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GS 2 : Polity, Governance, International Relations

1. Bhutan, China to schedule boundary discussions soon

Context:

Bhutan and China have agreed to set up the next round of boundary talks between them.

Areas of Dispute:

- The talks have thus far focused on two areas of dispute:
 - Pasamlung and Jakarlung valleys to the north of Bhutan.
 - Doklam to the west of Bhutan, along the tri-junction with India.
- However, at a UN environmental meeting in June 2020, China raised an objection to a grant for Bhutan's Sakteng Sanctuary to the east frontier as well, saying that it was disputed.

Details:

- The countries also discussed a roadmap for expediting the boundary resolution.
- The upcoming talks, (the 25th round of the boundary talks mechanism) will be the first since the Doklam standoff in 2017.
- It would also be the first since China made new claims on Bhutan's eastern boundary bordering Arunachal Pradesh in 2020.

Note:

- Their annual boundary talk mechanism had begun in 1984, and was followed by two agreements on the maintenance of peace and tranquillity along the border areas in 1988 and 1998.

2. People are free to choose religion: SC

Context:

The Supreme Court said that the people are free to choose their religion.

Background:

- A public interest petition filed claimed that there is mass religious conversion happening across the country.
- It alleged that the court should direct the Centre and the States to control black magic, superstition and religious conversion being done through threats, intimidation or bribes.
- “Incidents are reported every week throughout the country where conversion is done by intimidating, threatening, luring through gifts and monetary benefits,” the petition alleged.

Details:

- The bench, led by Justice Rohinton F. Nariman, said people have a right under the Constitution to profess, practise and propagate religion.
- It lashed out at a “very, very harmful kind” of public interest petition.
- Justice Nariman said every person is the final judge of his/her choice of religion or who their life partner should be. Courts cannot sit in judgment of a person’s choice of religion or life partner.
- Religious faith is a part of the fundamental right to privacy.
 - And a Constitution Bench in its judgment had upheld the inviolability of the right to privacy, equating it with the rights to life, of dignity and liberty.

Article 25

- Fundamental right under Article 25 of the Constitution guarantees the freedom of conscience and free profession, practice and propagation of religion, subject to public order, morality and health.
- It further provides that this article shall not affect any existing law and shall not prevent the state from making any law relating to:
 - Regulation or restriction of any economic, financial, political, or any secular activity associated with religious practice.
 - Providing social welfare and reform.
 - Opening of Hindu religious institutions of public character for all the classes and sections of the Hindus. (The term ‘Hindus’ includes individuals who profess Sikh, Jain or Buddhist religion).

3. China, Pakistan to back each other’s ‘core interests’ at UN

What’s in News?

China and Pakistan have pledged to back each other’s core and major interests in the United Nations after holding bilateral consultations on UN affairs.

- In a joint statement, the two countries said they would “firmly safeguard multilateralism and support the central role of the United Nations in international affairs.”
- The countries, which describe their relationship officially as one of “all-weather partners” and “iron brothers”, have in recent months stepped in to provide crucial support to the other on issues they see as sensitive.
- Beijing has raised the Kashmir issue at the UN Security Council and Islamabad backed China on Hong Kong and Xinjiang.
- China and Pakistan also agreed to strengthen their cooperation on the UN and other multilateral platforms and to support each other on each side’s core and major interests, work toward the political and peaceful resolution of regional and international hotspot issues, and jointly safeguard peace and stability of the world, especially in Asia.

4. India protests U.S. naval exercise

Context:

India said that it has protested the U.S. decision to conduct a patrol in the Indian Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in the western Indian Ocean.

Background:

- In a rare public statement, the U.S. Navy announced that its ship, USS John Paul Jones, had carried out Freedom of Navigation Operation (FONOP) in the Indian EEZ.
- It added that its operations had challenged what the U.S. called India’s excessive maritime claims.
- As per the annual FONOP reports released by the U.S. Department of Defence for each fiscal year, the U.S. carried out multiple FONOPs every year challenging excessive Indian maritime claims.
- USS John Paul Jones asserted navigational rights and freedoms approximately 130 nautical miles west of the Lakshadweep Islands, inside India’s exclusive economic zone, without requesting India’s prior consent.
- India requires prior consent for military exercises or manoeuvres in its exclusive economic zone or continental shelf.
 - The US Navy asserts that this claim is inconsistent with international law.

Details:

- India rejected the U.S.'s claim that India's domestic maritime law was in violation of international law.
- The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) said that the Government of India's stated position on the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) is that the Convention "does not authorise other States to carry out in the EEZ and on the continental shelf, military exercises or manoeuvres, in particular those involving the use of weapons or explosives, without the consent of the coastal state".

Note:

While India ratified the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea in 1995, the U.S. has failed to do it so far.

5. US Restores Aid to Palestinians

Why in News

The United States, in a significant reversal to the earlier policy, has announced the restoration of at least USD 235 million in **financial assistance to the Palestinians**.

