and what is at stake**

### **Why in news?**

Maldives has been in the news for all the wrong reasons for the past some time now. The new government led by President Mohamed Muizzu asked India to withdraw military personnel, chose China for one of his first overseas visits, and then moved to scrap a key pact involving a water survey.

The latest trigger has been undiplomatic words used by ministers in Muizzu's cabinet against Prime Minister Narendra Modi in particular and Indians in general. Maldives has moved to control the damage by sacking all the three leaders who made the disparaging remarks. In India, calls are growing louder for boycotting Maldives as a tourist destination.

But lost in the noise are three key questions:

### **First, what's at stake?**

At stake is the diplomatic and political relationship between the two countries, painstakingly built over the last about six decades.

After the British relinquished control of the islands in 1965, India established diplomatic ties. While there was no diplomatic mission in Male earlier — it was run by the Indian High Commission in Colombo till 1978 — since 1980, India has had an ambassadorial representative in the islands.

After the democratic transition took place in 2008, India has built deep relationships with all relevant stakeholders — players in politics, military, business, and civil society — despite the change in governments.

This was a work of years: of networking with the local population, and building India as the first destination of choice for most Maldivians — for education and medical reasons.

### **Second, why does India need the Maldives?**

**Location and maritime security:** Maldives' proximity to the west coast of India (barely 70 nautical miles from Minicoy and 300 nautical miles from India's West coast), and its location at the hub of commercial sea-lanes running through the Indian Ocean

(particularly the 8° N and 1 ½° N channels) imbues it with significant strategic importance to India. Maldives is one of the key elements in India's maritime security calculus. The security scenario in India's periphery in the Indian Ocean is very much linked to the maritime strength of Maldives.

**Defence:** This is the reason why India invests on Maldives' security by training its defence forces. Estimates suggest that almost 70 per cent of Maldives' defence training is done by India — either on the islands or in India's elite military academies.

India has trained over 1,500 Maldivian National Defence Force (MNDF) personnel in the past 10 years. The Indian Navy has given aircraft and choppers to the Maldivian defence forces for aerial surveillance, and have trained their personnel on how to land vertically in the islands.

India also wants to set up a coastal radar system in Maldives, with a view to keep an eye on the activities in the Indian Ocean.

**China:** The Chinese have also worked their way in, in the past 15 years. Maldives opened its embassy in that country in 2009, and China opened its embassy as recently as 2011. But with investments into projects, especially since President Xi Jinping came to power and pushed the Belt and Road Initiative, Male has been actively wooed by the Chinese.

India is obviously concerned at the expanding Chinese footprint there. While Mohamed Nasheed first started the engagement with China, Abdulla Yameen took it up several notches during his term from 2013-2018. Muizzu, who was a minister in Yameen's government, is seen as carrying forward his mentor's policies.

So, from a purely strategic perspective, India needs Maldives on its side to secure its maritime periphery, keep an eye on the Indian Ocean, and check the influence of China in its neighbourhood.

### **Now, the third question is: why does Maldives need India?**

**Daily needs:** India supplies Maldives with its everyday essentials: rice, spices, fruits, vegetables, poultry — basically every possible edible item in the country, except, of course, seafood, which Maldives has in plenty.

It supplies medicines — not just everyday medicines, but all critical care and life-saving drugs.

India also supplies basic items to build infrastructure in Maldives — cement, rock boulders, and basically anything one needs to build a house or a bridge or a school or

a hospital. In fact, one of the major multi-speciality hospitals in Maldives has been built by India, the 300-bed Indira Gandhi Memorial hospital.

**Education:** India has been the education provider for Maldivians. Since the country has a small population base and the islands are isolated and spread out, there are no major educational institutions. So, every year, Maldivian students flock to Indian higher educational institutions. Some come to India's boarding schools as well. The government gives out scholarships for Maldivian students to study in India.

**Economic dependence:** Maldives is dependent on India for most items, and hence India is among its top trading partners. Of the Rs 50 crore total trade between India and Maldives in 2022, Rs 49 crore was India's exports to Maldives. India emerged as Maldives' second largest trade partner in 2022.

**Help during disasters:** India has been the main pillar of help for Maldives in times of crisis and distress.

When a tsunami struck the islands in 2004, India was the first to send in help. Again, in 2014, when Male suddenly had a drinking water crisis as the major desalination plant broke down, India overnight airlifted drinking water to the islands. During the Covid-19 pandemic, India sent essential medicines, masks, gloves, PPE kits and vaccines for the island country.

**Security provider:** When there was a coup attempt in 1988 against then President Abdul Gayoom, India sent in troops to fight the combatants.

Indian Navy and the Maldivian Navy conduct joint exercises and Indian assets are always in readiness in the vicinity to protect the island nation.

In this overall context, it is in the interest of both New Delhi and Male to dial down the current tensions, by assuaging each other's concerns and cooperating on what matters most for both sides.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Bilateral Relations

Source: Indian Express & The Hindu

## 15. Who are the Shia Houthis, and why are they aligned with the Sunni Palestinian Hamas?

### Background

The United States and the United Kingdom launched strikes aimed at Houthi groups in Yemen on January 11, in response to the persistent Houthi attacks on ships passing

through the Red Sea, the narrow body of water that separates Asia from Africa, and which is one of the world's busiest and most important maritime trade routes.



Since November 2023, the Houthis have attacked ships in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden to protest the Israeli military's continuing bombardment of Gaza. After Hamas, the Palestinian militant group, launched an attack against Israel on October 7, killing more than 1,200 people, Israel retaliated with a disproportionately heavy hand.

The Israeli military action has claimed around 23,000 lives so far, most of them civilians and including a very large number of children, according to Gaza's Health Ministry.

Ever since the Hamas attack, there have been concerns around the conflict drawing in other countries and groups such as the Houthis, given the various alliances and rivalries that have existed for decades in the Middle East. Who are the Houthis, why have they involved themselves in the Israel-Hamas war, and what risks do the latest escalation pose?



### **First, why have the US and the UK launched strikes on Houthi positions along Yemen's western coast (and deeper inland)?**

On January 11, President Joe Biden said in a statement that the strikes were conducted with support from Australia, Bahrain, Canada, and the Netherlands "against a number of targets in Yemen used by Houthi rebels to endanger freedom of navigation in one of the world's most vital waterways".

### **And why are these attacks such a cause of concern for the West?**

Around 12 per cent of the world's trade passes through the Red Sea and the Suez Canal that connects the Arabian Sea to the Mediterranean. After the Houthi attacks began around November 19, several major shipping and oil companies have announced they were pausing movement on this East-West passage.

Concerns over the safety of vessels have meant that some ships have had to sail around the Cape of Good Hope in South Africa. This route around the African continent takes much longer, and leads to higher costs of fuel.

While the Houthis initially said they were targeting Israel-linked ships, they have also attacked vessels registered in other countries, and carrying crews of other nationalities. In December, a Liberia-flagged merchant vessel, MV Chem Pluto, carrying a crew of 22 (of which 21 were Indians), came under a drone attack around 220 nautical miles southwest of Porbandar, Gujarat, while it was on its way to New Mangalore.

### **Who are the Houthis and why are they getting involved in the Israel-Hamas war?**

The Houthis are a militant group that has been fighting the civil war in Yemen for a decade. After they seized power in the capital Sana'a in 2014, a Saudi-UAE alliance attempted to dislodge them. The Houthis now control northern Yemen, including Sana'a, and have a presence in most regions of the country. The earlier government now operates out of the port of Aden.

The Houthis are Shia, and are backed with arms and finances by the Shia regime in Iran. Iran's great regional rival, Sunni-majority Saudi Arabia, along with Western allies like the US, backs the Yemen government.

Though Hamas is a Sunni organisation, it is backed by Iran because of their mutual opposition to the US and Israel. The Houthis' support for Palestine and the Yemen conflict are both, therefore, also a manifestation of existing regional rivalries. The Iranian regime also backs and funds the Shia militant group Hezbollah in Lebanon, which has been taking on the Israeli defence forces in the north of the country.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; International Relations

Source: The Indian Express & The Hindu

## 16. Bhutan elections and implications for India

### Why in news?

Tshering Tobgay and the People's Democratic Party (PDP) won Tuesday's (January 9) runoff election in Bhutan, defeating former bureaucrat Pema Chewang and the relatively new Bhutan Tendrel Party (BTP).

The PDP won 30 of 47 seats in the national legislature, with 3.2 lakh Bhutanese voters (out of a registered 5 lakh) casting the ballot. This was after a November 2023 primary election, in which three parties, including Lotay Tshering's ruling centre-left Druk Nyamrup Tshogpa party, were ousted.

Tobgay, 58, is a conservationist and former civil servant with a master's degree in public administration from Harvard University. He founded the liberal PDP in 2007, and previously served as prime minister from 2013 to 2018.

### A promising young democracy

Unlike Pakistan and Bangladesh, where the fairness of elections is perennially in question, Bhutan's elections have been relatively straightforward, without any complaints of tampering or uneven playing fields. Even after the incumbent was ousted in November, there were no crackdowns or violence reported, and no opposition figures have been imprisoned on politically motivated accusations.

This is quite the accomplishment, especially since Bhutan transitioned from a monarchy to a parliamentary democracy as recently as 2008. The nation is still ruled in the name of the monarch, however, the King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuk holds little actual political authority.

Since the first elections were held, 15 years ago, Bhutan's democratic system has significantly evolved. Whereas in the inaugural elections, only two parties were eligible to compete, the recent race saw five candidates. Moreover, compared to past elections, candidates this time had specific promises and positions, giving voters a genuine — and difficult — choice.

That being said, Bhutan's democracy is far from perfect. DC-based political advocacy group Freedom House characterises the country as "partly free," citing media censorship and discrimination against religious and linguistic minorities. Concerns remain about the lack of accountability among the Bhutanese political class.

### Economic concerns key

The election this year took place against a dismal economic background in Bhutan. Its tourism industry is still reeling from the lingering effects of the Covid-19 pandemic,

and the country has a youth unemployment rate of 29 per cent — over half of Bhutan's population is under 30 years old and categorised as 'youth'.

Moreover, data show that one in eight people in Bhutan are "struggling to meet their basic needs for food" and other necessities. Over the past five years, Bhutan's GDP has grown at a snail's pace of about 1.7 per cent on average. This is leading to record numbers of young people emigrating from Bhutan to places like Australia in pursuit of better opportunities.

These economic concerns were central to Tobgay's successful campaign. He has pledged to encourage the investment required to strengthen the \$3 billion Bhutan economy, and deal with the unemployment that he says is behind the "mass exodus" from Bhutan.

### **Where India stands**

India remains Bhutan's biggest donor and ally, and will be crucial in helping with its economic recovery. India is funding multiple infrastructure initiatives in the country, including a newly announced railway project. Bhutan also has untapped hydroelectric potential, with New Delhi likely to be a lucrative client.

But in recent years, Bhutan has also been an arena of hostilities between India and Bhutan's other neighbour China. Doklam, a border region claimed by both China and Bhutan, saw clashes between Indian and Chinese troops break out in 2017. Earlier this week, satellite photos purportedly depicting a Chinese military presence on Bhutan-claimed land were released.

Now Bhutan does not maintain formal diplomatic relations with China. However, the previous prime minister, Lotay Tshering, signed a joint cooperation agreement with Beijing in October 2023, which specified the duties of a joint technical team in delineating the border between the two. He was generally seen as more "pro-China", to the extent that he was willing to negotiate with the country.

Newly-elected Tobgay, on the other hand, is very much considered to be pro-India, and thus hands a major boost to India's strategic concerns in the region.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Bilateral Relations

Source: Indian Express

## **17. Death by nitrogen: Why this Alabama execution is polarising**

### **Why in news?**

Alabama inmate Kenneth Smith was executed on January 25 by nitrogen hypoxia, marking the United States' first execution using the method, and the first time in over

four decades that a new method of execution was introduced, since lethal injection was first used in 1982.

The simple science behind nitrogen hypoxia Smith, 58, was fastened to a gurney and forced to breathe pure nitrogen. In its court filings, the state of Alabama said that a "NIOSH-approved Type-C full facepiece supplied air respirator" — a type used in industrial settings to deliver life-preserving oxygen — was used to deliver the nitrogen.

Now, we breathe nitrogen all the time. In fact, the colourless and odourless gas makes up 78 per cent of the air inhaled by humans. Clearly, the gas itself is harmless. But what



this execution does is force the inmate to breathe in pure nitrogen and nothing else. This deprives the body of oxygen needed to maintain bodily functions and ultimately causes death.

The Alabama attorney general's office had told a federal judge that the nitrogen gas will "cause unconsciousness within

seconds, and cause death within minutes."

### **A 'botched' execution?**

The execution, however, took roughly 22 minutes, and onlookers were left distressed by what they saw.

Smith's spiritual adviser, the Rev Jeff Hood described the execution as "the most horrible thing" he had ever seen. "What we saw was minutes of someone struggling for their life".

Nonetheless, Alabama state representatives stated that "nothing out of the ordinary" took place. "There was some involuntary movement and some agonal breathing, so that was all expected and is in the side effects that we've seen and researched on nitrogen hypoxia".

Agonal breathing is a serious medical sign that indicates someone is not getting enough oxygen and is, thus, close to death. It is not "true breathing" but rather a reflex gasp triggered by the brain in a desperate attempt to get oxygen.

### **Legal and ethical questions**

Smith's lawyers, till the very end, attempted to stop the execution from taking place. They contended that the state was making Smith a test subject for an experimental execution method that could violate the US constitution's ban on cruel and unusual punishment.

"There is little research regarding death by nitrogen hypoxia. When the State is considering using a novel form of execution that has never been attempted anywhere, the public has an interest in ensuring the State has researched the method adequately and established procedures to minimise the pain and suffering of the condemned person," Smith's attorneys said in a statement.

However, federal courts rejected the bid to block the execution. Smith, 58, had previously survived a botched execution attempt using lethal injection in 2022. He was sentenced to death for his role in a 1988 contract-killing.

### **Death penalty in the US**

The death penalty is a highly charged political issue in the United States, drawing polarised responses from people. Proponents argue that it is a just retribution for certain heinous crimes, and provides closure for victims' families. They say that it also acts as a deterrent for potential criminals from committing certain heinous offences. There is no evidence, however, of capital punishment acting as a deterrent at all.

With regards to the 'just retribution' argument, critics counter by saying that there is always a risk of a wrongful prosecution, and in general, studies have shown significant racial and economic bias when it comes to capital punishment.

### **Method of Death Penalty**

Then there is the separate question of the method of death penalty. Constitutionally speaking, state-sanctioned executions must be as painless and comfortable as possible. There is, however, no silver bullet to achieve this outcome.

The most common method, lethal injection, has been mired in controversy in recent years, from botched executions to non-availability. In a typical three-injection protocol, a person can die as quickly as 30 to 60 seconds after the final fatal injection. But the process is far from reliable. In 2014, for example, an Oklahoma inmate had an apparent heart attack 43 minutes after receiving the first injection.

Currently, capital punishment is legal in 27 of 50 US states. However, in 7 of these states, executions have been paused. Executions have also been paused at the federal level, although the US military, with its own justice system, retains the death penalty.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; International Issues

Source: The Indian Express

## **18. Iran, Pakistan, and the Baloch militancy**

### **Why in news?**



The relationship between Iran and Pakistan has taken serious hits over the last two days. Recently, Iranian missiles and drones struck two alleged bases of the Jaish al-Adl, an anti-Iran Baloch militant group, in Pakistan's Balochistan province.

Pakistan reacted strongly to the "blatant breach" of its sovereignty, recalled its envoy to Tehran, said the Iranian ambassador (who is now in Iran) "may not return", and then carried out its own cross-border missile strikes on alleged terrorist sanctuaries in Iran.

Iran has summoned a senior Pakistani diplomat in response. Both countries have claimed civilian casualties in attacks by the other side.

### **Relationship before 1979**

Before the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, both countries were firmly allied to the United States and had, in 1955, joined the Baghdad Pact, later known as the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO), a military alliance modelled on NATO.

Iran provided material and weapons support to Pakistan during its 1965 and 1971 wars against India. After the liberation of Bangladesh, the Shah of Iran famously said that he would not tolerate "further disintegration" of Pakistan.

### **Relationship after Iran revolution**

When Ayatollah Khomeini's ultra-conservative Shiite regime took power in Iran, Sunni-majority Pakistan was undergoing its own Islamisation under military dictator Gen Zia-ul-Haq — and the two countries found themselves at opposite ends of the sectarian divide.

Geopolitically too, differences began to emerge.

First, as Iran went from being an ally to a sworn enemy of the United States almost overnight, the Americans embraced Pakistan closer. Since 1979, the US has been a major reason for the Iranian distrust of Pakistan, which increased after 9/11 as Islamabad extended unqualified support to the US "War on Terror".

Also, Pakistan and Iran ended up on opposite sides in Afghanistan after the withdrawal of Soviet forces. Iran backed the Northern Alliance against the Taliban, a Pakistani creation.

### **Common Baloch 'problem'**

The 909-km Iran-Pakistan border, known as the Goldsmith Line, stretches from a tripoint with Afghanistan to the northern Arabian Sea. Roughly 9 million ethnic Baloch live on either side of the line, in the Pakistani province of Balochistan, and the Iranian province of Sistan and Baluchestan. Another 500,000 live in the neighbouring areas of Afghanistan in the north.

The Baloch share cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and religious links that transcend modern borders. They also nurse deeply rooted grievances against both the Pakistani and Iranian states.



In Pakistan, the Baloch are an ethnic minority physically and politically distant from the Punjabi-dominated regime; in Iran, in addition to being an ethnic minority, the majority-Sunni Baloch are also a religious minority who have been persecuted by the state.

The Baloch homeland is rich in natural resources but impoverished. In Iran, 80% of the Baloch population lives under the poverty line. In Pakistan, massive investments in projects such as China's Belt and Road initiative have not improved their lives.

Baloch nationalism traces its roots to the early decades of the 20th century, when new international borders came to be drawn in the region. Their marginalisation in both countries in subsequent years fuelled several separatist movements for a "Greater Balochistan" nation state.

The insurgents travel back and forth across the porous border after attacking military, and sometimes, civilian targets. Iran's strikes were in response to terrorist actions by the Sunni Islamist Jaish al-Adl that operates in Iran; the Pakistani response targeted

the Baloch Liberation Army and the Baloch Liberation Front, separate groups that have been active in Pakistan.

Notably, the Baloch insurgents in Iran are often organised on Sunni religious lines, whereas the ones in Pakistan are more secular ethno-nationalist organisations. Iran and Pakistan have earlier cooperated to combat the Baloch insurgency. At the same time, the insurgency has been a source of tension, with the two countries accusing each other of harbouring and supporting terrorists.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; International Issues

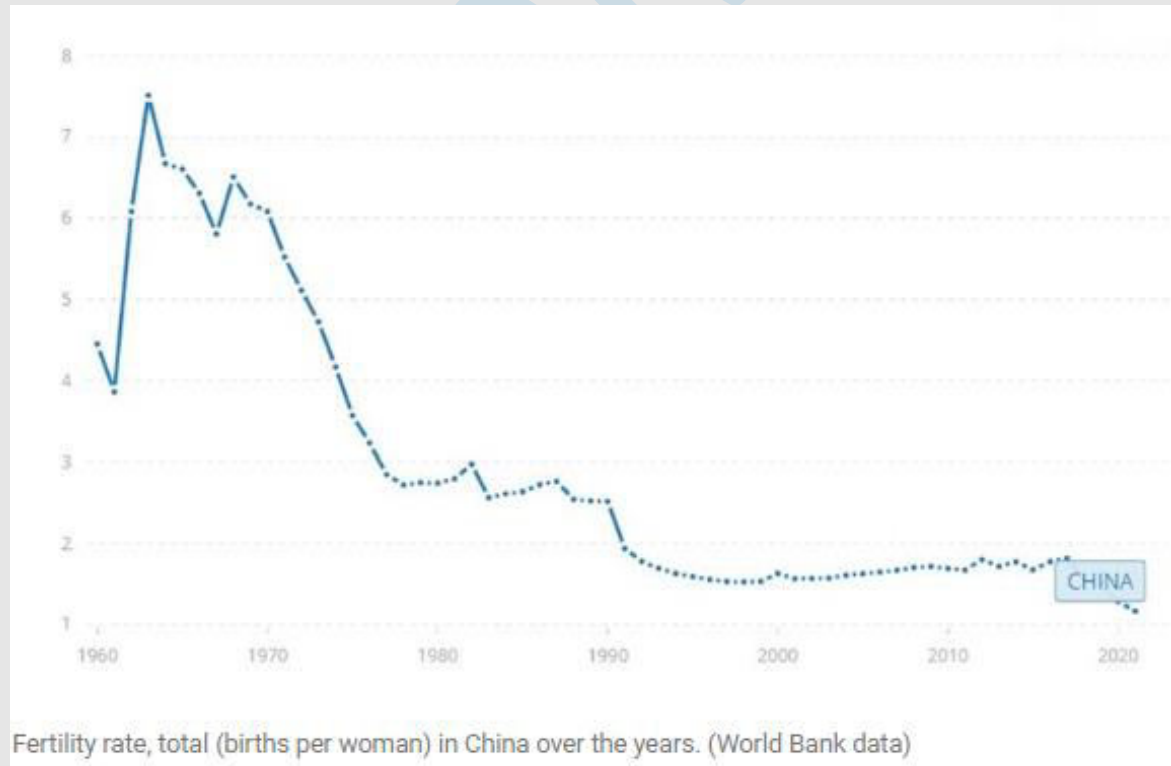
Source: The Indian Express & The Hindu

### 19. China's population fell for the second year in a row in 2023. But why?

#### Why in news?

The year 2023 saw 11.1 million deaths and 9 million births in China, marking the second year in which the country's total population has reduced. In the same year, India overtook China as the most populous country in the world.

In numbers released recently, the Chinese government said that the total population stood at 1.4 billion.



#### Recent Trend

The fall is part of recent population trends. Since 2016, the Total Fertility Rate or TFR (the number of children a woman, on average, is expected to bear in her lifetime) has

been falling in China. Another important concept here is that of replacement rate. It is the number of children a woman is to have, to replace the present generation in the future. A couple having two children would mean maintaining the same level of population in the future as well. China's TFR, according to its 2020 Census, was 1.3 births per woman — marginally up from the 1.2 in the 2010 and 2000 censuses, but way below the replacement rate of 2.1.

### **Is the One-child policy to be blamed for China's falling population?**

Introduced in 1980, the One-child policy restricted couples to have only one child, or face harsh penalties. The Communist Party of China, the most powerful entity in the country and one that has been in power since 1949, did so in a bid to accelerate economic growth.

### **So what other factors are responsible?**

In 2016, the One-child policy officially ended and couples were allowed to have up to two children. This was increased to three children in 2021. However, this has not helped achieve the goals of population growth.

As is the case with its two neighbours, China's demographic trends have in part to do with an increasingly educated population. Women's education and employment allow them the agency to make choices about their reproductive health. High pressures of modern society, with increasing competition for jobs, is also a factor.

People are marrying later and sometimes choosing not to have children. Even those who do often have only one child because of the high cost of educating children in cities in a highly competitive academic environment.

### **How could a falling population impact China?**

The working-age population between 15 to 59 years, which is seen as being productive in an economy, has now fallen to 61% of the total population. The proportion of those aged 60 and older has increased. Life expectancy has also increased for both men and women over time as a result of advanced healthcare systems.

In the short run, the trend will result in the need for greater investments in elderly care, including palliative care, and hiring more medical professionals and nursing staff. In the longer run, it could lead to greater pressure on the young population to support the 'dependants' (those under the age of 15 and over the age of 59). It also comes at a time when China's overall economic growth is lower than expected and yet to go back to the highs it reached in the 2000s.

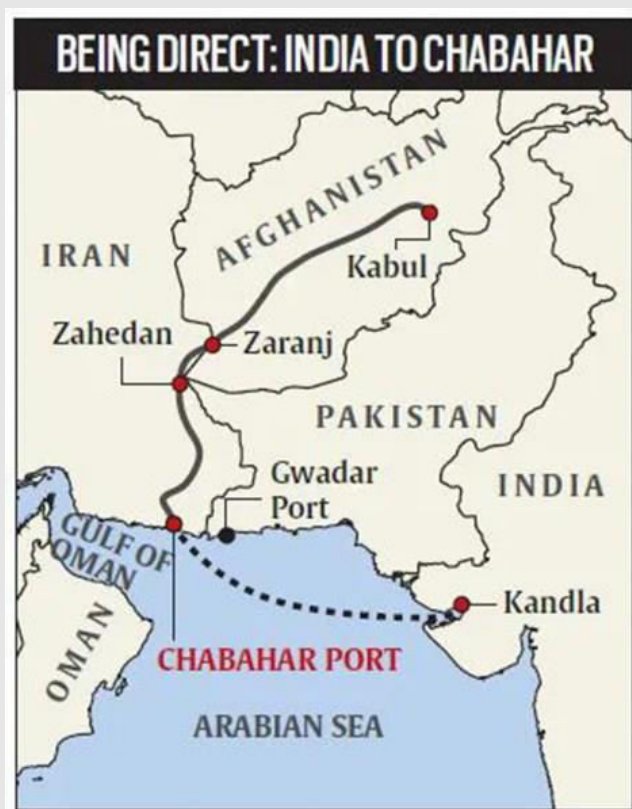
Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; International Issues

Source: The Indian Express

## 20. The history of Iran's Chabahar port, and its imperative for India

### Why in news?

There are two distinct ports in the Chabahar project, Shahid Beheshti and Shahid Kalantari. India's investment is restricted to the Shahid Beheshti port.



During this visit to Iran, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar held discussions with the Iranian Minister of Roads and Urban Development Mehrdad Bazrpash on establishing a long-term cooperation framework for the Chabahar port in the south of the country.

