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GS 1 : Heritage and culture ,Geography of the World and Society

1. "My Life My Yoga"

Context

Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi has launched a video blogging competition titled "My Life, My Yoga" inviting citizens to take part in it to promote the practice of yoga among the masses.

About the Background

- The development comes as one of the Government's activities to observe the sixth International Day of Yoga which is set to be celebrated on 21 June.
- The contest is a joint effort by the Union Ministry of AYUSH and the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR).

About the contest

- The contest which had been announced by PM Modi in his monthly Man Ki Baat national address has already gone live on the Ministry of AYUSH's website.
- As per a statement issued by the Ministry, the video blogging competition as an effort to promote the practice of Yoga comes as no mass gatherings would be possible this year in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- In its first leg, the competition will consist of an international contest wherein the winners will be picked within a country.
- Thereafter, in the second leg, global prize winners will be chosen who will be selected from the winners from different nations.
- Entries can be sent in by participants under three categories covering the youth (less than 18-years of age), adults (more than 18-years of age) and yoga professionals further broken down separately for men and women.

2. Tropical Cyclone: Cristobal

Why in News

- Recently, a tropical Cyclone named Cristobal has formed in the southern Gulf of Mexico.

Key Points



- Atlantic Hurricane Season:
 - Tropical cyclones in the North Atlantic are called hurricanes, tropical storms, or tropical depressions.
 - The Atlantic hurricane season is the period in a year when hurricanes usually form in the Atlantic Ocean.
 - In the Northern Atlantic Ocean, a distinct hurricane season occurs from June 1 to November 30, sharply peaking from late August through September.
 - Worldwide, tropical cyclone activity peaks in late summer, when the difference between temperatures is large and sea surface temperatures is the greatest.
- Favourable Conditions in Gulf Of Mexico:
 - Sea surface temperature is generally very high in southwestern Gulf of Mexico, which is to allow the system to strengthen.

- **Wind shear** i.e. the increase in wind speed with height in the atmosphere, or a sharp change in wind direction, **is low as the storm emerges** over open water and begins its northward
- The **low wind shear** favors strengthening of the system even if interaction with Mexico first weakens the storm.

Gulf of Mexico

- The Gulf of Mexico is an **ocean basin and a marginal sea of the Atlantic Ocean**, largely surrounded by the **North American continent**.
- It is bounded on the northeast, north and northwest by the **Gulf Coast of the United States**, on the southwest and **south by Mexico**, and on the **southeast by Cuba**.

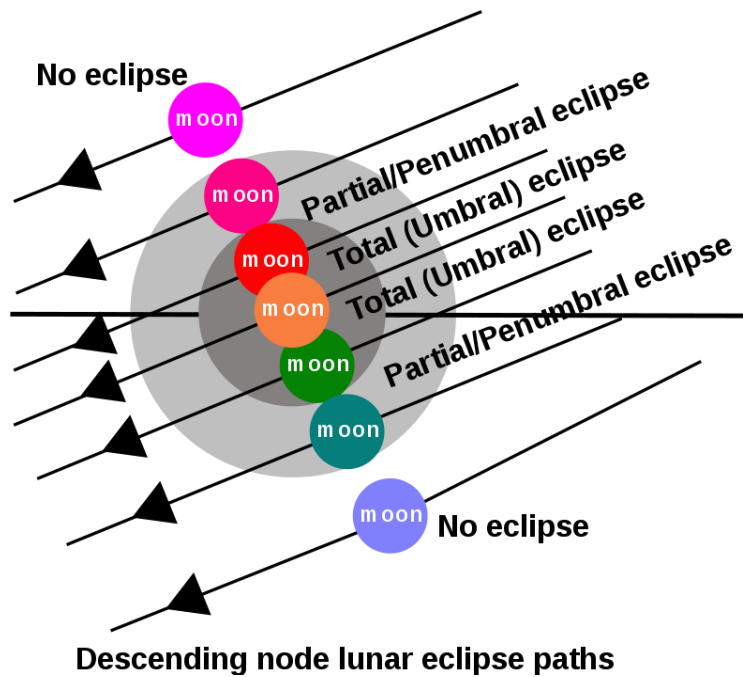
Tropical Cyclone

- **Tropical cyclones** are violent storms that originate over **oceans in tropical areas** and move over to the **coastal areas bringing about large scale destruction** due to violent winds, very heavy rainfall (torrential rainfall) and storm surge.
- They are irregular wind movements involving **closed circulation of air around a low pressure center**.
- **Conditions Favourable for Tropical Cyclone Formation:**
 - **Large sea surface with temperature higher than 27°C:** Ocean waters having temperatures of 27° C or more is the source of moisture which feeds the storm. The condensation of moisture releases enough latent heat of condensation to drive the storm.
 - **Presence of the Coriolis force:** The Coriolis force is zero at the equator (no cyclones at equator because of zero Coriolis Force) but it increases with latitude.
 - Coriolis force at 5° latitude is significant enough to create a storm.
 - About 65% of cyclonic activity occurs between 10° and 20° latitude.
 - The rotation of the earth about its axis affects the direction of the wind. This force is called the **Coriolis force**.
 - **Weak low-pressure area:** Small local differences in the temperature of water and of air produce various low pressure centers of small size.
 - A weak cyclonic circulation develops around these areas.
 - **High humidity:** Such conditions exist over the equatorial doldrums, especially in western margins of oceans (this is because of east to west movement of ocean currents), which have great moisture carrying capacity because the trade winds

continuously replace the saturated air.

- **Doldrums:** Known to sailors around the world as the doldrums, **the Inter-Tropical Convergence Zone, (ITCZ)** is a belt around the Earth extending approximately five degrees north and south of the equator. Here, the prevailing trade winds of the northern hemisphere blow to the southwest and collide with the southern hemisphere's driving northeast trade winds.

3. What is Lunar Eclipse?



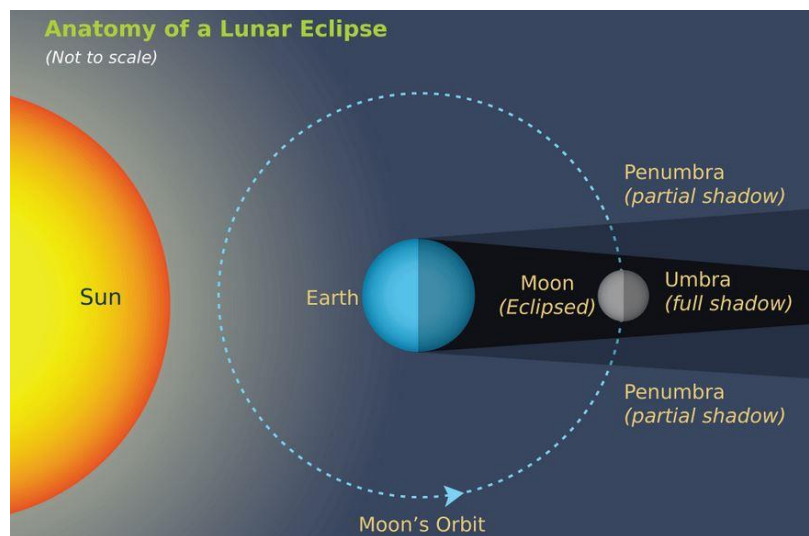
A penumbral lunar eclipse will be observed today midnight. The Earth will imperfectly align itself between the Sun and the moon, casting a shadow on the latter, marking the second lunar eclipse of the year.

Lunar Eclipse

- A lunar eclipse occurs when the Moon moves into the Earth's shadow.
- This can occur only when the Sun, Earth, and Moon are exactly or very closely aligned with Earth between the other two.
- A lunar eclipse can occur only on the night of a full moon. The type and length of a lunar eclipse depend on the Moon's proximity to either node of its orbit.
- Any object that obstructs light will produce two shadows: one which will be dark and dense, is called the umbra; and the other which is light and diffused is called the penumbra.

- The only light reflected from the lunar surface has been refracted by Earth's atmosphere.
- This light appears reddish for the same reason that a sunset or sunrise does: the Rayleigh scattering of bluer light. Due to this reddish colour, a totally eclipsed Moon is sometimes called a blood moon.

Types



- **In a total eclipse of the moon**, the inner part of Earth's shadow, called the umbra, falls on the moon's face. At mid-eclipse, the entire moon is in shadow, which may appear blood red.
- **In a partial lunar eclipse**, the umbra takes a bite out of only a fraction of the moon. The dark bite grows larger and then recedes, never reaching the total phase.
- **In a penumbral lunar eclipse**, only the more diffuse outer shadow of Earth – the penumbra – falls on the moon's face. This third kind of lunar eclipse is much more subtle and much more difficult to observe than either a total or partial eclipse of the moon.

How it is different from Solar Eclipse?

- A solar eclipse happens when the moon passes in between the earth and the sun. A lunar eclipse happens when the earth passes in between the moon and the sun.
- During a solar eclipse, the moon partially or fully hides the sun's rays for a few minutes.
- Unlike a solar eclipse, which can only be viewed from a relatively small area of the world, a lunar eclipse may be viewed from anywhere on the night side of Earth.
- Also unlike solar eclipses, lunar eclipses are safe to view without any eye protection or special precautions, as they are dimmer than the full Moon.

What's special this time?

- This eclipse is also called a strawberry moon eclipse – the term, interestingly, originates from an American concept and has little to do with the Euro-Asia region.
- June's full moon usually coincides with the harvesting season of wild strawberries in America and the phenomenon was often addressed in reference to that.
- India had already witnessed an eclipse earlier this year, in January.

The strawberry moon eclipse is going to be its second and probably the last visible lunar one in 2020.

4. Amid pandemic, traditional art of 'talamaddale' goes digital

Context:

The traditional art of 'talamaddale' has gone virtual in times of COVID-19.

Details:

- Talamaddale is a variant and a derived form of Yakshagana theatre.
- "Tala" refers to a pair of small hand cymbals and a "Maddale" is a type of drum.
- Unlike the Yakshagana performance, in the conventional 'talamaddale,' the artists sit across in a place without any costumes and engage in testing their oratory skills based on the episode chosen.
- If music is common for both Yakshagana performance and 'talamaddale,' the latter has only spoken word without any dance or costumes. Hence, it is an art form minus dance, costumes and stage conventions.
- 'Arthadhari' in a talamaddale performance is an artist who is an orator.
- Artha vaibhava or the grandeur of dialogues tends to be a highlight of these performances relished by the audience.

Yakshagana:

- Yakshagana is a traditional Indian theatre form.
- It is believed to be developed in Dakshina Kannada, Udupi, Uttara Kannada, Shimoga and western parts of Chikmagalur districts, in the state of Karnataka and in Kasaragod district in Kerala. This theatre style is mainly found in the coastal regions of Karnataka in various forms.
- Yakshagana combines dance, music, dialogue, costume, make-up, and stage techniques with a unique style and form.
- It is believed to have evolved from pre-classical music and theatre during the period of the Bhakti movement.
- Yakshagana is traditionally presented from dusk to dawn. Its stories are drawn from Ramayana, Mahabharata, Bhagavata and other epics from both Hindu and Jain and other ancient Indic traditions.

5. Kodumanal Megalithic Burial Site

The Kodumanal excavation in Erode Dist. of Tamil Nadu has thrown light on burial rituals and the concept of afterlife in megalithic culture.

About these sites

- The researchers have identified 250 cairn-circles at the village in Erode district.
- Earlier excavations revealed that the site served as a trade-cum-industrial centre from 5th century BCE to 1st century BCE.
- The rectangular chambered cists, each two metres long and six metres wide, are made of stone slabs, and the entire grave is surrounded by boulders that form a circle.
- The grave could be of a village head or the head of the community as the size of two boulders, each facing east and west, are bigger than other boulders.
- Believing that the deceased person will get a new life after death, pots and bowls filled with grains were placed outside the chambers.

What are Megaliths?

- Megaliths are the earliest surviving man-made monuments we know of – derived from the Latin mega (large) and lith (stone).
- Megaliths were constructed either as burial sites or commemorative (non-sepulchral) memorials.
- The former are sites with actual burial remains, such as dolmenoid cists (box-shaped stone burial chambers), cairn circles (stone circles with defined peripheries) and capstones (distinctive mushroom-shaped burial chambers found mainly in Kerala).
- The urn or the sarcophagus containing the mortal remains was usually made of terracotta.
- Non-sepulchral megaliths include memorial sites such as menhirs. (The line separating the two is a bit blurry, since remains have been discovered underneath otherwise non-sepulchral sites, and vice versa.)
- In India, archaeologists trace the majority of the megaliths to the Iron Age (1500 BC to 500 BC), though some sites precede the Iron Age, extending up to 2000 BC.

Megaliths in India

- Megaliths are spread across the Indian subcontinent, though the bulk of them are found in peninsular India, concentrated in the states of Maharashtra (mainly in Vidarbha), Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana.

- According to archaeologists around 2,200 megalithic sites can be found in peninsular India itself, most of them unexcavated.
- Even today, a living megalithic culture endures among some tribes such as the Gonds of central India and the Khasis of Meghalaya.

Literary sources

- Megalithic culture finds several references in ancient Tamil Sangam literature. For instance, menhirs are referred to as nadukal.
- Ancient Sangam texts lay out, in detail, a step-by-step procedure for laying a memorial stone or nadukal in honour of a fallen hero.
- Manimekalai (5th century AD), the famous Sangam epic, refers to the various kinds of burials namely cremation (cuṭuvōr), post excarnation burial (iṭuvōr), burying the deceased in a pit (toṭukuliṭ paṭuvōr), rock chamber or cist burial (tāl̥vāyiṅ aṭaippōr), urn burial encapped with lid (tāl̥iyiṭ kavippōr).
- Even in the Sangam age (when kingship and a well-ordained society had emerged) the above modes of burials survived.

6.Skeletal remains of a child found at Tamil Nadu's Keeladi excavation site

Context:

- Recent excavation findings at Keeladi.

Background:

- Keeladi excavation site is a **Sangam period settlement** that is being excavated by the Archaeological Survey of India. This site is located southeast of Madurai, in Tamil Nadu, near the town of **Keeladi in Sivagangai district**.
- The settlement lies on the **bank of the Vaigai River** and reflects the ancient culture of Tamil people.

Details:

- Skeletal remains of a child were excavated from Konthagai village, part of the sixth phase of ongoing excavations in the **ancient site of Keeladi**.
- Excavations are currently taking place at Keeladi, Konthagai, Manalur and Agaram villages in Sivaganga district. Konthagai village, located around 2 km from Keeladi, is believed to be a burial site.

GS 2 : Polity, Governance, International Relations

1. China opposes to the presence of Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) in South Korea

In News:

- Recently, China objected to the presence of the USA's THAAD missile defence system in South Korea.

Key takeaways

- THAAD is a **transportable, ground-based** missile defence system.
- It is coupled with **space-based** and **ground-based surveillance** stations.
- These stations transfer data about the incoming missile and inform the THAAD interceptor missile of the threat type classification.
- Space-based satellites also have infrared sensors which raise alarm about incoming missiles.
- It has been designed and manufactured by the US company Lockheed Martin.
- It has been deployed in South Korea, UAE, Guam, Israel and Romania.
- In South Korea, it is operated by the US army stationed in its army base in Osan, South Korea.

2. Controversial Hong Kong law passed by China

In News:

- Recently, China's Parliament passed new legislation for Hong Kong.

Key takeaways

- The law is called the "**NPC Decision on Establishing and Improving the Legal System and Enforcement Mechanisms for the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region to Safeguard National Security**".
- It essentially empowers the National People's Congress (Ruling party of China) to draft new national security laws for **Special Administrative Region (SAR)** of Hong Kong for the first time.
- The laws could cover any activity that seriously endangers national security.
- The law is aimed at enabling measures to counter, lawfully prevent, stop and punish foreign and overseas forces which are using Hong Kong to carry out separatist or destructive activities.
- The law has been criticised by pro-democracy parties and legal community in Hong Kong.

- It is being said that it undermines the “one country, two systems” model of Hong Kong.

Important value additions

Special Administrative Regions (SAR)

- They are one type of **provincial-level administrative divisions** of China directly under the Central People’s Government.
- They possess the highest degree of autonomy.
- The legal basis for the establishment of SARs is provided for by Article 31 of the Constitution of the People’s Republic of China of 1982.
- Mainland China is governed by Article 30 of the Constitution.
- Since 1997, Hong Kong has been governed by the Basic Law, which gives the SAR **executive, legislative and independent judicial power**.
- Only defence and foreign affairs matters are handled by the central government.
- At present, there are two SARs established according to the Constitution:
 - Hong Kong SAR (former British dependency) was transferred to China in 1997.
 - Macau SAR (Portuguese dependency) was transferred to China 1999.
- Generally, the two SARs are not considered to constitute a part of Mainland China, by both Chinese and SAR authorities.

3. Friend turned foe: the Oli problem

Why in News:

Nepal’s decision to pass a constitutional amendment to change Nepal’s official map to include parts of Indian Territory that have been in dispute.

Key Details:

- The promulgation of the Nepali Constitution, one that India felt was unfair to Madhesi’s living in the south and unrepresentative of India’s interests in the country, seems to mark a drastic change in the relationship between India and Nepal.
- The blockade at the India-Nepal border resulted in supplies into landlocked Nepal being stopped for months. This adversely affected the India-Nepal relations.
- The eight-point transit and transport facilitation from China seems to have tilted Nepal towards a stronger relationship with China.

- The release of India's new political map of Jammu and Kashmir, and Ladakh has been the latest flashpoint in the relations.

Challenges:

Anti-India poll plank:

- The concern over Nepal Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli's "nationalist politics" translating into an "anti-India" stance seems to be coming true for India.
- Oli has been running an anti-India poll plank during recent elections.
- For PM Oli, this anti-India stance based on nationalistic plank seems to be a legacy building exercise in the Nepali political landscape.
- The growing discord against Mr. Oli's leadership within his own party has resulted in Mr. Oli taking a hard stance towards India in an effort to deflect attention from domestic affairs.

Fissure in ties:

- India has also hardened its position with Mr. Oli.
- Despite the agreement in 2014 over Foreign Secretaries meeting on the Kalapani and Susta disputes, no meeting on the disputes has been held in six years.
- The Nepal PM, wooed by the U.S. and China due to its strategic location, has been insisting on more strategic autonomy in the region and moving away from its traditionally strong relation with India.

4. Anchoring the ties with Australia the virtual way

Relations with much potential

- Mr. Modi convened a virtual multilateral summit to bring South Asia together to face the pandemic, and he also spoke online with G-20 leaders on similar issues.
- On June 4, India will have its **first virtual bilateral summit with Australia**.
- The **convergence of interests and values** has been patently obvious.
- But the time has also come to translate that **potential into reality**.

So, let's see how India and Australia are expanding the scope of cooperation

- **1)** The two countries have sought to reconstruct their **increasingly turbulent regional geography** in the Indo-Pacific and see the **Quad (with Japan and the United States)** as the most potent instrument to promote cooperation.
- The Quad, not surprisingly has been causing apprehensions in Beijing.
- **2)** It is expected that the '**Mutual Logistics Support Agreement**' will be signed during the summit.

- That should **enhance defence cooperation** and ease the conduct of large-scale joint military exercises.
- **3)** Last April, Australia and India conducted **AUSINDEX**, their largest bilateral naval exercise.
- And there are further developments on the anvil, including **Australia's permanent inclusion** in the Malabar exercise with Japan.
- **4)** It may be prudent too for New Delhi and Canberra to elevate the 'two plus two' format for talks from **the Secretary level to the level of Foreign and Defence Ministers**.

Now, let's look at the cooperation in areas that matter to the lives of the people of the countries-

1) Pandemic control through controlled adaptation: Lesson from Australia

- Australia is one of the few countries that has managed to combat COVID-19 so far through "controlled adaptation" by which the coronavirus has been suppressed to very low levels.
- Two of the leaders of this great Australia-wide effort are Indian-born scientists.
- There is much that the two Prime Ministers can share on this front.

2) Collaboration in health, safe food and supply chains

- In terms of health and safe food as well the supply chains that facilitate their delivery, there are important lessons to be learnt.
- One of Australia's richest businessman and first patron of the **Australia-India Leadership Dialogue** recently described the promise of **DTC-CPG** (direct to consumer; consumer packaged goods) which could transform global supply chains.
- Here too there is much room for collaboration and new thinking.

3) Higher education

- The recovery of Australia's universities, most of which are publicly funded and many rank among the top in the world, is still in question.
- But they are proving to be resilient and pioneers in distance and online learning.
- Australian universities could well open earlier than most and emerge as a safer destination for quality education than their European or Ivy league counterparts.

Conclusion

As India and Australia with shared values try to bring about fresh order in a turbulent world, the virtual summit, in this sense, could not have been better timed.

5. The 5G Club 'D10'

Britain said that it was pushing the U.S. to form a club of 10 nations that could develop its own 5G technology and reduce dependence on Huawei.

The D10 Club

- The Britain is proposing a 'D10' club of democratic partners that groups the G7 nations with Australia and the Asian technology leaders South Korea and India.
- It would include G7 countries – UK, US, Italy, Germany, France, Japan and Canada – plus Australia, South Korea and India.
- It is aimed for channelling investments into existing telecommunication companies within the 10 member states.
- The group aim to create alternative suppliers of 5G equipment and other technologies to avoid relying on China.

Ruling out Huawei

- Britain has allowed the Chinese global leader in 5G technology to build up to 35% of the infrastructure necessary to roll out its new speedy data network.
- But their PM Boris Johnson was reported to have instructed officials to draw up plans to cut Huawei out of the network by 2023 as relations with China sour.

6. PM-CARES Not Under RTI

Why in News

The **Prime Minister's Office (PMO)** has clarified that the **Prime Minister's Citizen Assistance and Relief in Emergency Situations Fund (PM-CARES Fund)** is not a public authority under the ambit of the Right To Act (RTI), 2005.

- PM-CARES Fund was set to accept donations and provide relief during the Covid-19 pandemic, and other similar emergencies.
- The PMO's response came in the backdrop of the RTI query filed to know the Fund's trust deed and all government orders, notifications and circulars relating to its creation and operation.

PM-CARES Fund

- **Description:**
 - PM-CARES was set up as a **public charitable trust** with the trust deed registered on March 27, 2020.

- It can avail donations from the foreign contribution and donations to fund can also avail **100% tax exemption**.
- PM-CARES is **different** from the Prime Minister's National Relief Fund (PMNRF).
- **Purpose:**
 - It is meant for **supporting relief or assistance** of any kind relating to a public health emergency or any other kind of emergency, calamity or distress, either man-made or natural.
 - It includes the creation or upgradation of healthcare or pharmaceutical facilities, funding relevant research or any other type of support.
- **Composition:**
 - **Prime Minister as chairperson**
 - Defence Minister, Home Minister, Finance Minister
 - Three trustees nominated by the Prime Minister "who shall be eminent persons in the field of research, health, science, social work, law, public administration and philanthropy".

Prime Minister's National Relief Fund (PMNRF)

- **Description:**
 - PMNRF was instituted in **1948** by then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, to **assist displaced persons from Pakistan**.
 - The fund is recognized as a **Trust under the Income Tax Act** and the same is managed by the Prime Minister or multiple delegates for national causes.
 - The contributions towards PMNRF are notified for **100% deduction** from taxable income under section 80(G) of the **Income Tax Act, 1961**.
- **Purpose:**
 - The fund is currently used primarily to **tackle natural calamities** like floods, cyclones and earthquakes.
 - The fund is also used to help with medical treatment like kidney transplantation, cancer treatment and acid attack.
- **Contributions:**

- The fund consists **entirely of public contributions** and **does not get any budgetary support**. It accepts voluntary contributions from Individuals, Organizations, Trusts, Companies and Institutions etc.
- The corpus of the fund is also invested in various forms with scheduled commercial banks and other agencies. Disbursements are made **with the approval of the Prime Minister**.

Key Points

▪ **PM-CARES Not a Public Authority:**

- It has been stated that the PM-CARES Fund is **not a Public Authority** under the ambit of **Section 2(h) of the RTI Act, 2005**.
- However, relevant information in respect of PM-CARES Fund may be seen on the website pmcares.gov.in.

▪ **Ambiguous Nature of PMNRF Under RTI:**

- There is **ambiguity** regarding whether the PMNRF (Prime Minister's National Relief Fund) is subject to the RTI Act.
- The **Central Information Commission (CIC)** has **directed PMNRF to disclose** information as a **result of the Delhi High Court's split opinion** on the question of whether PMNRF is a public authority under the Act.

- The split opinion signifies that some Justices from the Delhi High Court Bench held PMNRF as a public authority, whereas some Justices held that PMNRF is not a public authority.

▪ **Audit of PM-CARES and PMNRF:**

- Earlier, the **Comptroller and Auditor General's (CAG)** office had clarified that it **wouldn't audit the PM-CARES Fund** as it is '**a charitable organisation**' and is also based on donations from individuals and organisations.
- The PMNRF too is **not audited by CAG** but it is **audited by an independent auditor outside of the government**.

Section 2 (h) of the RTI Act

- Under **section 2(h) of the RTI Act "Public authority"** means any authority or body or institution of self government established or constituted –
 - by or under the Constitution;
 - by any other law made by Parliament/State Legislature.

- by notification issued or order made by the appropriate Government, and includes any –
 - body owned, controlled or substantially financed;
 - non-Government organisation substantially financed, directly or indirectly by funds provided by the appropriate Government.
- Earlier in 2019, the Supreme Court ruled that the **office of the Chief Justice of India (CJI) is a public authority** under the Right to Information (RTI) Act, 2005.

7. Antifa in USA

Why in News

The USA is experiencing a '**law and order**' situation due to the violent nationwide protests triggered by anger over **racial inequities and excessive use of police force**.