- The US administration had **already announced USD 15 million in coronavirus relief to the Palestinians**.

Key Points

- **Financial Aid:**
 - The financial aid includes USD 75 million economic help for the **West Bank & Gaza**, USD 10 million for '**peacebuilding**' programmes of the **US Agency for International Development (USAID)** and USD 150 million in humanitarian assistance to the **UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA)**.
 - The UNRWA funds would include educational assistance for at least 5,00,000 Palestinian children living in West Asia.
 - The **Trump administration (former administration) had almost ended all funding** to the organisation in 2018.
 - The **UN welcomed the move**, hoping it would attract more funds to the body. There were a number of countries that had greatly reduced or halted contributions to UNRWA after the US stopped the aid.
 - The **Prime Minister of Palestine welcomed the move** and called it a new political path that meets the rights and aspirations of the Palestinian people based on international law and UN resolutions.

- However, **Israel**, which has **accused UNRWA of anti-Semitism** (hostility to, prejudice, or discrimination against Jews), **objected to the funding plans**.
- **Israel - Palestine Issues:**
 - The decades-long conflict between Israelis and Palestinians is rooted in **competing claims to the Holy Land**, and includes **disputes over borders, Jerusalem, security, and Palestinian refugees**.
 - The **Israel-Palestine Conflict** can be traced back to 1917.
 - Holy Land is a Middle Eastern region with great religious and historical significance to Christians, Jews, and Muslims.
 - **Mideast War, 1967** was a major turning point. It is also known as the **six-day war or Third Arab-Israeli war**.
 - Israel captured the West Bank, east Jerusalem and Gaza Strip in the war. In the decades since, Israel has built settlements in the West Bank and east Jerusalem that now house a million Israelis.
- **US Recent Policy:**
 - US President Donald Trump's decision in 2017, to **relocate the US Embassy to Jerusalem**, was criticized for being heavily tilted towards Israel.
 - **Mideast Plan or Middle East Peace Plan:** It was unveiled by the then US government in January, 2020.
 - Under it, the Palestinians would have a limited statehood contingent on a list of stringent requirements while **Israel would annex some 30% of the West Bank**.
 - The Palestinians rejected the plan and threatened to withdraw from key provisions of the **Oslo Peace Accords**, which are a series of agreements between Israel and the Palestinians signed in the 1990s.
 - Present US President Joe Biden has reaffirmed the United States' commitment to a **two-state solution**.
- **India's Stand:**
 - India **recognised Israel in 1950** but it is also the **first non-Arab country to recognise Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO)** as the sole representative of the Palestinian.
 - India is also one of the first countries to recognise the **statehood of Palestine in 1988**.
 - In 2014, India favored **UNHRC's** resolution to probe Israel's human rights violations in Gaza. Despite supporting the probe, India abstained from voting against Israel in UNHRC in 2015.
 - As a part of **Link West Policy**, India has **de-hyphenated its relationship** with Israel and Palestine in 2018 to **treat both the countries mutually independent and exclusive**.

- In June 2019, India voted in favor of a decision introduced by Israel in the **UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC)** that objected to granting consultative status to a Palestinian non-governmental organization.
- So far India has **tried to maintain the image of its historical moral supporter for Palestinian self-determination**, and at the same time to engage in the military, economic, and other strategic relations with Israel.

The Territorial Puzzle

- **West Bank:** The West Bank is **sandwiched between Israel and Jordan**. One of its major cities is Ramallah, the de facto administrative capital of Palestine.
 - Israel took control of it in the 1967 war and has over the years established settlements there.
- **Gaza:** The Gaza Strip located **between Israel and Egypt**. Israel occupied the strip after 1967, but relinquished control of Gaza City and day-to-day administration in most of the territory during the **Oslo peace process**.
 - In 2005, Israel unilaterally removed Jewish settlements from the territory, though it continues to control international access to it.
- **Golan Heights:** The Golan Heights is a **strategic plateau that Israel captured from Syria** in the 1967 war. Israel effectively annexed the territory in 1981.
 - The US has officially recognized Jerusalem and Golan Heights as part of Israel.
- **Fatah:** Founded by the late Yasir Arafat in the 1950s, Fatah is the largest Palestinian political faction.
 - Unlike Hamas, Fatah is a secular movement, has nominally recognized Israel, and has actively participated in the peace process.
- **Hamas:** Hamas is regarded as a terrorist organization by the US government. In 2006, Hamas won the Palestinian Authority's legislative elections.
 - It ejected Fatah from Gaza in 2007, splitting the Palestinian movement geographically, as well.

Way Forward

- **Balanced Approach Towards the Israel-Palestine:** The world at large needs to come together for a **peaceful solution** but the reluctance of the Israeli government and other involved parties have aggravated the issue more.
 - Thus a balanced approach would help to maintain favorable relations with Arab countries as well as Israel.
- **Abraham Accords, a Positive Step:** The recent normalization agreements between **Israel and the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco**, known as the **Abraham Accords**, are the steps in the right direction.