Chabahar, which sits at the mouth of the Gulf of Oman, is Iran's first deepwater port that puts the country on the global oceanic trade route map. The port lies to the west of Iran's border with Pakistan, about as far as Gwadar, a competing port developed by China in Pakistan, lies to the east of the border.

Chabahar is of strategic importance to both Iran and India. It can potentially help Tehran ward off the effect of Western sanctions, and offers New Delhi an alternative route that bypasses Pakistan, which does not allow India land access for trade with Afghanistan and Central Asia.

The port is also part of the proposed International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), a multi-modal transportation project linking the Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf to the Caspian Sea via Iran, and onward to northern Europe via St Petersburg in Russia.

### How much of the Chabahar port has been developed?

There are two distinct ports in the Chabahar project, Shahid Beheshti and Shahid Kalantari. India's investment is restricted to the Shahid Beheshti port.

India, Iran, and Afghanistan signed a trilateral agreement in April 2016, after which the Indian Shipping Ministry worked at a rapid pace towards developing the port. In December 2017, the first phase of Shahid Beheshti port was inaugurated, and India sent its first consignment of wheat to Afghanistan through Chabahar that same year.



Two years later, Afghan exports to India passed through the port for the first time. India received four such consignments that year.

Meanwhile, in January 2015, India Ports Global Limited (IPGL) was incorporated under the Companies Act, 2013, for the development of ports overseas. In December 2018, IPGL took over a part of the operations at Shahid Beheshti.

### **But why is it taking so long to develop the port?**

Geopolitical roadblocks, the biggest of which is Iran's relationship with the US, have been the major reason for the delay.

The US-Iran relationship started to improve temporarily after the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was signed between Iran and the P5+1 and the European Union in 2015 when Barack Obama and Rouhani were Presidents.

The Donald Trump administration, however, walked the US out of the Iran nuclear deal in 2018, and imposed sanctions on dealing with Tehran. A "carve-out" was provided to India for Chabahar, but it was difficult under the sanctions regime to find international suppliers for the material required to develop the port.

The US exit from Afghanistan and the return to power of the Taliban in August 2021 came as a further blow as India snapped ties with Kabul. The situation has improved since — in 2022, India reopened its embassy in Kabul and announced Rs 200 crore of development assistance to Afghanistan.

New Delhi also allocated Rs 100 crore for the Chabahar port project, and said in 2023 that it would send 20,000 metric tonnes of wheat to Afghanistan through the port.

### **What happens in the project here onward?**

The pace of development of Chabahar port will be impacted by US-Iran ties, which have been deteriorating steadily.

The ongoing crisis in the Red Sea, a spillover of the Israel-Hamas conflict in Gaza, has made the situation in the entire region extremely volatile and unpredictable.

Relevance: GS Prelims

Source: The Indian Express

## **21. Davos meeting 2024: 5 key takeaways**

### **Why in news?**

This year's edition of the World Economic Forum (WEF) annual meeting was held from January 15 to January 19.

Every year, leaders from various fields, such as business, politics, economics, etc., gather in the Swiss town (Davos) to discuss challenges facing the world and explore the ways forward. The event has faced criticism for its elite and expensive nature, but the Davos summit still remains relevant, if only for the glimpse it offers of how the rich and powerful react to the most pressing issues.

This year, some key themes dominated proceedings at the meeting. Here are the five main takeaways (with a special mention of India).

### **Artificial Intelligence**

The one issue that took centre stage at this year's WEF meet was Artificial Intelligence (AI). While its many transformational abilities for human welfare were discussed, so were the need for regulation, fear of job losses, the risks of impersonation and misinformation, and the inequalities it can potentially worsen.

### **War and uncertainty**

Business leaders spoke of the risk posed by a fragile geopolitical situation, wars in the Middle East and Europe, the threats to global supply chains, and the uncertainty around food security. Yet, no plans or roadmaps for peace were offered about the Israel-Gaza violence.

### **Climate**

The need for businesses to adapt to climate change and for countries to unite for action against it despite differences was another hot topic.

### **China's economy**

Facing a slowing economy, China tried to attract more investment from the West, which has witnessed some cooling. At 5.2%, China's GDP growth in 2023 is still below pre-pandemic levels.

### **And finally, India**

An assessment of Davos 2024 by consulting firm McKinsey and Company says, "India is transforming rapidly as one of the fastest growing large economies in the world. When it comes to technology, talent, healthcare, and other areas, its future in 2024—and beyond—is worth paying attention to."

India also made its presence felt in ways other than its economic potential. One of the ideas discussed at WEF this year was how investment in women's health could boost the global economy by \$1 trillion annually by 2040. According to the Press Information Bureau (PIB), "One of the key takeaways from the Forum meeting was the

announcement of the launch of a Global Good Alliance for Gender Equity and Equality with the support and endorsement by WEF and Government of India. The idea of this alliance emerged from the G20 Leaders' Declaration and India's abiding commitment to the cause of women-led development as propounded by Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi."

The objective of this Alliance is to bring together global best practices, knowledge sharing and investments in the identified areas of women's health, education, and enterprise.

Relevance: GS Prelims

Source: The Indian Express

## 22. What is the India-Myanmar border Free Movement Regime, which the Centre is planning to end?

### Why in news?

Union Home Minister Amit Shah recently announced that the Centre has decided to fence the entire length of the India-Myanmar border to stop the free movement of people. The two countries share a largely unfenced 1,643 km border, which goes through the states of Manipur, Mizoram, Assam, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh. The government is reconsidering Free Movement Regime (FMR) agreement with Myanmar, and is going to end this ease of coming and going. The FMR agreement was implemented in 2018.



### What is the Free Movement Regime on the India-Myanmar Border?

The FMR is a mutually agreed arrangement between the two countries that allows tribes living along the border on either side to travel up to 16 km inside the other country without a visa. It was implemented in 2018 as part of the Narendra Modi government's Act East policy, at a time when diplomatic relations between India and Myanmar were on the upswing.

### **But why was such a regime conceptualised?**

The border between India and Myanmar was demarcated by the British in 1826, without seeking the opinion of the people living in the region. The border effectively divided people of the same ethnicity and culture into two nations without their consent. The current India-Myanmar Border reflects the line the British drew.

People in the region have strong ethnic and familial ties across the border. In Manipur's Moreh region, there are villages where some homes are in Myanmar. In Nagaland's Mon district, the border actually passes through the house of the chief of Longwa village, splitting his home into two.

Apart from facilitating people-to-people contact, the FMR was supposed to provide impetus to local trade and business. The region has a long history of trans-border commerce through customs and border haats. Given the low-income economy, such exchanges are vital for the sustenance of local livelihoods. For border people in Myanmar too, Indian towns are closer for business, education, and healthcare than those in their own country.

### **So why is the FMR being discussed critically?**

The illegal migration of tribal Kuki-Chin peoples into India from Myanmar is one of the key issues in the ongoing Manipur conflict. While the Meiteis have accused these illegal migrants and the alleged "narco-terror network" along the India-Myanmar Border (IMB) of fomenting trouble in the state, the Kukis have blamed the Meiteis and Chief Minister N Biren Singh, a Meitei himself, of using this as a pretext for "ethnic cleansing".

Amid this charged and sensitive debate in the state, questions have been raised about the FMR.

Although beneficial to local people and helpful in improving Indo-Myanmar ties, it has been criticised in the past for unintentionally aiding illegal immigration, drug trafficking, and gun running.

The border runs through forested and undulating terrain, is almost entirely unfenced, and difficult to monitor. In Manipur, less than 6 km of the border is fenced.

Since the military coup in Myanmar on February 1, 2021, the ruling junta has launched a campaign of persecution against the Kuki-Chin peoples. This has pushed large

numbers of Myanmarese tribals across the country's western border into India, especially into Manipur and Mizoram, where they have sought shelter. Mizoram, where a large section of the population has close ethnic and cultural ties with people across the border, has set up camps for more than 40,000 refugees, despite protests from the Union Ministry of Home Affairs.

### **What about migration from Myanmar to Manipur?**

Manipur too has received a chunk of illegal migrants in the last few months. A committee set up by the state government to identify such migrants in 2023 put their number at 2,187. In September 2022, 5,500 illegal immigrants were caught in Moreh, and 4,300 were pushed back, sources said. Biometrics of these individuals have been recorded.

The Manipur government has alleged that village chiefs have been illegally settling migrants from Myanmar in new villages in the hills, leading to deforestation. An eviction drive against these new villages became the flashpoint between Kukis in the hills and the government last March, leading to violence in the state. The Kuki and Naga peoples live in the hills that surround the Imphal valley, whereas the valley itself is home to the majority Meiteis.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Bilateral Relations

Source: The Indian Express

## **23. What are labour rules for workers abroad?**

### **Why in news?**

The Uttar Pradesh and Haryana governments, with the help of the National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC), have started the process of recruiting about 10,000 workers to go to Israel, primarily for construction activities. The NSDC website describes it as a "passport to dreams abroad", and a chance to "discover new horizons in Israel". There are 2,000 openings for plastering workers, 2,000 for ceramic tile workers, and 3,000 each for iron bending and frame workers with monthly salaries of about ₹1.37 lakh (6,100 Israeli shekels). Screenings have started in various locations in Haryana and U.P. with the help of State governments.

### **Who are opposing the move?**

Trade unions have opposed this move, citing the Emigration Rules under the Emigration Act. They are planning to challenge this employment drive legally. The central trade unions told the media that such a move is against the Indian ethos of bringing back citizens from conflict zones. The trade union leaders alleged that the BJP-led government was using unemployment among the youth and workers to further their "politics of hate" to please Israel. Several hundreds of people, meanwhile, turned up at the screening centres in Haryana.



### **What do the Rules prescribe?**

Workers going to conflict zones or places without sufficient labour protections are required to register with the Ministry of External Affairs' 'e-migrate' portal. Passports issued under the ECR (Emigration Check Required) scheme cover workers travelling to 18 countries, including Afghanistan, Bahrain, Indonesia, Iraq, Jordan, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Malaysia, Oman, Qatar, South Sudan, Sudan, Syria, Thailand, the UAE, and Yemen. Israel is not on this list and the 'e-migrate' system will not be used for those going to Israel despite continuing violence due to Israel's bombing of Gaza.

### **What are the international practices?**

The international practices for protection of migrant workers are governed by two conventions of the International Labour Organisation: the Migration for Employment Convention (Revised), 1949 (No. 97) and Migrant Workers (Supplementary Provisions) Convention, 1975 (No. 143). While India has not ratified both conventions, Israel had ratified the 1949 convention in 1953. The 1949 convention says: "Each Member for which this Convention is in force undertakes that it will, so far as national laws and regulations permit, take all appropriate steps against misleading propaganda relating to emigration and immigration. For this purpose, it will where appropriate act in co-operation with other Members concerned."

The Israel Defense Forces spokesman Doron Spielman had told media that "there is not a place in Israel that is safe now" due to Hamas. According to some estimates, about 100 people who died in Gaza are migrant workers from Asian and African countries, and as per the Indian Embassy website, as of February 2023, "There are about 18,000 Indian citizens in Israel, primarily caregivers employed by Israeli elders to take care of them, diamond traders, IT professionals and students."

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance

Source: The Hindu

## **24. 19th Summit of the Non-Aligned Movement**

### **Why in News?**

The 19th Summit of the Non-Aligned Movement has held from 15th to 20th January 2024 in the capital of Uganda, Kampala. The 18th Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) Summit was held in 2019 in capital of Azerbaijan, Baku. In the 19th Summit, India was represented by External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar.

### **Non-Aligned Movement**

The Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) is a forum of 120 countries that are not formally aligned with or against any major power bloc. It was founded with the view to

advancing interests of developing countries in the context of Cold War confrontation. After the United Nations, it is the largest grouping of states worldwide.

The movement originated in the aftermath of the Korean War, as an effort by some countries to counterbalance the rapid bi-polarization of the world during the Cold War, whereby two major powers formed blocs and embarked on a policy to pull the rest of the world into their orbits. One of these was the pro-Soviet socialist bloc whose best-known alliance was the Warsaw Pact, and the other the pro-American capitalist group of countries, many of which belonged to NATO.

In 1961, drawing on the principles agreed at the Bandung Conference of 1955, the Non-Aligned Movement was formally established in Belgrade, Yugoslavia, through an initiative of Yugoslav President Josip Broz Tito, Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser, Ghanaian President Kwame Nkrumah, and Indonesian President Sukarno.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; International Organisations

Source: The Hindu

## **25. What is UNRWA, and why have Western countries paused its funding amid Gaza war?**

### **Why in news?**

UN officials urged countries to reconsider their decision to suspend the funding for the United Nations agency for Palestinian refugees (UNRWA), assuring that it would take strict action against any staff member found to be involved in Hamas' October 7 attack on Israel.

The agency also highlighted that two million Palestinians in Gaza are dependent on UNRWA services that would be scaled back as soon as February if the funding is not restored.

The US and eight other Western countries, which together provided more than half of UNRWA's 2022 budget, cut the money after Israel accused some of the agency's staff members of involvement in the October 7 attack.

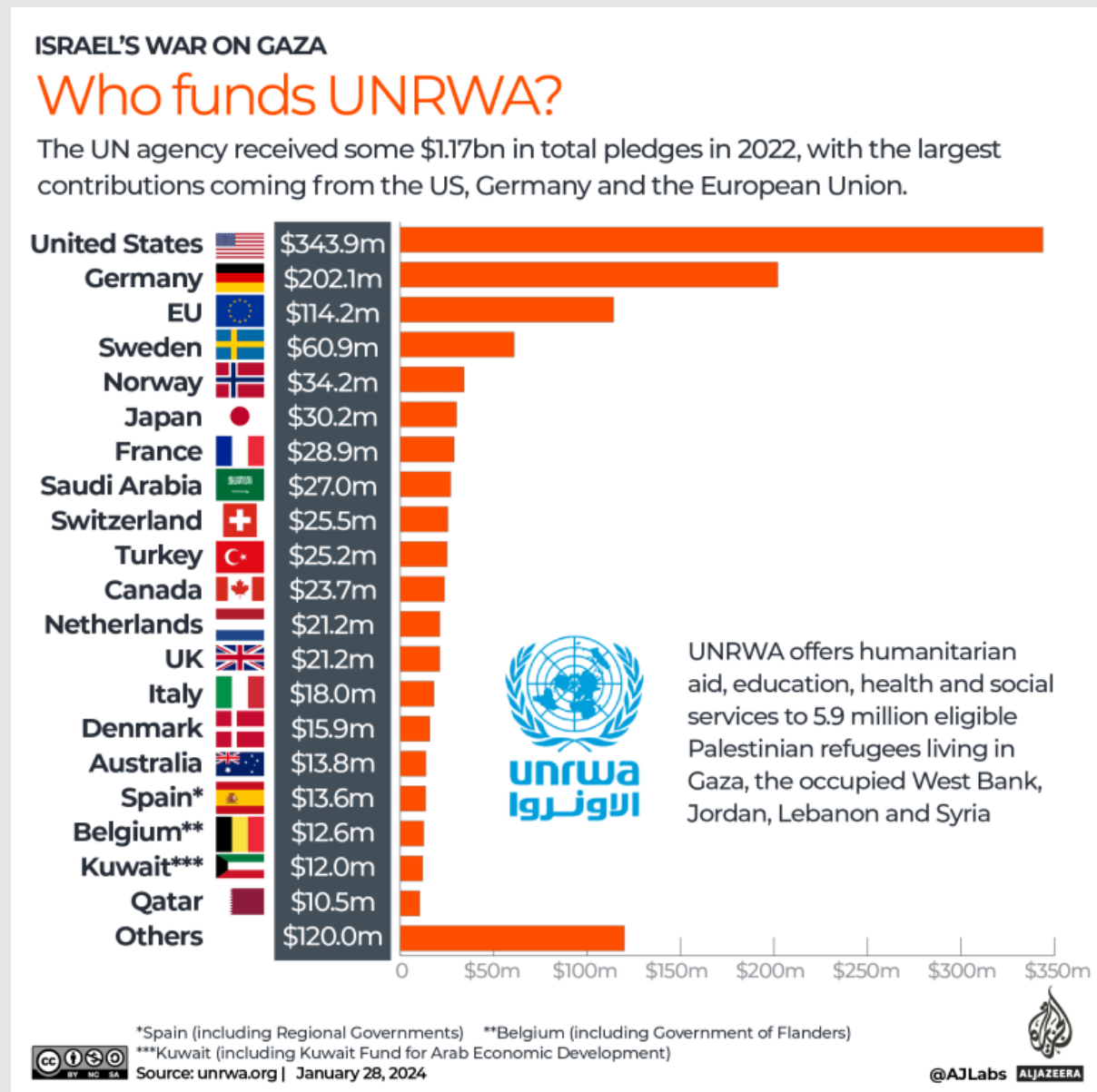
### **What is UNRWA?**

UNRWA stands for UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East. It was founded in 1949 to provide aid to about 700,000 Palestinians who were forced to leave their homes in what is now Israel during the 1948 Arab-Israeli war.

The UN agency operates in Gaza and the Israeli-occupied West Bank, as well as Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan — countries where the refugees took shelter after their

expulsion. According to UNRWA's website, it runs education, health, relief and social services, microfinance and emergency assistance programmes inside and outside refugee camps based in the aforementioned areas.

Currently, around 5.9 million Palestine refugees — most of them are descendants of original refugees — access the agency's services.



### What has Israel accused UNRWA of?

The details of the accusations are scant. Israel has alleged that 12 staff members of UNRWA were involved in the October 7 attack. It has also claimed that Hamas siphons off funds given to UNRWA and fights from in and around the agency's facilities.

Israel has alleged that Hamas tunnels (are) running next to or under UNRWA facilities and accuses the agency of teaching hatred of Israel in its schools.

### **How has UNRWA responded?**

The UNRWA has denied all the allegations, saying it has no links to Hamas. In the statement, UN officials said out of 12 staff members who were accused of being involved in the attack, nine have been terminated. One is confirmed dead and the identity of the two others is being clarified.

### **What happens now?**

UNRWA is crucial for the survival of people living in Gaza, which has plunged into a humanitarian crisis after the outbreak of the conflict. The agency has been the main supplier of food, water and shelter to civilians of the enclave. UNRWA, however, would run out of money needed for its aid work within weeks if the funding isn't restored, according to Guinness.

Although Imran has claimed that the cable is proof of a US conspiracy to push the Pakistani military to oust him in a parliamentary vote in 2022, he has denied revealing its content publicly — the former PM has said news outlets got the document from other sources.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; International Organisations

Source: The Indian Express and Aljazeera

## **26. What is the Islamic Resistance of Iraq, which has claimed responsibility for killing 3 US soldiers in Jordan?**

### **Why in news?**

Three US military servicemen were killed in a drone attack on their outpost in Jordan, marking the first time that US soldiers have died in the ongoing conflict in the Middle East.

US President Joe Biden said in a statement that "radical Iran-backed militant groups operating in Syria and Iraq" were behind the strikes. A group known as the Islamic Resistance of Iraq (IRI) claimed responsibility for the strikes.

### **Why were US troops stationed in Jordan?**

The strikes targeted Tower 22, a US military outpost (a smaller version of a military base) in Jordan. The country is bordered by Israel to its west, Saudi Arabia to its southeast, Iraq to its northeast and Syria to its north.

Tower 22 is near the Al Tanf garrison, located in Syria. US troops used the garrison while fighting against the Islamic State (IS), which emerged amid the Syrian Civil War. That conflict broke out in the early 2010s when a section of Syrians attempted to dislodge President Bashar al-Assad from power. His father had ruled the country for

decades before him, and this uprising also came from issues such as high inflation and unemployment.



Map showing Jordan and the Middle East.

### **What is the Islamic Resistance of Iraq?**

In Iraq and Syria, US forces have come under repeated assault by a newly created group of Iran-backed militias known as the Islamic Resistance of Iraq.

The group is part of the 'Axis of Resistance' – the multiple groups that Iran backs as part of its anti-Western and anti-USA stance. "Analysts believe the "Islamic Resistance of Iraq" is a front for Iranian-backed factions within an umbrella of militias known as Hashd al-Shaabi. These have become powerful military and political forces, boast tens of thousands of fighters and are also integrated into the state.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; International Issues

Source: The Indian Express



### 1. FPI disclosure norms deadline extended: Why is SEBI seeking investor data?

#### Why in news?

Foreign portfolio investors (FPIs), who are mandated to liquidate their holdings as per the Securities and Exchange Board of India's (Sebi) January-end deadline, will get seven months more to provide additional disclosures.

In August last year, the markets regulator had asked FPIs, who were holding more than 50 per cent of their equity assets under management (AUM) in a single corporate group or with an overall holding in Indian equity markets of over Rs 25,000 crore, to disclose granular details of all entities holding any ownership, economic interest, or exercising control in the FPI. The norms were announced to prevent the possible round-tripping by certain promoters using the FPI route.

#### Why has SEBI asked FPIs to provide additional disclosures?

In its August circular, Sebi said certain FPIs have been observed to hold a concentrated portion of their equity portfolio in a single investee company/ corporate group.

Such concentrated investments raise the concern and possibility that promoters of such investee companies/ corporate groups, or other investors acting in concert, could be using the FPI route to circumvent regulatory requirements such as that of disclosures under Substantial Acquisition of Shares and Takeovers Regulations, 2011 (SAST Regulations) or maintaining Minimum Public Shareholding (MPS) in the listed company.

The regulator said while Press Note 3 or PN3 issued by the government in April 2020 does not apply to FPI investments, there are concerns that entities with large Indian equity portfolios could potentially disrupt the orderly functioning of Indian securities markets by misusing the FPI route. To mitigate these concerns, a need was felt to obtain detailed information from FPIs.

#### What additional details are required from FPIs?

Sebi said granular details of all entities holding any ownership, economic interest, or exercising control in the FPI will have to be provided by FPIs. While economic interest means returns from the investments made by the FPI, ownership interest means ownership of shares or capital of the entity or entitlement to derive profits from the activity of the entity.

#### Are all FPIs required to provide additional disclosures?

No. Sebi has said FPIs holding more than 50 per cent of their Indian equity assets under management (AUM) in a single Indian corporate group or holding over Rs 25,000 crore of equity AUM in the Indian markets are required to disclose details.

### **Which FPIs are exempted from making additional disclosure?**

FPIs who are sovereign wealth funds (SWFs), listed companies on certain global exchanges, public retail funds, and other regulated pooled investment vehicles with diversified global holdings, are exempted from making enhanced disclosures.

### **What is Press Note 3?**

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the government amended the foreign direct investment (FDI) policy through a Press Note 3 (2020) on April 17, 2020. The amendments were said to have been made to check opportunistic takeovers/acquisitions of stressed Indian companies at a cheaper valuation.

The new regulations required an entity of a country, sharing a land border with India or where the beneficial owner of an investment into India is situated or is a citizen of any such country, to invest only under the Government route.

Also, in the event of the transfer of ownership of any existing or future FDI in an entity in India, directly or indirectly, resulting in the beneficial ownership falling within the restriction/purview of the said policy amendment, such subsequent change in beneficial ownership will also require government approval.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Economics

Source: Indian Express

## **2. Why did FIU IND act against virtual asset providers?**

### **Why in news?**

On December 28, the Financial Intelligence Unit India (FIU IND) issued show-cause notices to nine offshore virtual digital asset service providers (VDA SPs), including Binance, Kucoin, Huobi, Bitfinex and MEXC Global, among others. This was for "operating illegally" without complying with the provisions of the Prevention of Money Laundering Act, 2002 (PMLA). It has also been written to the Secretary of the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology to block URLs of the mentioned entities.

### **What is the premise of the non-compliance?**

In March 2023, Virtual Digital Asset Service Providers (VDA SPs) in India were brought under anti-money laundering/counter financing of terrorism regulations. They were mandated to comply with PMLA 2002, verify the identities of onboarded clients, and maintain records of their financial positions and potentially suspicious transactions. This obligation applies to all VDA SPs operating in India irrespective of physical

presence. Non-registration made entities non-compliant despite serving Indian users. To put it in perspective, the entities “though catering to a substantial part of Indian users were not getting registered and coming under the Anti Money Laundering (AML) and Counter Financing of Terrorism Network (CFT) framework”. Currently, 31 VDA SPs have registered with FIU IND.

### **What purpose does the PMLA compliance serve?**

The objective of the PMLA and its reporting obligation are to enable monitoring and tracking of financial transactions to curb money laundering and terror financing. The government has made it amply clear that it intends to enforce PMLA obligations on offshore entities if they satisfy the ingredients of the March 2023 PMLA notification on VDA SPs.

This is also in line with India’s efforts through the G-20 where it has been advocating for global regulation of cryptocurrency and consequently the framework proposed by the International Monetary Fund and the Financial Stability Board to the G-20 in September 2023 is likely to be actioned in 2024.

### **What considerations emerge when looking to regulate VDAs?**

The Bureau for International Settlements (BIS), which is the global forum for cooperation among central banks, in a report about financial stability from crypto assets in emerging economies (August 2023) observed three high-level policy options under consideration. These include an outright ban, containment and regulation. BIS observed that an outright ban may not prove enforceable. This is because of the pseudo-anonymous nature of crypto markets. There could be a possibility that regulators lose all sight of the market, further shrinking their transparency and making them less predictable. Containment would imply controlling the flows between crypto markets and traditional financial systems. However, BIS argued that the strategy would not address the vulnerabilities inherent in the crypto markets and could result in financial stability risks.

About regulation, motivation to regulate the asset varies across jurisdictions. The report holds that it must be ensured that the benefits of regulating and supervising are greater than the costs involved. Furthermore, for emerging market economies three issues are of importance, that is: defining the (regulatory) authority or entity and their scope, then the scope of regulation in terms of either activity or entity, and lastly, filling in the data gaps to understand the technology and interconnections.

Relevance: GS Prelims; Economics

Source: The Hindu

## **3. Nrega, Nyay and PM-Kisan: Why do politicians rush to give direct benefits (cash) to the poor**

### **Why in news?**

Congress President Mallikarjun Kharge reportedly said that if voted to power, the party would implement the NYAY scheme under which women would be given “at least Rs 60,000-70,000” annually. NYAY is an acronym for Nyuntam Aay Yojana (or Minimum Income Scheme).