- The unrest began with peaceful protests over the **death of a African-American man** in police custody in Minneapolis city of USA.
- Subsequently, many cities across the USA remain under curfews **at a level not seen since riots** following the **1968 assassination of civil rights activist Martin Luther King Jr.**

Key Points

- **Blame for Ongoing Violent Protest :**
 - The USA President has **blamed** an organisation namely, **Antifa** for the violent protest that erupted in the country.
 - The antifa movement **gained more visibility in 2017** after a series of events that put a spotlight on anti-fascist protesters.
- **Declaration as Terrorist Organisation:**
 - It has been also argued that the USA will be designating Antifa as a **terrorist organization** in the future.
 - Although, the USA has **no statute that permits designating violent domestic groups terrorists**, as it has for international groups like Islamic State or Al-Qaeda.

Antifa

- **Description:**
 - The word "antifa" was **first** used in **1946**, **Antifa stands for "Anti-fascism"**.

- The name comes from **early 1930s Germany**, where socialist "anti-fa" groups attempted to **stand up to the rise of Adolf Hitler's Nazis**.
- Antifa was started in the **Rose City Antifa of Portland, Oregon (USA)** in **2007** to shut down a neo-Nazi skinhead music festival called Hammerfest.
- **Principles:**
 - The organisation covers a **range of social justice issues**. It believes in a world **free of fascism, racism, sexism, homo/transphobia, and islamophobia**.
 - It also focusses on countering the **resurgence of neo-nazi and white supremacist groups**.
 - It is also **only one** activist movement that has come together in the past few years **to oppose the far right**.
- **Members:**
 - Antifa is more of a movement of activists whose followers **share a philosophy and tactics**.
 - The **movement is secretive and has no official leaders**.
 - It is organised into **autonomous local cells**.
- **Unique Ways to Protest:**
 - Antifa members typically **dress in black and often wear a mask at their demonstrations**, and follow **far-left ideologies such as anti-capitalism**.
 - What makes them stand out is the violence, although the group also participates in non-violent protests.
 - It **criticises mainstream liberal politicians for not doing enough**, and Antifa members have often physically confronted their conservative opponents.
 - Apart from public counter-protests, Antifa members run websites that track white extremist and ultra-right groups.

Fascism

- **Features:**
 - Fascism is a form of **authoritarian ideology which promotes ultranationalism**.
 - Opposed to Liberalism, Marxism, and Anarchism, Fascism is **placed on the far-right within** the traditional left-right spectrum.

- It is usually characterized by **dictatorial power, forcible suppression of opposition, as well as strong regimentation of society and of the economy.**
- **Origin and Spread:**
 - The term 'fascism' is of Italian origin. It was first used for the movement which started in Italy under the leadership of Benito Mussolini.
 - It came to prominence in early **20th-century Europe**. The first fascist movements emerged **in Italy during World War I**, before spreading to other European countries.
 - Several other countries also have experienced fascist regimes or elements of them which include Adolf Hitler in Germany, Francisco Franco in Spain and Juan Perón in Argentina, etc.

8. PM Swanidhi Scheme for street vendors

The Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs has launched a micro-credit facility for street vendors under the Swanidhi Scheme.

PM Swanidhi Scheme

- The Pradhan Mantri Street Vendor's Atmanirbhar Nidhi Scheme is aimed at benefiting over 50 lakh vendors who had their businesses operational on or before March 24.
- The scheme was announced by Finance Minister as a part of the economic package for those affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown.
- The loans are meant to help kick-start activity for vendors who have been left without any income since the lockdown was implemented on March 25.
- The scheme is valid until March 2022.

Expected beneficiaries

- This loan will be given to those who run shops on the roadside, handcart or streetcar.
- Fruit-vegetable, laundry, saloon and paan shops are also included in this category.

Facilities provided under the scheme

- The vendors will be able to apply for a working capital loan of up to ₹10,000, which is repayable in monthly instalments within a year.
- On timely/early repayment of the loan, an interest subsidy of 7% per annum will be credited to the bank accounts of beneficiaries through direct benefit transfer on a six-monthly basis.
- The loans would be without collateral. There will be no penalty on early repayment of the loan.

9. Seizing the moment at the WHO

Challenges for India as it heads WHO executive board

- Minister of Health and Family Welfare is elected as the Chair of the World Health Organization's (WHO) executive board.
- The **34-member** body is tasked with implementing the decisions of the recently concluded **World Health Assembly (WHA)**.
- The elevation affords India an important platform to **steer the global public health response to COVID-19**.
- It also comes at a time when the **WHO is being rocked politically** as never before.

WHO: caught between the US-China crossfire

- Recently, U.S. President Donald Trump wrote a letter to the WHO Director-General.
- In the letter, he threatened to make permanent his temporary funding freeze as well as reconsider the U.S.'s membership in the organisation if the latter did not commit to major substantive reforms within 30 days.
- By contrast, at the WHA plenary, Chinese President Xi Jinping pledged **\$2 billion** to fight the virus.
- He also promised to pair up 30 African hospitals with domestic counterparts, accelerate the building of the Africa Centers for Disease Control headquarters, and ensure that vaccine development in China, when available, would be made a global public good.

So, as WHO executive body chair, India will have to navigate this treacherous power landscape with candour and tact. Following **5 elements** should inform its **policy approach**.

1. Set epidemic prevention and control as a priority

- India must insist that **epidemic prevention and control** remain the international community's foremost priority.
- As the virus' chain of transmission is broken, the **focus should shift** to identifying the **animal-to-human transmission origins** of SARS-CoV-2.
- China shares an **important interest** in facilitating **international access** to investigate **COVID-19's zoonotic origins**.
- **Why China shares interest?** Because Wuhan and other previously infected zones could yet be susceptible to the risk of viral reintroduction.

2. Review the early response of China and WHO to outbreak

- India should lean on the WHO secretariat to fast-track the “**impartial, independent, and comprehensive review**” of the WHO’s – and China’s – early response to the outbreak.
- The review’s findings should illuminate **best practice** and highlight **areas for improvement**, both in the WHO’s leadership and capacity as well as member states’ implementation of the International Health Regulations.
- For those in New Delhi **inclined to relish the prospect of Beijing’s comeuppance**, the review’s findings may yet sorely disappoint.
- The **WHO-China Joint Mission** featuring renowned global epidemiologists had termed China’s early COVID-19 response as the “most ambitious, agile and aggressive disease containment effort in history”.

3. Ensure equitable access to COVID-19 vaccines for all

- For ensuring **equitable access to COVID-19 therapeutics and vaccines** for all countries, India must **promote** the establishment of an appropriate **multilateral governance mechanism**.
- The envisaged **voluntary pooling mechanism** to collect patent rights and **regulatory test data** should be suitably tailored to the needs of crisis.
- And the World Trade Organization’s **intellectual property rights provisions** should be overridden as is allowed during a public health emergency to assure affordable vaccine availability.

4. Taiwan issue at WHA: India should stay aloof

- India must stay aloof from the West’s campaign to re-seat Taiwan as an observer at the WHA.
- When **Taipei last attended in 2016**, it did so under the explicit aegis of UN General Assembly **Resolution 2758**, whereby the **UN considers Taiwan to be an integral part of the People’s Republic of China**.
- That the independence-minded Tsai government is **unwilling to concede this basis for attendance** has more to do with domestic political manoeuvring than Chinese or international ostracism.

5. Global ban on consumption of wild animals

- India must lead the call for a **permanent global ban on the consumption and trade of wild animals**.
- This ban should be with limited exceptions built-in for scientific research, species protection and traditional livelihood interests.

- With **two-thirds** of emerging **infections and diseases now arising from wildlife**, the destruction of natural habitats and biodiversity loss must be taken much more seriously.

Conclusion

India has its work cut out. The government should seize the moment to steer the global response in addressing the shortcomings in various areas exposed by the Covid-19 pandemic.

10. Multilateralism in the new cold war

Opportunity for India to set the global response

- As chair of the **Executive Board of the World Health Assembly** – India can set the global response **in terms of multilateralism, not just medical issues**.
- How can India set a global response in terms of multilateralism? Consider the following- **a rare alignment of stars for agenda-setting**.
- **1)** In September, the United Nations General Assembly will discuss the theme, **“The Future We Want”**.
- **2)** In 2021, India joins the UN Security Council (non-permanent seat).
- **3)** And chairs the BRICS Summit in 2021.
- **4)** Also hosts the G-20 in 2022.
- **New principles for international system:** At the online summit of the Non-Aligned Movement, in May, Prime Minister Modi called for new principles for the international system.
- His new globalisation model based on **humanity, fairness and equality** has wide support in a more equal world as, for the first time since 1950, everyone is **experiencing the same (virus) threat**.

Changing global context

- China is losing influence and the dynamics in its relations with the United States.
- And Asia again is emerging as **the centre of global prosperity**.
- The global governance, economy, scientific research and society are all in need of being re-invented.
- India should use this opportunity to recover our global thought leadership.

The US-China powerplay and its consequences for multilateralism

- The clash between China and the U.S. at the just concluded World Health Assembly in May **marks the end of the multilateralism of the past 70 years**.

- The **donor-recipient relationship** between developed and developing countries has ended with **China's pledge of \$2-billion**.
- The **agenda-setting role of the G7 over UN institutions** and global rules has also been effectively challenged by **WHO ignoring the reform diktat of the U.S.** leading to its withdrawal, and **characterisation of the G7 as "outdated"**.
- The U.S. has also **implicitly rejected the G20** and UN Security Council, for an expanded G7 **"to discuss the future of China"**.
- **Important shift in the UN:** After World War II, the newly independent states were not consulted when the U.S. imposed global institutions fostering trade, capital and technology dependence.
- This was done ignoring the **socio-economic development** of these countries.
- But **social and economic rights** have emerged to be as important as political and procedural rights.
- Against this backdrop, China's President Xi Jinping deftly endorsed **the UN Resolution on equitable access to any new vaccine**.

Emergence of Asia and China: Challenges for the US and the West

- The U.S. faces an uphill task in seeking to lead a new multidimensional institution in the face of China's re-emergence.
- The re-emergence of China is based on technology, innovation and trade balancing U.S. military superiority.
- At the same time, there is a clear trend of declining **global trust in free-market liberalism, central to western civilisation**.
- With the West experiencing a shock comparable to the one experienced by Asia, 200 years ago, the **superiority of western civilisation is also under question**.
- The novel coronavirus pandemic has **accelerated the shift of global wealth to Asia** suggesting an inclusive global order based on principles drawn from ancient Asian civilisations.
- Colonised Asia played no role in shaping the Industrial Revolution.
- But, the **Digital Revolution** will be shaped by different values.
- It is really this clash that multilateralism has now to resolve.

World is questioning both U.S. and China's exceptionalism

- China has come out with **alternative governance mechanisms to the U.S.-dominated International Monetary Fund, World Bank and World Trade Organization** with its all-encompassing **Belt and Road Initiative**.
- The U.S., European Union and Japan are **re-evaluating globalisation** as it pertains to China and the U.S. is unabashedly **"America First"**.
- The world is questioning both **U.S. and China's exceptionalism**.
- For India, the strategic issue is neither **adjustment to China's power** nor **deference to U.S. leadership**.

Opportune moment for India to propose new multilateralism

- The global vacuum, **shift in relative power** and its own potential, provides India the capacity to articulate a benign multilateralism.
- It should include in its fold **NAM-Plus** that resonates with large parts of the world and brings both **BRICS and the G7 into the tent**.
- This new multilateralism **should rely on outcomes**, not rules, 'security' downplayed for '**comparable levels of wellbeing**' and a **new P-5** that is **not based on the G7**.

India in a important role

- China, through an opinion piece by its Ambassador in India, has suggested writing "**together a new chapter**" with "**a shared future for mankind**".
- The U.S. wants a security partnership to contain China.
- And the Association of Southeast Asian Nations trade bloc – with the U.S. walking out of the negotiations – is keen India joins to balance China.
- With a new template. India does not have to choose.

Three principles the new system should be based on-

1. Peaceful coexistence

-
- First, the Asian Century should be defined in terms of **peaceful co-existence**, freezing post-colonial sovereignty.
- **Non-interference in the internal affairs** of others is a key lesson from the decline of the U.S. and the rise of China.
- National security now relies on **technological superiority** in artificial intelligence (AI), cyber and space, and not **expensive capital equipment**, as India's military has acknowledged.
- Instead of massive arms imports, we should use the savings to enhance endogenous capacity.
- And mould the global digital economy between **state-centric (China)**, **firm-centric (the U.S.)** and **public-centric (India)** systems.

2. New principles of trade

- A global community at comparable levels of well-being requires new principles for trade, for example, rejecting the 25-year-old trade rule creating intellectual property monopolies.
- **Global public goods** should include public health, crop research, renewable energy and batteries, even AI as its value comes from shared data.
- We have the scientific capacity to support these platforms as part of foreign policy.

3. Civilisational values

- Ancient civilisational values provide the **conceptual underpinning**, restructuring both the economic order and societal behaviour for equitable sustainable development.
- Which is what a **climate change impacted world**, especially Africa, is seeking.

Conclusion

In the new cold war, defined by technology and trade not territory, non-alignment is an uncertain option; India should craft a global triumvirate.

11. Depsang Plain near LAC



Reports of a heavy Chinese presence at Depsang, an area at a crucial dip (called the Bulge) on the Line of Actual Control (LAC) have increased the recent tensions between Indian and Chinese troops.

Depsang Plain

- The “Depsang Plain” is one of the few places in the Western Sector where light armour (vehicles) would have ease of manoeuvre, so any Chinese buildup there is a cause for concern.
- India controls the western portion of the plains as part of Ladakh, whereas the eastern portion is part of the Aksai Chin region, which is controlled by China and claimed by India.

- The buildup invokes memories of both the 1962 war, when Chinese troops had occupied all of the Depsang plains.
- More recently in April 2013, the PLA crossed the LAC and pitched tents on the Indian side for three weeks, before they agreed to pull out.

12. Australia to be Included in Malabar Exercise

Why in News

India is prepared to expand the **Malabar exercise** to also include Australia.

- **India and Australia** are soon to be holding a **virtual summit** for better cooperation and strengthening bilateral ties.

Malabar Exercise

- It is an **annual trilateral naval exercise** between the navies of **India, Japan, and the USA** which is held **alternately in the Indian and Pacific Oceans**.
- It began as a bilateral naval exercise between **India and the USA in 1992** and was expanded into a trilateral format with the **inclusion of Japan in 2015**.
- Other exercises between India and Australia are **Pitch Black** and **AUSINDEX**.

Key Points

- Despite regular requests from Australia, **India resisted** issuing the invitation due to its concerns that the move would give the **appearance of a 'quadrilateral military alliance' aimed at China**.
 - However, the recent **India-China tensions** over the situation at the **Line of Actual Control (LAC)** may have brought more flexibility to the decision making process.
 - India is already a member of the **Quad** and attended the **Quadrilateral Security Dialogue** held in November 2019.
 - Quad is the **informal strategic dialogue between India, the USA, Japan and Australia** with a shared objective to ensure and support a free, open and prosperous" Indo-Pacific region.
- **Focus of the Virtual Summit:**
 - **Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific.**

- Both countries have a shared approach to a free, open, inclusive and prosperous **Indo-Pacific** which leads to a convergence of mutual interest in many areas.
- **Strengthening of defence ties.**
 - A broader **maritime cooperation agreement** with a focus on **Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA)** is also in the works.
 - Australia has agreed to post a **Liaison Officer** at the Indian Navy's **Information Fusion Centre-Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR)** at Gurugram.
- Expected conclusion on **Mutual Logistics Support Agreement (MLSA)** to elevate the strategic partnership between **India and Australia.**
 - MLSA would allow reciprocal use of each other's military bases for exchange of fuel and provisions to simplify logistical support and improve operational turnaround.
 - India has **similar logistics support agreement with the USA** named **Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA)**.
- **Background:**
 - Australia was the first country to submit a draft MLSA after **India signed the first such agreement with the USA in 2016.**
 - Initially, it was to be signed in 2019 and then in January 2020.
 - The events got postponed due to the **Australian forest fires** and then **Covid-19 pandemic.**

Way Forward

- The two nations are at **very different levels of development** so there can be converging and diverging interests. Therefore, the future must be woven around the three pillars, which are **economic relationship, geostrategic congruence** and **people-to-people ties** and the glue that can bind this is a sustained momentum.
- India and Australia are wary of **China's assault** on maritime security and freedom of navigation **in the Indo-Pacific region.** Inclusion of Australia in Malabar exercise along with strengthening the idea of 'Quad' can therefore promote rule-based, open, free and inclusive Indo-Pacific.

13. Rajasthan Tops in Covid-19 Management Index

Why in News

Rajasthan has topped the list of **Covid-19 Management Index** which was analysed for **10 states** by the Central government, including parameters such as **active cases, recovered cases** and **mortality rate**.

Key Points

- The positive cases in the state are heading towards the 10,000-mark but the **graph of active cases has been constantly declining**.
- There were **only 2,699 active cases** in the state as of now. The **mortality rate was 2.16%**, which was quite **less than the national average** and the **recovery rate was 67.59%**.
- While the **doubling time** of Covid-19 infection in **India is 12 days**, it stands at **18 days in Rajasthan**.
- **Despite the return of migrants** in huge numbers, the infection had not spread widely in the rural areas because of **micro-planning at the village and subdivision levels**.
 - Healthcare initiatives such as **immunisation, family welfare, maternal and child health** and **national health programmes**, ensured that the people's needs are met, health infrastructure remains intact and the State's health index is not adversely impacted.
- To raise awareness about the Covid-19, '**Swasthya Mitras**' will be appointed in each revenue village.
 - *Swasthya Mitra* is a **native of the area** and is **trained to create awareness** amongst the community for helping and guiding them by identifying the nature of the disease, the signs and symptoms and accordingly guiding them to seek proper medical treatment without much delay.

14. Dilemma for Delhi in Ladakh standoff

Why the latest transgression by PLA is unprecedented?

- There are around **400 transgressions/faceoffs each year** on an average along the LAC.
- But the recent spate of territorial transgressions by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) is **unprecedented in its scope and manner**.
- Even as independent accounts point out that Chinese troops are yet to withdraw from the **transgressed territories and restore status quo ante**.

- Those territories are traditionally considered by both sides to be on the Indian side of the LAC.
- Chinese officials have gone ahead and stated that the “Situation in China-India border is overall stable & controllable”.

What this move by China signals?

- The Indian government is left with two basic choices: **1) accept territorial loss as a fait accompli or 2) force or negotiate a reversal to status quo ante**, unless of course the PLA unilaterally withdraws.
- Either way, China’s **growing territorial aggression** on the LAC signals the **end of Beijing’s peaceful rise** and its traditional desire to maintain regional status quo with India.
- China under its President, Xi Jinping, unequivocally **seeks to demonstrate that it is the preponderant power in the region**.

Let’s analyse the aggression

- While the timing could be explained by the **global political distraction caused by COVID-19**.
- And also the international pressure on China (including by India) to come clean on the origins of the novel coronavirus could have played the role.
- But the proximate causes could be several. Consider the following-

1. Statement by India on Aksai Chin

- For one, New Delhi’s **terse statements about Aksai Chin** following the Jammu and Kashmir reorganisation in August last year had not gone down well with Beijing.
- While not many in India believe that New Delhi was serious about getting back Aksai Chin from Chinese control, **Beijing may have viewed it as India upping the ante**.
- More pertinently, in a clear departure from the past, New Delhi has been carrying out the **construction of infrastructural projects along the LAC** – a long overdue activity which is something that seems to have made China uneasy.

2. Broader context of long-term geopolitical world view

- The Chinese angle to the J&K conundrum deserves more attention here.
- The aggression must also be viewed in the **broader context of a long-term geopolitical world view China has for the region**. Consider the following in this regard-
- **1) China’s China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) connectivity to Pakistan through the Karakoram and New Delhi’s criticism of it.**
- **2) The reported presence of PLA troops in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (PoK).**
- **3) India’s new-found activism on Aksai Chin.**
- **4) The PLA’s incursions into areas in eastern Ladakh.**

3. Strategic goals

- It is equally important to appreciate the larger **Chinese strategic calculations** behind its recent spate of aggressions.
- Having given up its traditional slogan of 'peaceful rise', China, under Mr. Xi, is beginning to assert itself as the next superpower.
- Over the years, Beijing has perhaps **realised that India is not keen on toeing the Chinese line in the region.**
- So this is Beijing sending a **message to New Delhi to fall in line.**
- A message that **will not go unnoticed in the smaller capitals** around China – from Colombo to Kathmandu to Hanoi.

4. Political message

- Given that China is currently engaged in what many analysts are describing as a **new cold war with the United States**, in the middle of a crackdown in Hong Kong along with fighting COVID-19 at home, one would not have expected the Chinese leadership to open another front.
- And yet, by opening a limited military front with India on the LAC, China is signalling the U.S. **that it can handle pressure.**
- And telling India that it has the **political and military wherewithal** to put pressure on New Delhi notwithstanding its other preoccupations.

Why limited scope confrontation is cost-effective and preferred option by China?

- China's limited scope military expeditions on the long-contested border is cost effective for the PLA.
- This is because the ever-growing **conventional military superiority** that it enjoys with India.
- Moreover, because **limited fights or smaller land grabs** may not provoke an all-out **confrontation or nuclear use.**
- The side with **conventional superiority and more border infrastructure** would likely carry the day.

India's China dilemma

- Picking a **direct fight with India** which might lead to an **undesirable military escalation with India** does not suit Beijing's interests.
- But carrying out minor military expeditions with the **objective of inflicting small-scale military defeats on India** is precisely what would suit the Chinese political and military leadership.
- They are cost effective, less escalatory, and the message gets conveyed.

- More so, India's military response would depend a great deal on how far the regime in New Delhi is **willing to acknowledge such territorial losses** due to domestic political constraints.
- If New Delhi acknowledges **loss of territory**, it would have to regain it, but doing so vis-à-vis a conventionally superior power would not be easy.
- Put differently, growing conventional imbalance and domestic political calculations could prompt New Delhi to overlook minor territorial losses on the LAC.
- But let us be clear: the **more New Delhi overlooks** them, the more Beijing would be **tempted to repeat them**.
- These considerations **lie at the heart of India's China dilemma**.

How India could respond?

- Yet, there are limits to China's LAC adventurism.
- **1)** There are several places along the several thousand kilometre long LAC where the **PLA is militarily weak**, the Indian Army has the upper hand.
- And, therefore, **a tit-for-tat military campaign could be undertaken** by New Delhi.
- **2)** While China enjoys **continental superiority over India**, **maritime domain** is China's weak spot, in particular Beijing's commercial and energy interest to which the maritime space is crucial.
- **3)** Finally, and most importantly, would Beijing want to seriously damage the close to **\$100 billion trade with India** with its military adventurism on the LAC?

Way forward

- In any case, for India, the age of pussyfooting around Chinese intimidation strategies is over.
- The time has come to **checkmate Beijing's military aggression** even as we maintain a robust economic relationship with our eastern neighbour.
- It is also a reminder for us to get more **serious about finalising a border agreement with China**.
- The bigger the **power differential between India and China**, the more concessions Beijing would demand from New Delhi to settle the dispute.

Conclusion

There is little doubt that China is our neighbour and that we have to live next to the larger and more powerful China. However, India should not accept Beijing's attempts at land grabs, or military intimidation. That China is a rising superpower located next door to us is a reality, but how we deal with that reality is a choice we must make as a nation

15. India-Bhutan MoU on cooperation in the areas of environment



Context

The Union cabinet approved a MoU between India and Bhutan for environment protection and cooperation in the areas concerning air quality, waste, chemical management and climate change.

About the Background

The Union cabinet chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi gave its nod for the signing of the MoU which will enable establishment and promotion of closer and long-term cooperation between the two countries in the field of environment protection and management of natural resources on the basis of equity, reciprocity and mutual benefits, taking into account the applicable laws and legal provisions in each country, an official statement said.

About the MoU

- Keeping in view the bilateral interest of both sides and mutually agreed priorities, a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) covering the areas of air, waste, chemical management, climate change and any other areas jointly decided upon in environment has been considered.
- The MoU shall enter into force on the date of signature and shall continue to remain in force for a period of 10 years.
- The ministry said both the countries intend to hold Joint Working Group/bilateral meetings to review and analyse the progress of activities and shall keep their respective ministries or agencies, duly informed of progress and achievements.

- The MoU shall also facilitate exchange of experiences, best practices and technical know-how through both public and private sectors and shall contribute to sustainable development.
- The Memorandum of Understanding provides the possibility for joint projects in areas of mutual interest. However, no significant employment generation is envisaged.
- The financial implications of the proposed MoU are limited to holding of the bilateral meetings/Joint Working Group meetings which shall meet alternatively in India and Bhutan.

About the Highlights

- An MoU was signed between the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB), the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC) and the National Environment Commission (NEC) of the Royal Government of Bhutan on March 11, 2013.
- This MoU expired on March 10, 2016, the ministry said, adding that noting the benefits of the earlier MoU, both sides have decided to continue cooperation and collaboration in the field of environment.

16. India-Australia Virtual Summit

Why in News

Recently, Prime Ministers of **India and Australia** held their **first virtual bilateral summit** and both **concluded nine agreements** including the **Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP)** and the **Mutual Logistics Support Agreement (MLSA)**.

- The two leaders are expected to meet in person at the extended **G-7 summit** which will be held in the USA later in 2020.

Key Points

- **Agreements:**
 - **Comprehensive Strategic Partnership:** Upgradation of the existing **2+2 dialogue** to the Ministerial level, elevating the **2009 bilateral Strategic Partnership** to a **CSP**.
 - India already has a **2+2 ministerial-level dialogues** mechanism with the USA and Japan, the other members of the **Quadrilateral grouping (QUAD)**.
 - **India has signed CSPs with** the United Kingdom, Indonesia, Vietnam and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) thus far, while **Australia has CSPs with** China, Indonesia and Singapore.