- All regional powers should envisage peace between the two countries on line of Abraham Accords.

GS 3 : Economy, Science and Technology, Environment

6. Production of Poppy Straw

The Central government has decided to rope in the private sector to commence production of concentrated poppy straw from India's opium crop.

What is the move?

- The move aims to boost the yield of alkaloids, used for medical purposes and exported to several countries.
- Among the few countries permitted to cultivate the opium poppy crop for export and extraction of alkaloids, India currently only extracts alkaloids from opium gum at facilities controlled by the Revenue Department.
- This entails farmers extracting gum by manually lancing the opium pods and selling the gum to government factories.
- The Ministry has now decided to switch to new technologies after trial cultivation reports submitted last year by two private firms showed higher extraction of alkaloids using the concentrated poppy straw (CPS).

Opium Poppy

- The milky fluid that seeps from cuts in the unripe poppy seed pod has, since ancient times, been scraped off and air-dried to produce what is known as opium.
- The seedpod is first incised with a multi-bladed tool.
- This lets the opium "gum" ooze out.
- The semi-dried "gum" is harvested with a curved spatula and then dried in open wooden boxes.
- The dried opium resin is placed in bags or rolled into balls for sale.

Why such a move?

- India's opium crop acreage has been steadily declining over the years.
- The CPS extraction method is expected to help cut the occasional dependence on imports of products like codeine (extracted from opium) for medical uses.

Amendments to NDPS Act

- Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh are the three traditionally opium-growing States, where poppy crop cultivation is allowed based on licences issued annually by the Central Bureau of Narcotics.
- While roping in private players in producing CPS and extracting alkaloids from it is likely to require amendments to the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) Act, 1985.
- The Revenue Department has decided to appoint a consultant to help frame the bidding parameters and concession agreements for the same.

7. B.1.617: Indian Double Mutant Strain

Why in News

The '**double mutant**' virus that is having a bearing on the spread of the pandemic in India, has been formally classified as **B.1.617**.

- **Mutation** is an alteration in the genetic material (the genome) of a cell of a living organism or of a virus that is more or less permanent and that can be transmitted to the cell's or the virus's descendants.

Key Points

- **Double Mutant (B.1.617):**
 - Earlier Genome sequencing of a section of virus samples by the **Indian SARS-CoV-2 Consortium on Genomics (INSACOG)**, revealed the presence of two mutations, **E484Q and L452R**.
 - Though these mutations have individually been found in several countries, the **presence of both these mutations together** have been first found in coronavirus genomes from India.
 - This double mutant from India has been scientifically named as **B.1.167**. However, it is yet to be classified as '**Variant of Concern**'.
 - Till now only three global '**Variants of Concern**' have been identified: the **U.K. variant (B.1.1.7)**, the **South African (B.1.351)** and the **Brazilian (P.1) lineage**.
- **Spread of B.1.617:** According to the INSACOG, sequencing a sample of genomes from coronavirus patients in India, **B.1.617 was first detected in India** in December, 2020.
 - Today, nearly **70% of the genome sequences** with the mutations characterising **B.1.617 are from India**.

- This is followed by the **United Kingdom (23%), Singapore (2%) and Australia (1%)**.

Variant of Concern

- These are variants for which there is evidence of an increase in transmissibility, more severe disease (increased hospitalizations or deaths), significant reduction in neutralization by antibodies generated during previous infection or vaccination, reduced effectiveness of treatments or vaccines, or diagnostic detection failures.
- **Issues Associated with Mutants:**
 - Mutant virus is **associated with large spikes** of Covid-19 cases in some countries.
 - It enables **viruses to become more infectious** as well as **evade antibodies**.
 - It has also been associated with a **reduction in vaccine efficacy**. International studies have shown reduced efficacy of vaccines particularly those by Pfizer, Moderna and Novavax to certain variants.
 - However, the vaccines continue to be significantly protective in spite of this.
- **Another Mutation:**
 - According to INSACOG, there is also a **third significant mutation, P614R** other than the two mutations (E484Q and L452R).
 - All three concerning **mutations are on the spike protein**. The spike protein is the part of the virus that it uses to penetrate human cells.
 - Virus' spike protein may increase the risks and allow the virus to escape the immune system.
- **Resistant to T cells:**
 - **L452R** could even make the coronavirus resistant to T cells, that is the class of cells necessary to target and destroy virus-infected cells.
 - T cells are different from antibodies that are useful in blocking coronavirus particles and preventing it from proliferating.

T Cells

- A type of white blood cell that is of **key importance to the immune system** and is at **the core of adaptive immunity**.
- It creates the body's immune response to specific pathogens.
- The T cells are like soldiers who search out and destroy the targeted invader.