Congress’s 2019 manifesto had promised that NYAY would be provided to the poorest 20% of Indian families (roughly 5 crore families out of a total of 25 crore; assuming 5 people per household). Nyay was to include a guaranteed payment of Rs 72,000 to each eligible family.

Around the same time, in 2018, the incumbent government, led by Prime Minister Modi, had rolled out a similar scheme called PM-KISAN (Pradhan Mantri – Kisan Samman Nidhi). It was billed as the world’s largest direct benefit (read cash) transfer (or DBT) scheme for farmers and involved “an income support of 6,000/- per year in three equal installments will be provided to all land holding farmer families” in India.

### **Issues to be discussed**

There are several questions here: What is the charm of such schemes? Are they the same as Universal Basic Income? Have they worked elsewhere? Can a country such as India afford them?

### **Why are Nyay/PM-Kisan not UBI?**

While these schemes resemble UBI, the first thing to note is that they are not exactly the roll out of Universal Basic Income (UBI).

Under a UBI, the government gives a “basic” income to every citizen in the country — from the richest person to the poorest one, regardless of whether they work or not. But there is a flip side to UBI: The government also rolls back all types of subsidies — from food to fertiliser to train tickets to medical bills.

The idea is simple: Just give everyone a minimum income amount, cut down the bureaucratic costs involved in running scores of welfare programmes, and simply tax everyone in such a manner as to fund the UBI. The truly needy people will get a minimum help while anyone who doesn’t actually need the UBI help will find it taxed away.

As should be evident, such schemes — be it the proposed Nyay or the existing PM-KISAN — are different in all three aspects.

For one, they are not accompanied by removal of all the existing subsidies. It is not as if the poor or the farmers will be deprived of other social welfare schemes if they enjoy the DBT.

Secondly, the amount is much smaller than what anyone can consider to be the minimum or basic income that everyone needs to have to live a decent life. Lastly, the scope of the schemes is limited to a section of Indians; these are targeted schemes, not universal ones.

### **Why has UBI not been rolled out?**

Even though UBI has captured the imagination of people, the hard fact is that no country can afford it.

In rich countries such as Switzerland (which considered and refused to adopt UBI) the UBI amount is quite a lot even though the population may be small. Sheer affordability itself is a massive stumbling block.

The other problem is the reduction of existing subsidies. Announcing the removal of existing subsidies is almost certain to create a political backlash.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Economics

Source: The Indian Express

## **4. 7 Odisha products that have bagged GI tag**

Seven products from Odisha, ranging from the Similipal Kai chutney made with red weaver ants to the embroidered Kapdaganda shawl, have bagged the coveted Geographical Indication (GI) tag in recognition of their exclusivity to the state.

Geographical Indications of goods refer to the place of origin of a product. Such tags are accorded as they convey an assurance of quality and distinctiveness, attributable to the fact of its origin in a specific geographical locality, region or country.

A marker of authentic products, the GI tags also help protect the interests of the local growers and artisans by preventing duplicity of the products. Consumers, through the tags, can know which goods are certified. Here is a quick look at the seven products and what makes them distinctive:

### **1. Kapdaganda shawl**





Woven and embroidered by the women of the Dongria Kondh tribe, a particularly vulnerable tribal group (PVTG) in the Niyamgiri hills in Odisha's Rayagada and Kalahandi districts, the shawl reflects the rich tribal heritage of the Dongria Kondhs. It is embroidered on an off-white coarse cloth with red, yellow and green coloured threads, with each colour holding significance. Green symbolises the mountains and hills, and yellow stands for peace and happiness. Red stands as the symbol of blood.

The motifs in the shawls are mostly lines and triangles, believed to be a reflection of the importance of mountains for the community. The shawl is worn by both men and women and the Dongrias gift it to their family members as a token of love and affection.

## **2. Lanjia Saura Painting**

The painting, one of the oldest tribal art forms, is also known as Idital. The artworks are famous for their beauty, aesthetics, ritualistic association and iconography.

The art form belongs to the Lanjia Saura community, a PVTG largely residing in the Rayagada district. These paintings are in the form of exterior murals painted on the mud walls of homes. White paintings figure over a crimson-maroon background.

It is believed that the Lanjia Sauras paint their walls with Idital artworks to show gratitude to their deities and forefathers, and also for the well-being of their community. Reflecting the love and affection of the primitive tribes for nature, they feature subjects like tribal humans, trees, animals, birds, the Sun and the Moon.



### 3. Koraput Kala Jeera Rice

The black-coloured rice variety, also known as the 'Prince of Rice', is famous for its aroma, taste, texture and nutritional value. Tribal farmers of the Koraput region have preserved the rice variety for around 1,000 years. As the rice grains resemble cumin seeds, it is also called Kala Jeera. Consumption of the rice variety helps in increasing haemoglobin levels and improves metabolism in the body.

The farmers and producers of Koraput Kala Jeera rice have followed the traditional knowledge and practices in cultivation. Ancient tales also speak about the physical, mental and spiritual delights resulting from the consumption of the rice variety.

### 4. Similipal Kai chutney

The chutney made with red weaver ants is a traditional delicacy of the tribals in Odisha's Mayurbhanj district. The ants are found in the forests of Mayurbhanj, including in the Similipal forests – Asia's second-largest biosphere. Rich in medicinal and nutritional value, the chutney is believed to be a good source of nutrients like protein, calcium, zinc, vitamin B-12, iron, magnesium, potassium, etc.

The tribals prepare the Kai chutney by grinding the ants manually on a Sil Batta or the grinding stone. Mayurbhanj's tribals also earn their livelihood by selling the red ants and the chutney made from the ants. They believe that its consumption helps boost immunity and prevents diseases.

### 5. Nayagarh Kanteimundi Brinjal

Nayagarh Kanteimundi Brinjal is known for its prickly thorns on the stems and the whole plant. The green and round fruits contain more seeds as compared to other



genotypes. It is famous for its unique taste and relatively short quick cooking time. The plants are resistant to major insects and can be grown with minimal pesticide.

It is being widely cultivated in Nayagarh district of the state. The growers are getting a yield of up to 200 quintals per hectare and selling at around Rs 60 per kg. Historical records also suggest that the locals got the brinjal from the hilly areas. They collected seeds from it and started raising seedlings nearly 100 years ago.

## **6. Odisha Khajuri Guda**

Odisha's "Khajuri Guda" or jaggery is a natural sweetener extracted from date palm trees and has its origin in the Gajapati district. Traditionally, the jaggery is prepared in a trapezoidal form called 'Patali Gur' and is organic by nature. It is dark brown and has a unique taste.

## **7. Dhenkanal Magji**

Dhenkanal Magji is a type of sweet made from cheese from buffalo milk, with distinct characteristics in terms of appearance, taste, flavour, shape, and size. It also has unique nutritional values that distinguish it from other cheese-based sweets.

Thousands of people were said to be earning their livelihood through animal husbandry, especially buffalo rearing, during the British era. The region was the hinterland of buffalo milk production and cheese was the third largest produce, after milk and curd. Mandar-Sadangi area of Gondia block is believed to be the centre of origin of the sweet stuff, which has now been spread to the entire district.

The sweet is prepared by draining moisture from the cheese and then frying it, finally forming balls from the mixture.

Relevance: GS Prelims; Economics

Source: The Indian Express

## **5. First Advance Estimates of India's GDP out: What are they, and what do the data show?**

### **Why in news?**

According to the First Advance Estimates (FAEs) released by the government, India's GDP will grow by 7.3% in the current financial year (2023-24), slightly faster than the 7.2% growth in 2022-23, on Friday showed.

### **How can GDP be estimated when there are still almost three months to go in the year?**

The FAE are presented at the end of the first week of January every year. They are only the first estimates of growth for that financial year. By the end of February, the Ministry

of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI) will release the Second Advance Estimates and, by the end of May, the Provisional Estimates.

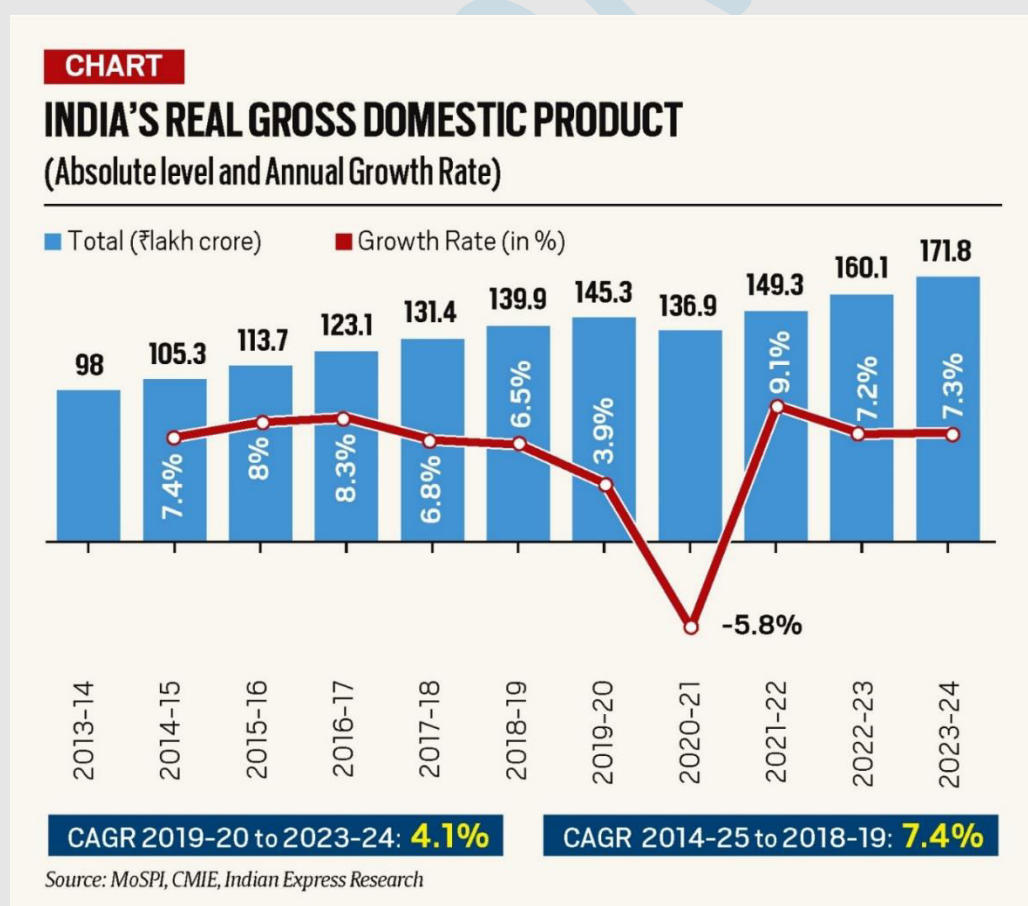
The GDP estimates continue to be revised as more and better data become available — and in the coming three years, MoSPI will release the First, Second, and Third Revised Estimates of this year's GDP before settling on the final number, which is called the "Actuals".

The FAE are based on the performance of the economy over the first seven-odd months, and the data are extrapolated to arrive at an annual picture.

### If the data are not final, what is the point of the FAEs?

The crucial significance of the FAEs is that they are the last GDP data released before the Union Budget for the coming financial year (which is presented on February 1) is finalised. As such, the FAEs constitute the base for the Budget numbers. However, since Lok Sabha elections will be held in April-May, a full-fledged Union Budget will not be presented this year.

This year's FAEs draw some additional significance from the fact that they provide the first complete picture of economic growth in the 10 years of the government led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi.



### So what do the FAE data show?

The chart shows India's real GDP (GDP after stripping away the effect of inflation), both in absolute terms (in Rs lakh crore) and in terms of growth rate.

### What is contributing to India's growth?

India's GDP is calculated by adding up all kinds of spending in the economy — the demand side of the economy. As such, there are four main "engines" of GDP growth.

**\*Spending by people in their individual capacity:** Technically this is called Private Final Consumption Expenditure (PFCE). It accounts for almost 60% of India's GDP.

**\*Spending towards investments in boosting the productive capacity of the economy:** This could be the building of a factory, companies buying computers for their offices, or governments building roads.

This is called Gross Fixed Capital Formation (GFCF), and is the second-largest engine of growth that typically accounts for 30% of the GDP.

TABLE

### MAIN ENGINES OF INDIA'S GDP

Absolute level (in ₹ lakh crore) and Annual Growth Rate (in %)

Year	PFCE		GFCE		GFCF		Net Exports	Growth Rate in NX*
	Private spending	Growth rate	Govt spending	Growth rate	Spending for investments	Growth rate		
2013-14	55.6		9.8		31.9		-1.8	
2014-15	59.1	6.4%	10.5	7.1%	32.8	2.5%	-1.6	-11.8%
2015-16	63.8	7.9%	11.3	6.9%	34.9	6.1%	-1.4	-9.1%
2016-17	69	8.1%	12	5.7%	37.9	7.8%	-1.3	-5.7%
2017-18	73.3	6.2%	13.4	10.7%	40.8	7.2%	-4.8	257.6%
2018-19	78.5	7.1%	14.3	6.3%	45.4	10.1%	-4.4	-8.2%
2019-20	82.6	5.2%	14.9	3.8%	45.9	1.1%	-5.1	16.1%
2020-21	78.2	-5.2%	14.8	-0.9%	42.6	-7.9%	-3.1	-38.8%
2021-22	87	11.2%	15.8	6.2%	48.8	12.8%	-1.9	-39.6%
2022-23	93.6	7.5%	15.8	0.1%	54.3	10.2%	-3.4	79.7%
2023-24	97.7	4.4%	16.4	3.9%	59.9	9.3%	-8.2	144.2%
2019-20 to 2023-24@		4.5%		2.8%		5.6%		13.3%
2014-25 to 2018-19@		7.1%		7.9%		7.3%		19.6%

@Compounded Annual Growth Rate between  
Source: MoSPI, CMIE, Indian Express Research

\*a negative growth is good in India's case



**\*Spending by governments to meet daily expenditures such as salaries:** This is Government Final Consumption Expenditure (GFCE). It is the smallest engine, accounting for around 10% of GDP.

**\*Net exports or net spending as a result of Indians spending on imports and foreigners spending on Indian exports:** Since India typically imports more than it exports, this engine drags down GDP calculations, and shows up with a minus sign.

The table shows how each of these components has done in absolute and percentage terms.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Economics

Source: The Indian Express

## **6. The question of MSP: Is income support for farmers better than pricing that is delinked from market demand?**

### **What is the current situation?**

Farmers, for the most part, operate in a buyer's market. Since their crops — barring may be milk — are harvested and marketed in bulk, it leads to sudden supply increases relative to demand, putting downward pressure on prices.

Such market conditions, favouring buyers over sellers, also mean farmers are price takers, not price makers. Lacking the market power to influence the prices of their produce — or to even set the MRP (maximum retail price), as firms in most industries do — they sell at prevailing supply-and-demand-determined rates. Worse, while their crops are sold wholesale, they pay retail prices for everything from seeds, pesticides, diesel, and tractors to cement, medicines, toothpaste, and soap.

Thus, farmers from time-to-time demand minimum support prices (MSP) for their crops.

### **Logic for income support**

Most economists, though, are opposed to government-fixed MSPs based on cost-plus pricing, sans any consideration to market demand. Farmers, they say, should plant what the market wants, as reflected in the prices for various crops at a given point in time. Cost-plus MSPs that are oblivious to demand conditions will distort farmers' production decisions, resulting in the oversupply of some crops and an undersupply of others.

Economists largely believe that it is better to give farmers "income", instead of "price", support. That would mean transferring a fixed sum of money annually into their bank accounts, whether on a per-farmer (as in the Centre's PM-Kisan Samman Nidhi) or per-

acre (the Telangana government's Rythu Bandhu) basis. Direct income support schemes aren't market-distorting and benefit all farmers, irrespective of which crop they grow in whatever quantity, and sell to whomsoever at any price.

### **Logic for Price support**

However, the flip side to everyone being paid the same money is: where does this leave the real producing farmer, who invests more resources, time, and effort in the field?

These farmers, unlike those for whom agriculture is a secondary or incidental livelihood source, may be justified in seeking some kind of price assurance for the crop they are sowing now and harvesting a few months down the line.

And given that they, more than other businessmen, are exposed to both price and production risks (from weather, pests, and diseases), MSP guarantee is probably not an unreasonable demand.

Moreover, price support can be a useful tool for promoting crop diversification. Farmers are more likely to grow pulses, millets, and other nutrient-dense, less water-intensive crops than rice, wheat, or sugarcane if they are assured of MSP on the former. So long as MSPs do not deviate excessively from market rates and inter-crop price parity, it's the next question that deserves answering.

### **How can MSP be guaranteed?**

There are two conventional ways.

The first is to force buyers to pay MSP. Sugar mills are required, by law, to pay cane growers a "fair and remunerative" or "state advised" price within 14 days of purchase. But this approach risks implementation hurdles (recurrent cane payment arrears are proof), or worse, the private trade choosing to not buy at all.

The second is for government agencies to buy the entire marketable produce of farmers offered at MSP. That is unsustainable, both physically and fiscally.

But there's a third option: price deficiency payments (PDP). It entails the government not physically purchasing or stocking any crop, and simply paying farmers the difference between the market price and MSP, if the former is lower. Such payment would be on the quantity of crop they sell to the private trade.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Economics

Source: The Indian Express

## **7. India's First Inland Waterways Development Council commits US\$ 5.4 billion (Rs. 45,000 crore) for the development of River Cruise Tourism**

### **Inland Waterways Development Council**

The inaugural session of the Inland Waterways Development Council (IWDC) in Kolkata, led by Union Minister of Ports, Shipping & Waterways and AYUSH Mr. Sarbananda Sonowal, marked a pivotal moment for India's inland waterways.

### **Initiatives**

With key stakeholders and industry leaders in attendance, the meeting focused on bolstering the sector's capacity and viability. A substantial commitment of US\$ 5.4 billion (Rs. 45,000 crore) was announced for the development of river cruise tourism, allocating US\$ 4.2 billion (Rs. 35,000 crore) for cruise vessels and US\$ 1.2 billion (Rs. 10,000 crore) for cruise terminal infrastructure by 2047. Additionally, an investment of US\$ 1.8 billion (Rs. 15,200 crore), determined at the Global Maritime India Summit in October 2023, aims to propel inland waterways for cargo trade, projecting a remarkable growth rate exceeding 400%, leading to a volume increase to 500 million Tonnes Per Annum (MTPA) by 2047.

Mr. Sonowal, in launching the 'Harit Nauka' guidelines and the 'River Cruise Tourism Roadmap, 2047,' underscored India's impressive growth under Prime Minister Mr. Narendra Modi.

The IWDC's mission aligns with the vision of an Atmanirbhar Bharat, focusing on a modern approach and clear strategy to rejuvenate neglected waterways. The outlined roadmap aims to expand the capacity for River Cruise tourism, increase the number of cruise circuits, and enhance infrastructure, signaling a transformative journey toward sustainable development and economic rejuvenation.

Relevance: GS Prelims

Source: PIB

## **8. Restructuring Milestone for Coal Controller Organisation**

### **Why in news?**

The recent approval by the Ministry of Finance for the restructuring of the Coal Controller Organisation signifies a noteworthy advancement in adapting the organization to the changing dynamics of the coal sector.

### **Overview of Coal Controller Organisation**

Under the Ministry of Coal, the Coal Controller Organisation is tasked with collecting and managing coal production data from both private and public sector coal mines in India. The organization plays a pivotal role in ensuring fairness in production and

commercial transactions within the coal sector. Key responsibilities include regulating commercial mining, boosting domestic coal production, and achieving the ambitious target of 1 billion tonnes with zero imports in 2024. India's total coal production in FY23 was 893.08 million tonnes.

### **Background**

As a subordinate office under the Ministry of Coal, the Coal Controller Organisation fulfills various responsibilities to maintain the integrity of coal production. This involves inspecting collieries to verify coal class, grade, or size accuracy, issuing directives for maintaining coal grades, and serving as an appellate authority in disputes. The organization also oversees coal stock disposal, quality surveillance, and plays a crucial role in assessing and collecting excise duty on raw coal.

### **Need for Restructuring**

In response to the evolving landscape of the coal sector, the Ministry of Coal initiated a comprehensive review in November 2019. A four-member Committee, led by A.N.Sahay, proposed restructuring to enhance the organization's effectiveness. The restructuring, focused on regulating commercial mining and boosting domestic coal production, received approval from the Ministry of Finance on October 20, 2023.

### **Current Status and Future Plans**

The restructuring involves a new sanctioned strength of 130 personnel, distributed across Gazetted and Non-Gazetted groups. The Ministry of Coal and the Coal Controller Organisation are in the process of approving recruitment rules for these sanctioned positions. This represents a crucial step in implementing the restructuring and enhancing the organization's capabilities to meet the challenges and opportunities presented by the evolving coal sector.

### **Coal Controller Organisation's Commitment to Safety**

Aligned with the Directorate General of Mines Safety (DGMS), the Coal Controller Organisation prioritizes safety and health standards in the mining industry. Safety provisions are incorporated into agreements with private mine allocattees, ensuring compliance with laws and industry practices for the protection of employees' health, safety, welfare, and minimum wages.

Relevance: GS Prelims; Economics

Source: PIB

## **9. Collapse of mega Sony-Zee merger plan**

### **Why in news?**

More than two years after announcing a merger proposal, Japanese entertainment giant Sony Corporation said its Indian arm, Culver Max Entertainment Pvt. Ltd

(formerly Sony Pictures Networks India Pvt Ltd (SPNI), has called off the \$ 10 billion merger plan with Zee Entertainment Enterprises Ltd (ZEEL) that could have combined their linear networks, digital assets, production operations and programme libraries to create a mega entertainment firm.



### **Why did Sony terminate the agreement with Zee?**

While the expected completion of the deal was December 21, 2023, Zee had sought a deadline extension, which was to expire on January 20. This 30-day grace period was included in the merger pact signed in December 2021. However, the deal couldn't be fructified by January 20, 2024 and Sony cited the delay in the merger for the termination.

### **What's the real reason behind the Sony move?**

There was apparently a dispute about the leadership of the combined entity by Zee's MD & CEO Punit Goenka.

In June 2023, market regulator Sebi issued an interim order which restrained Zee group patriarch Subhash Chandra and Punit Goenka from holding any key positions in any listed company but Goenka got a reprieve from the Securities Appellate Tribunal (SAT), which overturned a ban on him by the Sebi to hold directorships in Zee group even as a regulatory probe over allegations of fund diversion still remained.

Sony has been uncomfortable with this regulatory overhang in view of its corporate governance policies, market sources said. It was pushing the name of its India MD & CEO NP Singh for the top job, which Goenka opposed.

### **What was the original merger plan?**

The merger plan of ZEEL into SPNI, which would have possibly created the biggest entertainment entity in India, was finalised on December 22, 2021. As part of the



scheme, both entities would combine their linear networks, digital assets, production operations and program libraries.

### **What's the Sebi case against Punit Goenka?**

Last year, the Securities and Exchange Board of India had barred Goenka along with Essel Group's Chairman Subash Chandra from holding directorial or key management personnel positions in ZEEL and its group companies. The action was taken after the regulator found that both had allegedly diverted funds from Essel Group companies for their own benefit.

SEBI started investigating the matter related to the appropriation of certain fixed deposits (FD) of ZEEL by Yes Bank for squaring off loans of related entities of Essel Group. The regulator found that Chandra had provided a Letter of Comfort (LoC) in September 2018, towards credit facilities amounting to Rs 200 crore availed by certain group companies from Yes Bank. The LoC was issued without the knowledge of the board of ZEEL, which was a violation of SEBI's Listing Obligations and Disclosure Requirements (LODR) norms.

However, in October last year, the Securities Appellate Tribunal (SAT) had set aside Sebi's order against Punit Goenka, which barred him from holding key management personnel positions in any listed entity. This paved the way for Goenka to become the managing director of the company formed due to the merger of ZEEL and Culver Max Entertainment.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Economics

Source: The Indian Express

## **10. The allegations against PVR for abuse of dominant position**

### **Why in news?**

Having found "no discernible competition concern," the Competition Commission of India (CCI) rejected a complaint alleging that multiplex chain PVR had abused its dominant market position. Yogesh Pratap Singh, a film director, had accused the multiplex chain of according preferential treatment to films from large production houses over those by independent film makers.

### **What were the allegations about?**

The primary allegation was that the multiplex chain, utilising its dominant position in the film exhibition market, had accorded preferential treatment to films of the "powerful and monetarily affluent production houses." Mr. Singh also said that PVR engaged in cartelisation and vertical integration. He cited PVR's foray into the business of film production; and actions relating to film distribution and film exhibition with big production houses. In the context of film distribution, vertical arrangements entail

agreements between entities at different levels of the production chain; that is, producer-distributor, producer-exhibitor and distributor-exhibitor.

### **What was PVR's response?**

PVR denied the allegations. It said that the allegations were not backed by evidence. Further, the chain argued that the purpose of the complaint was to "pressurise" it to exhibit his film, in the absence of any legal obligation to do so. PVR clarified that it has no special tie-ups or recurring/long-term arrangements. More importantly, the multiplex chain said that it was not in their interest to accord preferential treatment to a specific producer or distributor, and that it does not offer any preferential treatment to its own films.