- **Mutual Logistics Support Agreement:** Both sides agreed to continue to deepen and broaden **defence cooperation** by enhancing the scope and complexity of their military exercises and engagement activities to develop new ways to address shared security challenges.
 - It will **increase military interoperability** through defence exercises and allow both militaries the reciprocal use of bases, humanitarian and disaster relief cooperation, port exercises and passage exercises.
 - **India has such agreements with the USA (Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement-LEMOA), France, Singapore and South Korea.**
- **Joint declaration on 'Shared Vision for Maritime Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific':** The two sides announced a roadmap to harness opportunities and meet challenges together as **comprehensive strategic partners**.
- **Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement (CECA):** The two sides decided to recommence suspended talks over the **India-Australia CECA** which has been suspended since 2015.
 - This move comes in the wake of **India opting out** of the **ASEAN-led Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP)**.
- **Australia-India Strategic Research Fund** to promote innovative solutions for responding to and treating **Covid-19** as well as other jointly determined priorities, to be preceded by a one-off **Special Covid Collaboration Round in 2020**.
- Both sides have decided to reflect on the recommendations of the ongoing evaluation of the international response over the **World Health Organisation's (WHO)** role in dealing with the **Covid-19 pandemic**.
- Both countries will work together to **strengthen international institutions** to ensure they are **inclusive and rules-based**.
- **Framework arrangement on Cyber and Cyber-enabled critical technology cooperation:** Work together in the digital economy, cybersecurity and critical and emerging technologies.
- **Agreement on agriculture and related activities:** Agriculture was identified as an important pillar of both the economies with shared challenges and climatic conditions.
- **Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on mining and processing critical and strategic minerals:** Cooperate on **new technologies for exploration and extraction of minerals** including Australian rare earth metals used for electronics, governance, vocational training and water management.

▪ **Untouched Issues:**

- **Tensions between India and China** over the **standoff at the Line of Actual Control (LAC)** and Australia-China tensions over trade issues and differences over the handling of the pandemic.
- There were no discussions on **including Australia in Malabar exercise**.
- Both leaders had no discussions on **the RCEP**, even though earlier Australia had expressed hope that India would reconsider joining the trade agreement.

Way Forward

- **Shared values, shared interests, shared geography and shared objectives** are the bedrock of deepening India-Australia ties and the cooperation and coordination between the two countries have picked up momentum in recent years.
- Both India and Australia share a vision of a free, open, inclusive and rules-based Indo-Pacific region and cooperative use of the seas by adherence to international law including the **United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)** and peaceful resolution of disputes rather than through unilateral or coercive actions.

17. Global Vaccine Summit

Why in News

Recently, the Prime Minister of India addressed the **virtual Global Vaccine Summit**.

- The Summit was **hosted** by the **United Kingdom (UK)**. Almost 50 countries including the business leaders, UN agencies, civil society, government ministers, Heads of State and country leaders participated in the Summit.

Key Points

- **Purpose:**
 - The Summit was intended to urge nations around the world to **pledge funding for vaccinations** to protect the world from **future outbreaks of infectious diseases**.
 - The Summit was aimed at **raising USD 7.4 million** to immunise a further **300 million** children in the **world's poorest countries by 2025**.
- **India's Contribution:**
 - India has pledged **USD 15-million** as India's contribution to the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunizations (GAVI).

- GAVI is an **international organisation** which brings together public and private sectors to create equal access to vaccines for children.
- India had also mentioned that it has **shared its stocks of medicines with over 120 countries** in the wake of the pandemic.
- **The Status of Vaccination in India:**
 - India is the **world's foremost producer of vaccines** and contributes to the immunisation of about **60% of the world's children**.
 - India has also added **six vaccines** to its **Universal Immunization Programme (UIP)** to expand protection of vaccination in the country.
 - Universal Immunization Programme (UIP) was launched by the government in **1985**, to prevent mortality and morbidity in children and pregnant women against **12 vaccine-preventable diseases**.
 - Under UIP **free of cost vaccination** is provided against twelve vaccine-preventable diseases i.e. Tuberculosis, Diphtheria, Pertussis, Tetanus, Polio, Hepatitis B, Pneumonia and Meningitis due to Haemophilus Influenzae type b (Hib), Measles, Rubella, Japanese Encephalitis (JE) and Rotavirus diarrhoea.
 - The Country has also **digitised the vaccine supply chain** and an electronic intelligence network has been developed to monitor the integrity of the cold chain.
 - But, recently the report released by the **World Health Organisation (WHO)** observed the **disruption of the Global Vaccination Programme in the country** in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Way Forward

- The Covid-19 pandemic has **exposed the limitations of global cooperation** and that for the first time in recent history, the human kind faces a clear common enemy.
- But GAVI is not just a global alliance but also a **symbol of international solidarity**. Thus, the whole world needs to stand together to come out of the pandemic.
- There is an urgent need to focus upon the **Global Vaccine Action Plan 2011-2020** that is a framework to prevent millions of deaths by 2020 through more equitable access to existing vaccines for people in all communities.
 - It is equally important for the countries to give importance to the United Nations **Sustainable Development Goal 3 i.e. Good Health and Well being**.

- There is a need for an immediate action plan to restart the vaccination programmes through **better health infrastructure** and **medical equipment** during the corona crisis.

18.India-Australia leaders' virtual summit



Context

- Australia supported India to play a role in the Indo-Pacific region, with its Prime Minister Scott Morrison stating that the nations "share responsibility for that ocean".
- During the first-ever bilateral India-Australia virtual summit, Morrison also lauded Prime Minister Narendra Modi for the leadership he has displayed during the COVID-19 crisis.

Background

- The relationship between the two nations was upgraded to a "Strategic Partnership" level in 2009.
- Since then, both countries have expanded their cooperation in a range of key areas.
- In its White Paper on Foreign Policy in 2017, Australia recognised India as the "pre-eminent maritime power among Indian Ocean countries" and a "front-rank partner of Australia".
- The bilateral economic engagement too has been on an upswing in the last few years.
- According to official data, the trade between the two countries was around USD 21 billion in 2018-19.

- Australia's investment in India is about USD 10.74 billion whereas India's total investment in Australia is USD 10.45 billion.
- In the last few years, both the countries have been focusing on expanding maritime cooperation.

Highlights of the summit

- The bilateral "Virtual Summit" has set a new model of conducting business, Prime Minister Narendra Modi tweeted, shortly after his online summit with Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison.
- Various issues covering the "entire expanse" of India-Australia relationship were discussed during the meet, he said.
- The two leaders discussed a range of issues including trade, defence, education as well as the COVID-19 crisis.
- The summit was held after Morrison had to cancel his trip to India in January, 2020 due to the devastating bushfires season in Australia.
- In his opening remarks at the bilateral "Virtual Summit" -- the first such summit between PM Modi and a foreign leader, the Prime Minister said he believed that it is the "perfect time and perfect opportunity" to further strengthen the relationship between India and Australia. "India-Australia relations have deepened. And this depth comes from our shared values, shared interests, shared geography and shared objectives," PM Modi said in his opening remarks.
- The Australian Prime Minister also promised PM Modi that he will prepare Gujarati khichdi in his kitchen before their next meeting in person.
- The virtual summit was wrapped up with "Samosa-Khichdi" diplomacy. "I thank you for the samosas....we had a lot of fun with it over the weekend," Mr Morrison said, referring to him making the samosas and tweeting about it.

19.LiDAR Based Research in Tamar Valley

Why in News

A U.K.-based team of archeologists has continued its research over the **Tamar Valley** through **LiDAR (Light Detection and Ranging)** despite lockdown due to **Covid-19** in the country.

- LiDAR is commonly used by geologists and surveyors to make high-resolution maps.

Tamar Valley

- Tamar valley is located in the **south of England** and is a rich archaeological landscape with many sites **belonging to the Iron Age and Roman era**.

- The area is a **World Heritage Site due to its historic mining activities.**
 - A World Heritage Site is a place that is listed by the **United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)** for its **special cultural or physical significance.**
 - The list of World Heritage Sites is maintained by the **international 'World Heritage Programme'**, administered by the UNESCO World Heritage Committee.

LiDAR

- **Description:**
 - LiDAR (Light Detection and Ranging) is a **remote sensing** method that uses light in the form of a pulsed laser **to measure ranges & variable distances.**
 - These light pulses – combined with other data recorded by the airborne system – generate precise, three-dimensional information about the shape of the Earth and its surface characteristics.
 - A LiDAR instrument principally **consists of a laser, a scanner, and a specialized GPS receiver.**
 - Airplanes and helicopters are the most commonly used platforms for acquiring LiDAR data over broad areas.
- **Applications:**
 - LiDAR is used for **agriculture, hydrology** and water management systems
 - and **geology-related** applications.
 - It is also used in **archaeology.**

20. India's Campaign Brochure for UNSC Seat

Why in News

Recently, India has released a **campaign brochure** ahead of the vote for the **non-permanent member** of the **United Nations Security Council (UNSC)** in 2021-22.

- This will be the **eighth time** India will occupy a non-permanent UNSC seat, with its last term in 2011-2012.
- India also seeks for a **permanent membership in the UNSC.**

- India along with **other countries of G4 grouping (Japan, Brazil and Germany)** is asking for a spot for permanent membership in UNSC.
- **Five permanent members:** China, France, the Russian Federation, the UK and the USA.

Key Points

- India is guaranteed a place as it is the **sole candidate for Asia-Pacific** but needs two-thirds of the 193-member General Assembly to vote in its favour in a secret ballot scheduled for 17th June, 2020 in New York (USA).
- **Issues Highlighted:**
 - International governance has been under increasing strain due to traditional and non-traditional security challenges. **Terrorism** is one of the most cited examples.
 - Unreformed and under-representative global institutions and the Covid-19 **pandemic** with its economic impact has increased challenges for the UNSC.
- **India's Solutions:**
 - Its objective will be the achievement of **N.O.R.M.S: a New Orientation for a Reformed Multilateral System.**
 - India will highlight international terrorism, **United Nations** reforms and Security Council expansion, streamlining the peacekeeping operations and technology initiatives during its upcoming tenure.
- **Background:**
 - Since 2013, India has been planning for a seat in **2021** as the year will mark its **75th year of Independence.**
 - Identifying an uncontested spot is not an easy task.
 - However, the **Islamic Republic of Afghanistan** agreed to set aside for the 2021-22 seat, in a **friendly gesture.**
 - India also **persuaded the Asia-Pacific grouping nomination** by diplomacy and negotiations to avoid any last-minute contenders against India.
 - India was able to win a **unanimous endorsement from the 55-nation** grouping that **included both China and Pakistan**, in June 2019.
 - However, **winning the maximum votes** at the General Assembly this time will be a little **hard for India due to:**
 - Rising **tensions** in relations with both **Pakistan and China.**

- Criticism from Turkey, Malaysia and the **Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC)** over the government's decision on scrapping **Article 370** as well as the **Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) 2019**.

Selection of Non-permanent Members of Security Council

- Each year, the General Assembly **elects five non-permanent members** (out of ten in total) for a **two-year term**. The ten non-permanent seats are distributed on a regional basis:
 - Five for African and Asian countries.
 - One for Eastern European countries.
 - Two for Latin American and Caribbean countries.
 - Two for Western European and other countries.
- **Article 23 of the UN Charter** concerns the composition of the Security Council.
- **Other Contenders for Other Seats:**
 - **Mexico** is expected to be elected unopposed for the **Latin American group**.
 - **Canada, Ireland and Norway** will contend for two seats of the **West European and Others Group (WEOG)**.
 - **Kenya and Djibouti** will contend for an **African seat**.

Way Forward

- India for long has been of the view that the UNSC sought to be reformed by expansion in its permanent membership and non-permanent membership as well.
- India has been acknowledged as a rising power by most of the states. Also, there is a pressing need to democratize multilateral fora, starting from the United Nation system itself. In this context, India is making a legitimate claim for its rightful place in the changing architecture of global governance, including the UNSC.

21. Unmanned Aircraft System (UAS) Rules of 2020

Context: Unmanned Aircraft System (UAS) Rules of 2020 notified by the **Ministry of Civil Aviation**.

These rules seek to **regulate the production, import, trade, ownership and operation of unmanned aircraft systems or drones**. They also create a framework for their use by businesses.

Overview:

Who can sell drones? Only authorised entities.

Who can own or operate? Entities authorised by the Director General of Civil Aviation.

Permits for flying these also have to be sought online and a log has to be shared after the flight.

Applicability: The norms apply to all existing drones as well.

Exception: Nano-drones weighing 250 grams or less can be operated without a drone pilot license.

Insurance: No unmanned aircraft (UA) system shall be operated in India unless there is in existence a valid third party insurance policy to cover the liability that may arise on account of a mishap.

Rule number 36 and 38 in the Ministry's draft state that no unmanned aircraft shall carry any payload, unless specified by the Director General of DGCA. Neither shall a person "drop or project or cause or permit to be dropped or projected from a UAS (unmanned aircraft system) in motion anything," except when specified.

Eligibility: For owning and using a drone, one has to be at least 18 years old. In the case of companies, the requirement is that their main place of business has to be in India and the chairman and at least two thirds of directors have to be Indian citizens. Also, businesses operating drones have to be substantially owned and effectively controlled by Indian nationals.

Need for these rules:

Drones have wide use in commercial, safety, law and order, disaster management and surveillance operations, which cuts down manpower requirement and costs. The government is also keen to encourage domestic production of drones.

Besides, the rules come at a time the coronavirus pandemic has highlighted the role technology can play in reducing human interface and costs.

22. Country is still at risk, says WHO expert

Context:

- COVID-19 pandemic in India.

Background:

- Though the over 2,00,000 current novel coronavirus cases in India looks huge it is still modest for a country with a population of over 1.3 billion people.
- The measures taken in India, like the **nationwide lockdown**, had helped **to slow transmission**.
- The doubling time of cases in India was about three weeks at this stage. Hence, the increase in epidemic **though not exponential is still growing**.

Challenges:

- WHO Chief Scientist Soumya Swaminathan and WHO Health Emergencies Programme executive director Michael Ryan have noted that though COVID-19 has not “exploded” in India, the risk of it happening remains as the country moves towards **exiting the lockdown**.
- As the disease generated and gained a foothold in communities, the number of cases could accelerate at any time.
- Specific issues in India regarding a **large amount of migration, the dense populations in the urban environment** and the fact that many workers had no choice but to go to work every day could lead to a sudden spurt in the number of cases.
- India is a **heterogeneous and huge country** with very densely populated cities and a much lower density in some rural areas and **varying health systems in different States**, and these factors posed challenges to the control of COVID-19.

Way forward:

- It is important for India to keep track of the growth rate and the doubling time of the cases.
- As the lockdown and restrictions are lifted, it must be ensured that people take all precautions. There is the **need for behavioural change at a large level**.

23. Educational Complexes for Tribal Students: Odisha

Why in News

Recently, the Government of Odisha has announced the establishment of **three mega educational complexes exclusively for tribal students**, where both academic and sporting skills will be harnessed.

Key Points

- **Establishment:**
 - The complexes will be established in **tribal-dominated districts** such as **Keonjhar, Sundargarh and Mayurbhanj**.
 - **Santal and Bhuyan** are two dominant tribal groups living in these districts.
 - Each complex will house **3,000 tribal students**, which is a unique initiative in the field of **tribal education**.
 - These complexes will have state of the art facilities to improve educational and sporting skills of tribal students from **Standard I to XII**.
 - **State-of-the-art (cutting edge or leading edge)** refers to the **highest level of general development**, as of a device, technique, or scientific field achieved at a particular time.
- **Funding:**
 - Funds required for mega complexes will be sourced from **Odisha Mineral Bearing Areas Development Corporation (OMBADC)**, which was formed for focused development of **mineral-rich districts**. Incidentally, most mineral-rich districts are tribal-dominated.
- **Tribal Population in Odisha:**
 - According to the 2011 Census, tribal people constitute **8.6%** of the nation's total population i.e. over 104 million people.
 - A **tribe** has been defined as a **group of indigenous people** having a common name, language and territory tied by strong kinship bonds, having distinct customs, rituals and beliefs etc.

- **The President** under **Article 342** is empowered to declare communities as scheduled tribes, while **Parliament** by law can amend the list.
- **Odisha's tribal population** constitutes **9.17%** of the country's tribal population.
- In Odisha, the tribal population is **22.85%** of the state's total population.
 - In terms of **percentage tribal population**, it occupies the **third position** in India.
 - The First and Second are **Madhya Pradesh** and **Maharashtra** respectively.
- Similarly, of India's total 75 **particularly vulnerable tribal groups**, 13 reside in Odisha.
- With 62 tribal communities, Odisha has the most diverse tribes in India.
 - Keonjhar, where tribes such as Sounti, Ho, Juang, Kharwar, Mahali, Oraon Kolha and Kora reside is the most mined district of the State.
 - **Keonjhar** district contains **more than 70%** of the iron ore reserves of Odisha.

Educational Schemes for Tribals

- **Eklavya Model School: Residential School** based on Navodaya Model to be opened in each tribal block by 2022.
- **Rajiv Gandhi National Fellowship Scheme (RGNF):** RGNF was introduced in the year 2005-2006 with the objective to encourage the students belonging to the ST community to pursue higher education.
- **Vocational Training Center in Tribal Areas:** The aim of this scheme is to develop the skill of ST students depending on their qualification and present market trends.
- **National Overseas Scholarship Scheme:** The National Overseas Scholarship Scheme provides financial assistance to 20 students selected for pursuing higher studies abroad for PhD and postdoctoral studies.
- Pre and Post Matric Scholarship Schemes.

Way Forward

- There is a need to give special focus to the education of tribal populations by the **Ministry of Tribal Affairs**.

- Awareness Campaigns like street drama, camps counselling session to bring attitudinal change in parents.
- Emphasis should be given to **career or job** oriented courses.
- Teachers should be locally recruited who understand and respect tribal culture and practices and most importantly are acquainted with the local language.
- **The Kothari Commission** stressed to pay special attention to the education of ST.
- **The XaXa Committee** recommended a greater focus on removing gender disparity in education.

24.Persian Gulf Region

Why in News

The persian gulf region has the presence of the **major producers of crude oil and natural gas**, and thereby contributing **critically to the global economy**.

- Thus, **maintaining peace in the geopolitically** significant region through **cooperative security** by the regional members and major world economies is one of the best solutions to stabilize the region politically and economically.

Persian Gulf Region

- The lands around the Persian Gulf are shared by **eight** countries namely, **Bahrain, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates**.
- These all **eight** countries are **members of the United Nations**.
 - United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar, Kuwait are members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).
 - Out of persian gulf countries, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates(UAE) and Saudi Arabia are members of OPEC.
- Being major producers of **crude oil and natural gas**, there is a **commonality of interest** among these countries.

- This commonality of interest has given rise to **their own prosperity** and subsequently, **economico-political entanglements among them.**



Background

▪ British Era:

- For eight decades prior to 1970, the Persian Gulf was **guarded as a 'British lake'**.
- After the end of the British era, regional players entered with the **intra-regional rivalries** and **forced cooperation.**

▪ Aggravated Political Tensions in the Region:

- Events like the **Muscat conference (1975)**, **Iranian Revolution (1979)** and **the Iraq-Iran War (1980)** aggravated the political tensions in the region. Subsequently, it **enhanced USA's interests and roles in the region.**
- The Muscat Conference (1975) was intended to develop the unified army cooperation to enhance the security among Gulf states to guarantee free navigation in the Persian Gulf.
- Later, the **United Nations Security Council Resolution 598 (1987)** was adopted to ensure a ceasefire between Iran and Iraq **specifically** and to

explore measures to enhance the security and stability in the region **generally**.

Current Scenario

▪ Rising Conflicts in the Region:

- Recently, the geopolitical factors and conflicts in the **West Asian region – Yemen, Syria, Libya** – aggravated global and regional relationships.

▪ Declining Role of USA:

- The above mentioned conflicts have **hampered USA-Iran relations** that were to be premised on the multilateral agreement on **Iran's nuclear programme agreed to by western powers**.
- The **declining USA's commitment to sub-regional security** has raised more issues among the members of the **Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)** due to political and ideological disagreement with Iran.

▪ Emerging Split Within GCC:

- The recent **emergence of conflicting tactical and strategic interests** and subjective considerations has created a division among the members of the GCC.
- These divisions in the GCC are being aggravated due to following reasons:
 - **Global economic crisis**
 - **Immediate and longer-term impact of Covid-19 on regional economies**
 - **Problems in the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC)**
 - **Decline in oil prices**

Possible Stability Framework for the Region

Regional as well as Global Security:

- Any possible framework for stability and security in the region needs to ensure the **security not only on the regional terms but also on global terms**.

- Because the gulf regional security is not an issue among the Gulf States themselves but it is also an external issue.
- **Other Aspects:**
 - Additionally, the framework will also need to ensure the following conditions which include:
 - **Peace and stability** in individual littoral states.
 - Freedom to all states of the Gulf littoral to exploit their **hydrocarbon and other natural resources**.
 - **Freedom of commercial shipping** in international waters of the Persian Gulf.
 - Freedom of **access to, and outlet from, Gulf waters** through the **Strait of Hormuz**.
 - The **prevention of conflict** that may impinge on the freedom of trade and shipping.

India's Relation with Persian Gulf Region

- **India and GCC:**
 - The economic and political relationship of India with the GCC has blossomed in recent years. The governments of the GCC members are **India-friendly and Indian-friendly**.
 - The friendly relation has been reflected in the **bilateral trade of around \$121 billion** and **remittances of \$49 billion** from a workforce of over nine million.
 - GCC suppliers account for around **34% of India's crude imports**.
- **India and Iran:**
 - India has always shared a friendly relationship with Iran. But the India-Iran relation faces one of the **most complex phases** at all times due to the **USA's pressure** which has **politico-economic impacts**.
 - In May 2018, the **USA abandoned the nuclear deal** and reinstated **economic sanctions against Iran**.

▪ **India's Overall Role in the Region:**

- India has **avoided involvement in local or regional disputes** in the region.
- Indian interests do not entail power projection but necessitate peace and regional stability.

Way Forward

- It has been assessed that Saudi Arabia is a fading power whereas UAE, Qatar and Iran are emerging as the new regional leaders. Oman and Iraq will have to struggle to retain their sovereign identities.
- Thus, Indian interests would be best served if the stability in the region is ensured through **cooperative security** since the alternative, of competitive security options, cannot ensure durable peace.

25. Taking care of finances of local governments

This article makes some suggestions to improve local finance and argues that the extant fiscal illusion is a great deterrent to mobilisation.

Advantageous position in handling disasters

- In terms of information, monitoring and immediate action, local governments are at an advantage, and eminently, to meet any disaster such as COVID-19.
- While increasing the borrowing limits of the state from **3.5% of GDP to 5%**, there was a recognition that local governments should be fiscally empowered immediately.
- This is a valid signal for the future of local governance.

4 challenges posed by Covid and addressing them collectively

- COVID-19 has raised home four major challenges: **1) economic, 2) health, 3) welfare/livelihood 4) resource mobilisation.**
- These challenges have to be **addressed by all tiers of government** in the federal polity, **jointly and severally.**

Local government empowerment: 5 critical areas

- **1) Own revenue** is the critical lever of local government empowerment.
- But the several lacunae that continue to bedevil local governance have to be simultaneously addressed.

- 2) The new normal demands a paradigm shift in the **delivery of health care** at the cutting edge level.
- 3) The parallel bodies that have come up after the 73rd/74th Constitutional Amendments have considerably **distorted the functions-fund flow matrix** at the lower level of governance.
- 4) There is yet **no clarity in the assignment of functions**, functionaries and financial responsibilities to local governments.
- Functional mapping and responsibilities **continue to be ambiguous in many States**.
- Instructively, **Kerala attempted even responsibility mapping** besides activity mapping.
- 5) The critical role of local governments will have to be recognised by all.

Let's look into resource mobilisation issue: 3 Heads

- A few suggestions for resource mobilisation are given under three heads: 1) local finance, 2) Members of Parliament Local Area Development Scheme- **MPLADs**, 3) the Fifteenth Finance Commission (FFC).

1. Local finance

- **Property tax collection** with appropriate exemptions should be a compulsory levy and preferably must cover land.
- The **Economic Survey 2017-18** points out that urban local governments, or **ULGs**, generate about **44% of their revenue from own sources** as against only **5%** by **rural local governments, or RLGs**.
- Per capita own revenue collected by ULGs is about **3%** of urban per capita income while the corresponding figure is only **0.1% for RLGs**.
- There is a yawning **gap between tax potential and actual collection**, resulting in colossal underperformance.
- When they are not taxed, people remain indifferent.
- LGs, States and people seem to labour under a fiscal illusion.
- In States such as **Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Jharkhand**, local tax collection at the panchayat level is **next to nil**.
- **Property tax forms the major source of local revenue throughout the world**.
- All States should take steps to enhance and rationalise property tax regime.
- A recent study by Professor O.P. Mathur shows that the share of property tax in GDP has been declining since 2002-03.

- The share of property tax in India in 2017-18 is only **0.14% of GDP as against 2.1%** in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries.
- If **property tax covers land**, that will hugely enhance the yield from this source even without any increase in rates.

Other 2 options for raising finances

- **1) Land monetisation and betterment levy** may be tried in the context of COVID-19 in India. To be sure, land values have to be unbundled for socially relevant purposes.
- **2) Municipalities and even suburban panchayats can issue a corona containment bond** for a period of say 10 years.
- We are appealing to the patriotic sentiments of non-resident Indians and rich citizens.
- Needless to say, **credit rating is not to be the weighing consideration.**
- That the **Resurgent India Bond of 1998** could mobilise over \$4 billion in a few days encourages us to try this option.

2) MPLADS

- The suspension of MPLADS by the Union government for **two years** is a welcome measure. The annual budget was around **₹4,000 crore**.
- The Union government has appropriated the entire allocation along with the huge non-lapseable arrears.
- MPLADS, which was avowedly earmarked for local area development, **must be assigned to local governments**, preferably to panchayats on the basis of well-defined criteria.

3) Fifteenth finance commission-FFC

- A special COVID-19 containment grant to the LGs by the FFC to be distributed on the basis of **SFC-laid criteria** is the need of the hour.
- The commission may do well to consider this.
- The local government grant of **₹90,000 crore for 2020-2021 by the FFC** is only **3% higher than** that recommended by the **Fourteenth Finance Commission**.
- Building **health infrastructure and disease control strategies** at the local level **find no mention in the five tranches of the packages** announced by the Union Finance Minister.