Indian SARS-CoV-2 Consortium on Genomics

- Indian SARS-CoV-2 Consortium on Genomics (INSACOG) is a **multi-laboratory, multi-agency, pan-India network to monitor genomic variations in the SARS-CoV-2.**
- It helps in the understanding of how the virus spreads and evolves.
- Genomic surveillance can generate a rich source of information for tracking pathogen transmission and evolution on both national and international levels.

THE INDIAN EXPRESS

GS 2 : Polity, Governance, International Relations

1. Freedom of Navigation Operations

The US Navy has had “asserted navigational rights and freedoms approximately 130 nautical miles west of Lakshadweep Islands, inside India’s exclusive economic zone (EEZ), without requesting India’s prior consent, consistent with international law”.

Freedom of Navigation Operations

- FONOPs are closely linked to the concept of freedom of navigation, and in particular to the enforcement of relevant international law and customs regarding freedom of navigation.
- It involves passage conducted by the US Navy through waters claimed by coastal nations as their exclusive territory.
- It is carried under the US policy of exercising and asserting its navigation and overflight rights and freedoms around the world”.
- It says these “assertions communicate that the US does not acquiesce to the excessive maritime claims of other nations, and thus prevents those claims from becoming accepted in international law”.

Significance of FONOPs

- FONOPs are a method of enforcing UNCLOS (United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea) and avoiding these negative outcomes by reinforcing freedom of navigation through practice.

- It is exercised by sailing through all areas of the sea permitted under UNCLOS, and particularly those areas that states have attempted to close off to free navigation as defined under UNCLOS.

What about EEZs?

- An exclusive economic zone (EEZ) is prescribed by the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.
- It is an area of the sea in which a sovereign state has special rights regarding the exploration and use of marine resources, including energy production from water and wind.
- It stretches from the baseline out to 200 nautical miles from the coast of the state in question.
- It is also referred to as a maritime continental margin and, in colloquial usage, may include the continental shelf.
- The term does not include either the territorial sea or the continental shelf beyond the 200 nautical mile limit.
- The difference between the territorial sea and the exclusive economic zone is that the first confers full sovereignty over the waters, whereas the second is merely a “sovereign right” which refers to the coastal state’s rights below the surface of the sea.
- The surface waters, as can be seen on the map, are international waters.

Is FONOP violative of India’s EEZ?

- As per India’s Territorial Waters Act, 1976, the EEZ of India “is an area beyond and adjacent to the territorial waters, and the limit of such zone is two hundred nautical miles from the baseline”.
- India’s “limit of the territorial waters is the line every point of which is at a distance of twelve nautical miles from the nearest point of the appropriate baseline”.
- Under the 1976 law, “all foreign ships (other than warships including submarines and other underwater vehicles) shall enjoy the right of innocent passage through the territorial waters”.

2. India-Seychelles

Why in News

Recently, a virtual meet was held between the **Prime Minister of India and the President of Seychelles**.

Key Points

- **Events at the Meet:**
 - **Joint Inauguration:**
 - Inaugurated the **new magistrates' court building in Mahé** constructed with a USD 3.5-million, a **1 MW solar power plant** built at a cost of USD3.4 million, and **10 community development projects** in Seychelles.
 - All the projects were built by the **help of India**.
 - India has so far taken up **29 small people-oriented development projects in Seychelles**, while the 1MW solar project was built in addition to installing solar systems at **146 government buildings and domestic households**.
 - The **solar plant will meet the electricity needs of around 400 houses round the year**.
 - **Fast Patrol Vehicle:**
 - India handed over a **fast patrol vessel (PS Zoroaster)** to the island nation.
 - The 48.9-metre patrol boat was built by **Garden Reach Shipbuilders and Engineering** (under the administrative control of the Ministry of Defence) at a **cost of Rs. 100 crore** and has a **top speed of 35 knots** and an **endurance of 1,500 nautical miles**.
 - The vessel will be **used for multi-purpose operations**, such as patrolling, anti-smuggling and anti-poaching operations, and search and rescue.
 - India **gifted similar vessels to the Seychelles in 2005, 2014 and 2016**.
- **India's Stand:**
 - Seychelles is central to India's vision of **Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR)**.
 - India is **honoured to be a partner of Seychelles** in the development of its security capabilities and in meeting its infrastructural and developmental needs.
- **Seychelles Stand:**
 - **India is a reliable and trusted partner**.
 - India's precious donation of 50,000 doses of **Covid-19 vaccines** had **helped Seychelles in moving towards the goals of achieving 70% herd immunity** by the end of April 2021 and opening up the economy.
 - Seychelles was the **first country** to receive the Covid vaccine from India.