### **What does the CCI's order say?**

After examining the submissions of the multiplex chain, CCI concluded that there existed no perceptible concern about competition. Its order held that the commercial wisdom of the exhibitors is largely driven by consumer demand. Unless harm to competition was apparent, any intervention on its part would only lead to "undesirable consequences," it noted. This would amount to taking away the autonomy of the entities and substituting that with the decisions of the regulator. About vertical integration, the order held that it was not per se prohibited under the provisions of the Competition Act. Further, the complainant had not submitted any evidence to substantiate these allegations. It held that most of the agreed terms for both independent filmmakers and larger production houses were largely the same — including revenue sharing terms. Finally, upholding autonomy in screen allocation, the regulator concluded that the guiding factor for selection and allocation was maximisation of revenue. The specific criteria include the revenue generating potential of the movie, the buzz around the film, marketing, advertising and promotions done etc.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Economics

Source: The Hindu

## **11. Health insurance companies to offer 100% 'cashless' treatment in hospitals**

### **Why in news?**

Taking the health insurance segment to a new level, general and health insurance companies have decided to offer 100 per cent cashless treatment across the country from January 25. The step, initiated by the Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority of India (IRDAI), is expected to boost insurance penetration in the country and ease the claim process of policyholders and hospitals, thus avoiding delays and disputes normally seen in the reimbursement mode.

### **How will 100% cashless treatment work in hospitals?**

Under the 'Cashless Everywhere' system, the policyholder can get treated in any hospital they choose without paying any amount, and a cashless facility will be available even if this hospital is not in the insurance company's network. This means the policyholder can get admitted to any hospital without paying any advance money, and insurance companies will pay the bill on the discharge day.

### **What's the situation now?**

During the fiscal 2022-23, 56 per cent of the health claims were settled through the cashless route, according to the IRDAI Annual Report.

The cashless facility is currently available only at hospitals where the respective insurance company has an agreement or tie-ups. If the policyholder chooses a hospital without such an agreement, the cashless facility is not offered now, and the customer has to go for a reimbursement claim, further delaying the claim process and leading to disputes. Policyholders in rural and semi-rural areas often find it difficult to access network hospitals for the cashless facility.

### **Will the move boost insurance penetration?**

Insurance officials say the ease of claims settlement without burdening the policyholders financially will be a win-win situation for all three parties involved – hospitals, the general public and insurers. The biggest beneficiary will be the policyholders, who won't have to shell out money during the treatment period depending on the policy terms.

### **What are the issues in reimbursement mode?**

Patients struggle to identify hospitals in the insurer's network and, if not discovered, end up paying from their pockets and claiming reimbursements later. This leads to several difficulties, frustrations and delays that can last for weeks.

Often, despite having insurance, customers do not have enough money to pay for hospital expenses and end up borrowing at exorbitant interest rates as urgent cash for hospitalisation. If the hospital bill is high, patients find it tough to arrange funds if they are in the reimbursement mode, as witnessed during the peak of the Covid pandemic. Patients are also asked to pay a hefty amount as an advance in the reimbursement system.

The general complaint among customers was that insurers normally slash the claim amount drastically and even reject claims on various pretexts in the reimbursement mode.

### **What's to be kept in mind?**

In the cashless system, insurers will pay only up to the amount taken as a sum assured in the policy. If the sum assured is Rs 5 lakh, insurers will pay the hospital up to Rs 5

lakh during the year. Moreover, in the case of some illnesses, there's a waiting period of two or three years before the insurance coverage is applicable.

Customers must read the policy documents carefully to see the waiting periods and pick the plan with the least waiting period and those which cover the maximum number of illnesses.

### **How many claims were settled?**

During 2022-23, general and health insurers settled 2.36 crore health insurance claims and paid Rs 70,930 crore towards settlement of health claims as against Rs 69,498 crore in the previous year. The average amount paid per claim was Rs 30,087 in 2022-23 as against Rs 31,804 a year ago, according to the IRDAI Annual Report.

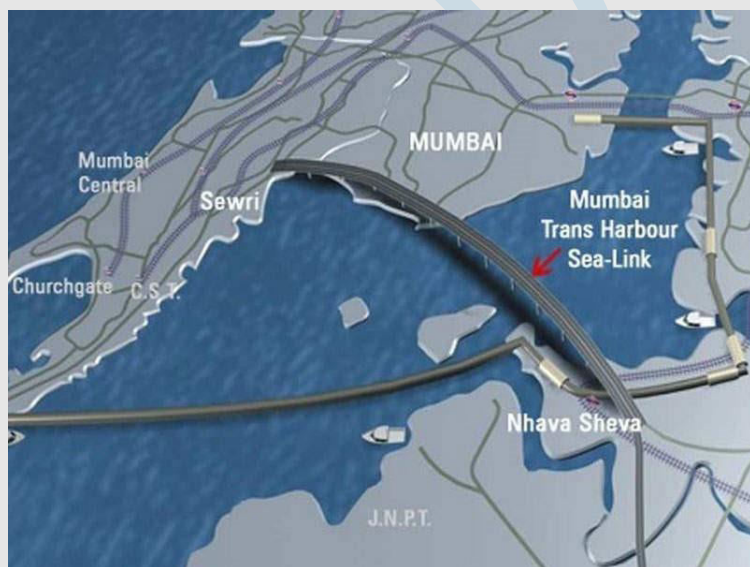
Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Economics

Source: The Indian Express

## **12. Mumbai Trans Harbour Link inaugurated: How the country's longest sea bridge will cut travel time**

### **Why in news?**

Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurated the country's longest bridge over the sea, the 22 km Mumbai Trans Harbour Link, officially the Atal Setu Nhava Sheva Sea Link. The bridge will cut the travel time between Sewri and Chirle to under 20 minutes.



The Mumbai Trans Harbour Link (MTHL) is a 22-km-long (16.5 km sea link) including twin-carriageway six-lane bridge over the Thane Creek in the Arabian Sea, connecting Sewri in the island city of Mumbai to Chirle in Raigad district on the mainland.

### **Making of Trans harbour link**

The idea of a bay crossing connecting Mumbai to the mainland was first floated in

1963, but no follow-up action was initiated. The plan was revived in the late 90s, and the first tenders were floated in 2006.

In February 2008, Anil Ambani's Reliance Infrastructure emerged as the preferred bidder after promising to build and recover the cost of building the (then) Rs 6,000

crore bridge in nine years and 11 months through a public private partnership (PPP) model.

Months later, however, Ambani withdrew from the project. Multiple unsuccessful bidding processes followed, and the nodal agency was changed from the Maharashtra State Road Development Corporation (MSRDC) to the Mumbai Metropolitan Region Development Authority (MMRDA).

The project finally got moving after MMRDA entered into an agreement with Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), which agreed to fund 80 per cent of the project cost, with the rest being borne by the state and central governments.

The deal and tendering were finally completed in December 2017, and work commenced in early 2018. A total Rs 21,200 crore has been spent on the project, of which Rs 15,100 is loan from JICA.

Relevance: GS Prelims; Economics

Source: Indian Express and The Hindu



### 1. Global warming, sea level rise, ageing flood defence systems: Why European countries have been flooded

#### Why in news?

Heavy rains have hit France, England, Netherlands and Germany for more than two weeks, causing rivers to burst their banks in many areas, flooding homes and prompting evacuations.

While rain this time of year in these regions isn't unusual, it's the intensity of the downpour that has set off alarm bells among experts. They suggest a combination of factors, including global warming, rising sea levels, and ageing flood defence systems have led to the deluge in the countries.



**View of flooded streets as the Aa river overflows in northern France**

#### What is happening?

In France, the northern region has been the worst affected with the overflow of Aa river.

Widespread deluge has impacted central England — in Nottinghamshire County, officials declared a “major incident” due to flooding along the Trent River last week. Meanwhile, Germany and Netherlands also witnessed floods.

#### Why is it happening?

There are three factors at play here: rising global temperature, sea level rise, and outdated flood defence systems. Let's look at each of them.

**Global Warming:** Scientists have known that as the planet gets warmer, there will be more frequent extreme rainfall. With higher temperatures, there is more evaporation from land, oceans and water bodies, which means a warmer atmosphere can hold more moisture — experts suggest for every 1-degree Celsius rise in average temperature, the atmosphere can hold about 7% more moisture. This makes storms more dangerous as it leads to an increase in precipitation intensity, duration and/or frequency, which ultimately can cause severe flooding.

**Sea Level rise:** The second factor is sea level rise due to which rivers frequently breach their banks to flood the adjacent areas. Take the example of northern France, where rising sea levels likely led to the recent deluge — between 1966 and 2018, sea levels rose by 4.4 cm.

**Ageing flood defence systems:** Lastly, ageing flood defence systems have exacerbated the situation. For instance, the outdated water management systems of France failed to tackle the large volumes of water that had entered the affected regions. Authorities had to get water pumps from the Netherlands to combat flooding. Moreover, people, both in France and England, have built infrastructure like roads and buildings on floodplains, restricting the natural routes the water would have taken to get drained into the floodplain soils. As a result, the water ends up flooding certain areas.

### **What happens next?**

The situation is bound to get worse. Studies have shown that as the planet gets warmer, storms would get more intense, causing heavier rainfall. The frequency of extreme weather events like floods is also expected to go up.

Therefore, there is an urgent need to improve flood defences, early warning systems and resilience measures to tackle the fallout of heavy rain.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Environment

Source: The Indian Express

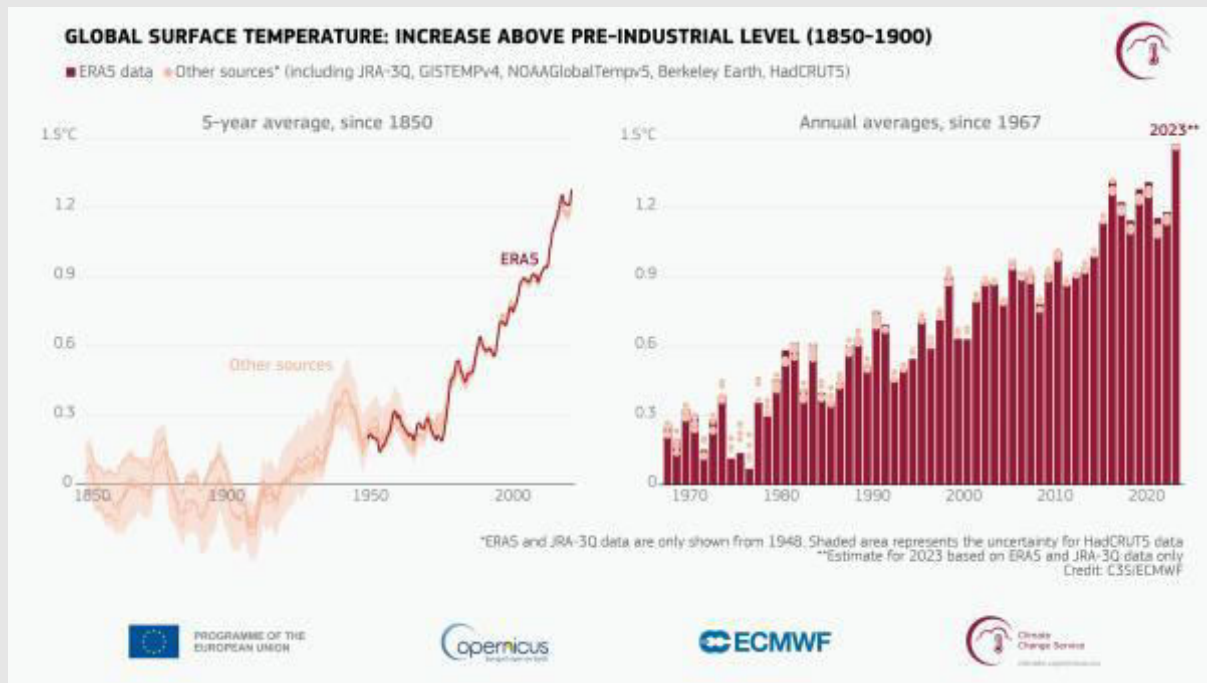
## **2. Why 2023 was the warmest year ever, and what happens now**

### **Why in news?**

2023 was the warmest year since records began in 1850, beating the previous record of 2016, Europe's Copernicus Climate Change Service (C3S) said. The announcement said temperatures in 2023 likely exceeded those of any year-long period in at least the

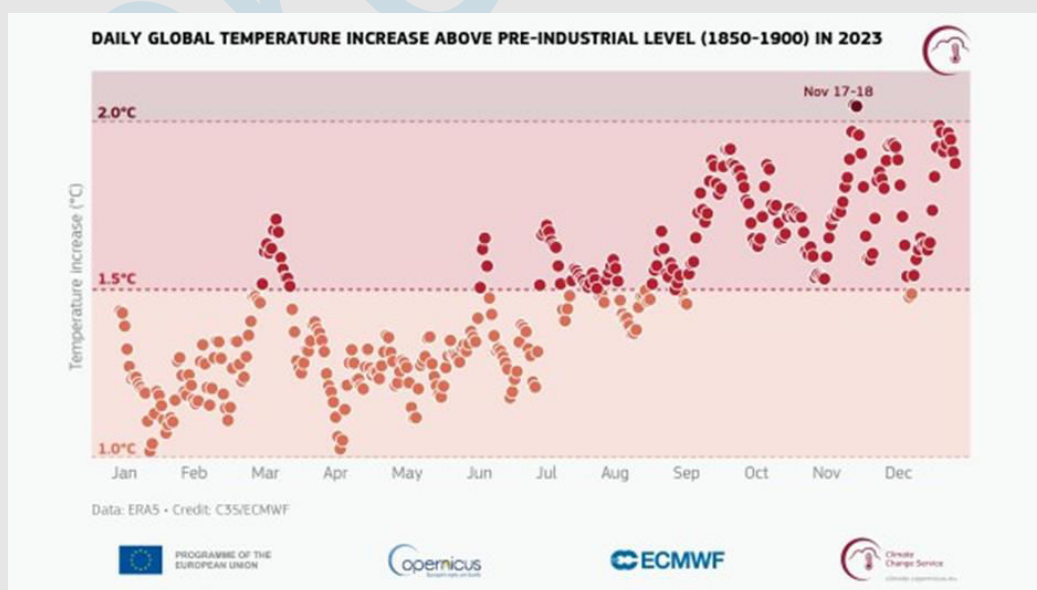
last 100,000 years. The announcement was confirmation of what scientists have known for a few months.

Last year was 1.48 degree Celsius warmer than the average of the 1850-1900 pre-industrial level and 0.17 degree Celsius warmer than 2016, C3S said.



## Tumbling records

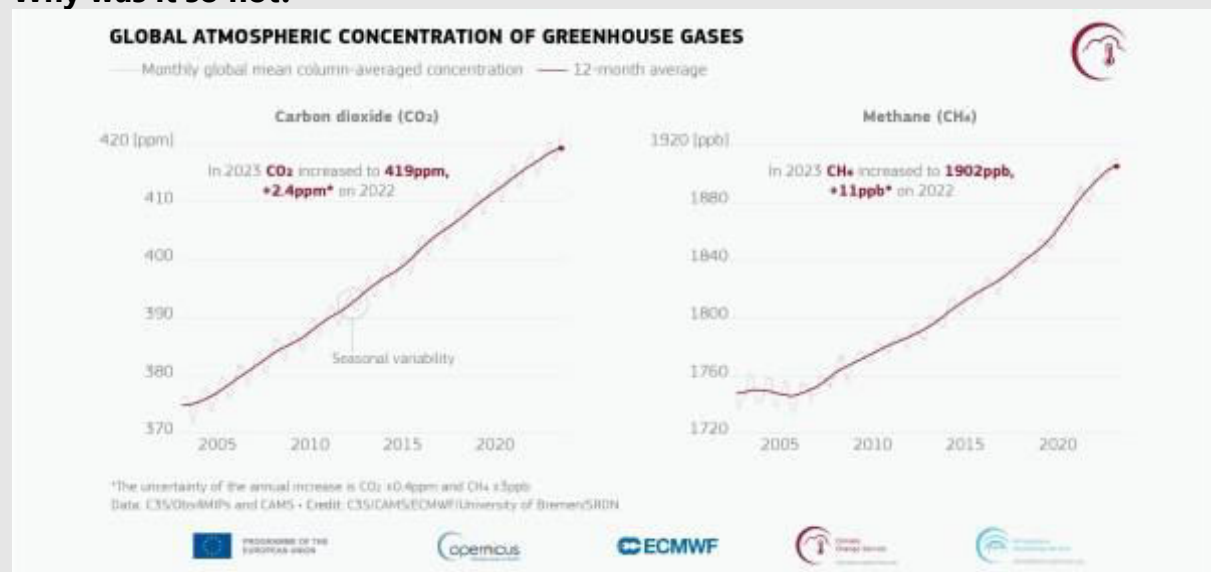
Climate records fell like dominoes in the exceptional heat spell witnessed last year. 2023 marked the first time on record that every day within a year exceeded 1 degree Celsius above the 1850-1900 pre-industrial level.



About 50% of days were more than 1.5 degree Celsius warmer than the 1850-1900 level — and two days in November were, for the first time, more than 2 degree Celsius warmer.

This, however, does not mean that the planet has breached the 1.5 degree and 2 degree Celsius thresholds set by the 2015 Paris Agreement. Those thresholds refer to long-term warming — which means global temperatures over a period of 20-30 years, on average, must not exceed 1.5 degree or 2 degree Celsius.

### Why was it so hot?



The main driver behind the extreme warming is the increasing greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere. Greenhouse gases like carbon dioxide and methane, and water vapour trap the Sun's energy in the Earth's system before it escapes to space, causing warming.

Since the industrial revolution, human activities like burning fossil fuels such as coal, oil, and gases have released unprecedented levels of such gases. As a result, the planet has warmed rapidly, especially in recent decades.

In 2023, greenhouse gas concentrations reached the highest levels ever recorded in the atmosphere, according to C3S and the Copernicus Atmosphere Monitoring Service (CAMS). Carbon dioxide concentrations in 2023 were 2.4 parts per million (ppm) higher than in 2022; methane concentrations increased by 11 parts per billion (ppb).

The onset of El Niño last year, after seven years, played a role. El Niño refers to an abnormal warming of surface waters in the equatorial Pacific Ocean. It increased the

likelihood that temperature records would be broken, and there would be more extreme heat in many parts of the world and the ocean.

### **What could happen now?**

Scientists have suggested that 2024 could be warmer than even 2023. Typically, in the past few decades, very hot years have been ones that began in an El Niño state. Last year, El Niño didn't set in until around July, which means that it wasn't the primary reason behind the abnormal heat at that point.

It is also possible that the next year may surpass the 1.5 degree Celsius warming threshold across the entire calendar year for the first time. The World Meteorological Organisation in its 2023 State of Global Climate report said there was a 66% chance that at least one of the years between 2023 and 2027 would cross the threshold.

A long-term breach of the 1.5 degree limit would unleash far more severe climate change impacts, including more frequent and severe droughts, heatwaves, and rainfall. To prevent this, the world needs to urgently implement certain steps, including greenhouse gas emission cuts, which it has failed to do so far.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Environment

Source: The Indian Express

### **3. Punganur, dwarf cows that PM Modi fed on Makar Sankranti**

#### **Why in news?**

Prime Minister Narendra Modi fed cows at his residence, 7 Lok Kalyan Marg, on the occasion of Pongal/ Makar Sankranti.

Officials in the government confirmed that all the cattle seen in the pictures from the Prime Minister's residence are of the Punganur breed of Andhra Pradesh. What are the characteristics of Punganur cows, and why are they considered to be a very special breed?

#### **What is the Punganur breed, and where are these cattle found?**

The Punganur is an indigenous breed native to the Punganoor, Vayalapadu, Madanapalli, and Palamaneer talukas of Chittoor district in the Rayalaseema region of southern Andhra Pradesh. They are a unique dwarf breed, considered the shortest humped cattle in the world. Their small size makes it easy to keep them at home.

Punganur cows can be white or grey, or of shades of light or dark brown. They have small, crescent-shaped horns of 10-15 cm length.

#### **How numerous is this breed of indigenous cattle?**



The Punganur were once on the verge of extinction, and their numbers had fallen below 3,000 heads of cattle across the country. However, in recent years, these numbers have increased.

In the breed-wise report of livestock and poultry in the 20th Livestock Census conducted in 2019, the total number of Punganur was recorded at 13,275.



PM Modi with the cows

Relevance: GS Prelims; Biodiversity

Source: The Indian Express

#### 4. Rare golden tiger snapped in Kaziranga

##### Why in news?

Wildlife photographer Gaurav Ramnarayanan from Coimbatore snapped the tiger with the golden coat on a safari in Assam's Kaziranga National Park on January 24.

##### Exact count unknown

According to him, more than one tiger with the golden coat are believed to be in Kaziranga, but the exact count is not known. The photograph of a golden tiger, said to be taken in 2019, is of a different tiger.



This tiger looks golden because it has a mutation or a genetic variant. Basically, tigers have three colours: black, orange, and white. In this tiger, the black colour is missing, and it is slightly faded. The orange colour is also faded.

Relevance: GS Prelims; Environment

Source: The Hindu

### 1. XPoSat: ISRO's X-ray eye in the sky



#### Why in news?

At 9.10 am on the first day of 2024, the Indian Space Research Organisation launched XPoSat, short for 'X-ray Polarimeter Satellite'. The satellite will study X-rays emitted by phenomena in space and their polarisation from earth-orbit.

#### What are X-Rays?

X-rays are electromagnetic radiation whose wavelength is 0.01-10 nanometres (where 1 nanometre is one-billionth of a metre), corresponding to energies of 100-100,000 electron-volt (eV).

X-rays can be polarised when they get scattered. For example, when an X-ray travelling through space encounters an

atom, the electric field of the X-ray can energise an electron, which will then emit a photon. Since X-rays are also photons, the new photon will give the impression that an X-ray photon has been scattered. Polarised X-rays are also produced when the path of a fast-moving charged particle is bent by a magnetic field.

Tracking how these X-rays evolve in time can reveal many things about the body producing such fields, like a pulsar.

The XPoSat satellite has two payloads to make these measurements. POLIX will study X-rays with energy 8-30 keV emitted by around 40 astronomical sources in five years. XSPECT will study X-rays with energy 0.8-15 keV and track changes in continuous X-ray emissions.

Relevance: GS Prelims; Science & Technology

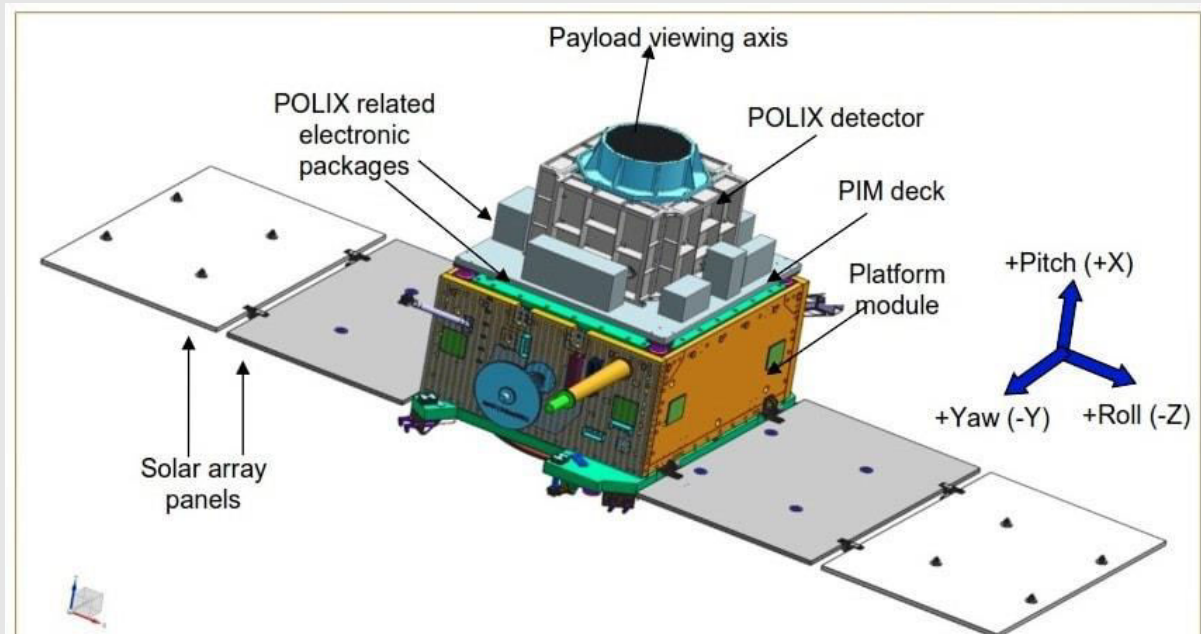
Source: The Hindu

### 2. ISRO launches XPoSat: What is the mission and its significance?



## Introduction

Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) put its first polarimetry mission X-ray Polarimeter Satellite (XPoSat) in a precise circular orbit of 650 km on January 1 morning after a 21-minute flight. XPoSat is the world's second satellite-based mission dedicated to making X-ray polarimetry measurements.



## What is XPoSat?

X-ray Polarimeter Satellite (XPoSat) is India's maiden mission dedicated to analysing the polarisation of X-rays emanating from bright celestial sources in the medium frequency band.

XPoSat comprises two payloads, including Indian X-ray Polarimeter (POLIX) and X-ray Spectroscopy and Timing (XSPECT). They have been built by Raman Research Institute and UR Rao Satellite Centre, both located in Bengaluru.

The spacecraft is designated for observation from low earth orbit (~ 650 km, low inclination of ~ 6 degree).

It has an estimated mission life of about five years during which XPoSat will observe sources that emit polarised X-rays. The observations will be done when the magnetars or neutron stars (they are highly magnetic and display a wide array of X-ray activity) are in transit through the Earth's shadow, for instance, during the eclipse period.

## What are the two scientific payloads onboard XPoSat?

**POLIX:** It is the world's first instrument designed to operate in the medium X-ray of 8 to 30 kilo electron Volt (keV) energy band. It comprises a collimator, which is the key component to filter light originating from bright sources in the field of view. Moreover,

there is a scatterer consisting of four X-ray proportional counter detectors (that prevent the trapped light from escaping). It will observe a few tens of astronomical sources. It was conceived, designed, and built at RRI.