Suggestions related to grants

- The **ratio of basic** (i.e. with no conditions) **to tied** (with condition) **grant is fixed at 50:50** by the commission.
- In the context of the crisis under way, all grants must be **untied** for freely evolving proper COVID-19 containment strategies locally.
- The **13th Finance Commission's recommendation** to tie local grants to the union **divisible pool of taxes** to ensure a **buoyant and predictable source of revenue to LGs** (accepted by the then Union government) must be restored by the commission.

Conclusion

COVID-19 has woken us up to the reality that local governments must be equipped and empowered. Relevant action is the critical need.

26.e-Diplomacy

Why in News

Recently, the **first India-Australia Virtual Leaders' Summit** was held where important strategic decisions, ranging from military interoperability to jointly tackling the **pandemic**, were made.

- The summit was noteworthy for its **novel modus operandi** after the dangers posed by **Covid-19** have compelled the traditional summit diplomacy to adapt to new digital ways.

Key Points

- **e-Diplomacy (electronic diplomacy)** is the use of technology by nations to define and establish diplomatic goals and objectives and to efficiently carry out the functions of diplomats.
 - These functions include representation and promotion of the home nation, establishing both bilateral and multilateral relations, consular services and social engagement.
- The pandemic has forced mankind to **maintain physical and social distancing**, leading to a **shift towards work from home mode and using online platforms** for education (**online classes**), business (**e-Commerce**) and other daily things.

- Just as corporations and educational institutions have migrated to online mediums, nation-states are left with no choice but to do the same by conducting virtual or e-summits.
- **Advantages:**
 - These are **physically safer** for leaders because there is no need for any physical contact with anyone.
 - The process is **time-saving** as the leaders can attend the summits and conferences from their offices without having the need to physically reach the venue or other country.
 - These **economise events** by avoiding costly physical journeys and event management.
- **Challenges:**
 - It is **doubtful** that major breakthroughs or deals requiring the direct intervention of leaders can happen **without all the protocols and structured dialogues** in person.
 - There is a possibility of **e-diplomacy becoming less productive** as online summits will simply **not satisfy the broader political goals and bigger objectives** that heads of state carry with them.
 - Threats related to **cybersecurity** also come in the picture:
 - E-diplomacy is riskier and could be subject to **hacking** of classified content.
 - This could reduce the spontaneity and openness of the conversations.
 - In pre-Covid-19 times, summit venues were debugged to prevent sensitive foreign policy content from being spied upon or leaked.
- Apart from the virtual summit with Australia, India has had a **few multilateral e-diplomacy rounds** since the Covid-19 outbreak. **For example,**
 - **SAARC Leaders' video conference.**
 - **Extraordinary G20 Leaders' Summit.**
 - **Non-Aligned Movement Virtual Summit.**

Way Forward

- The **British scholar Ernest Satow** dubbed "**summits a permanent feature of diplomatic topography**". It has been a maxim in diplomacy that face-to-face interactions at the highest level mark the zenith of foreign relations.

- In-person summits will restart one-day but the **online interlude has to go on because diplomacy has to go on.**
- However artificial and unsatisfying the video conferencing medium is, **having some summit is better than no summit at all.** Key partners have to get on with it and hold high-level meetings as part of their strategic signalling.

27. Pay attention to their objectives in dealing with China and Pakistan

Coordinated efforts to corner India?

- Latest news on the Ladakh front suggests that Chinese and Indian forces have begun to **disengage in select areas.**
- But this does not detract from the reality that in the past few weeks **Beijing and Islamabad are making coordinated efforts** to challenge India's presence in the **Kashmir-Ladakh region.**
- There is stepped-up activity on **Pakistan's part to infiltrate terrorists** into the Valley.
- China has undertaken **provocative measures on the Ladakh front** to assert control over disputed areas around the Line of Actual Control (LAC).

Let's see how Pakistan and China's interests overlap

- In Pakistan's case the intensification in its terrorist activities is related in part to the **dilution of Article 370.**
- Dilution of Article 370 helps India **de-link Ladakh from the Kashmir problem.**
- For China, the **division of Ladakh from Jammu and Kashmir** allows India a **freer hand** in contesting China's claims in the region.
- Increasing **road-building activity on India's part** close to the LAC augments this perception.
- In addition, Ladakh borders China's most restive provinces of Xinjiang and Tibet.
- Ladakh is also contiguous to Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK), Gilgit and Baltistan, where the Chinese have invested hugely under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (**CPEC**) project.
- External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar's remark last year that India expects to have "**physical jurisdiction over (POK) one day**" has alarmed Beijing which sees any such Indian move as **threatening the CPEC project.**
- These factors demonstrate the overlapping interests that Beijing and Islamabad have regarding India in this region.

But there are major differences in Pakistani and Chinese objectives regarding India

- These differences are related to their divergent perceptions of their disputes and their different force equations with India.
- For **China**, Ladakh is primarily a territorial dispute with **strategic ramifications**.
- China also **believes it is superior to the Indian militarily** and, therefore, can afford to push India around within limits as it has been attempting to do in the recent confrontation.
- For Pakistan, its territorial claim on Kashmir is based on an **immutable ideological conviction** that it is the **unfinished business of partition** and as a Muslim-majority state is destined to become a part of Pakistan.
- Islamabad also realises that it is the **weaker power in conventional terms** and therefore **has to use unconventional means**, primarily terrorist infiltration, to achieve its objective of changing the status quo in Kashmir.
- China is a **satiated power in Ladakh** having occupied Aksai Chin and wants to keep up the pressure on New Delhi to prevent the latter from trying to change the situation on the ground.

Way forward-Pay attention to objectives while negotiating

- China's primary concern with regard to Kashmir is to prevent any Indian move from **threatening the CPEC project**.
- It does not **challenge the status quo in Kashmir**.
- Pakistan, on the other hand, is **committed to changing the status quo in Kashmir at all cost**.
- It has been trying to do so since Partition not only through clandestine infiltration but also by engaging in conventional warfare.
- Therefore, while it is possible to negotiate the **territorial dispute with China on a give-and-take basis**.
- Doing the same is not possible in the case of Pakistan which considers Kashmir a zero-sum game.
- India should, therefore, distinguish the **different objectives** on the part of Beijing and Islamabad and **tailor its responses accordingly** without conflating the two threats to its security.

Conclusion

Lumping the twin threats posed by Pakistan and China together because of a tactical overlap between them makes it difficult to choose policy options

rationally. So, the policy response must understand the difference in their objectives and avoid clubbing them together.

28. Migrants should not be prosecuted

Context:

- The Supreme Court has said that migrant workers should not be prosecuted for trying to reach home amid the national lockdown.
- The court passed the order after suo motu taking cognisance of the migrant workers' exodus.

Details:

- A Bench led by Justice Ashok Bhushan directed the Centre and the States to withdraw any complaint or prosecution lodged against migrant labourers, under **Section 51 of the Disaster Management Act**, who had set out on foot from big cities for their native villages to escape starvation, unemployment and disease during the pandemic.
- The court said "society as a whole was moved by their miseries and difficulties".
- The Bench also ordered the States and the UTs to bring the stranded migrant workers home within the next 15 days.
- It ordered the Railways to provide the States with more Shramik Special trains to transport migrant workers.
- The Bench directed that counselling centres should be set up to reach out to them and explain the various schemes framed for their rehabilitation and employment.
- The States and UTs were directed to conduct extensive skill-mapping of the returned workers.

In a retort to the government criticism of High Courts running a "parallel government" with their orders on migrants, the Supreme court said that the High Courts, as constitutional courts, were well within their jurisdiction to take cognisance of the violation of fundamental rights of the migrant workers and there is no doubt that those proceedings would proceed.

29. LAC row: China reaches accord with India

The way forward

A look at some fresh developments, and future course of action by India and China

- India and China discuss de-escalation plan on five conflict points in Ladakh – Galwan area (PP 14, 15 and 17), Pangong Tso and Chushul
- Partial disengagement begins at Galwan area
- China removes some tents and some troops and vehicles moved back. India reciprocates



Adding muscle: A file photo of Indian Army vehicles near the Pangong Tso area in Ladakh.

- Talks at Major General level on Wednesday at PP 14
- Talks at other levels over the next 10 days at PP 15, PP 17, Chushul
- No talks decided yet at Pangong Tso
- At Pangong Tso, territory is marked by ridges or “Fingers”. India claims up to Finger 8 and patrols up to Finger 4, but after a skirmish on May 5, Chinese troops have dug in at Finger 4
- No discussion yet on standoff at Naku La in Sikkim

ON THE TABLE

- Return to status quo ante pre-May 5
- Full withdrawal of PLA troops from the five conflict points, and away from the LAC
- Removal of tents, vehicles and equipment pitched at various points
- Drawdown of fighter bombers, rocket forces, air defence radars and jammers and troops build-up behind Chinese side of the LAC

China said that it had “reached an agreement” with India on the ongoing tensions along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), a day after India announced troops from both sides had begun a “partial disengagement” from some of the stand-off points.

Troops moving back

- Partial deinduction has happened from some points in Galwan and Hot Springs areas.
- Chinese side removed some of the tents and some troops and vehicles have been moved back, and the Indian side to has reciprocated.
- At some points in the Galwan Valley, Chinese troops have moved back 2-3 km. However, there is no change in the ground situation at Pangong Tso.

De-escalation begins

- India and China held Major general-level talks to discuss further de-escalation at several standoff points in Eastern Ladakh including Patrolling Point (PP) 14, following a broad accord reached on Saturday in talks held at the Corps Commander-level.
- As per the agreement, a series of ground-level talks would be held over the next 10 days, with four other points of conflict identified at PP15, PP17, Chushul and the north bank of Pangong Lake.

- The Chinese Foreign Ministry said both sides had agreed to handle the situation “properly” and “in line with the agreement” to ease the situation.
- However, it did not provide specific details on some of the stand-off points, such as Pangong Lake, where Chinese troops are still present on India’s side of the LAC.

No final solution yet

- At present, the two sides are taking actions in line with the agreement to ameliorate the border situation.
- Government officials said a partial disengagement had happened at some points in the Galwan area and at Hot Springs, but there was no change at Pangong Lake.
- Chinese state-run media has revealed that the ongoing dispute will not escalate into a conflict.
- But it added due to the complexity of the situation, the military stand-off could continue for a little longer.

Way forward

- The military-level talks showed that both sides do not want to escalate tensions further.
- It showed that China and India remain determined to peacefully resolve border issues.
- However, the ongoing stand-off is not likely to end immediately, as concrete issues must still be resolved.

30. International Religious Freedom Report 2019

Why in News

Recently, the **US State Department** has released its annual **International Religious Freedom (IRF) Report 2019**, which is a survey of the state of **religious freedom** across the world.

- It published a report i.e. **the country report for India** to highlight the issue of religious freedom in the country.
- Earlier, **the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF report)** downgraded India’s religious freedom to the lowest grade – in the ‘Country of Particular Concern (CPC)’ category.

Key Points

- The IRF report listed countries for **positive developments in religious freedom** and **negative examples**.
 - **Nicaragua, Nigeria and China** were cited as negative examples.

- It stated that in China, state-sponsored repression against all religions continues to intensify because of the Chinese Communist Party.
- **India is not cited in either list.**
- **The Country Report for India:**
 - It highlighted the developments that took place in 2019 i.e. **the status of Jammu and Kashmir, the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA) and the National Register of Citizens (NRC).**
 - It discussed in detail about **mob lynchings, anti-conversion laws, cow vigilantism** and related issues.
 - Taking note of the alleged attacks and discrimination **against religious and ethnic minorities in India, the report emphasised the need to ensure full protection to minorities in the country as guaranteed under the Constitution.**
 - It also outlines the U.S. engagement with India on these issues.
- **India's Stand:**
 - The Indian government **has rejected the report by asserting** that there is no locus standi **for a foreign government to comment on the state of its citizens' constitutionally protected rights.**
 - It also emphasised that the report **did not talk about the religious freedom given to various communities** in India.

Freedom of Religion in India

- Freedom of religion in India is a **fundamental right** guaranteed by **Article 25-28 of the Constitution of India.**
 - **Article 25** (Freedom of conscience and free profession, practice and propagation of religion)
 - **Article 26** (Freedom to manage religious affairs)
 - **Article 27** (Freedom as to payment of taxes for promotion of any particular religion).
 - **Article 28** (Freedom as to attendance at religious instruction or religious worship in certain educational institutions)
- Further Article 29 and 30 of the Constitution deal with the protection of interest of minorities.
- **Religious Freedom in the US:**

- The US government has signed an executive order which included a move to formally prioritise religious freedom in the U.S. foreign policy.
- The order also directed the **United States Agency for International Development (USAID)** to allocate \$50 million in its yearly budget towards programmes that sought to promote religious freedom.
- Recently, the US faced domestic protests in response to the death of George Floyd, an unarmed black man at the hands of a white police officer.

31. Sikkim-Tibet Convention of 1890 and its significance

The skirmishes between Indian and Chinese troops at Naku La in Sikkim that is considered settled may be Beijing's way of attempting a new claim. Defence experts highlighted the historical Sikkim-Tibet Convention of 1890 as proof of India's ownership of the territory.

China creates a new flashpoint

- Referring to a major scuffle that took place at Naku La in May, it was unusual for Chinese troops to open up a part of the LAC that has not been in contention before.

Sikkim-Tibet Convention of 1890

- Of the entire 3,488km Sino-Indian border, the only section on which both countries agree that there is no dispute is the 220km Sikkim-Tibet section of the boundary.
- This is because under the Anglo-Chinese Convention of 1890, the Sikkim-Tibet border was agreed upon and in 1895 it was jointly demarcated on the ground.
- Not only that but the new government of People's Republic of China, which took power in 1949, confirmed this position in a formal note to the government of India on 26 December 1959.

Chinese claims

- Prior to Sikkim's merger with India in 1975, the Chinese side accepted the Watershed based alignment of the International Border (IB).
- The Sikkim - Tibet boundary has long formally been delimited and there is neither any discrepancy between the maps nor any dispute in practice.
- The Chinese reiterate that, as per para (1) of the Convention of 1890, the tri-junction is at Mount Gipmochi.

India's stance

- The geographic alignment of the features was so prominent that it could easily be identified and recognized.

- Even analysing the available Google images of the past, the location of Naku La could be discerned by anyone as the watershed parting line in the area was very prominent. “
- There exist no ambiguity with respect to the location of the pass, since geographic realities cannot be altered.

How Sikkim came into the picture?

- Earlier, Sikkim came into the limelight in 1965 during the India-Pakistan conflict, when the Chinese suddenly and without any provocation sent a strongly-worded threat.
- Then PM Lal Bahadur Shastri neatly sidestepped the issue by stating that if the bunkers were on the Chinese side they were well within their rights to demolish them.
- The point that the Chinese were trying to make was not military, but political, for they wanted to bolster the Pakistani spirit, which by then was rapidly losing steam.
- As India stood firm with the backing of USSR and the US, nothing emerged from Chinese threats on the Sikkim-Tibet border.

Series of activity since then

- In 1967, the Chinese again activated the Sikkim-Tibet border and on 11 September, suddenly opened fire on an Indian patrol party near Nathu La pass. The main point was that India did not lose any position, nor did it yield any ground.
- The next important episode was in 2003. When PM Vajpayee conceded during his visit to China in 2003 that “the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) was a part of the PRC” with the expectation that China would recognize Sikkim as a part of India.
- This did not materialize then but in the joint statement issued by premier Wen Jiabao and prime minister Manmohan Singh on 11 April 2005.
- In part 13, the Chinese recognized “Sikkim State of the Republic of India”. Wen even handed over an official map of the People’s Republic of China to Singh, showing Sikkim as a part of India.

Nothing new about the skirmishes over Sikkim

- History would thus indicate that the present stand-off between India and China over the Sikkim-Tibet boundary is nothing new.
- The latest episode after a road construction party entered Doklam area, despite Bhutanese attempts to dissuade them.

Ignoring usual behaviour

- The clearly orchestrated actions on an otherwise dormant area mask a hidden agenda.
- The Chinese push at several points along the LAC and also the ongoing aggression in the South China Sea and Taiwan Straits are testimony to this.
- The timeline of initiating this incident indicates a high level of pre-planning, possibly at senior levels of the PLA as well as the Chinese government.

Way forward

- There is no question of India bending to Chinese “demands”, for like in 1967, it must stand its ground firmly.
- That would be a sufficient lesson for the Chinese that the Indian Army is no pushover and this is perhaps the only way to deal with China that likes to flaunt its economic and military prowess.

32. Govt. considering universal basic income, says NHRC

Context:

- Mid-term report of India’s National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) to the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC).

Background:

- As a part of the third round of the **Universal Periodic Review (UPR) process**, which is done every four-and-a-half-years, the NHRC submitted its mid-term report to the UN agency recently.
- The report reviewed the implementation of **152 recommendations of the UPR Working Group that the Indian government had accepted in September 2017.**

Details:

Universal basic income:

- One of the major recommendations of the UPR Working Group was to study the possibility of a **universal basic income** as a way to further reduce poverty levels with a view to possibly phasing out the existing social protection system, in full consultation with all stakeholders.
- In its report, the NHRC has stated that the recommended implementation of a universal basic income was “under examination and active consideration” of the Centre.

Budgetary allocation for health:

- The report stated that there had been a consensus on the need for **increasing budgetary allocation for health and nutrition** by the Centre and state governments.

Child rights:

- The NHRC noted that it had found “gaps in policies as compared to obligations” under the **United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child** and had made recommendations to address the same.
- The report notes the **National Commission for Protection of Child Rights** working on a proposal for a pilot project to eliminate child labour in five “aspirational districts with high incidence of child labour”.
- To make education more accessible to children with disabilities, the NHRC said it had recommended to the Human Resource Development Ministry to ensure “**holistic inclusion**” of **children with disabilities in the Draft National Education Policy**.

Reproductive rights:

- On the issue of reproductive rights, the NHRC noted that the Centre had requested the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, the Department of Financial Services, the Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority of India and the National Health Authority to consider the issue of **sterilization, birth control treatment** and procedures’ expenses not being covered under health insurance policies currently.

Women’s rights:

- The Report notes that the NHRC was in the process of setting up a committee to monitor the implementation of the **Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women**.

SC/ST related laws:

- The NHRC has expressed concerns over the inefficiencies in implementation of the **Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribe (Prevention of Atrocities Act) 1989 and the Rules of 1995** and warned States of coercive action against failure to submit reports on violation of human rights of SCs, STs and minorities.

Other issues:

- NHRC claims that several issues need to be looked into including the “ratification of international human rights instruments, issues in legislations of **trafficking and protection against child sexual abuse**” and “gaps in the implementation of schemes for **food security** and timely disbursement of wages under schemes for employment”.

33. MOOC can't be the substitute for learning in the classroom

UGC circular to adopt MOOC

- In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the University Grants Commission had issued a circular to universities.
- Through this circular, it encouraged them to adopt **massive open online courses (MOOCs)** offered on its SWAYAM platform for credit transfers in the coming semesters.
- But the move poses a great danger.
- **But why it's danger?** Because it is also being seen as an instrument to achieve the country's target **Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in higher education**.
- **GER** in higher education is envisioned to be **30% by 2021**; it was **25.8%** in 2017-18.

Issues with MOOC and what classrooms offers

- MOOC-based e-learning platforms tend to **reinforce a top-down teacher-to-student directionality** of learning.
- This misses the point that teaching and learning are **skills that are always in the making**.
- The teacher is after all "**an intellectual midwife**" who facilitates in the **birth of students'** ideas and insights through engaging in critical dialogue.
- In a conducive classroom environment, this role is often switched and the student plays intellectual midwife to the teacher's ideas.
- Moving to a MOOC-based degree system would **rob young teachers and students of these essential lessons** in teaching and learning from each other.
- Policymakers behind the **SWAYAM platform** have left out courses in engineering, medicine, dental, pharmacy, nursing, architecture, agriculture, and physiotherapy **on the grounds that they involve laboratory and practical work**.
- This move makes sense.
- But it **seems to suggest** that the pure sciences, the arts, the social sciences, and humanities curricula are largely lecture- and theory-based, and, therefore, readily adaptable to the online platform.
- Nothing can be farther from such a misconception.
- Implicit in every curriculum is the tacit assumption that the **classroom is a laboratory for hands-on testing of ideas**, opinions, interpretations, and counterarguments.
- A **diverse and inclusive classroom** is the best **litmus test** for any theory or insight.
- **Multidisciplinarity** happens more through serendipity – when learners across disciplines bump into each other and engage in conversations.
- Classroom and campus spaces offer the potential for solidarity in the face of **discrimination, social anxiety, and stage fear**, paving the way for a proliferation of voluntary associations that lie outside the realm of family, economy, and state.

- In the absence of this **physical space**, teaching and learning would give way to mere content and its consumption.
- Without a shared space to discuss and contest ideas, **learning dilutes to just gathering more information**.
- This could also dilute norms of evaluation, whereby a “**good lecture**” might mean merely a lecture which “**streams seamlessly, without buffering**”.

Online mode: add more value to the classroom education

- One could think of greater value-sensitive and socially just architectures and technologies that further foster classroom engagement.
- It also makes it accessible for students of various disabilities and challenges, thereby adding more value to the existing meaning of education.
- But public education modelled on social distancing is a **functional reduction and dilution of the meaning of education**.
- It could add value only as an **addendum to the classroom**.

Conclusion

Such platforms must be seen only as stop-gap variants that help us get by under lockdown situations and complement classroom lectures.

34. Nepal passes amendment on new map

Context:

Nepal's Parliament on Saturday unanimously voted to amend Constitution to update the country's new political map, laying claim over the strategically key areas along the border with India

Background:

- The territorial dispute stems from the fact that Nepal claims the land to the east of **river Kali**, which forms the country's western border.
- As per Kathmandu's understanding, the river originates from Limpiyadhura in the higher Himalayas, giving it access to a triangular-shaped land defined by Limpiyadhura-Lipulekh and Kalapani. India opposes the notion and says the origin of the river is much further down, which reduces Nepal's territorial demand.
- Nepal unveiled the new map after India inaugurated **Darchula-Lipulekh link road** Nepal had also earlier strongly protested when the updated Indian map published in November 2019, showing the region as part of Uttarakhand.

- Nepal claims right to the region and says India was allowed to station troops there in the 1950s and that India has refused to remove forces from the region ever since.

India's reaction:

- Responding to the development, the Indian Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) has stated the current development as being **violative of the current understanding between the two countries to hold talks on outstanding boundary issues**.
- It also argued that the artificial enlargement of claims is not based on historical fact or evidence and is not tenable.

Concerns:

- The current development will lead to further **complicating the Indo-Nepal border negotiations** as Foreign Secretaries or senior envoys have no right to negotiate on the provisions of Nepal's Constitution.
- The diplomatic fallout of the territorial dispute is likely to be serious, which could lead to **difficult days ahead for Nepal-India Relations as well as for the South Asian region**.

35. The need for an anti-discrimination law

Context:

- In the backdrop of the ongoing **anti-racism protests in the U.S.**, the author analyzes the challenges in India.

Details:

Scenario in India:

- The author argues that even after more than 70 years of independence, Indian society remains rife with **structural discrimination and prejudice**.
- The inequality problem in India is only exacerbated by historically ingrained forms of discrimination, along the lines of **caste, class, gender, and religion** among other things.
- These prejudices, which pervade every aspect of life, from access to basic goods, to education and employment, are sometimes manifest. But, on other occasions, the discrimination is indirect and even unintended.
- Both direct and indirect forms of discrimination go against **India's constitutional vision of equality**.

Concerns:

Discrimination in the private realm:

- While there are ample provisions to avoid discrimination by the state, entry barriers to goods such as housing, schools and employment tend to function in the **realm of private contracts** where there is the possibility of inequality in treatment.
- Civil liberties are just as capable of being threatened by acts of private individuals as they are by the state.
- For example, when a person refuses to lease his/her property to another based on the customer's faith, such a refusal would run directly counter to the guarantee of equality.

Counter-arguments against equality:

- **Article 15(2)** stipulates that citizens shall not on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth be denied access to shops, public restaurants, hotels and places of public entertainment. The above provision intends to place restrictions on any economic activity that sought to exclude specific groups.
- Despite constitutional provisions against inequality in the realm of private contracts, it has been observed that when case of discrimination is brought before the judiciary, the party that discriminates claims that he/she possesses a liberty to do so, that he must be free to act according to his own sense of conscience. The argument often put forward is the **rights of persons to associate with others**, often to the exclusion of certain groups.
 - The Supreme Court, in 2005, in **Zoroastrian Cooperative Housing Society vs District Registrar Co-operative Societies (Urban) and Others**, had ruled in favour of a by-law of a Parsi housing society that prohibited the sale of property to non-Parsis. The Court held that the right to forbid such a sale was intrinsic in the Parsis' fundamental right to associate with each other.

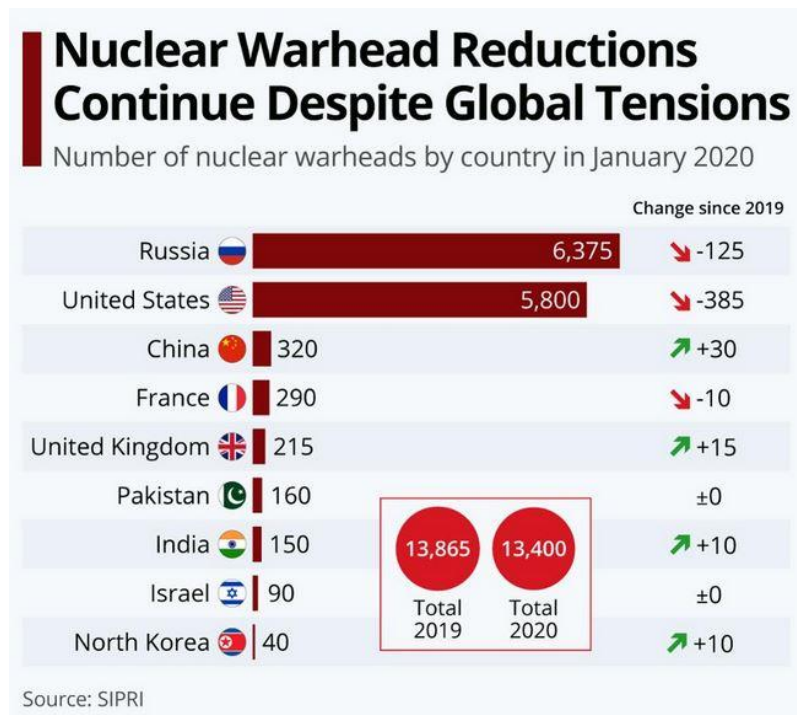
Lack of legislation:

- India is unique among democracies in that a **constitutional right to equality is not supported by comprehensive legislation**.
 - In South Africa, for example, a constitutional guarantee is augmented by an all-encompassing law which prohibits unfair discrimination not only by the government but also by private organisations and individuals.