India-Seychelles Relation

- **Background:**

- **Diplomatic ties** were established with Seychelles after its independence in **1976**.
- When Seychelles attained freedom, a contingent from the **Indian Naval Ship, INS Nilgiri, took part in the Independence Day celebrations**.
 - Since then the tradition of Indian military participation at the Seychelles National Day celebrations has continued till date.
- An **Indian Mission was established in 1979 in Victoria, Seychelles** with the High Commissioner based in **Dar-es-Salaam** (Tanzania) and concurrently accredited to Seychelles.
- The **first resident High Commissioner was appointed in 1987**, while **Seychelles opened its resident mission in New Delhi in early 2008**.
- **Economic Relation:**
 - India exported goods worth USD 84.49 million and imported goods worth USD 5.27 million from Seychelles during the financial year 2018-19.
 - **Tax Information Exchange Agreement (TIEA)** between India and Seychelles was signed in August 2015. Seychelles is also keen to sign the **Double Tax Avoidance Agreement (DTAA)**.
- **Energy & Environment:**
 - **Blue Economy** Protocol between India and Seychelles was signed in August 2015.
 - Recently, India has been **accepted as an observer of the Indian Ocean Commission**, of which Seychelles is a member.
 - With the ratification of the **International Solar Alliance (ISA)** Framework Agreement in September 2017, Seychelles has officially become one of the Founding Members of ISA.
 - **ISA is an Indian Initiative.**
- **Cultural Relations:**
 - With a significant presence of **Indian Diaspora** in Seychelles, cultural contacts between the two countries have been primarily community-driven with support from the two governments.
 - At the initiative of prominent **Person of Indian Origin (PIO)** associations in Seychelles, several Indian cultural troupes regularly visit Seychelles for performance.
 - In June 2018, **Cultural Exchange Programme (CEP)** was signed with Seychelles to mark the friendship and goodwill between the two countries.
- **Indian Community:**
 - The number of PIOs with Seychelles citizenship is estimated to be around 10,000 (or **11% of the population**), which is significant in a country with a total population of 96,000 (April 2019).

- There are about **10,000 Indian citizens** holding Gainful Employment Permits, who are mostly workers in the construction sector, shop assistants and a few professionals.
- **Defence:**
 - India and Seychelles have an elaborate architecture of defence and security cooperation that has deepened over the years with the growing piracy menace and other economic offences in the strategic **Indian Ocean region**.
 - **India gifted and installed six coastal surveillance radar systems in Seychelles** in 2015 enabling better coastal security for Seychelles.
 - **The Seychelles government has leased the Assumption Island to the Indian Navy** to build an overseas base of operations there.
 - Developing infrastructure on **Assumption Island in Seychelles is a key piece in India's proactive maritime strategy** as it counters China's moves in the Indian Ocean region.
 - Developing its infrastructure is being regarded as a "strategic asset" in India's arsenal.

SAGAR

- Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) was **launched in 2015. It is India's strategic vision for the Indian Ocean Region (IOR)**.
- Through SAGAR, **India seeks to deepen economic and security cooperation with its maritime neighbours** and assist in building their maritime security capabilities.
- Further, **India seeks to safeguard its national interests** and ensure Indian Ocean region to become inclusive, collaborative and respect international law.
- The **key relevance of SAGAR emerges when seen in conjunction with India's other policies** impacting the maritime domain like **Act East Policy, Project Sagarmala, Project Mausam**, India as 'net security provider', focus on Blue Economy etc.

Way Forward

- Seychelles has been a **strategic destination for several major powers** with vested interests in the region, however India's image and visibility in Seychelles is very high as compared to others.
- The **geo-strategic importance of Seychelles's location remains undiminished** in contemporary times, and will become enhanced and **China is fighting to get an upper hand which India must not allow**.
- There is also a **need to strengthen shared efforts of both the countries to combat drug trafficking, IUU (Illegal, unreported and unregulated) fishing, piracy and climate change** while protecting the ocean ecosystem.

3. Meeting of Education Ministers of E9 Countries

Why in News

Recently, a consultation meeting of Education Ministers of E9 countries was held.

- The meeting was held on the theme 'E9 initiative: **Scaling up digital learning to accelerate progress towards SDG4**'.

Key Points

- **Scaling up Digital Learning to Accelerate Progress towards SDG4 (Concept):**
 - The **United Nations (UN)** is spearheading a global initiative on **digital learning and skills for all**, targeting marginalized children and youth and aiming to close the digital divide and drive rapid change in education systems.
 - This initiative **focuses on three of the five priorities of the 2020 Global Education Meeting (GEM) Declaration**: supporting teachers; investing in skills; and narrowing the digital divide.
 - **E9 countries offer a starting gate** to accelerate progress on digital learning and skills in the immediate term and ultimately on the SDG4 agenda in the longer term.
- **E9 Countries:**
 - **E9 Partnership** was first established in **1993**, formed to achieve the goals of **UNESCO's Education For All (EFA)**.
 - A group of **E9 countries (Bangladesh, Brazil, China, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Nigeria, and Pakistan)** aims at strengthening political will and collective effort to ensure quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all.
 - E9 Partnership is working for the achievement of **SDG4 - Education 2030**.
- **Education For All (EFA):**
 - An international initiative, first launched at the **World Conference on Education for All** by **UNESCO, UNDP, UNFPA, UNICEF** and the **World Bank** in **Thailand** in **1990**.
 - Participants endorsed an '**expanded vision of learning**' and pledged to **universalize primary education** and **massively reduce illiteracy** by the end of the decade.
 - Ten years later, with many countries far from having reached this goal, a broad coalition of national governments, civil society groups, and

development agencies met again in Dakar, Senegal, and affirmed the commitment to achieving EFA by the year 2015.