**XSPECT:** It is designed to conduct fast timing and high spectroscopic resolution in a soft X-ray energy band (0.8-15 keV). It will observe a variety of sources like X-ray pulsars, black hole binaries, low-magnetic field neutron stars, active galactic nuclei or AGNs (a compact region at the centre of a galaxy that emits a significant amount of energy across the electromagnetic spectrum) and magnetars.

### **Why is the XPoSat mission significant?**

Till now, astronomers have largely used and depended on spectroscopic, imaging and timing-based data obtained from either ground-based telescopes or satellite-based missions from the optical to the radio frequency band of the electromagnetic spectrum. Polarisation of celestial sources was done either in the optical or radio bands.

XPoSat, however, will be a game-changer and facilitate X-ray polarisation measurements possible from bright sources, that too, in the medium energy band (8-30 keV) energy range – which has never been attempted ever before.

The XPoSat team has identified several tens of sources radiating X-rays. XPoSat will observe two kinds of sources — persistent sources (targeted and known sources) and transient sources (pulsars, active galactic nuclei, magnetars).

Out in space, X-rays get polarised due to multiple causes. For example, X-rays when subject to strong magnetic fields or due to the interactions with material present around black holes. So, by studying the polarised X-rays emanating from excellent sources like magnetars, black holes and their surrounding environments, and neutron stars, scientists can probe the nature of the radiations and the multitudes of processes involved in the generation of these radiations.

POLIX will undertake important measurements like the degree and angle of polarisation of X-ray photons from the environment surrounding black holes, neutron stars, and other such cosmic entities. These two additional parameters, along with the spectrographic, timing and imaging data, will aid researchers to overall improve the present understanding of the celestial bodies and ultimately unravel some of the unknown mysteries of the Universe.

### **What is the polarisation of X-rays and why study it?**

X-rays comprise electric and magnetic waves that are constantly in motion. Being sinusoidal waves, they do not follow a patterned direction of motion. Whereas, a polarised X-ray is both organised and has two waves vibrating in the same direction.



When magnetars or black holes emit X-rays, they encounter a wide variety of materials in the Universe. As X-rays pass through the thick cloud of materials, the electric component of the X-ray emits a photon in a changed direction, as it has now undergone scattering. In the process, the new photon has got polarised in a direction perpendicular to the plane formed between the original and scattered photon.

The polarisation measurements – angular and degree of polarisation – are believed to provide clues about the bright X-ray emitting sources the nature of these radiations and the complex process they undergo.

### **How does XPoSat compare with X-ray experiments or missions globally?**

Missions on X-ray polarisation measurements have been a handful, the world over. Some like HX-POL and XL-Calibur have been balloon-based and short-duration experiments by NASA and collaborators.

Indian astronomers, using AstroSat – India's first astronomy-based space missions launched in September 2015 — performed timing and broadband spectroscopy of X-ray sources but no polarisation studies were performed.

The lack of development of highly sensitive and precise instruments makes missions for polarisation measurements of X-rays extremely challenging, thus fewer missions have been attempted so far.

In 2021, NASA launched Imaging X-ray Polarimetry Explorer (IXPE). It has been designed to operate and perform X-ray polarisation measurements within the soft X-ray band (2 to 8 keV energy band).

Besides complementing IXPE, XPoSat's payload POLIX will offer an expanded observational energy band, as it is designated to perform X-ray polarisation in the medium X-ray band (8 to 30keV).

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; S&T

Source: The Indian Express

### **3. What is cyber kidnapping, how to protect yourself?**

#### **What happened?**

A Chinese student who was a victim of 'cyber kidnapping' has been found in rural Utah, unharmed. The 17-year-old, Kai Zhuang, was reported missing on December 28. By the time the police traced him, his parents back in China had paid \$80,000 in ransom.

The boy's parents had informed his host school, in Utah's Riverdale, that he appeared to have been kidnapped. The school then contacted the police. He was found in a tent about 40 km north of Brigham City, where he seems to have self-isolated. What is 'cyber kidnapping', and how does it work?



### **What is cyber kidnapping?**

Cyber kidnapping refers to a crime where the 'kidnappers' convince their victim to hide, and then contact their loved ones for ransom. The victim is also made to send pictures that make it look like they are being held captive — showing them bound or gagged. These are then shared with the family. Both parties believe their loved ones will be harmed if they don't do as the kidnappers ask.

The 'kidnappers', though not physically present, monitor the victim online through video-call platforms. In the Utah boy's case too, his parents were sent a picture indicating he had been kidnapped. The police believe he was being manipulated by the kidnappers since December 20. He was traced by analysing call data and bank records.

According to the FBI's website, "Although virtual kidnapping takes on many forms, it is always an extortion scheme—one that tricks victims into paying a ransom to free a loved one they believe is being threatened with violence or death. Unlike traditional abductions, virtual kidnappers have not actually kidnapped anyone. Instead, through

deceptions and threats, they coerce victims to pay a quick ransom before the scheme falls apart.”

### **How to protect yourself?**

Experts recommend being extra careful with calls from unknown numbers, though cyber criminals can also make it appear like they are calling from a loved one’s number. Scammers can use data you have shared on social media to make their calls more convincing, so be careful of what you share about yourself and your children online, specially names, specific locations, pictures of your home, neighbourhood, or children’s school.

Experts also recommend checking up on your loved ones before making payments, and to approach the police.

Relevance: GS Prelims; Science & Technology

Source: The Indian Express

## **4. How to grow seafood outside the sea — and why a Govt lab in Kochi has taken up this project**

### **Why in news?**

Kochi-headquartered ICAR-Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute (CMFRI) has entered into a collaborative research agreement with a private-sector start-up offering cultivated meat technology solutions to grow fish meat in the laboratory.

The Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed by the institute, which works under the Union Ministry of Agriculture & Farmers’ Welfare, with New Delhi-based Neat Meatt Biotech is the first initiative of its kind in the country.

### **What is lab-grown fish?**

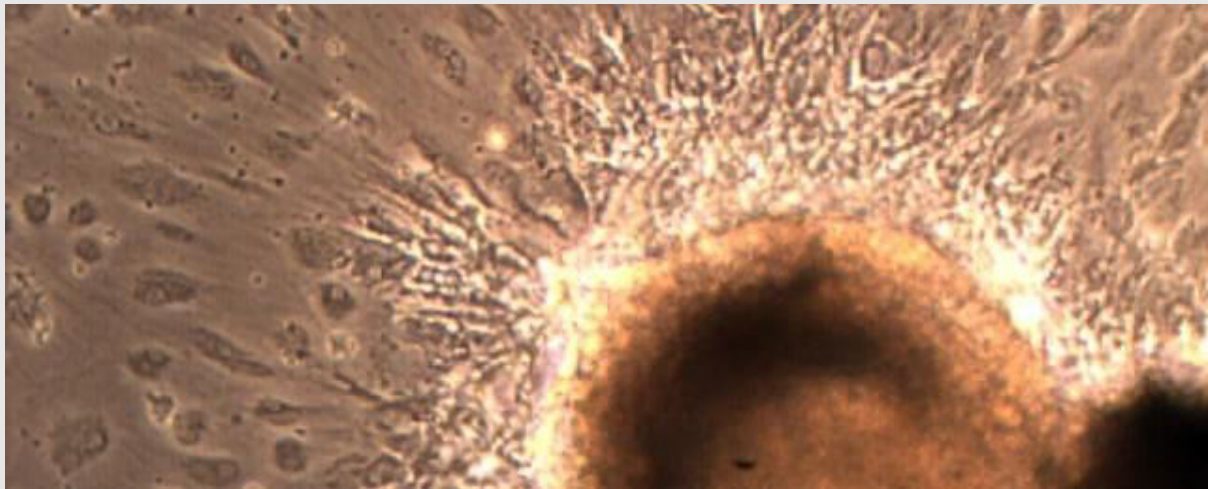
It is merely a type of lab-grown — or cultivated/ cultured — meat. Seafood without the sea is ‘grown’ in the same way as other cultivated meats are grown — without the need to raise and kill an animal.

Cultivated fish meat is produced by isolating specific cells from fish and growing them in a laboratory setting using media that is free of animal components. The final product is expected to replicate the flavour, texture, and nutritional qualities of ‘real’ fish meat.

### **What is the need to grow fish meat in the lab?**

Experiments are ongoing in many countries on developing commercially viable lab grown fish meat, which is expected to address the ever-growing demand for

seafood, and reduce excessive pressure on wild resources. Overfishing — the removal of fish faster than the resource can replenish itself — has resulted in dramatic reductions in populations of certain species, which has impacted entire marine ecosystems in many areas.



In theory, lab grown fish meat has significant potential for ensuring food security and environmental benefits. Besides taking some load off traditional fishing, lab grown fish meat will be antibiotics- and environmental contamination-free, and will have no contact with microplastics or heavy metals in the polluted oceans.

### **What other kinds of meat are being produced in labs?**

The Dutch pharmacologist Mark Post was the first to present a proof of concept for cultured meat in 2013. Several dozens of companies around the world are now reported to be working on developing lab-grown meat from cells, including chicken, pork, lamb, fish and beef.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; S&T

Source: The Indian Express

## **5. How AI can help detect cancer and why India's biggest cancer treatment hospital is utilising it**

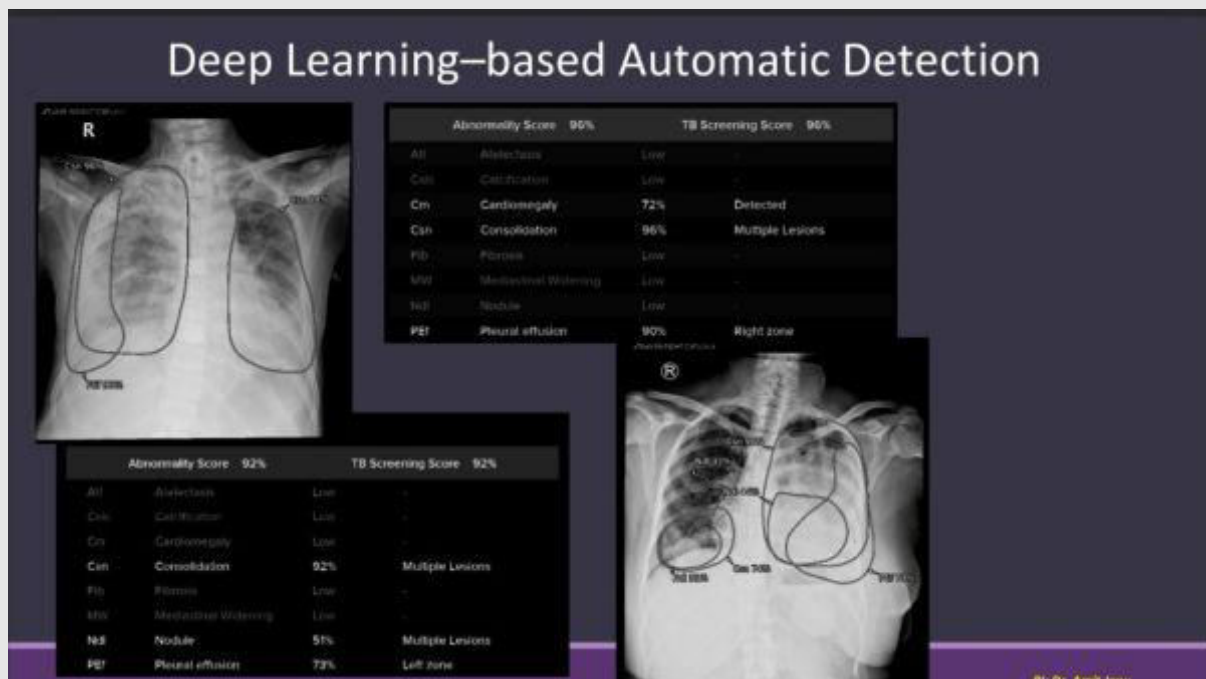
### **Introduction**

Given the escalating cases of cancer, the shortage of specialists poses a significant challenge in curbing fatalities. To address this gap, Mumbai's Tata Memorial Hospital (TMH), the biggest cancer hospital in India, is turning to artificial intelligence (AI).

By established a 'Bio-Imaging Bank' for cancer, the hospital is utilising deep learning to craft a cancer-specific tailored algorithm that aids in early-stage cancer



detection. It incorporated data from 60,000 patients into the biobank in the last year.



### Screegrab from a presentation on how AI automatically detects cancer

#### What is a 'Bio-Imaging Bank', and how does AI come into the picture?

The project's overarching goal is to create a robust repository encompassing radiology and pathology images, intricately linked with clinical information, outcome data, treatment specifics, and additional metadata. This comprehensive resource is strategically designed for the training, validation, and rigorous testing of AI algorithms.

Initially focusing on head neck cancers and lung cancers, with a minimum of 1000 patients for each cancer type, the project aims to surpass the committed patient data for both cancer types by its completion date. Alongside database creation, the project involves training and testing multiple AI algorithms using the gathered data, addressing medically relevant tasks such as screening for lymph node metastases, nucleus segmentation and classification, biomarker prediction (for instance, HPV in oropharyngeal and EGFR in lung cancer), and therapy response prediction.

The multi-institutional project is funded by the Department of Biotechnology, in collaboration with IIT-Bombay, RGCIRC-New Delhi, AIIMS-New Delhi, and PGIMER-Chandigarh.

#### How does AI help in early cancer detection?

AI contributes significantly to cancer detection by emulating the human brain's information processing. In cancer diagnosis, AI analyses radiological and pathological images, learning from extensive datasets to recognise unique features associated with



various cancers. This technology facilitates early detection by identifying tissue changes and potential malignancies.

Comprehensive imaging generates longitudinal patient data, aiding in understanding behaviour, treatment response, disease recurrence, and overall survival. AI and machine learning protocols utilise this data to develop predictive models for tumour survival and guide treatment aggressiveness.

The creation of a tumour image bank involves segmenting and annotating images, outlining tumours, identifying different features, and annotating them as malignant, inflammatory, or edematous. Biopsy results, histopathology, immunohistochemistry reports, and genomic sequences are correlated with images and clinical data to develop diverse algorithms.

This approach allows TMH to develop algorithms for different tumours, assess treatment responses directly from images, and avoid unnecessary chemotherapy for predicted non-responders, offering clinical utility. Leveraging the biobank, predictive and diagnostic models are developed using thousands of breast cancer images, undergoing AI and ML analysis with technical support from partners like IIT-Bombay.

### **Is this technology currently in use?**

Yes. TMH has already added the data of 60,000 patients into the biobank over the previous year, started using AI to reduce radiation exposure for paediatric patients undergoing CT scans.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Science & Technology

Source: The Hindu

## **6. Why ISRO's Aditya spacecraft is at 'L1', what it means**

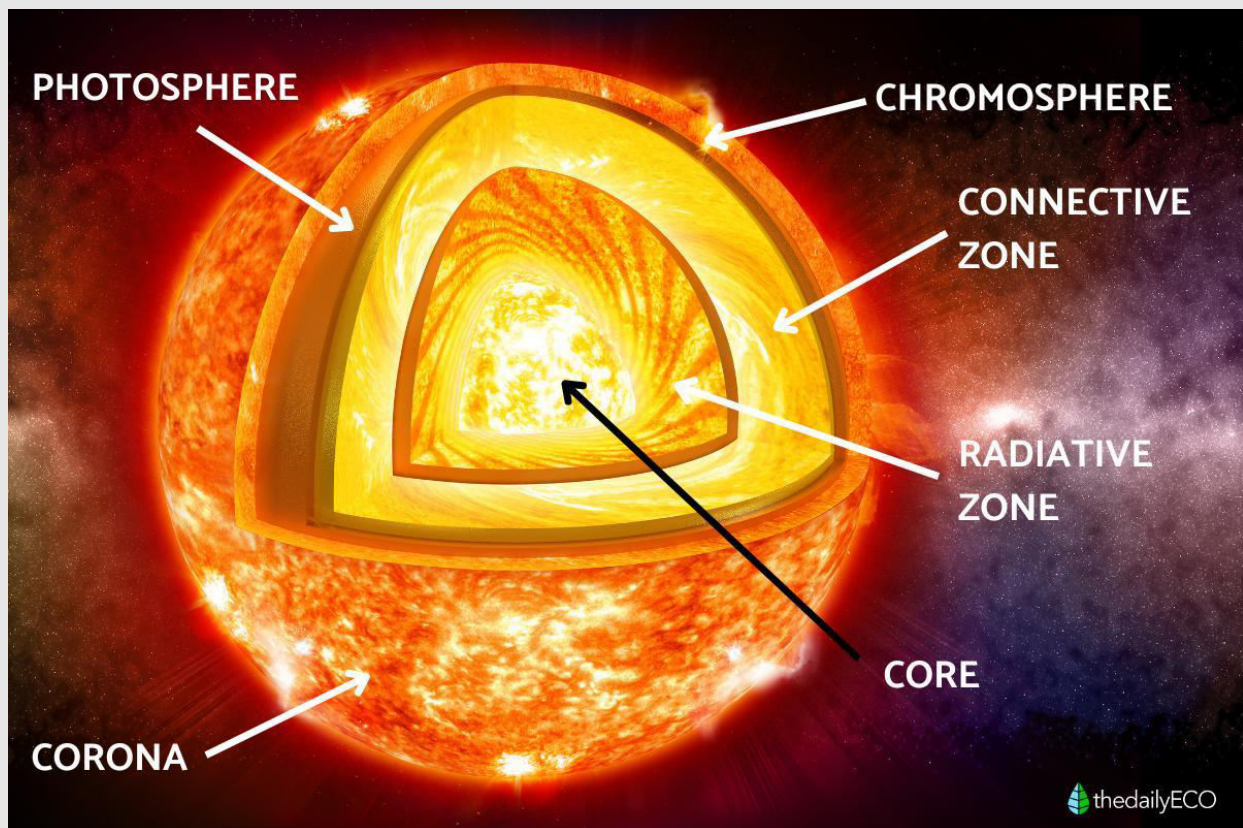
Aditya-L1 was launched by ISRO on September 2, 2023, with the mission of observing and helping us better understand the Sun. It arrives at its destination, L1 or the first Sun-Earth Lagrangian point, on January 6.

### **But first, why study the Sun?**

The Sun produces energy through nuclear fusion in its interior, and emits it from its outer layers. The photosphere, a 6,000-degree Celsius layer, emits all visible and infrared light, crucial for life. Above is the chromosphere, and higher still is the million-degree Celsius hot corona.

Interestingly, the corona is much hotter than the inner layers of the Sun — there must be some energy source which provides this heat. However, the processes involved in this are not yet fully understood. Moreover, it also emits ultraviolet and X-ray radiation

which would be lethal to life on Earth, without the presence of the atmosphere which absorbs most harmful radiation.



The Sun also continuously streams electrically charged particles — a stream known as the Solar wind. These charged particles produce the spectacular aurorae, known as the Northern and Southern Lights, seen close to the north and south poles of the Earth.

There are also sudden bursts and ejections of charged particles from the Sun into interplanetary space, known as Solar flares and coronal mass ejections. These directly affect space weather, space-reliant technologies like satellite communication networks, and can produce electric power blackouts in Earth's higher latitudes. Notably, they can be extremely difficult to predict.

### **What will Aditya-L1 do?**

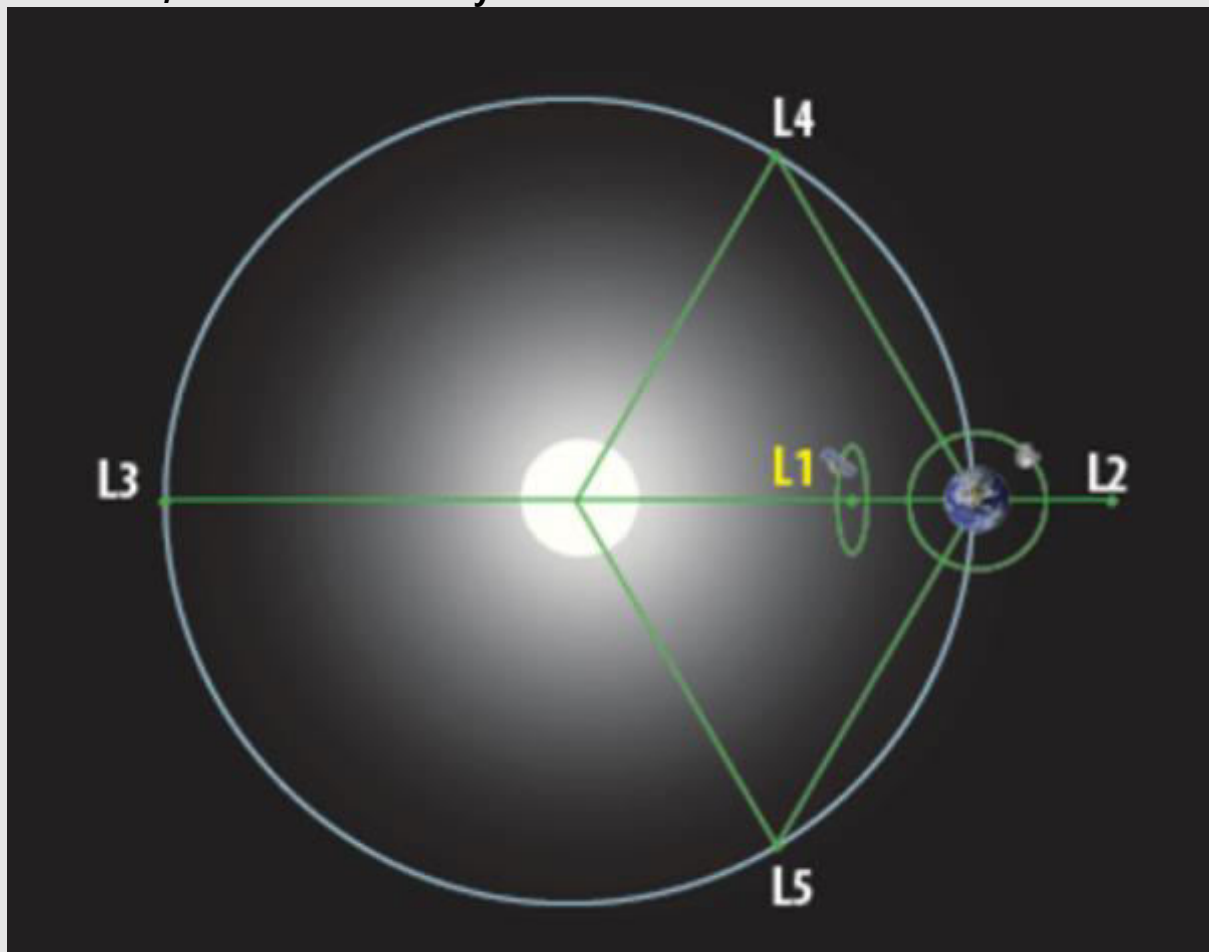
Since Aditya-L1 is located outside the Earth's atmosphere, its instruments can observe the ultraviolet radiation from the corona, and in the process, better understand its workings. Moreover, we need to monitor the Solar atmosphere and the corona continuously to monitor eruptions on the Sun, and study the properties of charged particles in the Solar wind.

Crucially, this task has to be carried out from outside Earth's atmosphere, and as close to the Sun as possible. This will then help provide early warning of Solar

eruptions, and allow us to initiate actions to minimise the disruption they may cause.

Aditya-L1 has seven instruments for the observation of all the radiation and charged particles. Its location, 1.5 million km away from Earth towards the Sun (more on that next), allows uninterrupted observations.

### What is L1, the location of Aditya?



L1 stands for the first Lagrangian point — there are five such points, L1 to L5, associated with the motion of one astronomical body around another one, in Aditya's case, Earth and the Sun. These points were theoretically discovered by the Swiss mathematician Leonhard Euler and the Italian-French mathematician Joseph-Louis Lagrange in the 19th century. We are particularly concerned here with points L1 and L2 because of their relevance to space missions.

When a spacecraft is in orbit around Earth, it is affected by the gravitational force exerted on it by the planet. Yet it does not fall to Earth's surface because effectively,

Earth's gravity is balanced by a centrifugal force which arises due to the motion of the spacecraft around the Earth.

The Earth's gravitational pull on a spacecraft gets ever so weaker the further it moves from the planet. Eventually, there comes a point where Earth's gravitational force becomes comparable that exerted by the Sun. If a spacecraft moves any further, it will get pulled into orbit around the sun, or eventually crash into it, depending on its speed. L1 is the sweet spot between Earth and the Sun, where the gravitational force exerted on a spacecraft by the two celestial bodies, and the centrifugal force cancel each other. As a result, once placed exactly at L1, Aditya would always continue to remain there without expending any energy.

### **Does this mean that Aditya is at a stationary point in space?**

No. As Figure 1 shows, L1 is on the line joining the Sun and the Earth. As Earth rotates around the Sun, L1 goes around the Sun too, while always remaining on the same line. Thus, rather than being at the same point in space, Aditya will remain at the same position, relative to the Sun and Earth.

In fact, the L1 point itself is fundamentally unstable — a tiny pull or push can send the spacecraft hurtling away in some other direction. To avoid this, Aditya is placed in an orbit around L1.

A complex orbit nearly perpendicular to the line joining the Sun and Earth, it will take the spacecraft about 178 days to complete one full orbit.

### **Why L1?**

Putting Aditya in orbit around the Earth would have made the mission much simpler. However, this would also mean that Earth would cover Aditya's view of the Sun for significant periods of time. While the duration of such eclipses can be reduced by choosing the correct orbit, it cannot be fully eliminated. Given that Aditya is meant to act as an early warning system for solar flares and coronal mass ejections, is necessary to have an uninterrupted view of the Sun.

When Aditya is at L1, the Earth is always on one side of it, and the Sun on the other side. Thus, the spacecraft's instruments can be pointed towards the Sun for a completely uninterrupted view. Even though placing the spacecraft at an orbit around L1 is complex, the benefits of having an uninterrupted view of the Sun at all times is well worth the effort, risk, and expense.

A few space missions are already parked around the L1 point, including the LISA Pathfinder, and Solar and Heliospheric Observatory (SOHO), both collaborative missions of NASA and European Space Agency.