Conclusion:

- Discrimination can take different forms. There is a need to **acknowledge** this and take corrective action.
- There is a need for a **suitable law that can address the culture of discrimination**.
- Though a statute only will not help resolve our systemic biases, it can be a step forward in addressing the deeply engrained prejudices and discrimination in our society.

36. SIPRI Report on Nuclear Stockpiles



All nations that have nuclear weapons continue to modernize their nuclear arsenals, while India and China increased their nuclear warheads in the last one year, according to a latest report by Swedish think tank Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI).

About SIPRI

- Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) is an international institute based in Sweden, dedicated to research into conflict, armaments, arms control and disarmament.
- Established in 1966, the Stockholm based SIPRI provides data, analysis and recommendations, based on open sources, to policymakers, researchers, media and the interested public.

Nuclear arsenals are on rise in 'thy neighbourhood'

- China is in the middle of a significant modernization of its nuclear arsenal.
- It is developing a so-called nuclear triad for the first time, made up of new land and sea-based missiles and nuclear-capable aircraft.
- China's nuclear arsenal had gone up from 290 warheads in 2019 to 320 in 2020, while India's went up from 130-140 in 2019 to 150 in 2020.

- Pakistan's arsenal was estimated to be between 150-160 in 2019 and has reached 160 in 2020.
- Both China and Pakistan continue to have larger nuclear arsenals than India.

A general decline across the globe

- Together with the nine nuclear-armed states – the U.S., Russia, the United Kingdom, France, China, India, Pakistan, Israel and North Korea – possessed an estimated 13,400 nuclear weapons at the start of 2020.
- This marked a decrease from an estimated 13,865 nuclear weapons at the beginning of 2019.
- The decrease in the overall numbers was largely due to the dismantlement of old nuclear weapons by Russia and the U.S., which together possess over 90% of the global nuclear weapons.

Major issue in reporting: Low levels of disclosure

- The availability of reliable information on the status of the nuclear arsenals and capabilities of the nuclear-armed states varied considerably, the report noted.
- The U.S. had disclosed important information about its stockpile and nuclear capabilities, but in 2019, the administration ended the practice of publicly disclosing the size of its stockpile.
- The governments of India and Pakistan make statements about some of their missile tests but provide little information about the status or size of their arsenals, the report said.

New START seems to 'STOP' very soon

- The U.S. and Russia have reduced their nuclear arsenals under the 2010 New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) but it will lapse in February 2021 unless both parties agree to prolong it.
- However, discussions to extend the New START or negotiate a new treaty made no progress with the U.S.'s insistence that China must join any future nuclear arms reduction talks, which China has categorically ruled out.
- The deadlock over the New START and the collapse of the 1987 Soviet-U.S. Treaty on the Elimination of Intermediate-Range and Shorter-Range Missiles (INF Treaty) in 2019 suggest that the era of bilateral nuclear arms control agreements between Russia and the U.S. might be coming to an end.
- Russia and the U.S. have already announced extensive plans to replace and modernize their nuclear warheads and delivery systems.
- Both countries have also given new or expanded roles to nuclear weapons in their military plans and doctrines, which marks a significant reversal of the post-Cold War trend towards the gradual marginalisation of nuclear weapons.

37. Nepal's Parliament unanimously endorses Constitution Amendment Bill on new map



Context

- In a historic event, the House of Representatives unanimously endorsed the Constitution Amendment Bill evening to make a change to the Coat of Arms as per the newly updated map of Nepal.
- In the closed voting, 258 votes were cast in favor of the amendment bill and no vote against which is more than the two-thirds majority required for the endorsement, Speaker Agni Sapkota announced.

About the Background

- The hall echoed with rounds of applause by the lawmakers following the announcement.
- All the parties representing the Federal Parliament supported the bill.
- Now, discussions will be held in the National Assembly as the bill has been endorsed by the lower house.

About the Highlights

- The government had released an updated political and administrative map of Nepal on May 20.
- With the issuance of the new map, Nepal's territorial area has increased by 335-square kilometers.
- The KP Oli-led government was under immense pressure from all walks of life to publish Nepal's updated political map after India inaugurated the link road via Lipu Lekh on May 8.

- Nepal had strongly condemned the construction of a new link road by India to connect Mansarobar of Tibet, China, via Kalapani Lipulekh area which falls in Nepali territory.
- The government of Nepal had called upon the government of India to refrain from carrying out any activity inside the territory of Nepal.
- Nepal has been consistently maintaining that as per the Sugauli Treaty (1816), all the territories east of Kali (Mahakali) River, including Limpiyadhura, Kalapani and Lipu Lekh, belong to Nepal.

38. Dilution of labour laws puts children at risk: activists

What's in News?

Activists and labour law experts have warned that the relaxation of labour laws across 11 States combined with closure of schools and reverse migration to rural areas due to the nationwide lockdown will force lakhs of children into child labour, while those already employed will be forced to work longer hours for meagre wages and under hazardous conditions.

- The changes made to labour laws by various State governments can be broadly divided into two categories:
 - Allowing longer working hours.
 - Suspending labour rights resulting in lax enforcement.

It is opined that easing of norms will lead to an overall increase in insecurity and informalisation of labour, loss of bargaining power among labourers and deterioration in working conditions, and that the impact on children and adolescents will be more severe.

India contributes to nearly 15% of the global child and adolescent labourers.

- There are over 10 million working children in the age group of 5 to 14 years and 22.87 million adolescents.

Even in the absence of these relaxations, children were extremely vulnerable as witnesses of food and livelihood insecurity, resulting in them falling out of the safety net.

It is highlighted that in the days to come, it is imperative that governments work on a vulnerability analysis and reach out to those children who have not returned to schools.

39. Changing Nepal and changing ties with India

Let's map the changes in Nepal and one constant: nationalism

1. Democracy

- The obvious change in Nepal is that it is now a democratic republic after nearly 250 years of being a monarchy.
- The Nepali Congress and Maoist leader, Prachanda, claim democracy (1990) and the abolition of monarchy (2008) as their legacies.

2. Societal change due to exposure to globalisation

- More pervasive is the societal change from Nepal's exposure to globalisation.
- **Geography**, too, stands to change, with the **Chinese** now having the potential to bore through the Himalayas and exhibiting their presence in Kathmandu in **economics and politics**.

3. Nationalism

- The constant in Nepal is nationalism which is really a **mask for anti-India sentiment**.
- Politicians use it for personal gain, and it is deeply **ingrained in the bureaucracy, academia and the media**.
- Today, Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli is cementing his legacy as a nationalist by **extending Nepal's map into Indian territory**.
- The cartographic aggression and the **embedding of the new map in the country's national emblem** and Constitution are untenable and should have been avoided under all circumstances.
- In 2015, the Nepali Congress government adopted the new Constitution, ignoring India's concerns.

4. Identity politics

- Identity politics with India is also visible within the country.
- Nepali citizens from the **Terai (Madhesis)** feel discriminated as being "Indian".

Let's understand how globalisation changed Nepal

- After **democracy was restored in 1990**, passports were more liberally issued, and Nepalis began looking for **work opportunities globally**, beyond just India.
- **West Asia and South-East Asia** specifically became **major destinations** for labour migration.
- **Security uncertainties** with the Maoist insurgency at home also propelled the trend of migration.

- Students and skilled personnel began moving to **Europe, the United States, Australia, Thailand and even to Japan and South Korea.**
- As of 2019, nearly a **fifth of Nepal's population**, from all parts of the country, were reportedly overseas.
- At an estimated **\$8 billion**, global remittances account for nearly **30% of Nepal's nominal GDP.**
- This makes Nepal one of the **most remittance-dependent countries** in the world.
- **Leftist ideology** and the prominent presence of **international non-governmental organisations** – ostensibly there to resolve conflict and alleviate poverty – have added to **Nepal's exposure to the world.**
- Nepal's 2011 Census shows that over **80% of its 28 million-strong** population were Hindus, and since 1962, it had formally been a Hindu kingdom.
- The new Constitution in 2015 makes Nepal a secular country.
- The proliferation of communication technology has also spread a certain cosmopolitanism but without the accompanying metropolitanism.

Nepal exploring options beyond India

- Kathmandu has continued its long-standing efforts to **spread Nepal's options beyond India.**
- **Multilateral development banks** are by far the **biggest lenders** and players in the country's development efforts.
- And in fact, one of Nepal's largest aid donors is the European Union.
- **India and China** are **not the only players** for big projects either.
- A long-delayed project to pipe water into Kathmandu was with an Italian company.
- Major investments in the telecom sector are coming from Malaysia, and the largest international carrier in Nepal is Qatar Airways.

Weakening of natural bond and responsible factors

- The **outward movement of students**, along with with the growth of institutions of higher learning at home, has meant that most young people in Nepal, including emerging contemporary leaders in politics, business or academics, have not studied in India.
- This lack of **common collegiate roots** removes a **natural bond of previous generations** that had provided for better understanding and even empathy.
- While most Nepalis **understand Hindi**, because of the popularity of Bollywood, **articulation is quite another matter.**

Robust ties with India, despite diversification

- Despite Nepal's efforts to diversify its options globally, **its linkages with India remain robust.**

- Nepal's trade with India has grown in absolute terms and continues to account for more than **two-thirds of Nepal's external trade** of around \$12 billion annually.
- This clearly reflects the **advantages of geography**, both physical and societal.
- India continues to be the **largest aggregate investor in Nepal**.
- The massive under-construction **Arun-III 900 MW hydro-electric project** is slated to **singly produce as much power, when completed in five years, as Nepal produces today**.
- Moreover, **the peg with the Indian Rupee** provides **unique stability** to the **Nepali Rupee**.

Unique advantage to Nepal

- Nepal's per-capita income is **just above \$1,000**.
- While the huge **remittance economy** has brought a semblance of well-being, the country **has a long way to go in reaching prosperity**.
- The relationship with India, with **open borders** and **Nepalis being allowed to live and work freely**, provides Nepal a unique advantage and an economic cushion.
- The latter is particularly important today with COVID-19-caused global contraction **positioned to pop the remittance bubble**.
- Neither the Chinese nor any others are likely to write blank cheques.
- India for its part should also **focus on developing its border areas with Nepal**, with better roads and amenities of interest (such as shopping malls) to the burgeoning Nepali middle class.
- This **would have economic plusses for both sides** and keep ties strong at the people's level. It would also be an image makeover.

Conclusion

It is important that we update the prism through which we view our relationship with our Himalayan neighbour. We must not forget the past nor turn away from it but, instead, must be mindful of the realities of a changing India and a changing Nepal.

40. U.S. Bill to sanction China over Uighur rights

Context:

U.S. President Donald Trump has signed legislation calling for sanctions over the repression of China's Uighurs.

Details:

- The Bill was intended to send China a strong message on human rights by mandating sanctions against those responsible for oppression of the Muslim minority.

- The UN estimates that more than a million Muslims have been detained in camps in the Xinjiang region.
 - The Uighur men are placed in concentration camps while the women are being used by the Han community.
 - The Han community reasons these actions as the basis of providing better integration among the community.
- China and the United States are already at loggerheads over a large number of issues from China's handling of the coronavirus pandemic to U.S. support for Chinese-claimed Taiwan.

China's reaction:

- China denies mistreatment and says the camps provide vocational training and are needed to fight extremism.
- China responded to the Bill with anger, saying it "vilified" the human rights situation in Xinjiang and was a malicious attack against China.
- It urged the US to stop its interfere in China's internal affairs.

Who are Uighurs?

- The Uighurs are a minority Turkic ethnic group originating from and culturally affiliated with the general region of Central and East Asia.
- The Uighurs are recognized as native to the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of the People's Republic of China.
- They are considered to be one of China's 55 officially recognized ethnic minorities.
- The Uighurs have traditionally inhabited a series of oases scattered across the Taklamakan Desert comprising the Tarim Basin, a territory which has historically been controlled by many civilizations including China, the Mongols, the Tibetans and the Turkic world.
- An estimated 80% of Xinjiang's Uyghurs still live in the Tarim Basin. The rest of Xinjiang's Uyghurs mostly live in Urumqi, the capital city of Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (UAR), which is located in the historical region of Dzungaria.

41. Rule of Law Index and India

The Supreme Court has asked the government to treat a writ petition for setting up expert panels to boost India's prospects in the Rule of Law Index.

Why in news again?

- The cause of action for the petition accrued when the World Justice Project ranked India in the 69th position in its Rule of Law Index.

- India has never been ranked even among top 50 in the Index, but successive governments did nothing to improve the international ranking of India, said the petition.
- Poor rule of law has a devastating effect on the right to life, liberty, economic justice, fraternity, individual dignity and national integration.

What is the Rule of Law Index?

- The Rule of Law Index is a quantitative assessment tool by the World Justice Project (WJP) designed to offer a detailed and comprehensive picture of the extent to which countries adhere to the rule of law in practice.
- It measures countries' rule of law performance across eight factors:

(1) Constraints on Government Powers, (2) Absence of Corruption, (3) Open Government, (4) Fundamental Rights, (5) Order and Security, (6) Regulatory Enforcement, (7) Civil Justice, and (8) Criminal Justice

WJP definition of Rule of Law

The World Justice Project defines the rule of law system as one in which the following four universal principles are upheld:

- The government and its officials and agents are accountable under the law.
- The laws are clear, publicized, stable and fair, and protect fundamental rights, including the security of persons and property.
- The process by which the laws are enacted, administered, and enforced is accessible, efficient, and fair.
- Justice is delivered by competent, ethical, and independent representatives and neutrals who are of sufficient number, have adequate resources and reflect the makeup of the communities they serve.

42. Individual contributions to NDRF get green light from Finance Ministry

Context:

- Contributions to the **National Disaster Response Fund (NDRF)**.

Background:

Plea in Supreme Court:

- In the light of concerns about donations sent to the **PM CARES Fund** or the **Prime Minister's National Relief Fund (PMNRF)**, as both claim they are **not public authorities** subject to questions under the **Right to Information Act** a

plea was made in the SC asking it to order the transfer of contributions made to the PM CARES Fund to the NDRF.

- The Supreme Court has sought a response from the Centre to the plea.

NDRF:

- The National Disaster Response Fund (NDRF) was set up in accordance with **Section 46 of the Disaster Management Act, 2005**. It is meant to “meet the expenses for emergency response, relief and rehabilitation” for any disaster situation.
- Although Section 46 includes a clause for grants made by any person or institution, provisions for such donations had not been made.

Details:

- The Finance Ministry has given approval to a proposal made by the Union Home Ministry to allow individuals and institutions to contribute directly to the National Disaster Response Fund (NDRF).

43. How Manipur defections put focus on Speakers’ powers to disqualify?

Manipur Speaker’s decision to disqualify some MLAs ahead of the Rajya Sabha election has raised questions once again on the Speaker’s powers to disqualify under the tenth schedule of our Constitution.

What is the Tenth Schedule?

- The anti-defection law, referred to as the Tenth Schedule, was added to the Constitution through the Fifty-Second (Amendment) Act, 1985 when Rajiv Gandhi was PM.
- It lays down the process by which legislators may be disqualified on grounds of defection by the Presiding Officer of a legislature based on a petition by any other member of the House.
- A legislator is deemed to have defected if he either voluntarily gives up the membership of his party or disobeys the directives of the party leadership on a vote.
- This implies that a legislator defying (abstaining or voting against) the party whip on any issue can lose his membership of the House.
- The law applies to both Parliament and state assemblies.

Exceptions under the law

- Legislators may change their party without the risk of disqualification in certain circumstances.
- The law allows a party to merge with or into another party provided that at least two-thirds of its legislators are in favour of the merger.

- In such a scenario, neither the members who decide to merge nor the ones who stay with the original party will face disqualification.

Is there any time limit to decide on the matter?

- The law does not specify a time period for the Presiding Officer to decide on a disqualification plea.
- Given that courts can intervene only after the Presiding Officer has decided on the matter, the petitioner seeking disqualification has no option but to wait for this decision to be made.

Under debate: Speaker's power

- The power for this disqualification is vested in the Speaker, who is usually a nominee of the ruling party.
- Since no action was taken by the Speaker on the disqualification petitions, a writ petition was filed before the High Court of Manipur in Imphal seeking directions to decide on the petition.
- However, the court did not pass an order.
- It said that the larger issue of whether a High Court can direct a Speaker to decide a disqualification petition within a certain timeframe is pending before a Constitution Bench of the Supreme Court.
- The parties are left with the option to move the apex court or wait for the outcome of the cases pending before it.

The apex court's reluctance to intervene

- In 2018, however, the High Court, refusing the preliminary objections of the Speaker, decided to hear the case on merits.
- It reasoned that since the remedy under Tenth Schedule is an alternative to moving courts.
- It said that if the remedy is found to be ineffective due to deliberate inaction or indecision on the part of the Speaker, the court will have jurisdiction.
- However, the High Court again did not pass orders since the larger issue is pending before the Supreme Court.

The apex court recommends-

- The apex court has expressed its displeasure with the Speaker's lack of urgency in deciding the disqualification petitions.
- A three-judge bench of the Supreme Court ruled that Speakers of assemblies and the Parliament must decide disqualification pleas within a period of three months except in extraordinary circumstances.
- This settled the law for situations where the timing of the disqualification is meddled to manipulate floor tests.
- The court also recommended that the Parliament consider taking a relook at the powers of the Speakers citing instances of partisanship.

44. YUKTI 2.0: Platform for Higher Education Institutes

Why in News

The **Ministry of Human Resource Development** has launched an initiative 'YUKTI 2.0' to help systematically assimilate technologies having commercial potential and information related to incubated startups in higher education institutions.

□ YUKTI 2.0 is an extension of 'YUKTI (Young India combating Covid with Knowledge, Technology and Innovation) Portal' which was launched to identify ideas relevant in Covid pandemic.

Key Points

□ **Creation of Database:** The Ministry has invited students, faculty members, startups and other stakeholders of higher education institutions to register on the YUKTI portal and share their technologies and innovations.

□ **Importance of Database:** o Database shared will be showcased to the investor community such as businessmen, farmers and industrialists i.e. students will be able to sell their ideas. • However, preliminary innovations won't be showcased on YUKTI 2.0 but only those which have commercialisation potential.

o It will provide a clear picture of the state of the innovation ecosystem of our higher educational institutions.

o It will help the government to identify bottlenecks and formulate appropriate policies to strengthen the innovation ecosystem in the country.

o Further, it will offer solutions to the problems faced by the country.

□ **In Line with Atmanirbhar Bharat:** YUKTI 2.0 will also help in fostering the culture of innovation and entrepreneurship in academic institutions.

□ **Other Initiatives to Boost Innovation:** o **Institutions of Eminence (IoE) Scheme** is a government's scheme to provide the regulatory architecture for setting up or upgrading of 20 Institutions (10 from public sector and 10 from the private sector) as world-class teaching and research institutions.

o Various amendments have been made in the **Prime Minister's Research Fellowship Scheme** to boost research in the country.

o Through the **Atal Innovation Mission**, the government has established Atal Tinkering Laboratories (ATLs) in schools across the country. The objective of this scheme is to foster curiosity, creativity and imagination in young minds; and inculcate skills such as design mindset, computational thinking, adaptive learning, physical computing.

GS 3 : Economy, Science and Technology, Environment

1. Universal Basic Income

Why in News

To deal with the **economic inequality, unemployment and poverty** created by the Covid-19 pandemic, many advocate **Universal Basic Income (UBI)** programme to be a solution.

Key Points

- In order to deal with the **Covid-19 pandemic**, the governments across the world have imposed measures like lockdown and social distancing.
- However, these measures have caused collateral damage to almost every sector of the economy, so much so that the **International Monetary Fund** held the current economic crisis could be the worst ever since the **Great depression 1929**.
- With almost **90% of India's workforce in the informal sector without minimum wages or social security**, micro-level circumstances in India are worse than anywhere else.
 - Even before pandemic, India was struggling to provide job opportunities for millions of job aspirants who were entering the job market.
- Regular payments through **Universal Basic Income (UBI)** can ensure the sustenance of the workers engaged in the informal sector, at least till the economy normalises.
- Countries across the world, which include **Kenya, Brazil, Finland, and Switzerland**, have bought into this concept.
- Supporters of the UBI programme include **Economics Nobel Laureates Peter Diamond and Christopher Pissarides**, and tech leaders Mark Zuckerberg and Elon Musk.

Idea of Universal Basic Income

- The **Economic Survey of India 2016-17** has advocated the concept of **Universal Basic Income (UBI)** as an alternative to the various social welfare schemes **in an effort to reduce poverty**.
- Idea behind the Universal Basic Income is that every person should have a **right to a basic income to cover his needs, just by virtue of being a citizen**.
- The purpose of the UBI is to **prevent or reduce poverty** and increase equality among citizens.
- UBI has five components:
 - **Universality**- It is universal in nature.

- **Periodic-** Payments at periodic regular intervals (not one-off grants)
- **Payments to individuals**
- **Payments in cash** (not food vouchers or service coupons).
- **Unconditionality-** There are no preconditions attached with the cash transferred to the beneficiary.

Benefits of Universal Basic Income (UBI)

- UBI will provide secured income to individuals.
- The scheme **will reduce poverty and income inequality** in society.
- It will **increase the purchasing power** of every poor which will further increase aggregate demand.
- Easy to implement because no identification of the beneficiary is involved.
- It will reduce the wastage of government money because its implementation is very simple.

Issues In implementing UBI

- **Lack of the political will** because of the **costs involved**.
 - The fiscal cost of a UBI pegged at Rs. 7,620, at 75% universality, was 4.9% of the GDP.
 - The Economic Survey of India's (2016-17) model of UBI suggested providing Rs. 7,620 per annum to 75% of India's population.
 - The income was based on **Suresh Tendulkar's poverty line** of 2011-12 inflation-indexed to 2016-17.
 - A UBI on par with the numbers suggested by the Economic Survey could lead to targeted household incomes increasing by almost Rs. 40,000 per annum, since the average Indian household size is approximately five.
- **Difficulty in reducing some of the existing subsidies** to balance the resultant deficit.
- There is no guarantee that the given cash will be spent on productive activities, health & education, etc. It may be spent on tobacco, alcohol, drugs, and other luxury goods etc.
- Free cash to the people will **increase the rate of inflation** in the economy.
- **Workers can refuse to work as a labourer or demand higher wages** which can increase the cost of production of agricultural goods.

Way Forward

- The 2017 Economic Survey had flagged the UBI scheme as “a conceptually appealing idea” and a possible alternative to social welfare programmes targeted at reducing poverty.
- UBI envisages an uncompromised social safety net that seeks to assure a dignified life for everyone, a concept that is expected to gain traction in a global economy buffeted by uncertainties on account of globalization, technological change, and automation.
- If universal basic income ever had a time, it is now. It can be implemented to deal with the unemployment, income inequality and poverty posed by Covid-19 pandemic.

2. Locust control: 'govt. ignoring non-chemical measures'

Context:

- Locust Infestation in India.

Background:

- The Central Government's **locust control policy has been focussed on the use of pesticides.**
- The government has been taking steps to increase its capacity for **aerial spray of poisonous pesticides for locust control.**

Details:

- Rajinder Chaudhary, Advisor, Kudrati Kheti Abhiyan, Haryana has expressed concerns over the **potential side-effects of aerial spraying of pesticides.**
- The government seems to have completely ignored non-chemical measures despite the fact that a number of effective non-chemical remedies have been suggested by experts from India and abroad.

Ill-effects of chemical methods:

- The ill-effects of aerial spraying of dangerous pesticides are well-established. The **hazardous and long life chemicals** would **pollute the water and soil** which could have a detrimental effect on the environment and human health.

Non-chemical methods:

- The non-chemical methods would provide an effective approach to control locusts **without serious side-effects.**
- There are numerous strategies available under the non-chemical framework.

- The non-chemical measures could involve the use of **biological methods** to control locusts.
 - One simple strategy would be to protect **birds that eat the predatory insects**.
 - China's deployment of the duck army is now becoming a diplomatic policy. China had even sent its duck army to Pakistan to deal with the locust menace.
 - Use of bio-pesticides provides for an effective solution. The **oil formulations of Metarhizium anisopliae spores (mycopesticide)** provide an effective control measure for locusts. Metarhizium biopesticide kills 70%-90% of treated locusts within 14-20 days, with no measurable impact on non-target organisms.
- Chintala Venkata Reddy, an organic farmer from Telangana who was awarded the Padma Shri, has suggested a method to control locust infestations.
 - It involves **spraying mud** (sub soil with high clay content) on to the standing crops.
 - Given the fact that the locusts cannot digest the clay content, this measure will help control locusts without serious side-effects.

Way forward:

- There is a need to ensure that the locust control measures do not pollute air, water, environment and the food chain.
- There is a need for an **integrated pest management strategy**.
- If chemical methods cannot be neglected all together, then at least in the areas near the population and close to catchment and storage areas of waterbodies, the government must adopt the safer non-chemical measures instead of adopting chemical measures.

3. Problem of interest rate differential in India

Why long term loans come with a higher interest rate?