- They **identified six key education goals** which aim to meet the learning needs of all children, youth and adults by 2015 (e.g. the Dakar Framework for Action).

2020 Global Education Meeting Declaration

- As part of the Decade of Action to accelerate progress on SDG4 and in response to Covid-19, the 2020 GEM Declaration **identified five priorities** for urgent action:
 - Education financing;
 - Safe school reopening;
 - Supporting teachers as frontline workers;
 - Investment in skills; and
 - Narrowing the digital divide.
- The **Covid-19 crisis** revealed the weakness and unpreparedness of the current education systems worldwide, prompting the deployment of **digital learning** during mass school closures across almost all countries.

SDG4

- To bring sustainable development in the mainstream, the **United Nations (UN) member states, in 2015, adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**.
 - There are **17 goals and 169 specific targets** to be achieved by 2030.
 - SDGs are **not legally binding**.
- **SDG4 is to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities** for all.

GS 3 :Economy, Science and Technology,Environment

4. Give small savers what is due to them

Issue of small savings interest rate

- For decades, small savings have constituted an important source of household savings, **funded development programmes** of state governments and **offered a safe and secure source of income** to senior citizens.

- Recently, a notification on reducing the interest rates on small savings schemes quickly made headlines and was rescinded after 12 hours.
- For small savers, the pandemic turned into a triple whammy: **Battling job losses, higher food prices and a sharp devaluation in the value of their savings and earnings thereof.**
- Interest on the **Senior Citizens' Saving Scheme** was cut to 7.4 per cent, effective from April 2020, from 8.7 per cent before,
- This was done despite the Gopinath Committee had recommended **the rates should never be revised more than 100 basis points** in a single year.

Linking small savings rate to G-sec yields

- The suggestion to link small savings rates to G-Sec yields was **first made in 2001** by Y V Reddy, then deputy governor of RBI.
- Reddy committee suggested small savings rates **should be reset once a year**, allowing for a **spread of up to 50 basis points.**
- Reddy's recommendations were reiterated by his successor **Rakesh Mohan.**
- **The Gopinath Committee**, set up in 2009 gave its report in June 2011 and **annual revisions** in small savings rates linked to G-sec yields got underway effective April 2012.
- In 2016, however, the government decided to reset them on a **quarterly basis.**

Why link small savings rate to G-sec yields

- Such linking is premised on the argument that the money collected through these schemes is **invested in central and state government securities.**
- While the yield on the government securities progressively declined over time, small savings rates remained downwardly rigid.
- This resulted in an asset-liability mismatch that **threatened the viability of the NSSF.**
- It is also argued that people's dependence on small savings schemes had **significantly declined since formal banking had rapidly expanded.**
- Moreover, for those who used small savings as safety nets there were other **alternatives such as old-age pension and other similar schemes.**

Issues with resetting rates on annual basis

- All expert committees that examined the issue had strongly argued against resetting the rates on a quarterly basis.
- The fear was it could result in unfair rewards for small savers in the event the **G-sec yields remain artificially low** for a certain period of time.

- It did happen in the pandemic year when small savings rates **faced the steepest cut in five years.**
- The changed policy on small savings is also premised on the **belief that markets offer fair outcomes.**
- More often than not, that is not true.
- The experience of the past year bears it out.
- While retail inflation spiked, the **RBI used every trick in its bag to hold G-sec yields down.**

Way forward

- The government could go back to **resetting the rates annually**, keeping the **revision under 100 basis points** and allowing small savings rates **a spread of at least 50 basis points**, not up to 50 basis points, over and above the G-sec yields.
- Also, it may revisit the suggestion made by the Rakesh Mohan Committee to use **a weighted average of G-sec yields over preceding two years** – two-thirds weight for the later year, one-third for the earlier year.

Conclusion

Adopting the changes suggested here may require setting aside a few thousand crores to fill the resultant gap in the NSSF. But it is worth doing.

5. NanoSniffer: A Microsensor based Explosive Trace Detector

A Union Minister has launched NanoSniffer, the world's first Microsensor based Explosive Trace Detector (ETD) developed by NanoSniff Technologies, an IIT Bombay incubated startup.