### **And what about L2?**

While the L1 is the ideal point to observe the Sun, L2 is a very useful staging point for spacecraft to be used for observing the distant Universe. As can be seen from Figure 1, L2 also is along the line joining the Sun and Earth, but it is on the opposite side of the Earth, at about 1.5 million kilometres.

So, a spacecraft in a halo orbit around L2 can have all its instruments pointing away from the Earth, to get an uninterrupted view of the deep space. The James Webb Space Telescope (JWST), Gaia and Euclid are some of the important astronomical probes which are presently in orbit around L2. The Planck mission, which carried out path breaking observations of the cosmic microwave background radiation was also located there.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; S&T

Source: The Indian Express

## **7. First US lunar lander since 1972 launched: The mission, significance**

### **Why in news?**

A spacecraft developed by a private US company and carrying a bunch of scientific instruments from NASA, took off from Florida on January 8, hoping to become the first US spacecraft to land on the Moon in more than 50 years.

The Peregrine lander module of the mission (lander module lands on surface of moon), as well as the Vulcan rocket that launched it, have both been built by private space companies in the US. The Mission is part of NASA's Commercial Lunar Payload Services (CLPS) initiative that seeks to involve private space sector in its ambitious Artemis programme that is planning a return to the Moon in a big way.

If successful, this mission would also involve the first landing of a private spacecraft on the Moon. Last year, a Japanese company had attempted a moon landing with its Hakuto-R mission but was unsuccessful. In 2019, the first Israeli attempt to land on the Moon was also engineered by a private company, but the spacecraft, Beresheet, had crash-landed.

### **The mission**

Five payloads from NASA sat inside the Peregrine lander that was launched by the Vulcan heavy rocket. The lander has been built by Astrobotic while the rocket came from United Launch Alliance, another private enterprise.





The spacecraft will take more than 40 days to reach the Moon, and is planned to make a landing on February 23. The payloads are meant to carry out various exploratory activities, including detection of water. One of the payloads, called Laser Retroreflector Array, is a collection of several mirrors that would allow precision measurements of the distance of other orbiting or landing spacecraft by reflecting light from them. This particular instrument would remain permanently deployed on the Moon's surface, and would act as a marker for distances on the Moon.

The other payloads would remain active for ten days after landing.

### **Return to Moon**

No US spacecraft has landed on the Moon since Apollo 17 in December 1972. That was the last of the six Apollo missions to have made the moon-landing, each allowing two astronauts to walk on the Moon's surface. The United States reignited its interest in the Moon in the 1990s but started almost afresh, sending a few Orbiters to study the lunar surface and environment from a distance. It was only in 2018 that the US decided to make a return to the Moon, this time for longer stays.

### **Artemis program**

The Artemis program is a robotic and human Moon exploration program led by the United States' National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) along with six major partner agencies— the European Space Agency (ESA), the German Aerospace Center (DLR), the Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency (JAXA), the Canadian Space Agency (CSA), the Israel Space Agency (ISA), and the Italian Space Agency (ASI). The Artemis program is intended to reestablish a human presence on the Moon for the first time since Apollo 17 in 1972.

Over the next few years, the Artemis programme plans to send a series of Moon missions, including those carrying astronauts. The first Artemis mission was sent off in November 22. It orbited the Moon and returned to the Earth. NASA is planning to send the first crewed mission into space next year, and would attempt a human landing on Moon in 2025.

The Artemis programme seeks to establish a permanent base camp on the Moon, and send astronauts and robots for longer stays for more comprehensive exploration, and scientific studies, of the lunar surface and atmosphere. It would also explore

opportunities for the utilisation of resources available on the Moon with the ultimate objective of launching deep space missions from the lunar surface.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; S&T

### 8. What is the Square Kilometer Array project, significance of India joining it



Artist's impression of Square Kilometre Array

#### Why in news?

India has decided to join the Square Kilometer Array (SKA) project, an international scientific collaboration working to build the world's largest radio telescope.

India had already been contributing to the project for the past several years, but the full member status, which offers greater scientific opportunities to use the upcoming facility, requires countries to sign and ratify an international treaty, and also make a financial commitment. India has approved Rs 1,250 crore for the project, which includes its funding contribution for the construction phase.

#### International scientific projects of which India is member

The decision to join SKA as a full member ensures India's participation in yet another international mega science project in the most advanced areas of scientific research. India has already decided to build a gravitational wave detector to join the international LIGO (Laser Interferometer Gravitational Wave Observatory) network, and is a full member of the ITER project, which is working to harness energy from nuclear fusion reactions. India also has a strong participation in the Large Hadron Collider

(LHC), the world's largest and most powerful particle accelerator that is running some of the most exciting experiments in particle physics.

### **The SKA**

The Square Kilometer Array will not be a single large telescope, but a collection of thousands of dish antennas operating as a single unit. The name, Square Kilometer Array, comes from the original intention to create one square kilometre (one million square metre) of effective area for collecting radio waves. This was meant to be achieved by installing thousands of smaller antennas in a specific array design that would make them function like a single radio telescope. As of now, it appears that the USD 2.4-billion project (2021 prices) would eventually have a lesser collecting area than one square kilometre, but the original name has been retained.

### **Location**

The antennas, about 200 of them in South Africa (Meerkat National Park) and more than 130,000 in Australia (Murchison Radio-astronomy Observatory), are being installed in sparsely populated locations, chosen to ensure they are as far away from human activities as possible. This has been done in order to minimise signal interference from undesirable Earth-based sources. Construction at both the sites began in December 2022, and the first phase of the project is expected to be completed by next year.

Once operational, SKA would be between 5 to 60 times more powerful than the most advanced existing radio telescopes functioning in comparable frequency ranges.

### **What's in it for India**

Though none of the SKA facilities would be located in India, there are immense science and technology gains for the country by participating in the project as a full member. In this regard, SKA offers opportunities similar to the LHC or the ITER, which too are located on foreign soil but have brought rich dividends to the Indian scientific community.

Radio astronomy is something in which India already has highly developed capabilities. The Giant Meterwave Radio Telescope (GMRT) near Pune is one of the most advanced — and sought-after — facilities in the world, which has been producing remarkable scientific results. The SKA, which will become the most promising tool for research in the most pressing scientific questions in astronomy, offers the next logical step forward for Indian scientists working in this area.

A full member status would provide India preferential access to the SKA facilities. Most existing telescopes operate under an open-use policy which allows research groups from any country to get time on the facility through competitive bidding by making a scientific case. This is how the GMRT also works. But there is a growing argument that

countries that contribute to building any large international project should have priority access to that facility. This is likely to be the case with the SKA. Member countries will get preferential allocation of time on the radio telescope, roughly in proportion to their contribution to the project, and only limited time slots would be available through competitive bidding.

There are technology benefits as well. The SKA would work on highest-end technologies, including electronics, software, materials science and computing. The intellectual properties generated by the project, though owned by the SKA Observatory, would be accessible to all the member countries. This can offer huge learning opportunities for scientists, academics and even private industry.

Participating in the project is expected to result in expanding the science and technology base in this area, along with capacity building and training opportunities. The Indian participation in the project is being led by Pune-based National Centre for Radio Astrophysics (NCRA), but 22 institutions are collaborating on SKA-related activities in the country. These include not just leading research institutions and some IITs and IISERs, but also a couple of universities and colleges. A few private companies are also involved.

### **India's involvement**

India has been involved in the SKA project right from its inception in the 1990s, and contributed to the design and development of the telescope as well as in negotiating the SKA Observatory Convention, the international treaty that established the facility as an intergovernmental organisation. The main contribution has come in the development, and operation, of the Telescope Manager, the 'neural network' or the software that will run the entire facility.

There are plans to set up an SKA regional centre in the country that will be part of the global network to process and store data and make it available for the scientific community.

Indian scientists have identified several areas of research for which they want to use the SKA telescopes. These include studies relating to the evolution of the early universe, the formation and evolution of galaxies, neutron star physics, and solar sciences. More than 150 scientists, researchers, and students from over 30 different Indian institutions, including a few private companies, have been participating in ongoing science activities related to the SKA.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Science & Technology

Source: The Indian Express



## 9. Hydroxychloroquine: How a new study links the COVID 'cure' to 17,000 deaths

### Why in news?

Researchers have linked hydroxychloroquine — an antimalarial drug that was briefly promoted by former US President Donald Trump and others as a “miracle” medicine for COVID-19 — to an increased mortality rate of up to 11%.

There was a great panic to find treatments for the respiratory disease during the first wave of the pandemic and, as is standard practice, pharmacologists looked at existing medicines to test whether any would help while we waited for a vaccine and the development of new drugs.

Even the World Health Organization looked at hydroxychloroquine as a potential COVID treatment.



Figure 4 Hydroxychloroquine, an antimalarial drug, was briefly used against COVID, but may have been lethal for some patients

The researchers writing in the open access journal Biomedicine & Pharmacotherapy, now say it is possible to link hydroxychloroquine to 17,000 deaths.

Hydroxychloroquine is generally safe, but “when you give it to a large number of healthy people preventively, the risk and effects need to be evaluated differently.”

### Hydroxychloroquine, the ‘miracle cure’

“What do you have to lose? Take it,” said Trump, who hailed hydroxychloroquine as a “miracle cure”. And he was not alone. Many world leaders followed suit, sharply increasing the sale of the drug globally. Millions hoarded the drug for personal use. Many countries had recommended its frontline health care workers take it everyday as a preventative measure against COVID.

“[It] lowers your immune reaction. This is the reason why it was administered initially in early COVID-19 cases, to suppress the cytokine storm,” said Subarna Goswami, a



public health specialist from India, where hydroxychloroquine was officially distributed to health care workers as a prophylaxis — a treatment to prevent disease.

The reason: COVID was found to produce cytokine storms in patients — their immune systems overreacted to the infection — and that was fatal.

But hydroxychloroquine was not the solution. A somewhat blind hope in the drug came crashing down when the US Food and Drug Administration warned against its use and the WHO discontinued its hydroxychloroquine tests.

### **How did hydroxychloroquine affect COVID patients?**

It is hard to say exactly how hydroxychloroquine affected COVID patients. But small-scale studies, for instance, had patients reporting cardiac discomfort or other side effects in the digestive system.

A lack of larger study groups at the time makes it difficult to pinpoint the precise cause of those effects — researchers say they don't know whether it was the hydroxychloroquine alone, something else, or a combination of factors.

### **Is hydroxychloroquine still used as a treatment?**

Hydroxychloroquine has been used to treat malaria for decades. It works by reducing pain and inflammation. It is usually consumed for a short period of time, until a person is rid of the disease.

The drug is also used to treat autoimmune disorders, such as lupus. Its anti-inflammatory properties have shown it to reduce the need for higher doses of other lupus treatments.

Patients typically take a small dose of the drug over a long period, sometimes for the rest of their lives.

Most people do not experience side effects, but it sometimes causes stomach pain, digestive problems, such as nausea or diarrhea, dryness of skin or damage to the eyes after prolonged use.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Science & Technology

Source: The Hindu

## **10. NASA loses contact with Mars helicopter: Everything you need to know about Ingenuity**

### **Why in news?**

The National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) lost contact with its Mars helicopter Ingenuity towards the end of its 72nd flight on the red planet on January 18. The small robotic chopper is the first aircraft in history to make a powered, controlled flight on another planet.

### **When and why was Ingenuity sent to Mars?**



Figure 5 NASA's Ingenuity helicopter on Mars

On July 30, 2020, NASA launched a spacecraft towards Mars, carrying the Perseverance rover, which had Ingenuity attached to its belly. On February 18, 2021, Perseverance successfully landed on the red planet. However, it wasn't until April 4 that the helicopter was deployed on the surface. It was only after the rover reached a suitable "airfield" location, it released Ingenuity to the surface.

While the rover's mission was to study signs of ancient life, and collect samples that might be sent back to Earth during future missions, Ingenuity was sent to Mars as an experiment to test powered, controlled flight on another world for the first time.

### **Why was Ingenuity's flight on Mars a big deal?**

The chopper made its first flight on Mars on April 19, 2021. It rose to a height of 10 feet, hovered for 30 seconds, and then descended back to the ground. The flight lasted 39.1 seconds. This was a big deal for two reasons. One, as mentioned before, Ingenuity was the first aircraft to fly on another planet. Two, it managed to fly in Mars' thin atmosphere, which isn't conducive for flying.

According to NASA Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL), Flight at Mars is challenging because the Red Planet has a significantly lower gravity – one-third that of Earth's – and an extremely thin atmosphere with only 1% the pressure at the surface compared to our planet. This means there are relatively few air molecules with which Ingenuity's two 4-foot-wide (1.2-meter-wide) rotor blades can interact to achieve flight.

Notably, Ingenuity is an autonomous aircraft. Perseverance acts as a relay between the chopper and Earth.

### **How did Ingenuity's mission evolve?**

In the weeks after its first flight, Ingenuity made four more flights of increasing time, speed and velocity. This was supposed to be the end of its mission. The plan was that Perseverance would leave the chopper behind and carry on with its scientific research.

However, scientists began to use Ingenuity for scouting. When Perseverance set off to explore the rocks to the south, Ingenuity went along, now scouting the terrain ahead of the rover.

Before it went missing, Ingenuity had made 72 flights, staying aloft for more than 128 minutes and covering a total of 17.7 kilometres.

Relevance: GS Prelims

Source: The Indian Express

## 11. How ARM-based chips can revolutionise Windows laptops this year



### Why in news?

Windows is all set to finally catch up with Apple, when it comes to adopting ARM-based SoCs/chips for its thin-and-light laptop lineup.

A recent benchmarks test run by XDA Developers saw an Asus Zenbook 14 2024 with Intel's 14th Gen Meteor Lake processors pitted against the ARM-based Snapdragon X Elite SoC from Qualcomm. Qualcomm's processor significantly outperformed Intel, in single-core, multi-core, and graphics performance — pushing the door open for Windows to make its mark in this segment, dominated by Apple since it launched its revolutionary M1 MacBook in 2020.

### But first, what is ARM — and how is it better?

Before understanding ARM, one must first understand what SoC, or 'System on a Chip', is. In simple terms, SoC is a single integrated chip that includes all the components required to run a whole CPU. In a typical CPU, the processor chip, the RAM, the storage and so on, exist as separate components — all these exist on a single chip in an SoC.

ARM or 'Advanced RISC Machine' is the name of a CPU architecture. Now ARM-based SoCs are not new — they have been in use on smartphones for a long time. What they provide, in comparison to the x86, x64, or even Intel's own x86-64 processors (like the above-mentioned Meteor Lake) is much higher battery efficiency and faster processing.

However, such chips were restricted to smartphones until Apple debuted an ARM-based SoC on its M1 MacBooks, launched in November 2020 — the company called this chip Apple Silicon.

### **Why was the M1 MacBook revolutionary?**

These laptops provided unseen-before battery life and processing efficiency — a measurement of how smoothly an operating system runs, how quickly it opens and closes programs, and read/write speeds.

Why? Apple Silicon or its ARM-based M1 chip, the first in Apple's M-series. In fact, since 2020, Apple Silicon has only gotten better. Most recently, the tech behemoth came out with the M3 MacBook Pro. Apple claims a 15 per cent increase in performance on M3 chips compared to the last gen M2.

### **What is the challenge for Windows, when it comes to ARM-based chips?**

Crucially, some Windows laptops already offer ARM-based chips. The company came out with an ARM version of Windows (called 'Windows on ARM') as far back as 2016. However, till date, there are only a handful of options for Windows laptops with ARM processors.

There exists a glaring problem. When Apple came out with Silicon, developers of MacOS programmes had to put in a lot of work to optimise programmes for revolutionary SoCs. In fact, owing to the sheer number of apps that had to be optimised, early M1 Mac users missed out on many programmes. Windows faces the same problem.

Currently, the only apps that work very well, and show that ARM magic, are the Office Suite (Word, Excel, PowerPoint, etc) and Microsoft Edge. Almost all other necessary programmes that an average Windows user needs, need to be optimised.

### **So, what's there to look forward to?**

There is hope for Windows users, though. Qualcomm recently announced its brand new Snapdragon X Elite SoC for Windows, which the company claims can go toe-to-toe with Apple's latest M3 series of chips, in terms of performance.

With the success enjoyed by the chips in early tests, industry experts hope that they signal Windows' intention to fully, and seriously, adopt this technology for its laptops.

Relevance: GS Prelims; Science & Technology

Source: The Indian Express

### 1. Why Kashmir and Ladakh are without snow this winter, its implications



#### The Kashmir Valley has experienced a dry spell this winter

One of Kashmir's main winter tourism attractions, Gulmarg, has been bereft of snow this season, leading to a plunge in the flow of tourists and severely hitting the business of ski resorts.

Snowfall in Kashmir, however, is much more than just a tourist attraction. It is crucial for the local climate, winter crops and horticulture, availability of waters in streams and rivers, and for the local economy.

#### Dry winter

Though the lack of snow is the most visible in Gulmarg, a major tourist destination during this time of the year, the whole of Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh have remained largely without rains or snow this winter.

Winter precipitation in Jammu and Kashmir, as also Ladakh, is mainly in the form of snowfall. Normally, the region gets its first snowfall in the first half of December, and then through most of January. But it has been mostly dry this season. Jammu and Kashmir saw 80 per cent rainfall deficit in December, and 100 per cent (absolutely no rain) deficit in January so far, India Meteorological Department (IMD) data show. Ladakh has had no precipitation at all in December or January.

While snowfall in the region has been showing a declining trend in recent years, this season is remarkable.



The overall decreasing trend of snowfall has been attributed to a decline in western disturbance events and gradual rise in temperatures, which involves the role of climate change. The prevailing El Nino event in the eastern Pacific Ocean might be the additional factor to account for this year, scientists say.

### **Western Disturbances**

Winter precipitation in the Himalayan region is caused mainly by Western Disturbances. These are large eastward-moving rain-bearing wind systems that originate beyond Afghanistan and Iran, picking up moisture from as far as the Mediterranean Sea and even the Atlantic Ocean.

Western Disturbances are the primary source of rainfall over north and northwest India during the post-monsoon and winter months. Along with the south-west monsoon season that runs from June to September, and the north-east monsoon that brings rains to Tamil Nadu and some other regions, Western Disturbances are the third major contributors to India's annual rainfall.

During winters, about four to six western disturbance events happen every month on an average. This season there was one feeble western disturbance event in December that did not bring any rains, and another similar one in January.

### **El Nino impact**

Indeed, there have been several years in the last one decade — 2022, 2018, 2015 — when winters have been relatively dry in Jammu and Kashmir, and snowfall has been very low.

For the past few months, El Niño has persisted and will continue to do so in the coming months. This has affected the global atmospheric circulation, and might be contributing to the deficit precipitation in the region as well.

### **Repercussions**

Less snowfall in the region is expected to have both short-term and long-term implications. Long-term implications include the generation of less hydroelectricity, an increase in the rate of glacier melting, and an adverse impact on the drinking water supply, since scanty snowfall means very little recharge of groundwater.

In the short term, a dry spell can result in an increase in forest fires, agricultural drought, and a drop in crop production.

The winter snow is a source of steady moisture to the soil that is vital for winter crops, particularly horticulture. Yields of apples or saffron, important ingredients of local economy, are badly affected in the absence of snowfall.

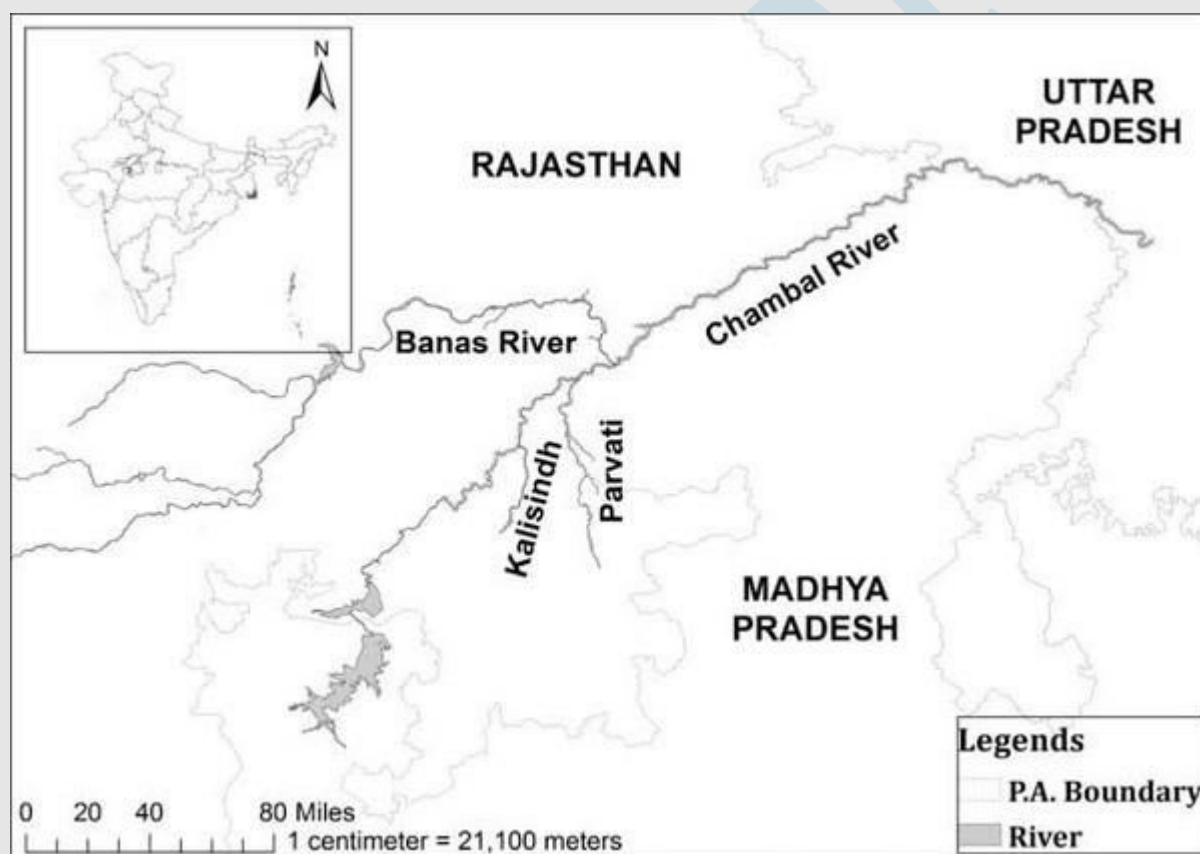
Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper I; Geography  
Source: The Indian Express

## 2. The river-linking project Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Centre have signed MoU for?

### Why in news?

Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Union Ministry of Jal Shakti to implement the Modified Parbati-Kalisindh-Chambal-ERCP (Modified PKC-ERCP) Link Project.

The project envisages integration of the long-pending PKC river link project with the Eastern Rajasthan Canal Project, under the national perspective plan of interlinking of rivers (ILR) programme of the Government of India.



The ERCP is politically significant in Rajasthan, and the last government had been pushing for a national project status for it.

### What is the Modified PKC-ERCP?

The Modified PKC-ERCP is an inter-state river linking project. According to the ministry, preparations for a Detailed Project Report (DPR) on this are on. Based on the outcome of the DPR, a Memorandum of Agreement (MoA) will be finalised among Rajasthan,

Madhya Pradesh, and the Centre, covering the sharing of water, exchange of water, sharing of costs and benefits, implementation mechanisms, arrangements for management and control of water in the Chambal basin, etc.

### **What is the PKC link project?**

The Parbati-Kalisindh-Chambal (PKC) link project is one of the 30 links included in the National Perspectives Plan formulated by the erstwhile Union Ministry of Irrigation (now Ministry of Water Resources) and the Central Water Commission in the year 1980.

As per the National Water Development Agency (NWDA), the preliminary feasibility report of the Kalisindh-Chambal link canal project was prepared and circulated to the states concerned in September 1991. The report proposed diversion of water from river Newaj (a tributary of Kalisindh) and Kalisindh to the river Chambal at either the Rana Pratap Sagar dam or the Gandhi Sagar dam.

Rajasthan came up with the proposal of the ERCP in 2019, and to utilise water resources optimally, the Task Force for Interlinking of Rivers (TFILR) discussed its merger with the PKC link project. This integration was approved by the Special Committee for Interlinking of Rivers in December 2022.

### **What is the ERCP?**

The Eastern Rajasthan Canal Project (ERCP) is aimed at intra-basin transfer of water within the Chambal basin, by utilising surplus monsoon water available in Kalisindh, Parvati, Mej and Chakan subbasins and diverting it into water deficit sub-basins of Banas, Gambhiri, Banganga and Parbati.

### **What are the benefits of the modified project?**

According to the Jal Shakti Ministry, the link project proposes to provide drinking and industrial water in 13 districts of eastern Rajasthan, and Malwa and Chambal regions of Madhya Pradesh, apart from providing irrigation in 2.8 lakh ha. area (or more) each in both the states (total of 5.6 lakh ha or more).

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper I; Geography

Source: The Indian Express

### 1. How Lakshadweep's unique cultural landscape developed

#### Why in news?

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's recent trip to Lakshadweep has catapulted the islands into national conversation. Lying about 400 km off the coast of Kerala in the Arabian Sea, the picturesque islands have long been touted as a "hidden gem" for Indian tourists.



#### Prime Minister Narendra Modi in Lakshadweep

#### Muslim majority

Culturally, the islands are unique. Though majority of its inhabitants are Muslim, the Islam practised in Lakshadweep is unlike that followed anywhere else in India, with islanders sharing ethnic, linguistic and cultural links to Malayalis, Arabs, Tamils and Kannadigas alike.

#### A matrilineal society

What really makes Lakshadweep's Islamic society unique is the tradition of matriliney — where descent and property is traced through the mother's line.