- Long term loans equate to **long repayment periods**.
- More uncertainty during these long periods can translate to **higher risks**.
- And to **compensate for the high risks** involved, banks quote higher interest rates when corporates borrow from them to build and operate stuff.
- However, when banks borrow from the RBI they are borrowing **over short intervals**.
- And so they get **charged lower interest rates**.

So, why banks are keeping interest rates high despite borrowing at low rates from the RBI?

- Ever so often, the RBI cuts rates in the hopes of making loans **more accessible to banks**.
- They are hoping banks will also extend this benevolence to their customers by cutting long term interest rates.
- But right now, banks are scared.
- They don't think the corporates can pay back.
- So they are keeping **long term rates at elevated levels** despite borrowing at consistently low rates from the RBI.

What happens when gap between long-term and short term interest rates widen?

- Capital wasn't cheap to begin with for corporate borrowers, and it's getting more expensive.
- This comes just as migrant rural workers have been driven out of urban production centers because of shuttered factories.
- Even if this labor is safely put back on, say, road construction, concessionaires [think private road contractors] might still go bankrupt before completing any projects.
- That's because their **annuity payments** from the government are linked to falling short-term policy rates, whereas their long-term borrowing **costs are both high and sticky**

To understand the issue of annuity payment and its relation with interest rates, let's dig deeper into 3 types of models-

1. Build-Operate-Transfer (BOT) Model

- So, NHAI is the National Highways Authority of India and is largely responsible for building and maintaining roads.
- Its preferred method to get the job done is to deploy what is called the **BOT model**.
- The **Build-Operate-Transfer (BOT) model**, as the name suggests is a way for NHAI to **offload its responsibilities of road building** to private contractors.
- Under BOT model, private contractors build the road, operate it, make money off of collecting toll, and after about 10-15 years, they hand over the road back to NHAI.
- There aren't enough private contractors willing to bid for such projects because – hey, maintaining and operating a road is a pain.
- Why pain? You have to wait 15 years to recoup all the money you had to pour in to build the damn thing. That's the pain.

2. Engineering, procurement and Construction (EPC) model

- Under the EPC (Engineering, Procurement & Construction) model, NHAI pays private contractors first, so that they can help NHAI build the road.

- The contractor does not operate or collect tolls here.
- Instead, it can walk away scot-free with money in its coffers once it's done building the road.
- But it's **hard for the government to shore up all the resources required upfront.**

3. Hybrid Annuity Model (HAM)- The middle path

- It's a nice little mix of both EPC and BOT.
- Under it, NHAI pays some money upfront in fixed installments usually, 40% of the project cost.
- And the private contractor does his bit by putting up the rest and finishing the project.
- However, once the construction is complete, the contractor does not make money off of collecting toll.
- Instead, he **transfers the assets over to NHAI.**
- So its incumbent on the government to pay the rest of the money once the project takes off.
- And the payments are **dependent on the asset created, the performance of the developer, and a few other things.**
- However, since the **payouts usually last 15-20 years** we need to find a way to determine what kind of money the government pays the contractor every 6 months.
- And here's the best way to think about this – So when the government pays the **40% upfront**, it's promising to pay the **60% sometime in the future.**
- It's money they owe the contractor.

And, here is the crux of the matter

- So when the repayments, are made, they'll have to pay **the principal and the interest.**
- The interest involves a **fixed component (3%)** and a **variable component.**
- What is variable component? The **variable component** is effectively the **short term policy rates.**
- So if the RBI keeps cutting these short term rates, private **contractors get less money per instalment** even if their roads are all nice and shiny.
- And this can't bode well for them because they probably put up the 60% back in the day by borrowing from another bank.
- A bank that's charging them long term interest rates that refuse to come down.

Conclusion

The widening gap between the short term policy rates and long term interest could easily spell the disaster for the entrepreneurs and in turn for the economy as a whole. The government should consider a special package for such entities given the unprecedented situations we found ourselves in.

4. Cabinet committee okays 50,000 cr. infusion for MSMEs

Context:

- The government will set up 10,000 crore fund, which, with leverage, will be able to finance equity infusion of about 50,000 crores in small businesses
- The move is expected to expand size as well as capacity of MSMEs and will encourage them to get listed on main board of domestic bourses

Details:

- The Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs approved ₹50,000 crore equity infusion for micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) with an aim to help them enhance capacity, while also encouraging them to get listed.
 - The government will set up ₹10,000 crore fund, which, with leverage, will be able to finance equity infusion of about ₹50,000 crores in small businesses.
 - The move is expected to expand size as well as capacity of MSMEs and will encourage them to get listed on main board of domestic bourses.

Besides, approval was given for a subordinate debt of ₹20,000 crore to provide equity support to stressed MSMEs. This is likely to benefit two lakh MSMEs.

The CCEA, headed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, also approved the new definition of MSMEs increasing the investment limit to ₹50 crore and turnover to ₹250 crore for medium enterprises. **Read more on this topic covered in 20th May 2020 CNA.**

- The new definition will not distinguish between manufacturing and service sector.

For micro enterprises, the investment limit will be ₹1 crore and turnover ₹5 crore, while for small enterprises, the investment limit will be ₹10 crore and the turnover ₹50 crore.

It has also been decided that the turnover with respect to exports will not be counted in the limits of turnover for any category of MSME units, be it micro, small or medium.

5. PM SVANidhi: Special Micro-Credit Facility Scheme launched

In News:

- The Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs recently launched a Special Micro-Credit Facility Scheme for providing affordable loans to **street vendors**.
- The scheme is **PM SVANidhi – PM Street Vendor’s Atma Nirbhar Nidhi**.

Key takeaways

- The vendors can avail a **working capital loan** of up to Rs. 10,000.

- It will be repayable in **monthly instalments** in the tenure of one year.
- On **timely/early repayment** of the loan, an **interest subsidy** at 7% per annum will be credited to the bank accounts of beneficiaries through Direct Benefit Transfer on six monthly basis.
- There will be **no penalty** on early repayment of loan.
- Over **50 lakh people**, including vendors, hawkers, thelewalas, etc. are **likely to benefit** from this scheme.
- Street vendors from peri- urban/ rural areas have become beneficiaries of an urban livelihood programme for the first time.
- MFIs/ NBFCs/ SHG Banks have been allowed in a scheme for the urban poor due to their ground level presence for the first time.

6. Kisan Credit Cards (KCC) for 1.5 crore dairy farmers

The Union Govt. is set to provide Kisan Credit Card (KCC) to 1.5 crore dairy farmers belonging to Milk Unions and Milk producing Companies within the next two months under a special drive.

What is Kisan Credit Card (KCC)?

- KCC is a credit scheme introduced in August 1998 by banks to extend credit facilities to farmers.
- This model scheme was prepared by the NABARD on the recommendations of R.V. GUPTA committee to provide term loans for agricultural needs
- Participating institutions include all commercial banks, Regional Rural Banks, and state co-operative banks. The scheme has short term credit limits for crops and term loans.
- KCC offering credit to the farmers is of two types: 1. Cash Credit 2. Term Credit (for allied activities such as pump sets, land development, plantation, drip irrigations).

Facilities under KCC

- Credit card and passbook or credit card cum passbook provided to eligible farmers facilitate revolving cash credit facility.
- Any number of withdrawals and repayments within a limit, which is fixed on the basis of operational land holding, cropping pattern and scale of finance can be made.
- Each withdrawal has to be repaid within a maximum period of 12 months and the Card is valid for 3 to 5 years subject to annual review.
- Conversion/reschedulement of loans is permissible in case of damage to crops due to natural calamities.
- Crop loans disbursed under KCC Scheme for notified crops are covered under Rashtriya Krishi Bima Yojana, to protect farmers against loss of crop yield caused by natural calamities, pest attacks etc.

What's' in the bucket for Dairy Farmers?

- Under the dairy cooperative movement, approximately 1.7 crore farmers are associated with 230 Milk Unions in the country.
- In the first phase of this campaign, the target is to cover all farmers who are members of dairy cooperative societies and associated with different Milk Unions and who do not have KCC.
- Although the general limit for KCC credit without collateral is Rs. 1.6 lakh, but for dairy farmers, it can be upto Rs.3 lakh.
- This will ensure more credit availability for dairy farmers associated with Milk Unions as well as assuring repayment of loans to banks.

7. Global Economic Prospects (GEP) 2020 report by World Bank

The World Bank has released its Global Economic Prospects (GEP) 2020 report.
Global Economic Prospects (GEP)

- GEP is a World Bank Group flagship report that examines global economic developments and prospects, with a special focus on emerging market and developing economies.
- It is issued twice a year, in January and June.
- The January edition includes in-depth analyses of topical policy challenges while the June edition contains shorter analytical pieces.



Summary of the report

In a nutshell, the outlook for the global economy for 2020 has darkened, amid slowing activity and heightened downside risks.

1) On poverty

- The scope and speed with which the COVID-19 pandemic and economic shutdowns have devastated the poor around the world are unprecedented in modern times.
- Current estimates show that 60 million people could be pushed into extreme poverty in 2020.

2) Policy choices

- Policy choices made today – include greater debt transparency to invite new investment, foster advances in digital connectivity, and a major expansion of cash safety nets for the poor.
- The financing and building of productive infrastructure are among the hardest-to-solve development challenges in the post-pandemic recovery.

3) Emerging Market and Developing Economies (EMDEs)

- EMDEs face health crises, restrictions and external shocks like falling trade, tourism and commodity prices, as well as capital outflows.
- These countries are expected to have a 3-8% output loss in the short term, based on studies of previous pandemics, as per the analysis.
- Growth is likely to slow more in commodity-exporting EMDEs than in commodity-importing ones.

8. Time to discontinue subsidy on electricity for farmers

Replacing free power supply scheme with DBT

- The Centre has prescribed that the **free power supply scheme** should be replaced with the **direct benefits transfer (DBT)** as a condition to allow States to increase their borrowing limit.
- It is not the first time that the Union government has recommended DBT with regard to electricity.
- But **what is new is setting the time frame** for implementing it.
- By December this year, the DBT should be introduced **at least in one district of a State** and from the next financial year, a full roll-out should be made.

Resistance from the states

- Tamil Nadu, which was the first State to introduce free power in September 1984, is strongly resisting the Centre's stipulation.
- Tamil Nadu Chief Minister has taken a categorical stand against the proposal.
- Though Chief Ministers of Andhra Pradesh, Telangana and Punjab, where free power scheme is in vogue, are yet to express their views.
- But it is not difficult to predict their response.
- After all, Punjab Chief Minister who had abolished the scheme during his first innings is now a strong votary of the scheme.

Let's get the overview of the power subsidy bill

- In the last 15 years, Maharashtra has been the only State that scrapped the scheme within a year of introducing it.
- Karnataka, which has been implementing it since 2008, may become the first southern State to have DBT in power supply if the hint dropped by Chief Minister in early March is any indication.
- The power subsidy bills in the **four southern States and Punjab are at least ₹33,000 crore**, an amount the State governments will struggle to meet due to resource crunch in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic.

But, why the Central government want to scrap the scheme?

It is because of the following issues-

1. Wastage of water and electricity

- The financial stress apart, the universal application of the scheme has had deleterious consequences.
- Primarily, the scheme has led to **widespread wastage of water and electricity**.
- It is **inherently against incentivising** even a conscientious farmer to conserve the two precious resources.
- It may be pertinent to point out that **India is the largest user of groundwater at 251 billion cubic meters**, exceeding the combined withdrawal by China and the U.S., as pointed out by Bharat Ramaswami of the Indian Statistical Institute last year.

2. Worrying rate of the groundwater table depletion

- Be it parts of the Cauvery delta in Tamil Nadu or Sangrur district of Punjab, the story about the groundwater table is the same – a worrying rate of depletion.
- There is one more attendant problem.

- To sustain their activity, farmers need to **go for submersible or high-capacity pumpsets**. [Consider the fact that to draw same quantity of water you have to use more power if your water table is low]

3. It encourages the installation of more pump sets

- Third, the extension of the scheme to different States over the years has only encouraged the installation of more pumpsets. Karnataka is a classic example, The number of irrigation pumpsets, which was around 17 lakh 12 years ago, is now around 30 lakh.

4. Misuse of scheme

- There is misuse of the scheme for which not just a section of farmers but also field officials have to be blamed.

5. AT & C losses clubbed as consumption by farmers

- In the **absence of meters for these connections or segregation of feeders or metering of distribution transformers**, accurate measurement of consumption becomes tricky.
- Those in charge of **power distribution companies** find it convenient to reduce their **aggregate technical and commercial (AT&C)** losses by clubbing a portion of the losses with energy consumption by the farm sector.

What is the argument of the supporter of the scheme?

- Proponents of the free power scheme have a couple of valid points in their support.
- Apart from ensuring food security, free power provides **livelihood opportunities to landless workers**.
- When farmers dependent on supplies through **canals get water almost free of cost**, it is **but fair that those not covered by canal irrigation should be given free electricity**.
- Though there is substance in the argument, it is **not difficult to arrive at a fair pricing mechanism**.
- Small and marginal farmers and those who are outside the canal supply **deserve free power**, albeit with restrictions.
- But there is no justification for continuing with the scheme perpetually to other farmers.
- However, those enjoying free power need **to be told about the need for judicious use of groundwater** and how to conserve it.

Conclusion

Making use of the situation created by the COVID-19 pandemic, the Centre is trying to make lasting changes in areas where such measures are long overdue. At least in the

area of power sector, its attempt can yield meaningful results only if there is a change in the mindset of agriculturists and political parties towards the concept of free power.

9. Kohala Hydropower project



Context

- China under the multi-billion-dollar CPEC will set up a 1,124-megawatt power project in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir despite India's objection to it, according to a media report.
- The details of the Kohala hydropower project were presented in the 127th meeting of the Private Power and Infrastructure Board (PPIB) chaired by Energy Minister Omar Ayub.

About G7

The meeting was informed that a tripartite agreement has been finalised among China's Three Gorges Corporation, the authorities in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK) and the PPIB to implement the 1,124-megawatt Kohala hydroelectric power project under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) framework.

About the project

- The project will be built on the Jhelum River and aims at annually providing more than five billion units of clean and low-cost electricity for consumers in Pakistan.
- The paper further reported that this marks one of the largest investments of USD 2.4 billion in an independent power producer (IPP) in the region.

- The 3,000-km-long CEPC is aimed at connecting China and Pakistan with rail, road, pipelines and optical cable fiber networks.
- It connects China's Xinjiang province with Pakistan Gwadar port, providing access to China to the Arabian Sea.
- The CPEC passes through PoK, over which India has conveyed its protests to China.

10.(PDCs) for attracting investments in India

MAKE IN INDIA

CREATING A PROJECT PIPELINE FOR INVESTMENT FLOW

Setting up of Project Development Cell in Ministries/Departments

Narendra Modi

- Grow the pipeline of investible projects in India
- Attract greater FDI
- Make India a more investment friendly destination
- Provide direct & indirect employment in various sectors

#InvestInIndia

Context

The Cabinet has given its approval for setting up of an Empowered Group of Secretaries (EGoS) and Project Development Cells (PDCs) in Ministries/Departments of the Central Government for attracting investments in India.

About the Background

- This new mechanism will reinforce India's vision of becoming a \$5 trillion economy by 2024-2025.
- It aims to take advantage of these opportunities from the global economic situation, considering the Covid-19 crisis, to make India among the largest players in the global value chain.

About Empowered Group of Secretaries (EGoS)

- The Empowered Group of Secretaries (EGoS) has the Cabinet Secretary as the Chairperson and Secretary, Department for Promotion of Industry, and Internal Trade as the Member Convenor.
- Secretaries of the Department of Commerce, Department of Revenue, and Department of Economic Affairs, and the CEO, Niti Aayog are the Members of this committee.
- The Secretary of Department concerned where investment is coming is to be co-opted in the committee.

About the Highlights

- A Project Development Cell (PDC) is also approved for the development of investible projects in coordination between the Central Government and State Governments and thereby grow the pipeline of investible projects in India and in turn increase Foreign Direct Investment inflows.
- Under the guidance of the Secretary, an officer not below the rank of Joint Secretary of each relevant central line Ministry, who will be in-charge of the PDC will be tasked to conceptualise, strategise, implement, and disseminate details with respect to investible projects.

11. Pharmacopoeia Commission for Indian Medicine and Homeopathy



Context

In a bid to improve the standardization outcomes and effective regulation and quality control of Ayurveda, Siddha, Unani and Homoeopathy drugs, the United Cabinet chaired by the Prime Minister, Narendra Modi gave its approval to re-establish Pharmacopoeia Commission for Indian Medicine & Homoeopathy (PCIM&H) as Subordinate Office under Ministry of AYUSH by merging into it Pharmacopoeia Laboratory for Indian Medicine (PLIM) and Homoeopathic Pharmacopoeia Laboratory (HPL)- the two central laboratories established at Ghaziabad since 1975.

Background

- The merger, the government said, is aimed at optimizing the use of infrastructural facilities, technical manpower and financial resources of the three organizations for enhancing the standardization outcomes of Ayurveda, Siddha, Unani and Homoeopathy drugs towards their effective regulation and quality control.
- Presently, Pharmacopoeia Commission for Indian Medicine & Homoeopathy (PCIM&H) is an autonomous body under the aegis of Ministry of AYUSH established since 2010.

About the Highlights

- This merger will facilitate focused and cohesive development of standards of AYUSH drugs and publication of pharmacopoeias and formularies.
- It is also intended to accord legal status to the merged structure of PCIM&H and its laboratory by virtue of making necessary amendment and enabling provisions in the Drugs & Cosmetics Rules, 1945.
- Post-merger PCIM&H will have adequate administrative structure under the Ministry to strive for augmenting the capacity and outcomes of pharmacopoeial work, achieving harmonization of pharmacopoeial standards of Ayurveda, Siddha, Unani and Homoeopathy drugs, preventing duplication and overlapping of drug standardization work and optimal utilization of resources in effective manner.

12. Payments Infrastructure Development Fund

Why in News

Recently, the **Reserve Bank of India (RBI)** has announced the creation of a Rs. 500-crore Payments Infrastructure Development Fund (PIDF).

Key Points

- **Aim:** PIDF has been created to **encourage deployment of Point of Sale (PoS) infrastructure**, both physical and digital, in **tier-3 to tier-6 centres and north eastern states**.
 - The setting of PIDF is in line with the measures proposed by the **vision document on payment and settlement systems in India 2019-2021**.
 - It is also in line with the **RBI's proposal to set up an Acceptance Development Fund** which will be used to develop card acceptance infrastructure across small towns and cities.
- **Corpus:** It has a corpus of Rs. 500 crore in which **the RBI has made an initial contribution of Rs. 250 crore**. The remaining will come from the card-issuing banks and card networks operating in the country.
- **Recurring contributions:** The PIDF will also receive recurring contributions to cover operational expenses from card-issuing banks and card networks. RBI will also contribute to yearly shortfalls, if necessary.
- **Governance:** The fund will be **governed through an advisory council** but will be managed and administered by the RBI.

- **Need:** Most of the PoS terminals in the country are concentrated in tier 1 and 2 cities because of the high cost of merchant acquisition and merchant terminalisation.
 - The **merchant onboarding** and **training** is a key challenge for enhancing the reach of digital payments in smaller towns and cities.
 - Merchant onboarding means adding the new merchant in a payment gateway system.
- **Benefit:** It will give a push to digital payments across India.
 - Reduce demand for cash over time.

13.Sunderbans Damaged in Cyclone Amphan

Why in News

Recently, the Chief Minister of West Bengal highlighted that about **28% of the Sunderbans** has been **damaged by Cyclone Amphan** and launched a drive for planting **mangroves** and trees to mark the **World Environment Day (5th June)**.

Key Points

- The Indian Sunderbans, an **area south of the Dampier Hodges line**, is spread over 9,630 sq km, of which the mangrove forest accounts for 4,263 sq km.
 - 1,200 sq km of that mangrove forest has been destroyed.
 - **Mangroves** not only **reduce wind speed** but **break the waves during a storm** surge caused by a cyclone.
 - **Trees turned yellow and red** after the cyclone mostly **due to salinity** and trees can only survive if the salinity of the soil comes down.
 - **Dampier Hodges line** is an imaginary line, passing through 24 Parganas South and North districts (West Bengal) which indicates the northern-most limits of the estuarine zone affected by tidal fluctuations.
- The **damage has been much on the Indian side** of the Sundarbans and not on the Bangladesh side.
- The CM has directed the Forest Department to be prepared to plant 3.5 crore mangroves by **14th July** which is celebrated as the **World Forest Day**.

Sundarbans

- It is a **vast contiguous mangrove forest ecosystem** in the coastal region of Bay of Bengal spread over **India and Bangladesh** on the delta of the **Ganges, Brahmaputra and Meghna rivers**.
- The site is intersected by a complex network of tidal waterways, mudflats and small islands of salt-tolerant mangrove forests and presents an excellent example of ongoing ecological processes.
- It constitutes **over 60% of the country's total mangrove forest area**.
- Indian Sundarbans was recognised as **UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1987**, 'Wetland of International Importance' under the **Ramsar Convention in January 2019** and also a **Biosphere Reserve in 1989**.
- The area is **known for its wide range of fauna**, including 260 bird species and is home to many rare and globally threatened wildlife species such as the **Estuarine Crocodile**, Royal Bengal Tiger, Water Monitor Lizard, **Gangetic Dolphin** and **Olive Ridley Turtles**.
- The Sunderbans Delta is the **only mangrove forest in the world inhabited by tigers**.
 - For its preservation, **Discovery India** and **World Wide Fund (WWF)** India partnered with the Government of West Bengal and local communities in the Sundarbans in 2019.

Mangroves

- Mangroves are the plant communities occurring in **inter-tidal zones along the coasts of tropical and subtropical countries**.
- Mangrove forests perform **multiple ecological functions** such as production of woody trees, provision of habitat, food and spawning grounds for fin-fish and shellfish, provision of habitat for birds and other valuable fauna; protection of coastlines and accretion of sediment to form new land.
- Among the states and Union Territories, **West Bengal has the highest percentage** of area under total Mangrove cover **followed by Gujarat and Andaman and Nicobar Islands**.
- The **India State of Forest Report** gives the data about mangroves and their conditions in the country.

14. Payments Infrastructure Development Fund (PIDF)

Context: In an effort to give a push to **digital payments** across the country, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) is setting up a **Payment Infrastructure Development Fund (PIDF)** of Rs 500 crore.

All you need to know about the fund:

Objective: This fund has been created to encourage acquirers to deploy point of sale (PoS) infrastructure, both physical and digital, in tier-3 to tier-6 centres and north eastern states.

Contributions to the fund: The RBI has made an initial contribution of Rs 250 crore covering half the fund. **The remaining will come from the card issuing banks and card networks operating in the country.**

Management: The fund will be **governed through an advisory council** but it will be **managed and administered by the RBI.**

Need for and Significance:

Over the years, payments ecosystem in the country has evolved with a wide range of options such as bank accounts, mobile phones, cards, etc.

To provide further fillip to **digitisation of payment systems**, it is necessary to give impetus to acceptance infrastructure across the country, more so in underserved areas.

The fund is also in line with the measures proposed by **the vision document on payment and settlement systems in India 2019-2021.**

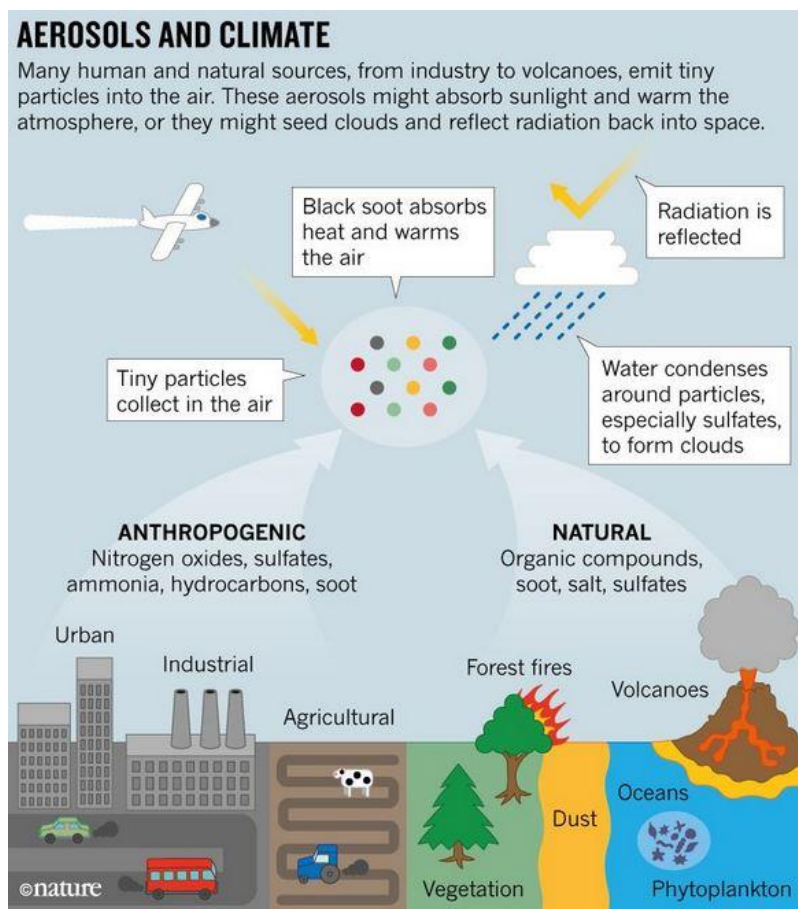
The enhanced ability of PoS infrastructure is supposed **to reduce demand of cash over time.** By 2021, there will be **around 5 million active PoS by 2021.**

Acceptance Development Fund:

In a similar move, last year, the RBI had also proposed to set up an Acceptance Development Fund which will be used **to develop card acceptance infrastructure across small towns and cities.**

The Fund will be used **to ensure growth of card acceptance infrastructure** such as swipe machines across the country particularly in Tier III and Tier VI cities.