NanoSniffer

- NanoSniffer is a 100% Made in India product in terms of research, development & manufacturing.
- It can detect explosives in less than 10 seconds and it also identifies and categorizes explosives into different classes. It detects all classes of military, conventional and homemade explosives.
- It gives visible & audible alerts with a sunlight-readable colour display.
- NanoSniffer provides trace detection of the nano-gram quantity of explosives & delivers result in seconds.
- It can accurately detect a wide range of military, commercial and homemade explosives threats.

- Further analysis of the algorithms also helps in the categorization of explosives into the appropriate class.

6. Ocean Acoustic During Covid-19

Why in News

There was reduced **noise pollution** on the surface of earth during the **Covid-19 pandemic** owing to lockdowns and stop of economic activities (like international trade).

- In the underwater world, too, **anthrophony (human-made sounds)** reduced substantially for long months.

Key Points

- **Noise in the Ocean:**
 - The three broad components of oceanic acoustics are:
 - **Geophony:** Sounds created by **non-biological natural events** like earthquakes, waves and bubbling.
 - **Biophony:** Sounds created by the ocean's living creatures.
 - **Anthrophony:** Sounds created by human beings (a large portion of which is **shipping noise**).
 - According to 'the Soundscape of the Anthropocene Ocean report' published in Science Journal in 2021, **geophony and biophony dominated the soundscape** of oceans before the industrial era.
 - However, now, **anthrophony interferes with and alters** these natural components.
- **Noise Level in Modern Times:**
 - The oceans of the **current geological era (Anthropocene era** - when human-made disruptions largely influence the environment) are noisier than the pre-industrial times.
 - During the first few days of the pandemic, ocean sound monitors at several places recorded a decibel (dB) drop.
 - The hydrophones at the **Endeavour node of Canada's Neptune Ocean Observatory showed an average decrease of 1.5 dB** in year-over-year mean weekly noise power spectral density at 100 hertz.
- **Impact of Anthrophony:**
 - In the short term anthrophony masks the **auditory signal processing by marine animals, weakening their ability** to forage for food, **escape a predator or attract a mate.**

- In the long run, it can thin out the population of some underwater species.
- **The International Quiet Ocean Experiment (IQOE):**
 - It is an international scientific program to promote research, observations, and modelling to improve **understanding of ocean soundscapes and effects of sound on marine organisms**.
 - It started in 2015 and will go on till the end of 2025. The IQOE team has gathered large quantities of data during the Covid-19 pandemic.
 - IQOE is developing methods to make **ocean acoustic data more comparable. These data will be compiled into a global dataset to establish trends in ocean sound** and look for effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on ocean sound.
 - The IQOE has identified **a network of over 200 non-military hydrophones (underwater microphones)** in oceans across the world.
 - Most of the hydrophones in the network of this project are along the **shores of the USA and Canada**. Now the presence is increasing in several other parts of the world, especially Europe.
 - These hydrophones (**that pick up even faraway low-frequency signals**) have recorded sounds from whales and other marine animals, as well as those emanated by human activities.

Hydrophone

- Just as a **microphone collects sound in the air, a hydrophone detects acoustic signals under the water**.
- Most hydrophones are based on a special property of certain ceramics that produces a small electrical current when subjected to changes in underwater pressure.
- When submerged in the ocean, a ceramic hydrophone produces small-voltage signals over a wide range of frequencies as it is exposed to underwater sounds emanating from any direction.
- By amplifying and recording these electrical signals, hydrophones measure ocean sounds with great precision.

Prelims Practice Questions

1. 'Bru tribe' has been in the news recently, is related to which of the following geographical areas?

- A North-East India
- B Nilgiris
- C Andaman & Nicobar Islands
- D Chhattisgarh Plains

Answer : A

Explanation:

- **Bru or Reang** is a community indigenous to Northeast India, living mostly in Tripura, Mizoram and Assam. In Tripura, they are recognised as a **Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group. Hence, option is A is correct.**
 - In Mizoram, they have been targeted by groups that do not consider them indigenous to the state.
 - In 1997, following ethnic clashes, nearly 37,000 Brus fled Mamit, Kolasib and Lunglei districts of Mizoram and were accommodated in relief camps in Tripura.
 - In January 2020, a quadrilateral agreement was signed by the Centre, the two state governments and Bru representatives to allow the remaining 32,000 to permanently settle in Tripura.