A reason for the continued existence of matriliney in Lakshadweep is its relative isolation. Not only did it avoid serious colonial influence, it also did not come under the influence of conventional Islamic ideas from other parts of the Muslim world, like the reformist Mujahid movement in south-west India in the 1930s.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper I; Indian Society

Source: The Indian Express

## **2. Pran pratishtha at Ayodhya Ram temple draws near: What is this ceremony, how it is performed**

### **Why in news?**

The day of the pran pratishtha of the idol at Ayodhya's Ram temple is coming closer. The pran pratishtha ceremony will be held on January 22.

While the basic meaning of pran pratishtha — giving life to the idol — is simple enough, the ceremony involves various rituals taken from the Vedas and Puranas, each with its own significance. So what exactly is pran pratishtha, and how is it carried out?



### **What is Pran Prathistha?**

Pran prathistha is the act which transforms an idol into a deity, giving it the capacity to accept prayers and grant boons. For this, the statue has to go through various stages. Here we describe some of the prominent steps. The number of steps involved will depend on the scale of the ceremony.

### **Shobha yatra**

One of the first stages is a shobha yatra, or a procession of the idol, taken out in the neighbourhood of the temple. During this yatra, as the idol is greeted and cheered on



by onlookers, some of their devotion is transferred into it, imbuing it with devotion and divine strength.

### **The adhivas**

To ready the idol for the pran pratishtha, multiple adhivaas are conducted, in which the idol is submerged in various materials. For one night, the idol is kept in water, which is called jalādhivās. Then it is submerged in grain, which is called dhānyādhivās. When an idol is being crafted, it sustains various injuries from the craftsman's tools. These adhivaas are meant to heal up all such injuries. Moreover, if the idol has a defect, or if the stone is not of a great quality, it will be found out when it is submerged in various materials.

### **Ritual bath**

After this, the idol is given a ritual bath and its abhishek is performed with various materials, depending on the scale of the ceremony. This rite can involve "108 different types of materials, such as panchamrut, water containing the essence of various fragrant flowers and leaves, water which has been poured over the horns of a cow, and sugar cane juice.

### **Opening of the eyes**

The most important ceremony is that of netronmeelan, or the opening of the deity's eyes.

The final step is the opening of the statue's eyes. This ceremony involves putting anjan, somewhat like kohl, around the deity's eyes, with a gold needle. This process is carried out from behind, as it is believed that if one looks into God's eyes the moment they open, their brilliance can be too much to take.

Once the anjan has been applied and the deity's eyes have opened, it has 'come to life' and can now receive devotees.

### **Where are these steps mentioned?**

The process of the pran pratishtha is mentioned in the Vedas and elaborated upon in various Puranas, such as Matsya Puran, Vaman Puran, Narad Puran, etc.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains

Source: The Indian Express

## **3. Latest All India Survey of Higher Education (AISHE)**

### **Why in news?**

The report of the All India Survey of Higher Education (AISHE) 2021–22 found that 4.33 crore students are currently enrolled in a higher educational institute — up from 4.14 crore in 2020-21, and 3.42 crore in 2014-15.

The survey captures total student enrolment in eight different levels: undergraduate, postgraduate, PhD, MPhil, diploma, PG diploma, certificate, and integrated programmes. In all, 10,576 standalone institutions, 42,825 colleges, and 1,162 universities/university level institutions responded to the survey.

### **The key takeaways of the Survey are as follows:**

#### **Female enrolment greater than male**

The number of women enrolled in higher educational institutes has steadily increased, the AISHE report showed.

From 1.5 crore women enrolled in 2014-15, there has been a jump of 32% to 2.07 crores enrolled in 2021-22. In the last five years, the number of women enrolled increased by 18.7%, from 1.74 crore in 2017–18.

The proportion of women enrolled in higher education, compared to men, has also gone up. Of the 91 lakh more students to have joined higher educational institutes in 2021-22 (when compared to 2014-15), 55% were women. The proportion of women is highest at the post graduate level, where 55.4% students are female.

#### **GER and Gender Parity**

Gross Enrollment Ratio indicates how many students are part of the higher education system in a given population. The estimated GER for the age group 18-23 years in India is 28.4, the AISHE 2021-22 report said (based on population data from the 2011 census).

In terms of state-wise data, Chandigarh, at 64.8%, boasts of the highest GER, followed by Puducherry at 61.5%, Delhi at 49%, and Tamil Nadu at 47%.

Another indicator called the Gender Parity Index (GPI) shows the ratio of the female GER to male GER. A GPI of 1 indicates parity between the two genders; any number between 0 and 1 shows a disparity in favour of males, whereas a GPI greater than 1 indicates a disparity in favour of females.

The survey observed that in 26 states and Union Territories, the GER is in favour of women. At the all-India level, GPI is 1.01.

#### **Arts over the sciences in graduation, PG**

The survey showed that the Bachelor of Arts (BA) programme has the highest enrolment, with 1.13 crore students — 34.2% of total undergraduate enrolment across India. In all, 3.41 crore students are enrolled in UG programmes.

Among disciplines at undergraduate level, in 2021-22, the enrollment is highest in Arts (34.2%), followed by science (14.8%), commerce (13.3%) and engineering and technology (11.8%). BA(Hons) accounts for 20.4 lakh (6.2%), the survey shows.

The latest survey shows that the Master of Arts (MA) programme has the highest enrolment, with 20.9 lakh students, which is 40.7% of total postgraduate enrolment.

### **Primacy of government institutions**

Interestingly, 73.7% of all students attend government universities, which make up only 58.6% of all universities.

### **Demographics of students graduating**

During the 2021–22 academic year, 1.07 crore students were estimated to have graduated from undergraduate, graduate, doctorate, master's, and other diploma/certificate programmes. Among these 1.07 crore students, 54.6 lakh or roughly 50.8% are women.

Category-wise, in 2021-22, around 35% of the students belong to Other Backward Classes (OBC), 13% are from Scheduled Caste (SC) community and 5.7% of the graduates are from Scheduled Tribe (ST) community.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper I; Indian Society

Source: The Indian Express

### 1. Indian Navy Foils Hijacking Attempt in Arabian Sea

#### Introduction

In a successful operation conducted in the North Arabian Sea, the Indian Navy's Marine Commandos (MARCOS) thwarted a hijacking attempt on the merchant vessel Lila Norfolk. The incident concluded with the secure evacuation of all 21 crew members, including 15 Indians.

#### Swift Response and Evacuation

The attempt, which took place approximately 460 nautical miles off the coast of Eyl, Somalia, was reported by the bulk carrier Lila Norfolk on the UK Maritime Trade Operations portal. Responding promptly, the Indian Navy diverted the destroyer INS Chennai, engaged in anti-piracy patrol, to intercept the vessel. The crew's safety was confirmed through contact established by a Maritime Patrol Aircraft (MPA) that overflew the vessel.

## Ships in distress

In the last month of 2023, India responded to three distress calls from ships in trouble



**Dec 14:** Malta-flagged vessel m.v. *Ruen*, with an 18-member crew, sent a mayday message indicating boarding by about six unknown persons around 700 nautical miles from the Indian coast

**Dec 23:** m.v. *Chem Pluto*, with 21 Indian and 1 Vietnamese crew members, reported a projectile attack around 217

nautical miles southwest of Porbandar. Initial investigation by the Navy indicated a drone attack

**Dec 23:** A Gabon-flagged crude oil tanker m.v. *Sal Baba* with an all-Indian crew heading to India was hit by a one-way attack drone in the Southern Red Sea; no injuries were reported

**Safe and secure:** The cargo ship Lila Norfolk, after the rescue, prepares to move to the next port of call. PTI

#### Abandonment of Hijacking Attempt

The hijacking attempt was likely abandoned following a forceful warning by the Indian Navy's MPA and the interception by INS Chennai. The vessel, en route to Khalifa Bin

Salman Port, Bahrain, from a port in Brazil, reported being boarded by approximately five to six unknown armed persons.

### **Successful Boarding and Sanitization**

INS Chennai intercepted the vessel, with MARCOS boarding for a complete sanitization process. The crew, who had gathered in the citadel, a strong room within the ship, were successfully evacuated after the sanitization operation.

### **Enhanced Maritime Security Measures**

This marks another hijacking incident in the region, prompting the Indian Navy to bolster maritime surveillance efforts in the Central and North Arabian Sea. Additionally, force levels have been increased to address and respond effectively to such incidents in the future.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Internal Security

Source: The Hindu

## **2. Aviation Safety Scrutiny: Recent Incidents Raise Concerns**

### **Why in news?**

In recent weeks, the field of aviation safety has come under intense scrutiny, prompted by two notable incidents. The first occurred on January 2, involving a Japan Airlines (JAL) Airbus A350-900 colliding with a Japan Coast Guard De Havilland Canada Dash 8 after landing, resulting in both aircraft catching fire. The second incident, on January 5, involved an Alaska Airlines Boeing 737 MAX 9 experiencing depressurization mid-air due to a blown-out window panel 'door plug.' These incidents have reignited concerns about air safety, leading to a closer examination of factors such as aircraft technology, crew response, and regulatory oversight.

### **Key Points**

#### **1. Japan Jet Inferno and Alaska Airlines Incident**

- The JAL incident resulted in a collision and subsequent fire, with all passengers on the Airbus A350-900 surviving, but five fatalities on the Coast Guard plane.
- The Alaska Airlines Boeing 737 MAX 9 incident involved a blown-out 'door plug,' causing depressurization. Fortunately, no major injuries were reported among the 171 passengers and six crew members.

#### **2. Boeing 737 MAX 9 Under Scrutiny**

- The Boeing 737 MAX 9's safety record has faced renewed attention, leading to increased oversight by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) in the U.S.



- The FAA's probe, along with the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) investigation, focuses on the cabin pressure control system.

### **3. Response to Boeing Case**

- Boeing CEO Dave Calhoun acknowledged mistakes in a meeting with employees, and the FAA announced additional oversight on Boeing.
- Aircraft with a plug door, like the one in the Alaska incident, will remain grounded for thorough reviews.

### **4. Airbus A350 Incident Highlights**

- The JAL Airbus A350 incident showcased the survival of all passengers despite the complete hull loss of the aircraft.
- Crew training, response time of fire and rescue teams, and advances in aircraft manufacturing technology played crucial roles in the evacuation.

### **5. Advancements in Aircraft Technology**

- The increasing use of composite materials in Airbus and Boeing aircraft enhances durability, strength, and reduces weight.
- Lessons from incidents like the JAL fire contribute valuable insights into the performance of advanced materials during real-world tests.

### **6. Safety Improvements and Certification Standards**

- The FAA-led improvements include enhanced seat cushion flammability, emergency escape path marking, lavatory safety measures, and improved materials to reduce heat release and smoke emissions.
- Aircraft certification requirements, including the 90-second evacuation rule, apply to all aircraft, ensuring stringent safety standards.

### **7. Ongoing Concerns and Design Aspects**

- While no aircraft can be made entirely fireproof, ongoing efforts focus on factors that enhance passenger survival.
- The JAL incident, with an 18-minute evacuation time, highlights the importance of design aspects in delaying the effects of a fire.

As the aviation industry continues to evolve, addressing these concerns becomes paramount to ensuring the safety of air travel worldwide.



**Narrow escape: The burnt-out JAL plane at Haneda airport, on January 3**

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Internal Security

Source: The Hindu

### 3. Army launches Op Sarvashakti



#### Why in news?

The Army has launched Operation Sarvashakti in the Rajouri-Poonch sector of Jammu and Kashmir, deploying forces on both sides of the Pir Panjal range to target terrorists who have carried out a series of attacks on troops in the area.

There were three major attacks on the security forces in 2023, and over the past few years, 20 soldiers have been killed in terrorist ambushes in this area. Most terrorists here are believed to be foreigners.

Operation Sarvashakti, as part of which at least three brigades of additional troops are being deployed in the sector from various reserve and strike corps formations in order

to increase the density of troops and, therefore, the likelihood of contact with terrorists, recalls an earlier operation by the Army in the same forests more than two decades ago.

Back in 2003, Indian forces launched Operation Sarpvinash to flush out terrorists who had infiltrated from across the border and set up camps in the thick forests south of the Pir Panjal range, especially in the Hilkaka area in Poonch.



### **What was Operation Sarpvinash?**

Following several encounters in the area, the Army carried out, from April 2003 onward, what was until then its biggest counter-insurgency operation in Jammu and Kashmir.

About 100 terrorists were killed in the operation. A large number of weapons of various kinds, dumps of explosives, and stores including some 7,000 kg of ration, medicines, and communication equipment were recovered. Some 40-50 terrorist hideouts were demolished in the operation.

### **Why is this area important strategically?**



The areas south of Mendhar leading to the Pir Panjal range through Hilkaka constitute among the shortest routes of access for infiltrators from across the LoC into the Kashmir valley.

The terrorists chose this region to set up camps because dominating this area can potentially provide a conduit to personnel in the event of a military operation by the Pakistanis, and easier infiltration of terrorists.

The dense forests and steep mountain slopes offer both adequate cover and visual domination of the area. Terrorists were able to merge with the foliage whenever Indian troops carried out searches in the area, and to inflict casualties in case of contact. All of these locational advantages for terrorists remain intact to some degree even now.

### **What was the outcome of Operation Sarpvinash?**

The operation flushed out terrorists and brought peace to the area that lasted until 2017-18, even as terrorist incidents continued to take place in the valley. But since 2021, this region has seen several high intensity attacks on security forces.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Internal Security

Source: The Indian Express

## **4. Manipur ministers and MLAs meet Arambai Tenggol members: Who are the radical Meitei group?**

### **Why in news?**

Almost all of the Meitei MLAs in Manipur as well as Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha MPs representing valley areas of the state were at Kangla Fort of Imphal morning to meet the leaders of radical Meitei group Arambai Tenggol.

The development came after Arambai Tenggol issued "summons" to "all the ministers and MLA belonging to the valley districts.

### **Who are the Arambai Tenggol group?**

According to sources, Arambai Tenggol started in 2020 as a cultural outfit, but soon transformed into a radical organisation. It is one of the two hardline Meitei organisations suspected to be involved in a large number of Meitei-Kuki clashes, which broke out in May 2023. The other group is Meitei Leepun.

Both the organisation had armed themselves and their membership grew rapidly during the conflict.

### **Why did the group 'summon' Manipur's political representatives?**

The meeting was organised to discuss the demands of Arambai Tenggol. The demands included delisting of Kukis from the Scheduled Tribes list, deportation of refugees to camps in Mizoram, border fencing, replacement of Assam Rifles with other paramilitary force and revoking Suspension of Operations (SoO) agreement between the Centre and Kuki militant groups.

Relevance: GS Prelims

Source: The Indian Express



### 1. How the Burj Khalifa became the world's tallest billboard

#### Introduction

Dubai's Burj Khalifa turned 14 on January 5, 2024. Developed by Emaar Properties, one of the world's largest real estate companies, the world's tallest building contains a luxury hotel, luxury residences, restaurants, and observatories.



It is also the tallest billboard in the world — whether it is to launch a new product or film, or share an important message, the skyscraper's exteriors act like one giant advertising platform, entrancing onlookers in Dubai and around the world.

#### The tallest human-made structure

At a total height of 829.8 m — equivalent to over 11.5 Qutub Minars, stacked on top of each other — the Burj Khalifa is the tallest human-made structure ever built. With its 160+ floors serviced by 57 lifts, the skyscraper overtook the Taipei 101

(508.2 m tall) to reach the top spot.

Construction began in 2004, and was completed in 2009, before Burj Khalifa's official opening on January 4, 2010.

Originally named Burj Dubai (literally "Dubai Tower"), it was renamed Burj Khalifa in honour of Sheikh Khalifa, the then president of the United Arab Emirates, who helped fund the project amidst financial trouble faced by Emaar.

#### The world's tallest billboard

From the very beginning, the Burj Khalifa was envisioned to be a premium advertising platform. It offers a number of locations where one can run ads — from inside elevators and common areas, to spots right outside the massive building, and of course, on the building itself.

The façade of the Burj Khalifa is one of the most exclusive, and expensive, advertising locations on the planet. According to Arabian Business, the cost to place an advertisement, movie teaser or message on the façade starts from roughly 250,000 Dirhams (or roughly \$70,000) for three minutes during weekdays, and can reach up to

350,000 Dirhams (roughly \$100,000) during weekends. These prices can be even higher depending on the specific date, time, duration, and type of advertising.

The exact advertising prices are not publicly disclosed, and are negotiated on a case-to-case basis. Over the years, the Burj Khalifa has been used by high-profile marketing campaigns for companies.

### **And how does all this work?**

The Burj Khalifa is the world's largest electronic display, fitted with over 1.2 million pixels on its south-facing façade. Installed in 2014, and first unveiled during the New Year's celebration of 2015, these LEDs together allow Burj Khalifa to act like any other electronic screen.

Visuals are sent to a "main brain" server, which, through a network of fibre optics and smaller brains, tells tiny LED lights on the façade to display a particular colour — seen together from a distance, the 1.2 million LEDs make up a composite image of the visual, turning the façade into a screen.

Relevance: GS Prelims

Source: The Indian Express

## **2. Who are the shankaracharyas — and who was Adi Shankara?**

### **Why in news?**

The four shankaracharyas have said that they will not attend the inauguration of the Ram temple in Ayodhya on January 22.

The shankaracharyas head the four Hindu mathas (monasteries) — in Dwarka (Gujarat), Joshimath (Uttarakhand), Puri (Odisha), and Sringeri (Karnataka) — that are believed to have been founded by the eighth-century religious scholar and philosopher Adi Shankara.

### **But first, why are the shankaracharyas skipping the Ram Mandir inauguration?**

While the seers from Dwarka and Sringeri have not given reasons, the shankaracharyas of the Joshimath and Puri mathas have been more vocal.

"[Prime Minister] Modi will inaugurate the temple, he will touch the idol, then what am I supposed to do? Stand and clap?" Puri's shankaracharya Nischalananda Saraswati told reporters.

The shankaracharya of the Jyotir Matha peeth, Avimukteshwaranand Saraswati, cited non-adherence to religious scriptures as his reason for skipping the inauguration. "The

scriptures are being undermined by carrying out consecration before the construction of the temple is complete. There is no reason for this rush," he said on Twitter (now X).

### **Who are the shankaracharyas?**

Shankaracharya, literally 'teacher of the way of Shankara', is a religious title used by the heads of the four cardinal mathas or peeths believed to have been established by Adi Shankara (c 788 CE-820 CE). According to tradition, they are religious teachers who belong to a line of teachers going back all the way to Adi Shankara himself.

### **And who was Adi Shankara?**

According to the most popular versions of Adi Shankara's life-story, he was born in Kalady village on the bank of the River Periyar in what is today Kerala's Ernakulam district.

From Kanchi in Tamil Nadu to Kamrup in Assam, from Kashmir and the Kedar and Badri dhams in the Himalayas to Kashi (Varanasi) on the bank of the Ganga and Puri on the Bay of Bengal, Adi Shankara is said to have traversed the length and breadth of the Indian landmass preaching Advaita Vedanta. (More on that later.)

He is also popularly identified as the author of 116 works, including celebrated commentaries (or bhashyas) on 10 Upanishads, the Brahmasutra, and the Bhagavad Gita. However, the authorship of many works attributed to Shankara remains disputed.

### **What is Advaita Vedanta?**

Shankara is most associated with Advaita Vedanta, a school of Hindu philosophy and spiritual discipline.

Advaita Vedanta articulates an ontological position of radical nondualism — it posits that all that we perceive is ultimately illusory (maya), and that the principle of brahman (not to be confused with the caste Brahmin) is the only true reality of all things, transcending empirical plurality. The fundamental thrust of Advaita Vedanta lies in the unity of atman or individual consciousness, and brahman or the ultimate reality.

This philosophical tradition found its most sustained early articulation in the works of Shankara, who "endeavoured to communicate nonduality through systematised theories of metaphysics, language, and epistemology".

### **What is the legacy of Shankara?**

Shankara's legacy today transcends his contributions to metaphysics and theology. His travels across the subcontinent have often been interpreted as a near nationalistic

project where faith, philosophy and geography are yoked together to imagine a Hindu India which transcended the political boundaries of his time.

And his four cardinal mathas, located in the North and South, East and West of India, are seen as the ultimate examples of this project. His mathas are thus also seen as keepers of Hindu faith and traditions. This is what makes the shankaracharyas' refusal to attend the inauguration of the Ayodhya temple so significant.



Relevance: GS Prelims

Source: Indian Express

### 3. What is the Nagara style, in which Ayodhya's Ram temple is being built



The Ram temple in Ayodhya will be inaugurated on January 22. Chandrakant Sompura, 81, and his son Ashish, 51, have designed the complex in the Nagara style of temple architecture.

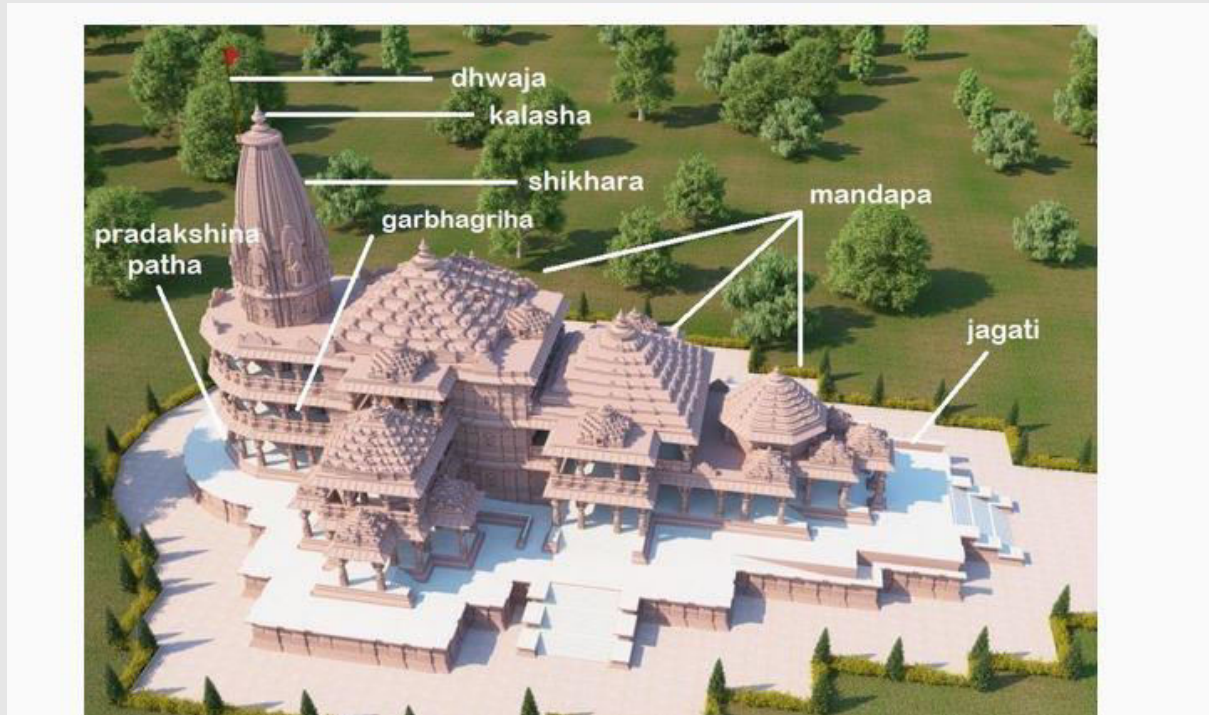
#### A 'language' of architecture

The Nagara style of temple architecture emerged some time in the fifth century CE, during the late Gupta period, in northern India. It is seen in juxtaposition with the Dravida style of southern India, which too emerged in the same period.

#### Distinguished by a towering shikhara



Nagara temples are built on a raised plinth, with the *garbha griha* (sanctum sanctorum) — where the idol of the deity rests — the most sacred part of the temple. Towering over the *garbha griha* is the *shikhara* (literally 'mountain peak'), the most distinguishable aspect of Nagara style temples.



A typical Nagara style temple also comprises a circumambulatory passage around the *garbha griha*, and one or more *mandapas* (halls) on the same axis as it. Elaborate murals and reliefs often adorn its walls.

### Comparison to Dravida style

The Dravida counterpart to the *shikhara* is the *vimana*. There exists, however, a fundamental difference.

In the Dravida style temples, *vimanas* are typically smaller than the great gatehouses or *gopurams*, which are the most immediately striking architectural elements in a temple complex. Moreover, while *shikharas* are mentioned in southern Indian architectural sources, they refer to only the dome-shaped crowning cap atop the *vimana*.

The existence of *gopurams* also points to another unique feature of the Dravida style — the presence of a boundary wall. Few Nagara style temple complexes are lined with distinctive boundary walls that are a part of the temple's design.



This is one of Ayodhya's Ram temple's 'hybrid' features — although no elaborate gopuram has been built (citing paucity of space), a 732m long wall runs around the temple compound.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper I; Culture

Source: The Indian Express and The Hindu

#### **4. Timeline leading to the consecration ceremony of Ram Mandir**

##### **1528: Demolition of temple for mosque**

In a chapter etched in the annals of history, the year 1528 witnessed a significant transformation in Ayodhya, where a temple made way for the construction of a mosque, as recounted in the most popular version documented in government gazettes. According to historical records, Mughal ruler Babur's general Mir Baq was instrumental in the establishment of a mosque at the site believed to be the birthplace of Lord Rama in Ayodhya's Ramkot, following the demolition of the existing temple. The historical narratives suggest that the location, identified as the capital of Lord Rama's father Dashrath in the epic Ramayana, witnessed a profound transformation during this period.

##### **1853: Beginning of dispute and the first petitions**

The echoes of religious unrest over the Babri Masjid site in Ayodhya resonated for the first time in 1853. In response to escalating tensions, the British administration took action six years later, installing a partitioning fence at the site. The move delineated two distinct sections, granting Muslims permission to pray within the mosque, while designating the outer court for Hindu use.

Later in January 1885, the first plea in the land dispute case was filed by Mahant Raghubir Das in the Faizabad district court seeking to construct a canopy on the Ramchabutra, a raised platform located outside the mosque. However, the plea was met with denial, underscoring the simmering tensions and legal disputes surrounding the contested site.