15. Aerosols Radiative Effects in the Himalayas



Indian researchers have found that the effect of anthropogenic aerosols is much higher over the high altitudes of western trans-Himalayas.

What are Aerosols?

- An aerosol is a suspension of fine solid particles or liquid droplets in air or another gas.
- They can be natural or anthropogenic.
- Examples of natural aerosols are fog, mist, dust, forest exudates and geyser steam. Examples of anthropogenic aerosols are particulate air pollutants and smoke.
- The liquid or solid particles have diameters typically less than 1 μm ; larger particles with a significant settling speed make the mixture a suspension, but the distinction is not clear-cut.
- Technological applications of aerosols include dispersal of pesticides, medical treatment of respiratory illnesses, and combustion technology.

Heat pump over the Himalayas

- The transport of light-absorbing carbonaceous aerosols and dust from the polluted Indo-Gangetic Plain and desert areas over the Himalayas constitutes a major climatic issue due to severe impacts on atmospheric warming and glacier retreat.
- This heating over the Himalayas facilitates the “elevated-hat pump” that strengthens the temperature gradient between land and ocean and modifies the atmospheric circulation and the monsoon rainfall.

Findings of the research

- The monthly-mean atmospheric radiative forcing of aerosols leads to heating rates of 0.04 to 0.13 C per day.
- Further, the temperature over the Ladakh region is increasing 0.3 to 0.4 degrees Celsius per decades from the last 3 decades.

How are aerosols fuelling the heat?

- The atmospheric aerosols play a key role in the regional/global climate system through scattering and absorption of incoming solar radiation and by modifying the cloud microphysics.

Assessing the Aerosol potential

- Despite the large progress in quantifying the impact of different aerosols on radiative forcing, it still remains one of the major uncertainties in the climate change assessment.
- Precise measurements of aerosol properties are required to reduce the uncertainties, especially over the oceans and high altitude remote location in the Himalayas where they are scarce.
- Researchers have analysed the variability of aerosol optical, physical and radiative properties and the role of fine and coarse particles in aerosol radiative forcing (ARF) assessment.
- ARF is the effect of anthropogenic aerosols on the radiative fluxes at the top of the atmosphere and at the surface and on the absorption of radiation within the atmosphere.

Significance of ARF study

- A scientific study of aerosol generation, transport, and its properties has important implications in our understanding and mitigation of climate change via atmospheric warming.
- Aerosols impact the snow and glacier dynamics over the trans-Himalayan region.
- The results from the study can help better understanding of aerosol effects in view of aerosol-climate implications.

16. Explained: Gross Value Added (GVA) Method

The National Statistical Office (NSO) recently released its provisional estimates of national income for the financial year 2019-20. The release also detailed the estimates of the Gross Value Added (GVA).

The GVA method

- In 2015, in the wake of a comprehensive review of its approach to GDP measurement, India opted to make major changes to its compilation of national accounts.
- It aims to bring the whole process into conformity with the UN System of National Accounts (SNA) of 2008.

What is GVA?

- As per the SNA, GVA is defined as the value of output minus the value of intermediate consumption.
- GVA is a measure of the contribution to GDP made by an individual producer, industry or sector.
- At its simplest, it gives the rupee value of goods and services produced in the economy after deducting the cost of inputs and raw materials used.
- It can be described as the main entry on the income side of the nation's accounting balance sheet, and from economics, perspective represents the supply side.

How it has changed income calculation?

- While India had been measuring GVA earlier, it had done so using 'factor cost'.
- GDP at 'factor cost' was the main parameter for measuring the country's overall economic output until the new methodology was adopted.
- GVA at basic prices became the primary measure of output across the economy's various sectors and when added to net taxes on products amounts to the GDP.
- In the new series, the base year was shifted to 2011-12 from the earlier 2004-05.

GVA estimates by NSO

- As part of the data on GVA, the NSO provides both quarterly and annual estimates of output – measured by the gross value added – by economic activity.
- The sectoral classification provides data on eight broad categories that span the gamut of goods produced and services provided in the economy.
- These are: 1) Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing; 2) Mining and Quarrying; 3) Manufacturing; 4) Electricity, Gas, Water Supply and other Utility Services; 5) Construction; 6) Trade, Hotels, Transport, Communication and Services related to Broadcasting; 7) Financial, Real Estate and Professional Services; 8) Public Administration, Defence and other Services.

How relevant is the GVA data given that headline growth always refers to GDP?

- The GVA data is crucial to understand how the various sectors of the real economy are performing.
- The output or domestic product is essentially a measure of GVA combined with net taxes.
- However, GDP can be and is also computed as the sum total of the various expenditures incurred in the economy.
- It includes private consumption spending, government consumption spending and gross fixed capital formation or investment spending; these reflect essentially on the demand conditions in the economy.

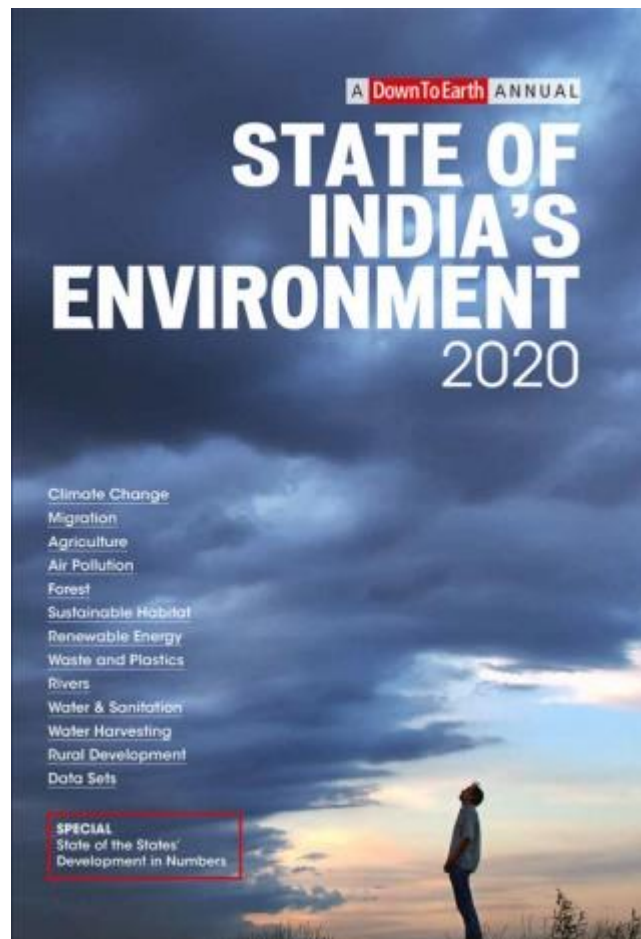
Significance of GVA

- From a policymaker's perspective, it is vital to have the GVA data to be able to make policy interventions, where needed.
- Also, from global data standards and uniformity perspective, GVA is an integral and necessary parameter in measuring a nation's economic performance.

Issues with GVA

- As with all economic statistics, the accuracy of GVA as a measure of overall national output is heavily dependent on the sourcing of data and the fidelity of the various data sources.
- To that extent, GVA is as susceptible to vulnerabilities from the use of inappropriate or flawed methodologies as any other measure.
- Economists argue that India's switch of its base year to 2011-12 had led to a significant overestimation of growth.
- They argued that the value-based approach instead of the earlier volume-based tack in GVA estimation had affected the measurement of the formal manufacturing sector and thus distorted the outcome.

17. State of India's environment report



Context

- The COVID-19 outbreak has put 265 million people at risk of starvation.
- Almost 76 per cent of the world's informal work-force has been severely affected.

About the Background

- India is lagging behind in meeting nine of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals.
- Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra and Himachal Pradesh are some of our best governed states – based on their performance in 10 key sectors.

Highlights

- India's climate commitments are more ambitious than that of many other countries, including China and the US.

- Statistics like these form the content of our annual State of India's Environment 2020 in Figures, a unique compendium of well-researched and closely analysed environmental data from across the country.
- On subjects ranging from COVID-19 and pandemics, Development in the states, Migration and Climate Change.
- To Air Pollution, Forests and Wildlife, Employment, Waste and Housing.

18. India's First Online Waste Exchange Platform



Context

- The Indian unit of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), prolific for being a premier organisation fighting for the rights of animals, has appreciated Andhra Pradesh chief minister YS Jagan Mohan Reddy for launching India's first online waste exchange platform.
- Through this, the government authorities can monitor the movement of hazardous waste in real-time using the tools incorporated in the platform.

About the Background

- On World Environment Day on June 5, Jagan launched the Andhra Pradesh Environment Management Corporation (APEMC).
- The state has a huge chunk of industries which are marked under the red and orange categories, which generate significant quantities of liquid waste, hazardous and non-hazardous solid waste and air pollutants.

- The industries also generate a lot of e-waste among forms of junk, which needs to be addressed properly.

About the initiative

- The state government observed that the waste management sector is not adequately organised to cater to the total quantity of the waste being generated by the industries.
- Hence, there was a requirement for appropriate system intervention to streamline, manage and scientifically dispose of the generated waste.
- To resolve the existing insufficiency in managing the waste generated and making the waste management market more organised, the APEMC as a government company to handle industrial waste, from its generation until the end of its lifecycle.
- The APEMC will track the waste till it is disposed of off safely while working with industries to implement the 6 Rs - Reduce, Reuse, Recycle, Refurbish, Redesign and Remanufacture.

19. Aditya: India's First Solar Ferry

Why in News

Recently, India's **first solar-powered ferry, Aditya** has been shortlisted for the **Gustave Trouvé Award** as the **only entrant from Asia**.

- Aditya, is among **12 such ferries** that have been **shortlisted** for the award across the world.

Gustave Trouvé Awards

- Gussies Electric Boat Awards were **instituted in memory of Gustave Trouvé**, a **French electrical engineer and pioneer in electric cars and boats**.
- Trouvé was a prolific inventor with over 75 patents. He had also developed a 5-m-long prototype electric boat in 1881.

Key Points

- **Description:**
 - Aditya is **operating between Vaikkom and Thavanakkadavu** in Kerala. It was launched in November 2016 and started its services in 2017.
 - It is India's **first solar-powered ferry** and the **largest solar-powered boat**.

- It is operated by the **Kerala State Water Transport Department (KSWTD)** and built by Navalt Solar and Electric Boats, Kochi.
- It is powered by a motor that can source energy from solar panels, batteries, and generators.
- Solar vessels do not create air and noise pollution.
- **Significance:**
 - Aditya has a **very low per km energy cost** and it operates **22 trips a day, covering a total of 66 km**, carrying 75 passengers per trip.
 - It needs **just Rs. 180 per day in energy cost**, compared to about **Rs. 8,000** for a diesel-run ferry of similar size, which is unusual for a high technology product to have such a low energy cost.
 - It has a high **financial viability with zero pollution vessels**.

20. Govt. to review if private banks taking part in MSME revival

Context:

While public sector banks (PSBs) have started sanctioning loans under the credit guarantee scheme for micro, medium and small enterprises (MSMEs), the government now wants to know if private lenders are also participating in the scheme.

Details:

- The decision to review the performance of private sector lenders in the credit guarantee scheme comes amid tightening of credit norms by these banks in view of the disruptions caused by the pandemic, denting borrowers' ability to service loans.
- This is because the private sector banks have a significant exposure to MSME credit.
- The total loan outstanding to the MSMEs is at ₹17.75 lakh crore.
 - Of this, India's largest private lender, the HDFC Bank's share is about 13%.
 - The balance is shared between other private lenders, PSBs and NBFCs.

The State Bank of India – the country's largest lender – has a share of about 23% in MSME loans.

The issue was discussed during a meeting convened to review the status of the emergency credit line guarantee scheme (ECLGS) and extended partial credit guarantee scheme, according to a communication by the Finance Ministry to the PSBs.

Way forward:

- While the RBI had cut the repo rate by 115 bps since March 2020, banks' response to the cut has not been proportionate.
- For the ₹3-lakh crore credit guarantee scheme to be successful, the private sector banks should also play an important role.
- The Finance Minister also indicated that banks need to drop their lending rates to revive economic activity.

Emergency Credit Line Guarantee Scheme:

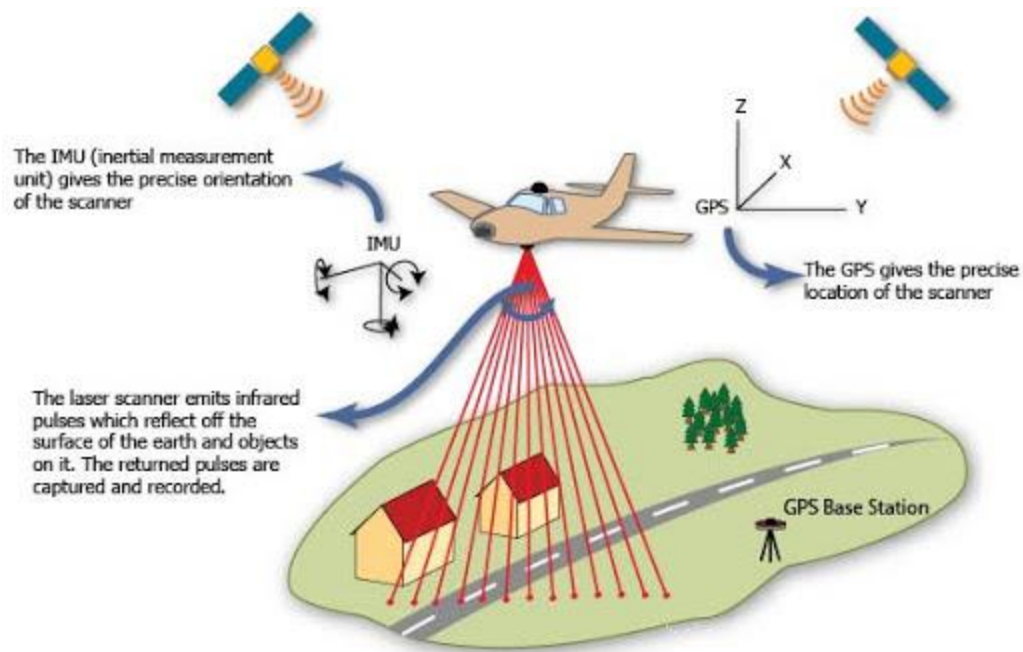
- In May 2020, the Union Cabinet, chaired by the Prime Minister, gave approval to enable additional funding of up to Rs. three lakh crore to eligible MSMEs and interested MUDRA borrowers by way of "Emergency Credit Line Guarantee Scheme."
- Under the Scheme, 100% guarantee coverage is to be provided by National Credit Guarantee Trustee Company Limited (NCGTC) for additional funding of up to Rs. three lakh crore to eligible MSMEs and interested MUDRA borrowers, in the form of a Guaranteed Emergency Credit Line (GECL) facility.
- The Scheme would be applicable to all loans sanctioned under GECL Facility during the period from the date of announcement of the Scheme to 31.10.2020, or till an amount of Rs 3,00,000 crore is sanctioned under the GECL, whichever is earlier.
- The Scheme aims at mitigating the economic distress being faced by MSMEs by providing them additional funding of up to Rs. 3 lakh crore in the form of a fully guaranteed emergency credit line.
- The entire funding provided under GECL shall be provided with a 100% credit guarantee by NCGTC to MLIs under ECLGS.
- Tenor of loan under the scheme shall be four years with moratorium period of one year on the principal amount.

Objective of the Scheme:

The main objective of the Scheme is to provide an incentive to Member Lending Institutions (MLIs), i.e., Banks, Financial Institutions (FIs) and Non-Banking Financial Companies (NBFCs) to increase access to, and enable availability of

additional funding facility to MSME borrowers, in view of the economic distress caused by the COVID-19 crisis, by providing them 100 per cent guarantee for any losses suffered by them due to non-repayment of the GECL funding by borrowers.

21. Light Detection and Ranging - LiDAR



Context

- A new market report by Market Research Intellect on the Airborne Light Detection and Ranging (LiDAR) System Market has been released with reliable information and accurate forecasts for a better understanding of the current and future market scenarios.
- The report offers an in-depth analysis of the global market, including qualitative and quantitative insights, historical data, and estimated projections about the market size and share in the forecast period.

About the Background

- The forecasts mentioned in the report have been acquired by using proven research assumptions and methodologies.
- Hence, this research study serves as an important depository of the information for every market landscape.
- The report is segmented on the basis of types, end-users, applications, and regional markets.

About the highlights

- The research study includes the latest updates about the COVID-19 impact on the Airborne Light Detection and Ranging (LiDAR) System sector.
- The outbreak has broadly influenced the global economic landscape.
- The report contains a complete breakdown of the current situation in the ever-evolving business sector and estimates the aftereffects of the outbreak on the overall economy.
- The report also emphasizes the initiatives undertaken by the companies operating in the market including product innovation, product launches, and technological development to help their organization offer more effective products in the market.
- It also studies notable business events, including corporate deals, mergers and acquisitions, joint ventures, partnerships, product launches, and brand promotions.

22. New guidelines for import of exotic species

Context

- The Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MOEFCC) has issued an advisory saying people importing “exotic live species” will have to make a voluntary disclosure.

Exotic Live Species

- It includes animal or plant species moved from their original range (location) to a new one.
 - Several exotic species of birds, reptiles, small mammals, fishes and even some plants are imported.

The Ministry has said “exotic live species” shall be construed to mean only “the animals named under the Appendices I, II and III of the Convention of International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) of Wild Fauna and Flora”.

- CITES Appendix I, no trade happens
- Appendix II, trade can happen with prior permission
- Appendix III, there are a large number of animals and birds which can be traded

Guidelines

- The advisory highlights a period of six months (from the date of the official order) to be given for voluntary disclosure for persons in possession of exotic live species in India. The disclosure needs to be made before the Chief Wildlife Warden of each state.
- For new “exotic live species”, the importer should obtain a no-objection certificate from the Chief Wildlife Warden (CWLW) of the State.
- For existing species, stocks “shall be declared by the owner/holder (stock, as on 1 January 2020) to the Chief Wildlife Warden (CWLW) of the concerned State or UT”.
- The advisory also has provision of “registration of progenies of imported animals” to the respective CWLW within 30 days after their birth.
- Forest officials will physically verify the submissions, check whether the facilities where the species are being housed are safe, and issue online certificates to owners within another six months from the date of disclosure.

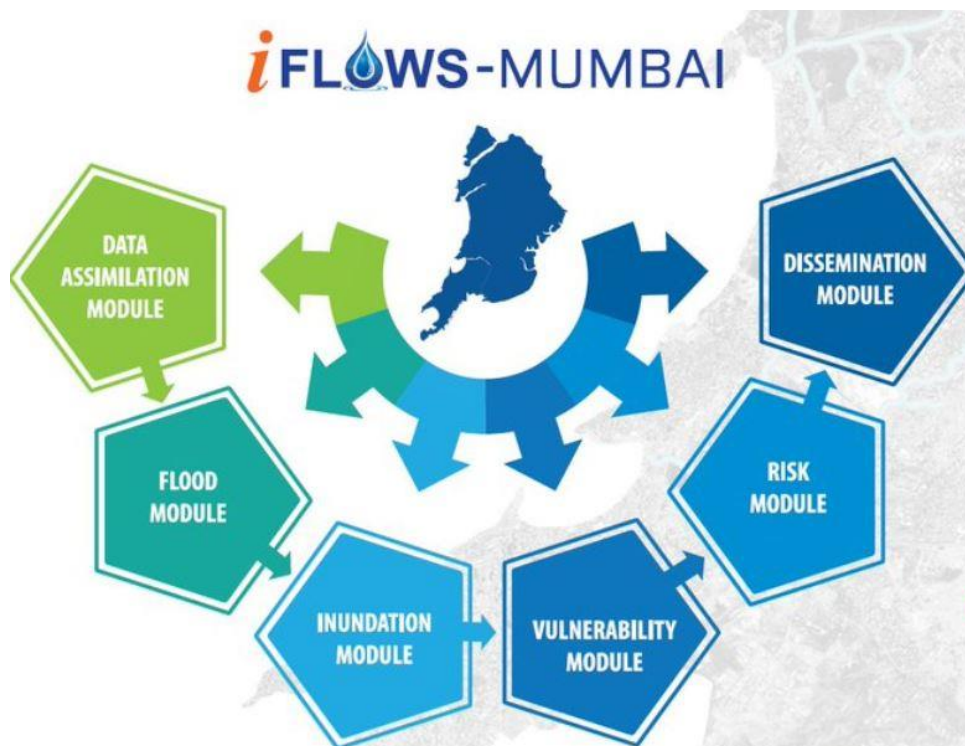
Why was the decision taken?

- The move comes as the outbreak of coronavirus (COVID-19) has raised global concerns about illegal wildlife trade and zoonotic diseases.
- It will create a process where all imports will be screened.

Significance

- It is a welcome step towards curbing illegal exotic wildlife trade in India.
- These regulations will act as deterrents for both buyers and sellers.

23. I-FLOWS: Mumbai Flood Management System



Integrated Flood Warning System for Mumbai (I-FLOWS Mumbai), a state-of-the-art flood warning system has been developed for the city.

What is IFLOWS-Mumbai?

- IFLOWS is a monitoring and flood warning system that will be able to relay alerts of possible flood-prone areas anywhere between six to 72 hours in advance.
- The Ministry of Earth Sciences (MoES) has developed the system with in-house expertise and coordination with the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC).
- The system can provide all information regarding possible flood-prone areas, likely height the floodwater could attain location-wise problem areas across all 24 wards and calculate the vulnerability and risk of elements exposed to flood.
- Mumbai is only the second city in the country after Chennai to get this system. Similar systems are being developed for Bengaluru and Kolkata.

How will it work?

- The primary source for the system is the amount of rainfall, but with Mumbai being a coastal city, the system also factors in tidal waves and storm tides for its flood assessments.

- The system has provisions to capture the urban drainage within the city and predict the areas of flooding.
- The system comprises seven modules- Data Assimilation, Flood, Inundation, Vulnerability, Risk, Dissemination Module and Decision Support System.

Why was this system needed in Mumbai?

- Mumbai, the financial capital of India, has been experiencing floods with increased periodicity.
- Floods, especially the ones in 2005 and 2017, are etched in everyone's memory.
- Last year, post-monsoon and unseasonal rainfall as late as October, two tropical cyclones in the Arabian Sea had caught authorities off guard and left a trail of destruction.
- The flood during 26th July 2005, when the city received a rainfall of 94 cm, a 100 year high in a span of 24 hours had paralyzed the city completely.
- Urban flooding is common in the city from June to September, resulting in the crippling of traffic, railways and airlines.
- As preparedness for floods before they occur, the system will help in warning the citizens so that they can be prepared in advance for flooding conditions.

Benefits

- IFLOWS-Mumbai will enhance the resilience of the city by providing early warning for flooding, especially during high rainfall events and cyclones.
- Using this, it will be possible to have an estimate of the flood inundation three days in advance, along with immediate weather updates.
- The Union Minister said the system was "one of the most advanced" ones and will help the city, which has been experiencing floods with increasing periodicity.
- The hi-tech system will predict floods before they occur, therefore enabling Mumbaikars to take due precautions in advance.

24. Government puts off decision on States' GST dues till July

Context:

- GST council meeting.

Background:

- GST collections in the past two months have **only reached 45% of the target amount.**
- Under GST law, the **Centre must pay the States full compensation for any shortfall in revenue collections until 2022.**

Details:

Compensation for the states:

- Recently, the Centre has paid pending compensation dues for December 2019 to February 2020 period. However, with revenues crashing since the lockdown, alternative options may need to be explored for the payment of remaining compensation to states.
- The council will meet again in July to discuss the issue of compensation cess and dues to the States, and the **possibility of borrowing money from the market** to meet these dues.

Relief measures:

- The Council approved a slew of measures to **ease tax compliance**, including a reduction in late fees for past returns, and **COVID-19 related relief for small tax payers** for the period between February and July 2020 provided returns are filed by September.
 - The late fee waivers and an additional moratorium for smaller businesses is a welcome move since with the current financial situation, smaller businesses have been aggressively seeking stimulus.

A one-time extension is also being granted to those seeking to revoke cancelled GST registrations.

Inversion of duties:

- The GST Council also agreed that there is a need to correct the **inversion of duties**, but postponed a decision on when to do so.
 - Inverted duty structure refers to the **taxation of inputs at higher rates than finished products** which result in a build-up of credits and cascading costs for the producers.

25. SC allows firms to negotiate with staff on lockdown wages

Context:

- Supreme Court directions on the issue of lockdown wages.

Background:

- A batch of petitions was filed by industry owners in the Supreme Court against the **government notification compelling the industry owners to pay full wages to workers.**
- The notification has been **revoked** by the government in May 2020.

Details:

- The SC has made the following observations regarding the petitions filed.

Both stakeholders equally affected:

- Various Industries, establishments were not allowed to function during the lockdown period and those allowed to function also could not function to their full capacity, which has led to the **deterioration of its financial position.**
- The workers and employees, although ready to work, could not due to closure of industries.
- Lockdown had an equally adverse effect on the employers as well as on employees.

Need for negotiations:

- The Supreme Court has asked factory owners and other private industrial establishments to **negotiate terms and enter into settlements** with their workers on the payment of wages during the lockdown period.
- The court urged employers and employees to sort out their differences and resume work in a congenial atmosphere.
- Employers and workers could seek the **help of Labour Department authorities and trade unions** to reach a settlement.
- The court highlighted that the government, too, had an obligation to ensure conciliation between private employers and their workers for the smooth running of industrial establishments.

No coercive action:

- Some industries would be able to bear the financial burden of payment of full or substantial wages for lockdown period, others may not be able to.
- The SC has held that no coercive action should be taken against private factory/industry owners who were unable to pay wages to workers during the lockdown.

26. Stimulus package can be fine-tuned, says EAC-PM's Goyal

- The COVID-19 outbreak and subsequent lockdowns have **severely disrupted economic activities.**

- S&P Global Ratings and Fitch Ratings have said India's economy will shrink by 5% in the current fiscal, while Moody's has projected a contraction of 4%.