2. With reference to PRAGATI meeting, consider the following statements:

1. It has been designed by the NITI Ayog for timely implementation of central government schemes.
2. It is a three-tier system in which Chief ministers of the concerned states participate.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

- A 1 only
- B 2 only
- C Both 1 and 2
- D Neither 1 nor 2

Answer : D

Explanation:

- Recently, the Prime Minister (PM) has chaired the **33rd PRAGATI meeting**.
- Interaction through PRAGATI is held once every month, known as PRAGATI Day.
- PRAGATI was launched in 2015, PRAGATI is the multimodal platform for Pro-Active Governance and Timely Implementation involving central and state governments.
- It has been designed by the **Prime Minister's Office (PMO)** team with the help of the National Informatics Center (NIC). **Hence, statement 1 is not correct.**
- It enables the PM to discuss the issues with the concerned central and state officials with full information and latest visuals of the ground-level situation.
- It is a three-tier system: PMO, Union **Government Secretaries**, and **Chief Secretaries of the States (not the Chief ministers)**. **Hence, statement 2 is not correct.**

3. Consider the following statements regarding Astra Missile

1. It is an indigenous beyond visual range Air-to-Air missile with a range of over 700 km.
2. It can carry nuclear warhead.
3. It is developed by ISRO

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

- A. 1 and 2 only
- B. 1 only
- C. 2 and 3 only
- D. None

Answer : D

Explanation:

All the statements given above are incorrect.

Astra is an indigenous Beyond Visual Range Air-to-Air missile with a range of over 70 km. It has a 15-kilogramme high-explosive pre-fragmented warhead.

Speed: The missile can fly towards its target at a speed of over 5,555 kilometres per hour. The Astra missile has been developed by Defence Research and Development Organisation along with 50 other public and private organisations.

4. Consider the following statements

1. Etikoppaka Bommalu, toys made of wood in the region of Andhra Pradesh.
2. Kurumba Painting is traditionally practiced by tribes located in Nilgiri Hills.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

- A. 1 only
- B. 2 only
- C. Both 1 and 2
- D. Neither 1 nor 2

Answer : C

Explanation:

Both the statements given above are correct.

Located on the banks of the river Varaha in Vishakhapatnam district of AP, is a small village called

Etikoppaka. Made in the Etikoppaka region of Andhra Pradesh, these toys are made with lacquer color and are traditionally known as Etikoppaka toys or Etikoppaka Bommalu. The village is very famous for its toys made of wood. The toys are also called as lacquer toys because of application of lacquer coating

Kurumba painting are the art form of Kurumba tribes from Nilgiris of TamilNadu. The art related to the tribal rituals, describes various facets of tribal life in the forests of the Nilgiris. C.P.Ramaswami Aiyar Foundation in Chennai took efforts for the revival of this age old art form and presented in to the world.

5. Which of the following is/are included in Public Debt of India?

1. Treasury bills
2. Outstanding external debts
3. Borrowing from small savings

Select the correct answer using the code given below.

- A. 1 and 2 only
- B. 1 and 3 only
- C. 2 and 3 only
- D. 1, 2 and 3

Answer : A

Explanation:

In India, public debt refers to a part of the total borrowings by the Union Government which includes such items as market loans, special bearer bonds, treasury bills and special loans and securities issued by the Reserve Bank. It also includes the outstanding external debt.

However, it does not include the following items of borrowings:

- (i) small savings,
- (ii) provident funds,
- (iii) other accounts, reserve funds and deposits.

Hence, option (a) is correct.

6. Which of the following practices were associated with the Harappan Settlements?

1. Ploughing of crop fields
2. Consumption of animal products
3. Mixed cropping
4. Practice of Irrigation

Select the correct answer using the codes below.

- A. 1 and 4 only
- B. 1, 2 and 4 only
- C. 2 and 3 only
- D. 1, 2, 3 and 4

Answer : D

Explanation:

Statement 2: The Harappans ate a wide range of animal products. Archaeologists have been able to reconstruct use of animals from finds of charred animal bones found at Harappan sites. These include those of cattle, sheep, goat, buffalo and pig.

Statement 1 and 3: Archaeologists have found evidence of a ploughed field at Kalibangan (Rajasthan). The field had two sets of furrows at right angles to each other, suggesting that two different crops were grown together.

Representations on seals and terracotta sculpture indicate that the bull was known, and oxen were used for ploughing. Terracotta models of the plough have been found at sites in Cholistan and at Banawali (Haryana). Statement 4: Most Harappan sites are located in semi-aridlands, where irrigation was probably required for agriculture. Traces of canals, water reservoirs and wells have been found at the Harappan sites indicate that agriculture was practiced.

Mains Practice Questions

1. Rapid globalisation has made money laundering an international problem. Explain this statement and discuss the policy level interventions taken by India to combat it.

Approach

- Briefly explain money laundering and globalization linking their relationship.
- Explain how globalization impacts money laundering.
- Discuss the recent legislative measures and policy efforts taken by India.
- Give a way forward.

2. The government is losing sight of Parliament's primary role discussion and reconsideration. In the light of the given statement, discuss the significance and prevailing issues in the functioning of parliamentary committees. (150 words).

Approach

- Elaborate the given statement in the introduction.
- Discuss the significance of the Parliamentary Committee system.
- Highlight the prevailing issues associated with the Parliamentary Committee system.
- Give a suitable conclusion.