##### **1949: Pivotal moments in the temple's movement**

The year 1949 stands out as a crucial juncture in the trajectory of the Ram Temple movement, witnessing a transformative event that would reverberate through the years. In a move that would set the stage for legal and communal tensions, members of the fringe Hindu outfit Akhil Hindu Ramayana Mahashabha placed an idol of Lord Ram inside the Babri Masjid.

Subsequently, both Hindu and Muslim groups filed petitions, adding complexity to the situation. Gopal Singh Visharad, seeking permission to worship the deity, filed a petition before the Faizabad court. In contrast, Hashim Ansari, a resident of Ayodhya,

approached the court advocating for the removal of the idols and the preservation of the site as a masjid. In response to the mounting tensions, the government intervened by locking the premises, though permitting daily puja by the priests.

### **1980s: Ram Mandir construction campaign takes centre stage**

A crucial chapter in the saga of the temple unfolded in the 1980s with the launch of a campaign aimed at reclaiming and constructing a temple at the birthplace of Lord Ram. Spearheading this mission was a dedicated committee led by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad Party (VHP).

In 1986, the Ayodhya court, responding to a plea by Hari Shankar Dubey, issued a historic order to open the gates of mosque for Hindus. The district judge in Ayodhya played a crucial role in implementing the court's directive, paving the way for Hindus to worship at the site. However, this decision stirred unrest, leading to the formation of the 'Babri Mosque Action Committee' by the Muslim community in protest.

In response to the court's ruling, the Rajiv Gandhi-led government took action and ordered the unlocking of the gates of Babri Masjid. The unfolding events during this period marked a significant turning point in the ongoing debate over the disputed site, setting the stage for further legal and communal developments in the years to come.

### **1989: Foundation of Ram Temple by VHP**

The foundation for the construction of the Ram Temple was ceremoniously laid by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad on the adjacent land to the Babri Masjid. Former VHP Vice President Justice Deoki Nandan Agarwal filed a case, urging the relocation of the mosque. The Faizabad court subsequently transferred the four pending suits to a special bench of the High Court.

### **1990: Lal Krishna Advani's Rath Yatra**

A pivotal moment in the Ram Mandir movement unfolded in 1990 with the launch of the Rath Yatra led by Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP's) then-president Lal Krishna Advani. This mass mobilisation, appreciated by the public at the time, saw Advani leading the Rath Yatra from Somnath in Gujarat to Ayodhya, expressing support for the Ram Temple agitation. Commencing on September 25, 1990, in Somnath, the Yatra included thousands of kar sevaks, or volunteers, affiliated with the Sangh Parivar.

### **1992: Babri Masjid demolition**

The year 1992 marked a seismic event in the Ram Mandir movement with the demolition of Babri Masjid by kar sevaks, triggering political tensions and communal riots across the country, resulting in the loss of at least 2,000 lives. The demolition unfolded in the presence of leaders from the Shiv Sena, VHP, and BJP, leaving an indelible mark on the socio-political landscape of India.

### **2003: ASI conducts survey of the disputed site**

In 2003, a three-judge bench of the Allahabad High Court issued an order directing the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) to excavate the disputed site and ascertain whether it had served as a temple in the past. The ASI conducted a thorough survey, revealing compelling evidence of a substantial Hindu complex beneath the mosque. However, these findings faced opposition from Muslim organizations, leading to prolonged disagreements over the historical interpretation of the site.

### **2010: Disputed site divided into three parts**

The culmination of legal proceedings occurred in 2010 when the Allahabad High Court delivered a landmark judgment. The court ruled that the contested land should be divided into three parts: one-third was allocated to Ram Lalla, represented by the Hindu Mahasabha; another third went to the Islamic Waqf Board; and the remaining portion was granted to the Nirmohi Akhara.

### **2011: Legal battle reaches Supreme Court**

The protracted legal saga surrounding the disputed Ayodhya site continued in 2011 as all three parties -- Nirmohi Akhara, Ram Lalla Virajman, and the Sunni Waqf Board -- approached the Supreme Court, challenging the Allahabad High Court verdict. The apex court promptly intervened, issuing a stay on the High Court order, which had divided the contested site into three parts.

### **2019: Supreme Court renders historic verdict**

A momentous chapter in the Ayodhya dispute unfolded in 2019 when the Supreme Court, led by then Chief Justice of India Ranjan Gogoi, delivered a landmark judgment. The five-judge bench ruled in favour of Ram Lalla and decreed that the entire disputed land would be handed over to a trust established by the government. According to the judgment, this trust would assume the responsibility of overseeing the construction of the Ram Temple at the site, bringing a long-awaited resolution to the complex and contentious issue that had gripped the nation for decades.

### **2020: PM Modi lays foundation stone of temple**

In a significant moment for the nation, Prime Minister Narendra Modi laid the foundation stone for the construction of the Ram Temple on August 5, 2020. During the ceremony, he not only laid the foundation stone but also unveiled a commemorative plaque and released a special postal stamp, marking the commencement of the much-anticipated construction project.

### **2024: Consecration Ceremony marks a sacred occasion**

A sacred event is scheduled to unfold in Ayodhya on January 22, 2024. This momentous occasion will witness the consecration ceremony (Pran Pratishtha) of Ram Lalla, further cementing the spiritual and cultural significance of the Ram Temple. The ceremony is poised to bring together dignitaries, devotees, and participants from

various walks of life, creating a chapter of reverence and celebration in the rich tapestry of Ayodhya's history. Ayodhya, the birthplace of Lord Rama, holds great spiritual, historical and cultural significance for the people of India. A Vedic priest from Varanasi, Dr Lakshmi Kant Dixit will perform the main rituals of the consecration ceremony of Ram Lalla on January 22.

Relevance: GS Prelims

Source: Times of India

## **5. ASI report says temple existed at the site of Gyanvapi mosque**

### **Why in news?**

The Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) in its scientific survey report on the Gyanvapi mosque complex has concluded that "there existed a Hindu temple prior to the construction of the existing structure" at the site. The report was submitted to the court last month in a sealed cover. The ASI was tasked by the Varanasi district court in July 2023 to conduct a scientific survey of the mosque and ascertain if it was "constructed over a pre-existing structure of a Hindu temple".

### **Here are five key takeaways from the ASI report:**

#### **1. The pre-existing structure was probably destroyed in the 17th century, during the reign of Aurangzeb**

The report mentions a loose stone with an inscription engraved on it which recorded the construction of the mosque during the reign of Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb between the years 1676 and 1677. The inscription also recorded that the mosque was repaired with sahan (courtyard), etc." in the year 1792-93.

ASI has a photograph of the loose stone which was taken in the year 1965-66. The report also noted that during the recent survey, it was found that "the lines relating to construction of the mosque and its expansion have been scratched out".

The pre-existing structure was destroyed after Aurangzeb "issued orders to the governors of all provinces to demolish the schools and temples of the infidels", according to Maasir-i-Alamgiri (1947) by Sir Jadunath Sarkar.

#### **2. Inscriptions in Devanagari, Grantha, Telugu and Kannada scripts with names of deities found**

During the survey, a total of 34 inscriptions were recorded, according to the report. "These are, in fact, inscriptions on the stones of the pre-existing Hindu temples, which have been re-used during the construction/ repair of the existing structure. They include inscriptions in Devanagari, Grantha, Telugu and Kannada scripts. Reuse of earlier inscriptions in the structure, suggest that the earlier structures were destroyed and their parts were reused in construction/ repair of the existing structure," it said.

### **3. Parts of the pre-existing temple were reused for the expansion of the mosque and construction of sahan**

The survey included an examination of pillars and pilasters (rectangular columns) in the corridor which indicated that they were part of the pre-existing temple.

### **4. The central chamber and main entrance of the pre-existing structure are part of the existing structure**

According to the report, the pre-existing temple had one big central chamber. The central chamber now forms the central hall of the existing structure. This structure with thick and strong walls, along with all architectural components and floral decorations was utilised as the main hall of the mosque.

### **5. Sculptural remains in cellars indicate that there existed a large Hindu temple**

Under the heading 'Sculptural Remains in Cellars', the report noted that pillars from the pre-existing temple were reused to make cellars in the eastern part of the platform — cellars and the platform were constructed in front of the mosque to accommodate a large number of people for prayers.

Moreover, sculptures of Hindu deities and carved architectural members were found under the dumped soil in one of the cellars.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper I; Indian Society

Source: The Indian Express

### **6. ASER survey results show gaps in learning persist, but access to tech offers avenues beyond physical school**

#### **Annual Status of Education Report**

Since 2005, the NGO Pratham's Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) has been recording trends in school enrollment, attendance, and reading and arithmetic abilities among children ages 6-14 years in rural areas of the country.

The 2023 survey focused on an older group of 14-to-18-year-old children, specifically on their ability to apply reading and math skills to everyday situations, and their aspirations. It also sought to capture their access to digital technology, and whether they possess the skills to use it.

The ASER 2023 'Beyond Basics' survey was carried out among 34,745 young respondents in 28 rural districts in 26 states, including two districts each in Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh.

#### **What are some key findings from the survey?**



Children in this age group are doing multiple things, even though that is not always captured by the education sector or the job market. Around 30% are already working, often for their parents. But when asked whether that was what they wanted to do when they grew up, the children say that is not for them.

The majority of respondents in Class 11 or higher were studying humanities-related subjects. It suggests that their prospects in a job market are bleak that values STEM knowledge.

As far as the digital component is concerned, at one level, it shows that everybody knows how to use the basic things. But they're not using it in depth; they're using the surface layer, say, mainly engaging with social media.

**The enrollment gap between boys and girls has been closing over the years. Can we say that about digital access too?**

About 90% of surveyed households had smartphones. Of the surveyed children, almost 95% boys and 90% girls could use a smartphone.

Across all phone-related tasks assigned to respondents, boys outperformed girls. Performance in digital tasks improved with education level. Ability to perform digital tasks also increased with basic reading proficiency.

Relevance: GS Prelims

Source: The Hindu

**7. What is Boeing's India Engineering and Technology Center, which PM Modi will inaugurate in Bengaluru?**

**Why in news?**

What is Boeing's India Engineering and Technology Center, which PM Modi will inaugurate in Bengaluru?

Prime Minister Narendra Modi will inaugurate aircraft manufacturing giant Boeing's largest investment facility outside the USA in Bengaluru. The Boeing India Engineering and Technology Center (BIETC), built with an investment of Rs 1,600 crore, will have a 43-acre campus.

**What is BIETC?**

BIETC is Boeing's new campus in India. The facility will look to develop next-generation products and services for the global aerospace and defence industry. The Prime

Minister will also launch the Boeing Sukanya Program, which aims to support the entry of more women from across India into the aviation sector.

**What does the programme aim to achieve?**

The program will provide opportunities for girls and women to learn critical skills in STEM fields and train for jobs in the aviation sector. For young girls, the program will create STEM Labs at 150 planned locations to help spark an interest in STEM careers. The program will also provide scholarships to women training to be pilots.

Relevance: GS Prelims

Source: The Indian Express

## Practice Questions

1. The United States Secretary of State Lloyd Austin announced 'Operation Prosperity Guardian'. What is the objective of this initiative?

- (a) Facilitate development in Africa
- (b) Mitigate Climate Change impacts
- (c) Promote Gender Equality
- (d) Facilitate Maritime Security

2. Which of the following statements is correct about Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA)?

- (a) Only Organisations can be designated as terrorist organisations under the act.
- (b) The act provides the definition of 'terrorist act', but does not define 'terrorist'.
- (c) The Organisation once accused as a terrorist organisation can file application to the Central government for removal of such an accusation.
- (d) Once an organisation is accused of terror crime, it has no power to approach the court.

3. Baloch is a large indigenous community in

- (a) Bangladesh
- (b) Nepal
- (c) Sri Lanka
- (d) Pakistan

4. What is Cyber kidnapping?

- (a) Taking control over computer network resources
- (b) Addiction of public to open widely surfed websites
- (c) Convincing the internet user to hide
- (d) Contacting strangers online and then physically kidnap them

5. Consider the following statements about legal aid programmes in India:

- 1. The Legal Services Authorities Act was enacted to give a statutory base to legal aid programmes.
  - 2. In India, Industrial workers and EWS are eligible to receive free legal aid.
  - 3. Legal Services Authorities at National and State level have statutory status in India.
- How many of the above statements are incorrect?

- (a) Only One
- (b) Only Two
- (c) All Three
- (d) None

6. Consider the following statements about Political system of Bangladesh:

- 1. Bangladesh has unicameral legislature.

2. The elections are held in Bangladesh after every 6 years.  
3. Like India, Prime Minister is the head of the government.  
How many of the above statements are Correct?

- (a) Only One
- (b) Only Two
- (c) All Three
- (d) None

7. Consider the following statements:

- 1. Bangladesh is largest economy in South Asia after India.
- 2. Bangladesh is the largest trading partner of India in South Asia.
- 3. Bangladesh has higher density of population than India.

How many of the above statements are Correct?

- (a) Only One
- (b) Only Two
- (c) All Three
- (d) None

8. The budget for the succeeding year (coming year) is based on the

- (a) Provisional estimates of the year preceding than the current year.
- (b) Actual figures of the year preceding than the current year.
- (c) First advance estimates of the current year.
- (d) Provisional estimates of the current year.

9. The 'Artemis Program' is related to

- (a) Moon Exploration
- (b) Prevent Climate Change
- (c) Biodiversity documentation
- (d) Study of Earth's composition

10. Which of the following statements correctly reflects the nature of Lakshadweep society?

- (a) Hindu majority and Patrilineal
- (b) Muslim majority and Matrilineal
- (c) Buddhist majority and Matrilineal
- (d) Christian majority and Patrilineal

11. The proposals for Republic Day tableaux are evaluated by which of the following ministries?

- (a) Ministry of Defence
- (b) Ministry of Home
- (c) Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment
- (d) Ministry of External Affairs

12. India has decided to join the Square Kilometre Array (SKA) project, an international scientific collaboration working to build the world's largest radio telescope. the SKA Project will be located in

- (a) India and Mexico
- (b) India and France
- (c) Australia and New Zealand
- (d) Australia and South Africa

13. How many of the following statements are correct regarding Climate Change?

- 1. 2023 has been the warmest year since 1850.
- 2. El Nino causes rise in average temperature of earth.
- 3. The earth has already breached the Paris agreement temperature thresholds.

Select the correct answer using the code given below:

- (a) Only One
- (b) Only Two
- (c) All Three
- (d) None

14. How many of the following statements are correct regarding Coal Controller Organisation?

- 1. It is tasked with collecting and managing coal production data.
- 2. It has responsibility of regulating commercial mining.
- 3. It has been given target of coal production of 1 billion tonnes with zero imports in 2024.

Select the correct answer using the code given below:

- (a) Only One
- (b) Only Two
- (c) All Three
- (d) None

15. According to 'The CEC and Other Election Commissioners (Appointment, Conditions of Service and Term of Office) Act, 2023', the appointment of CEC and other Election Commissioners will be done by

- (a) President on advice of Council of Ministers
- (b) President on advice of Prime Minister, Leader of Opposition and CJI
- (c) President on advice of Prime Minister, CJI and Union Cabinet Minister
- (d) President on advice of Prime Minister, Union Cabinet Minister and Leader of Opposition

16. Hydroxychloroquine, a popular drug, is used for cure of

- (a) Malaria
- (b) Diarrhoea



- (c) Digestive Problems
- (d) Covid

17. The Shankaracharyas head the four Hindu Mathas (monasteries). These Mathas are in which of the following places?

- 1. Dwarka (Gujarat)
- 2. Badrinath (Uttarakhand)
- 3. Puri (Odisha)
- 4. Sringeri (Karnataka)

How many of the above are correct?

- (a) Only One
- (b) Only Two
- (c) Only Three
- (d) All Four

18. Punganur is an indigenous variety of

- (a) Horse
- (b) Cow
- (c) Sheep
- (d) Camel

19. Goldsmith line forms the border between

- (a) Afghanistan and Pakistan
- (b) Iran and Pakistan
- (c) Iran and Iraq
- (d) Armenia and Azerbaijan

20. 19th Summit of the Non-Aligned Movement was held in January 2024 at

- (a) Baku, Azerbaijan
- (b) Colombo, Sri Lanka
- (c) Kampala, Uganda
- (d) Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

21. Ingenuity by NASA, which has been recently in news, is a

- (a) Rover on surface of Mars
- (b) Chopper on surface of Mars
- (c) Orbiter to Mars
- (d) Space observatory on Mars

22. Every year, the popular meeting of business leaders, politicians, economists and so on at global level is held in the month of January at

- (a) Davos
- (b) Geneva

- (c) Amsterdam
- (d) Brussels

23. Consider the following statements about Pradhan Mantri Suryodaya Yojana:

1. Under the scheme, 5 crores households will get rooftop solar power systems.
2. The target year for the scheme is 2025.
3. The scheme was launched on 22nd January, 2024.

How many of the above statements are correct?

- (a) Only One
- (b) Only Two
- (c) All Three
- (d) None

24. Who will be awarded Bharat Ratna in 2024?

- (a) B.P. Mandal
- (b) Prafulla Chandra Ghosh
- (c) Karpoori Thakur
- (d) Jyoti Basu

25. Operation Sarvashakti has been launched to

- (a) Restore normalcy in Manipur
- (b) Reduce dependence on imported coal
- (c) Target terrorists in J&K
- (d) Enhance Solar power

26. Post October 2021 notification, the BSF could exercise its powers within how many kilometres in States of Punjab, Rajasthan, Gujarat, West Bengal and Assam?

- (a) From borders till 15 kms
- (b) From borders till 30 kms
- (c) From borders till 50 kms
- (d) From borders till 80 kms

27. As per recent government notification, Aadhar can be used for how many of the following purposes?

1. Proof of identity
2. Proof Citizenship
3. Proof of Date of Birth

- (a) Only One
- (b) Only Two
- (c) All Three
- (d) None

28. Rare Golden tiger has been spotted after 2019, recently at

- (a) Ranthambore, Rajasthan
- (b) Sariska, Rajasthan
- (c) Jim Corbett, Uttarakhand
- (d) Kaziranga, Assam

29. How many of the following disputes can be undertaken by World Court?

1. Member State against an individual
2. Individual against Member State
3. Individual against Individual on charges of genocide
4. Member State against Member State

- (a) Only One
- (b) Only Two
- (c) Only Three
- (d) All Four

30. How many of the following rivers are tributaries of Chambal River?

1. Banas
  2. Kalisindh
  3. Parvati
- (a) Only One
  - (b) Only Two
  - (c) All Three
  - (d) None

31. Which of the following statements is correct about UNRWA?

- (a) It is a dedicated agency to carry out welfare of Palestinian refugees.
- (b) It was founded after six-day war of 1967.
- (c) It carries out relief work across the geographies.
- (d) All the statements are correct.

### Answer Key

1.(d)	2.(c)	3.(d)	4.(c)	5.(d)
6.(b)	7.(c)	8.(c)	9.(a)	10.(b)
11.(a)	12.(d)	13.(b)	14.(c)	15.(d)
16.(a)	17.(c)	18.(b)	19.(b)	20.(c)
21.(b)	22.(a)	23.(a)	24.(c)	25.(c)
26.(c)	27.(a)	28. (d)	29.(a)	30.(c)
31.(a)				

### Explanations

1. (d) The United States Secretary of State Lloyd Austin announced a joint maritime security initiative called Operation Prosperity Guardian on December 19 to aid the safe movement of ships.

2. (c) The organisation or individual accused of terrorism can file application to Central government for removal of such an accusation.

3. (d) The Balochistan region is split among three countries: Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan.

4. (c) Cyber kidnapping refers to a crime where the 'kidnappers' convince their victim to hide, and then contact their loved ones for ransom. The victim is also made to send pictures that make it look like they are being held captive — showing them bound or gagged. These are then shared with the family. Both parties believe their loved ones will be harmed if they don't do as the kidnappers ask.

5. (d) All the three statements are correct. Thus, none of the Statements is incorrect.

6. (b) Statement 2 is incorrect. Bangladesh's unicameral Jatiya Sangsad has 350 members of which 300 are elected in national elections held every five years. Fifty seats are reserved for women appointed by the ruling party/ coalition.

Like India, Bangladesh follows a first-past-the-post system. The Prime Minister is the head of the government, and the most powerful person in the country.

Remaining Statements are correct.

7. (c) All the three statements are correct.

8. (c) The crucial significance of the First Advance Estimates (FAEs) is that they are the last GDP data released before the Union Budget for the coming financial year (which is presented on February 1) is finalised. As such, the FAEs constitute the base for the Budget numbers.

9. (a) The Artemis program is a robotic and human Moon exploration program led by the United States' National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) along with six major partner agencies— the European Space Agency (ESA), the German Aerospace Center (DLR), the Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency (JAXA), the Canadian Space Agency (CSA), the Israel Space Agency (ISA), and the Italian Space Agency (ASI). The Artemis program is intended to reestablish a human presence on the Moon for the first time since Apollo 17 in 1972.

10. (b) Though majority of its inhabitants are Muslim, the Islam practised in Lakshadweep is unlike that followed anywhere else in India. What really makes

Lakshadweep's Islamic society unique is the tradition of matriliney — where descent and property is traced through the mother's line.

11. (a) According to a Ministry of Defence (MoD) circular dated October 30, 2023, each year, a select number of "State Governments /UT Administrations/ Central/Ministries/Departments" send their tableaux to the Republic Day parade. There is a rigorous application process which begins with interested parties submitting a concept note, along with design blueprints to the MoD.

The tableaux proposals received are evaluated by a committee of experts appointed by the MoD, comprising prominent persons in the field of art, culture, painting, sculpture, music, architecture, choreography, etc.

12. (d) The Square Kilometer Array will not be a single large telescope, but a collection of thousands of dish antennas operating as a single unit. The antennas, about 200 of them in South Africa (Meerkat National Park) and more than 130,000 in Australia (Murchison Radio-astronomy Observatory), are being installed in sparsely populated locations, chosen to ensure they are as far away from human activities as possible.

13. (b) Statements 1 and 2 are correct.

Statement 3 is incorrect. The planet has not breached the 1.5 degree and 2-degree Celsius thresholds set by the 2015 Paris Agreement. Those thresholds refer to long-term warming — which means global temperatures over a period of 20-30 years, on average, must not exceed 1.5 degree or 2 degrees Celsius.

14. (c) All the given statements are correct in context of Coal Controller Organisation.

15. (d) According to 'The CEC and Other Election Commissioners (Appointment, Conditions of Service and Term of Office) Act, 2023', the appointment of CEC and other Election Commissioners will be done by the President on advice of a selection committee consisting of Prime Minister, Union Cabinet Minister and Leader of Opposition.

16. (a) Hydroxychloroquine has been used to treat malaria for decades. It works by reducing pain and inflammation. It is usually consumed for a short period of time, until a person is rid of the disease.

17. (c) The shankaracharyas head the four Hindu mathas (monasteries) — in Dwarka (Gujarat), Joshimath (Uttarakhand), Puri (Odisha), and Sringeri (Karnataka).

18. (b) The Punganur is an indigenous cow breed native to the Chittoor district in the Rayalaseema region of southern Andhra Pradesh. They are a unique dwarf breed,



considered the shortest humped cattle in the world. Their small size makes it easy to keep them at home.

19. (b) The 909-km Iran-Pakistan border, known as the Goldsmith Line, stretches from a tripoint with Afghanistan to the northern Arabian Sea.

20. (c) The 19th Summit of the Non-Aligned Movement has held from 15th to 20th January 2024 in the capital of Uganda, Kampala. The 18th Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) Summit was held in 2019 in capital of Azerbaijan, Baku. In the 19th Summit, India was represented by External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar.

21. (b) The National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) lost contact with its Mars helicopter Ingenuity towards the end of its 72nd flight on the red planet on January 18. The small robotic chopper is the first aircraft in history to make a powered, controlled flight on another planet.

22. (a) World Economic Forum (WEF) is an annual meeting which is held in the month of January in Davos, Switzerland.

23. (a) Statement 1 is incorrect: Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced the 'Pradhan Mantri Suryodaya Yojana', a government scheme under which one crore households will get rooftop solar power systems.

Statement 2 is incorrect. The deadline for the scheme is 2026.

Statement 3 is correct. Thus, Only one statement is correct.

24. (c) The Centre recently announced it would award the Bharat Ratna posthumously to Karpooori Thakur, former chief minister of Bihar. This is the birth centenary year of Thakur, also known as 'Jannayak', or the leader of the people.

25. (c) The Army has launched Operation Sarvashakti in the Rajouri-Poonch sector of Jammu and Kashmir, deploying forces on both sides of the Pir Panjal range to target terrorists who have carried out a series of attacks on troops in the area.

26. (c) Prior to the notification issued in October 2021, the BSF could exercise its powers within 15 kilometres of the border in Punjab, West Bengal and Assam. The Centre expanded this to within 50 kilometres of the border.

27. (a) New Aadhaar cards and PDF versions of the identity document have started including a more explicit disclaimer that they are "a proof of identity, not of citizenship or date of birth", signalling to government departments and other organisations not to use it for those purposes.

28. (d) A Wildlife photographer snapped the tiger with the golden coat on a safari in Assam's Kaziranga National Park on January 24.

29. (a) Only Member State can file case against another Member State in World Court (International Court of Justice).

30. (c) All the given rivers are tributaries of Chambal River.

31. (a) UNRWA stands for UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East. It was founded in 1949 to provide aid to about 700,000 Palestinians who were forced to leave their homes in what is now Israel during the 1948 Arab-Israeli war.

The UN agency operates in Gaza and the Israeli-occupied West Bank, as well as Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan — countries where the refugees took shelter after their expulsion. According to UNRWA's website, it runs education, health, relief and social services, microfinance and emergency assistance programmes inside and outside refugee camps based in the aforementioned areas.

Currently, around 5.9 million Palestine refugees — most of them are descendants of original refugees — access the agency's services.