The government announced a **₹20.97 lakh crore rescue package for the economy**

- The package was announced in five tranches, which included Rs. 3.7 lakh crore support for MSMEs, Rs. 75,000 crore for NBFCs and Rs. 90,000 crore for power distribution companies, free foodgrains to migrant workers, increased allocation for MGNREGS, tax relief to certain sections and Rs. 15,000 crore allocated to the healthcare sector.

Much of the stimulus package pertains to the financial sector and relieving the liquidity crisis and **addresses the supply constraints**. There is a need for demand side measures as well to stimulate the economy.

The **PM's economic advisory council (EAC-PM)** member Ashima Goyal has stated that the stimulus package is not cast in iron and there is scope to fine-tune it further. There is a need to kick-start demand to stimulate the economy.

- Economic Advisory Council to the Prime Minister is a **non-constitutional, non-permanent and independent body** constituted to give economic advice to the Government of India, specifically the Prime Minister.

27. MSMEs wait for work as demand slumps post lockdown

Context:

- Challenges faced by the MSMEs during the pandemic.

Concerns:

Slump in demand:

- Despite the resumption of production in MSMEs, there is little business. **Demand has slumped by large margins.**

Unemployment:

- A large number of people employed in Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises have lost their jobs due to slump in demand post lockdown.
- Apart from the direct employees who have lost jobs, people indirectly dependent on the functioning of the MSMEs have also lost livelihood opportunities.

Long recovery time:

- Given the increasing number of COVID cases and the surrounding uncertainty, it seems possible that it may take months before the ground situation improves. This could deal a severe financial blow to the MSMEs whose financial condition is already fragile.

Government efforts:

- Despite the governmental efforts, there have been concerns raised about the “inadequate” efforts of the government for small businesses. Benefits, even if announced, have not reached many.

Way forward:

- Government should support the MSMEs until the situation comes back to normal.
- The government can **help create demand** by allowing big companies to work and lift all restrictions.

28. Review ordinances on farming sector, Amarinder urges PM

Context:

The Punjab Chief Minister has urged the Prime Minister to review the ordinances issued by the Central Government related to the farming sector.

Details:

- In a letter to the Prime Minister, the Punjab CM has sought reconsideration of the three ordinances – for permitting trade in agricultural produce outside the physical boundaries of the set-up of the agricultural market under APMC Act, easing of restrictions under the Essential Commodities Act and facilitating contract farming.

Background:

- Recently, the Union Cabinet approved an amendment to the 65-year-old Essential Commodities Act.
- The Cabinet also approved ordinances to remove restrictions on farmers selling their produce outside notified market yards, as well as to facilitate contract farming and allow farmers to engage in direct marketing.

29. In pandemic crisis, bridging the gulf with West Asia

Context:

- India-West Asia ties.

Background:

India-West Asia ties:

- For India, the West Asia/Gulf region holds significance for strategic and economic reasons ranging from **diaspora to energy security**.
 - An estimated **nine million Indians work in West Asia**.

- The West Asian countries are **major trading partners** for India.
 - The UAE is the third-largest trade partner of India after the United States and China.
- India gets around **60% of its hydrocarbon requirements from West Asia.**

Details:

- The COVID-19 pandemic has had a detrimental effect on lives and economies the world over.

West Asia:

- The **oil price crash**, triggered by expectations of oversupply following a dispute on output caps between Saudi Arabia and Russia, exacerbated by the crash in **demand due to COVID-19**, will carry massive costs to the West Asian economies which are largely oil dependent economies.
- According to a Dubai Chamber of Commerce & Industry survey, more than 70% of businesses classified as small and medium-sized enterprises in Dubai may not survive over the months to come as **labour critical industries such as tourism, conventions, hospitality and airlines bear the immediate brunt of the pandemic.**
 - UAE's hospitality sector itself contributes 4.6% of the country's GDP, generating nearly 600,000 jobs. Some reports suggest that up to 30% of these jobs could be lost.

The major sovereign wealth funds and other financial institutions in West Asia have been hit hard by COVID-19 as well. Some have seen their real estate and retail portfolios shrink dramatically over the last three months.

Beyond the immediate effects, the oil price crash is expected to have a **significant blow on the reform plans** initiated in Saudi Arabia, specifically mega-projects such as the envisioned \$500 billion futuristic mega-city of Neom planned on the coast of the Red Sea, and other more structural efforts to open up the Saudi economy and move the country's financial ecosystem away from its dependence on petro dollars.

India:

- An estimated nine million Indians work in West Asia, responsible for sending back more than **56% of India's annual infusion of \$80 billion in remittances.** The economic trouble in west Asia will have an adverse effect on remittances to India.
- The pandemic has initiated a **reverse migration of Indian blue-collar workers** as projects have stalled and infrastructure development has taken a hit amidst the contracting global economy.
 - The return of semi-skilled and skilled workers into India, which is already struggling with jobs, may become a point of worry.

Steps being taken:

- The softening oil prices have helped India cushion the impact of the national lockdown on the balance of payments. India has also taken advantage of the low prices to **build up its strategic reserves** and is looking at offshore storage options.
- The government has set up an **empowered group headed by the Cabinet Secretary** to take necessary **steps to attract FDI into India** from regions including the West Asian region.
- To mitigate the challenges posed by the reverse migration from West Asia, the Indian government has launched the **Skilled Workers Arrival Database for Employment Support (SWADES)**, which attempts to capture the skills profile of returning workers and house them in a central portal that can be accessed by Indian and foreign companies.

Way forward:

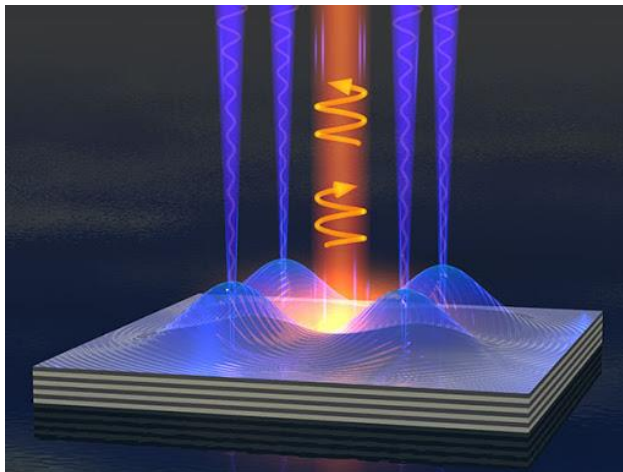
Expedite existing projects:

- As a starting point, there is a need to **expedite ongoing projects involving West Asian entities** like the proposed \$50 billion mega-refinery project, fast track resolution of litigation regarding the sale of a stake in Mumbai airport to the UAE sovereign fund and Abu Dhabi Investment Authority (ADIA). This will send out a positive signal to the markets.
- By creating a few immediate success stories, India has the opportunity to transform the landscape and attract the kind of **long-term capital** that the economy needs.

Ease and incentivize investment:

- The **economic reforms** announced recently by India bring much needed clarity to industrial and agricultural policy. There is a need for more policy measures to make India an attractive destination for capital from West Asia.
- A strong, positive message by India to the West Asian investors is crucial as both are well-placed to help each other during the current crisis.
 - **The Indian economy is in need of foreign investment.**
 - **The West Asian Economy, looking to diversify its economy,** can choose to invest in a growing economy like India.

30. Scientists create exotic 'Fifth State of Matter' on the space station



Context

- The fifth state of matter, known as a Bose-Einstein condensate (BEC), has been created in the microgravity of the International Space Station for the first time.
- The breakthrough is expected to help solve some of the quantum universe's most stubborn conundrums.

About Bose-Einstein condensates

- Bose-Einstein condensates (BECs) - were first predicted by Professor Albert Einstein and Indian mathematician Satyendra Nath Bose, almost a century ago.
- At this point, the atoms become a single entity with quantum properties, wherein each particle also functions as a wave of matter.
- BECs straddle the line between the macroscopic world governed by forces such as gravity, and the microscopic plane ruled by quantum mechanics.
- Scientists believe BECs contain vital clues to mysterious phenomena such as dark energy - the unknown energy thought to be behind the Universe's accelerating expansion.
- This exotic and rare form of matter is only produced when a gas of boson-like particles is cooled to temperatures just above absolute zero (about -459.67F).

About the Highlights

- Lasers operating in a vacuum chill clouds of a few million atoms and they do so at temperatures colder than those found in space.
- Microgravity allows us to confine atoms with much weaker forces, since we don't have to support them against gravity.

- They are classed as the fifth form of matter after plasma, gas, liquid and solid, but only certain types of boson-like particles can turn into a BEC state.
- This exotic type of matter has been on Earth for 25 years - the first was produced in June 1995 - but gravity has made it harder to study.

31. Climate report predicts hotter, rainier days

What's in News?

India's first ever national forecast on the impact of global warming on the subcontinent in the coming century, expects annual rainfall to increase, along with more severe cyclones and paradoxically, more droughts.

- These projections, based on a climate forecasting model developed at the Indian Institute of Tropical Meteorology (IITM), Pune, will be part of the next report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), expected to be ready in 2022.
- The frequencies of future warm days and warm nights are projected to increase by 55% and 70%, respectively, relative to the reference period of 1976-2005.
- Summer heat waves over India are projected to be three to four times higher by the end of the 21st century.
- According to the report, the projected rapid changes in India's climate will place increasing stress on the country's natural ecosystems, agricultural output, and fresh water resources.
- The report states that, from 1986 to 2015, the hottest day and coldest night have warmed 0.63°C and 0.4°C, respectively. By the end of the 21st century, the report says, these temperatures are projected to rise by approximately 4.7°C and 5.5°C, respectively, relative to the corresponding temperatures in 1976-2005.
 - This is under a hypothetical scenario where no steps are taken to curb global greenhouse gas emissions.

32. With 334 species, Guwahati redefining concept of urban jungle

Context:

According to a Guwahati-based wildlife expert, Guwahati redefines the term "urban jungle" with 334 and counting free-ranging faunal species living in the green spaces within concrete structures.

Details:

- In Guwahati, Assam's principal city and the largest in the northeast, assorted creatures, both big and small (Chinese pangolin, Nepal cricket frog, Bengal monitor lizard, Assamese cat snake, Eurasian moorhen, Asian elephant, Terai cricket frog, Ganges river dolphin, etc.) along with 326 other species of fauna recorded so far, share space with an estimated one million humans.
- The city and its outskirts have 18 hills, eight reserve forests, two wildlife sanctuaries and a Ramsar site (Deepor Beel) besides the Brahmaputra flowing past its northern edge.
 - This stretch of the river has Gangetic River Dolphins, which has the status of 'city animal'.

Over the years, 26 species of amphibians, 56 reptiles, 36 mammals and 216 birds have been recorded.

Also, there are more than 1,100 captive wild animals belonging to 107 species, of which 52 are highly protected under the Wildlife (Protection) Act of 1972.

But, the wildlife specialists are worried that Guwahati has been following the global trend, which projects the urban area on earth to triple before 2030.

33. Lonar lake: HC seeks report on colour change

Context:

The Nagpur Bench of the Bombay High Court has sought reports on the environmental impact assessment of Lonar lake from the National Environmental Engineering Research Institute (NEERI) and the Geological Survey of India.

Issue:

Recently, the water in the Lonar lake in the Buldhana district of Maharashtra was found to be turning reddish/pink.

Details:

- A Division Bench was hearing a petition raising concerns over the lake water which has turned pink in colour.
- NASA expert Dr. Shawn Wright said that there is a glass formation over the surface of the bed rock of the Lonar crater, which is a basalt rock. This is a new feature not found anywhere else on the Earth but is found only on the beds of craters existing on moon.
 - The expert team from NEERI and also the Geological Survey of India (GSI) would examine the findings regarding glass formation on the surface of the crater lake.

The forest department also informed the Bench that since the area is an eco-sensitive zone, the construction of Lonar-Kinhi road would be a problem, as there is a large

quantity of a unique material called ejecta blanket, which contains a substance as is found on the moon.

Therefore, the court has prohibited construction of the Lonar-Kinhi Road until further orders.

Lonar Lake:

- Lonar Lake, also known as Lonar crater, is a notified National Geo-heritage Monument.
 - Geo-heritage refers to the geological features which are inherently or culturally significant offering insight to earth's evolution or history to earth science or that can be utilized for education.

Lonar Lake was created by an asteroid collision with earth impact during the Pleistocene Epoch.

It is one of the four known, hyper-velocity, impact craters in basaltic rock anywhere on Earth. The other three basaltic impact structures are in southern Brazil.

The water in the lake is both saline and alkaline.

34. India joins leading economies to launch global partnership on Artificial Intelligence



Context

India joined the league of leading economies including USA, UK, EU, Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Mexico, New Zealand, Republic of Korea, Singapore to launch the Global Partnership on Artificial Intelligence (GPAI or Gee-Pay).

About GPAI

- GPAI is an international and multi-stakeholder initiative to guide the responsible development and use of AI, grounded in human rights, inclusion, diversity, innovation, and economic growth.

- GPAI will be supported by a Secretariat, to be hosted by Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in Paris, as well as by two Centers of Expertise- one each in Montreal and Paris.
- In collaboration with partners and international organizations, GPAI will bring together leading experts from industry, civil society, governments, and academia to collaborate to promote responsible evolution of AI and will also evolve methodologies to show how AI can be leveraged to better respond to the present global crisis around COVID-19.

About India's involvement

- India has recently launched National AI Strategy and National AI Portal and have also started leveraging AI across various sectors such as education, agriculture, healthcare, e-commerce, finance, telecommunications with inclusion and empowerment of human being approach by supplementing growth and development.
- By joining GPAI as a founding member, India will actively participate in the global development of Artificial Intelligence, leveraging upon its experience around use of digital technologies for inclusive growth.

35.India launches maiden gas exchange



Context

- India launched its maiden gas exchange, two years after mooted the idea.
- Indian Energy Exchange, the country's largest electricity trading platform, is the parent of the gas exchange, and had been planning to set up the nation's first natural gas exchange to tap into the increasing demand for clean fuel.

About the Background

- In February, the Indian Gas Exchange (IGX) had invited members to be part of its platform ahead of its formal launch.
- IGX has 12 members and 300 plus clients so far which includes buyers, sellers and users.
- Dharmendra Pradhan, minister of petroleum and natural gas, launched the exchange online.

About the Exchange

- According to the International Energy Agency global gas demand is expected to fall by 4%, or 150 billion cubic metres (bcm), to 3,850 bcm this year – twice the size of the drop following the 2008 global financial crisis.
- India, along with China, is expected to be a significant driver of demand for natural gas post 2021.
- Being the biggest emitter of greenhouse gases after the US and China, India aims to achieve emission reduction targets pledged at the 21st session of the Conference of the Parties (CoP) in Paris by promoting the use of natural gas and green fuel.
- Worsening air quality and the India's dependence on imported crude oil has altered its energy planning.
- India seeks to increase the share of natural gas in its energy mix to 15% by 2030 from the current 6%.
- This budget, finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman announced plans for expansion of the National Gas Grid to 27,000 km from the present 16,200 km to help deepen gas markets in India.

Highlights

- Industry players have said bringing natural gas under the ambit of goods and services tax (GST) to transport the fuel across the country will be more effective and will facilitate setting up of a domestic gas trading hub.
- While a trading hub would facilitate the availability of gas, the grid would help connect gas sources to consumption hubs which is key to government's plans to increase the share of natural gas in India's energy basket to 15% over the next decade from 6.2% now.
- According to analysts, a gas trading hub will help people buy and sell gas directly.
- Today, gas is locked up in contracts and a trading hub will be a kind of a spot market, which will be good.
- The exchange will help bring down the price of natural gas through competitive trade, boosting usage in the country that relies heavily on cheaper coal for its energy needs.

36. IIT Madras researchers demonstrate the role of Microrna in growth and spread of tongue cancer cells

Context

- Indian Institute of Technology Madras Researchers have identified a specific microRNA (miRNAs) called 'miR-155' that is over-expressed in tongue cancer.
- This finding is important in that molecular strategies can potentially be devised to manipulate miR-155 expression to develop therapeutics for tongue cancer.

About the Background

- miRNAs affect cancer growth through inhibiting or enhancing the functions of certain proteins.
- For example, it has been shown that a type of protein called 'programmed cell death 4' helps in stopping cancer cells from growing and spreading.
- Inhibition of this protein has been known to cause the spread of oral, lung, breast, liver, brain and colon cancers.

About the findings

- MicroRNAs (miRNAs) are short non-coding RNAs containing 20–24 nucleotides that participate in virtually all biological pathways in animals.
- They have been found to play important roles in many cancers, in carcinogenesis (start of cancer), malignant transformation and metastasis – the development of secondary cancer.
- The miRNAs associated with cancer are called 'Oncomirs'.
- Many of the oncomirs affect cancer by suppressing the performance of tumour suppressing agents that can prevent growth and spread of cancer cells, although some oncomirs are also involved in preventing tumour growth itself.
- It is therefore important to identify the types of miRNAs that are associated with both suppression and proliferation of cancer cells.
- They have also shown that knocking out miR-155 causes death of cancer cells, arrests the cell cycle, and regresses tumour size in animal models and reduces cell viability and colony formation in bench top assays.
- miRNA manipulation is being combined with conventional cancer treatment methods such as chemotherapy, radiotherapy and immunotherapy and the study reported by a collaborative team can enable such emerging therapeutics for cancer.

37. AGR demand from non-telco PSUs withdrawn, govt. tells SC

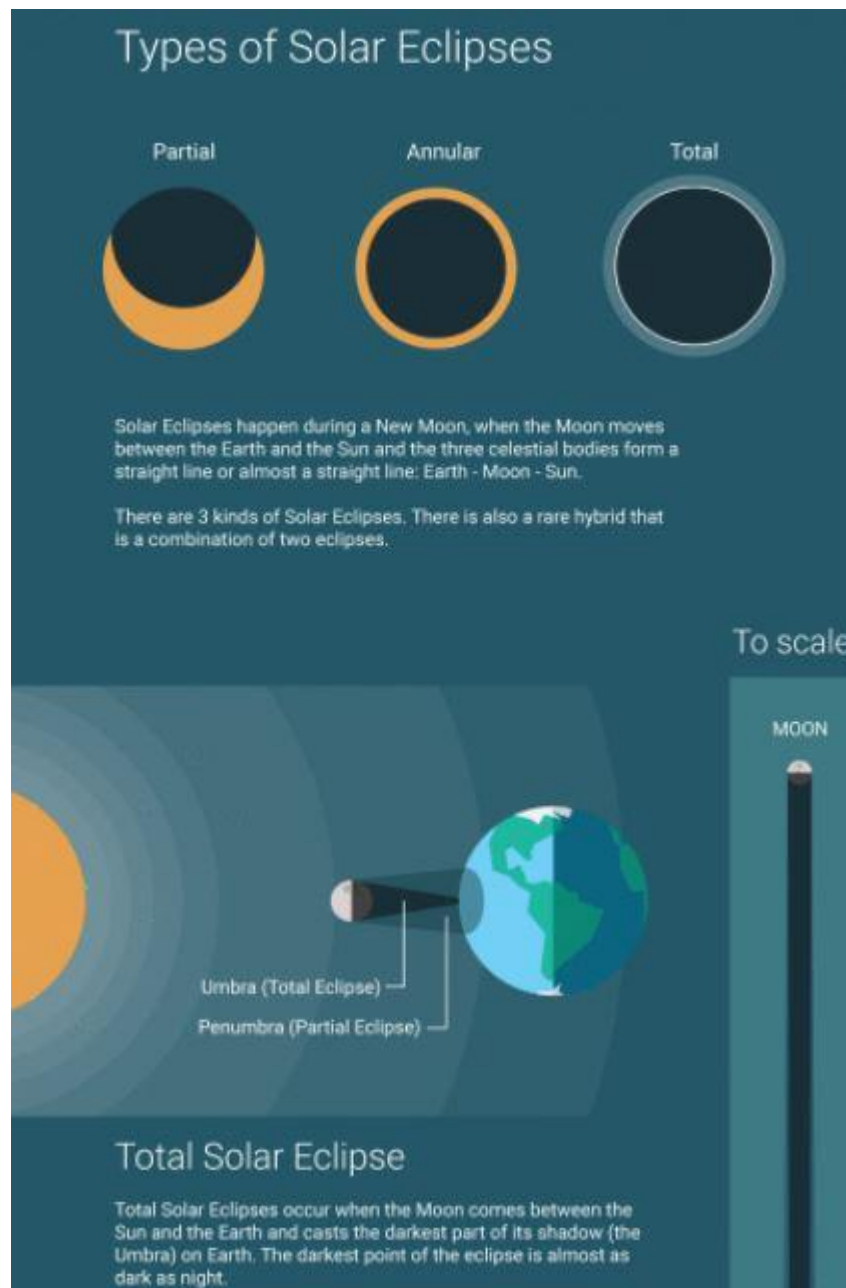
Context:

The Union government has informed the Supreme Court that it had withdrawn 96% of its ₹4 lakh-crore demand in adjusted gross revenue (AGR) from non-telecom public sector undertakings (PSUs).

Details:

- The turnaround comes after the court pulled up the government for misusing its October 2019 judgment to get money from PSUs such as DMRC.
 - A Bench, led by Justice Arun Mishra, had made it clear its verdict was only limited to AGR dues owed by telecom companies and not PSUs that had nothing to do with the sector.
- Solicitor General informed the court that since these PSUs are not in the business of providing telecom services, we are withdrawing 96% of the ₹4 lakh-crore demand.
- Also, the court is considering the viability of the government's proposed 'formula' to stagger the repayment of the dues over a period of 20 years.

38. 'Ring of Fire' Solar Eclipse



A rare celestial event, an annular solar eclipse popularly called as the 'ring of fire' eclipse, will be visible on June 21, 2020 from some parts of Northern India. The first solar eclipse of this year takes place on the summer solstice, which is the longest day in the Northern Hemisphere.

What is the Solar Eclipse?

- A Solar Eclipse happens when the moon while orbiting the Earth comes in between the sun and the Earth, due to which the moon blocks the sun's light from reaching the Earth, causing an eclipse of the sun or a solar eclipse.
- According to NASA, people who are able to view the total solar eclipse are in the centre of the moon's shadow as and when it hits the Earth.
- There are three types of eclipses: one is a total solar eclipse, which is visible only from a small area on Earth. A total solar eclipse happens when the sun, moon and Earth are in a direct line.
- The second type of a solar eclipse is a partial solar, in which the shadow of the moon appears on a small part of the sun.

Annular Solar Eclipse

- The third kind is an annular solar eclipse, which happens when the moon is farthest from the Earth, which is why it seems smaller.
- In this type of an eclipse, the moon does not block the sun completely, but looks like a "dark disk on top of a larger sun-coloured disk" forming a "ring of fire".
- Furthermore, during a solar eclipse, the moon casts two shadows on the Earth; the first one is called the umbra, which gets smaller as it reaches the Earth.
- The second one is called the penumbra, which gets larger as it reaches the Earth.
- According to NASA, people standing in the umbra see a total eclipse and those standing in the penumbra see a partial eclipse.

Why the study of solar eclipse is crucial?

- One of the reasons that NASA studies solar eclipses is to study the top layer of the sun called the corona.
- During an annular eclipse, NASA uses ground and space instruments to view this top layer when the sun's glare is blocked by the moon.

39. Increase in Money Supply

According to recent **Reserve Bank of India (RBI)** data, the uncertainty caused by the **Covid-19 pandemic** has led to a surge in money supply.

Key Points

- **RBI Data:** o Since the end of March, 2020 **currency held by the public** increased by 8.2%.
- o **M3 money supply (refer explanation below)** increased by 6.7% in the first five months of 2020 compared with the same period last year. This is the highest growth in seven years.
- o **Currency in circulation**, which measures money with the public and in banks, has also surged.

o However, the **savings and current account deposits decreased** by 8%. Gross capital formation also fell by 7% in the March, 2020 quarter.

•

□ **Reason:** o The recent increase reflects **higher cash withdrawals** by depositors to meet needs during the lockdown period and also to safeguard themselves against salary cuts or job losses.

□ **Impact:** o A rise in money supply usually is seen as a leading indicator of growth in consumption and business investments, but due to Covid-19 pandemic, the rise this time is unlikely to bolster either.

o People have curtailed their discretionary spending as they're not sure of their permanent income.

o Lenders too are unwilling to take risks as slowing discretionary spending slows demand for manufactured and industrial goods.

□ **Money Supply:**

The **total stock of money in circulation among the public** at a particular point of time is called **money supply**. • It needs to be noted that total stock of money is different from total supply of money.

• Supply of money is only that part of total stock of money which is held by the public at a particular point of time.

o The circulating money involves the **currency, printed notes, money in the deposit accounts** and in the **form of other liquid assets**.

o RBI publishes figures for four alternative measures of money supply, viz. M1, M2, M3 and M4. • **M1 = CU + DD**

• **M2 = M1 + Savings deposits with Post Office savings banks**

• **M3 = M1 + Net time deposits of commercial banks**

• **M4 = M3 + Total deposits with Post Office savings organisations (excluding National Savings Certificates)**

o CU is **currency (notes plus coins)** held by the public and **DD is net demand deposits held by commercial banks**.

o The word 'net' implies that only deposits of the public held by the banks are to be included in money supply. • The interbank deposits, which a commercial bank holds in other commercial banks, are not to be regarded as part of money supply.

o M1 and M2 are known as **narrow money**. M3 and M4 are known as **broad money**.

o These gradations are in **decreasing order of liquidity**. • M1 is **most liquid and easiest for transactions** whereas M4 is least liquid of all.

- M3 is the most commonly used measure of money supply. It is also known as **aggregate monetary resources**.

Key Terms

- **Gross capital formation** refers to the 'aggregate of gross additions to fixed assets (that is fixed capital formation) plus change in stocks during the counting period.' o Fixed asset refers to the construction, machinery and equipment.
- **Currency in circulation** includes notes in circulation, rupee coins and small coins.
- **Currency with the public** is arrived at after deducting cash with banks from total currency in circulation.