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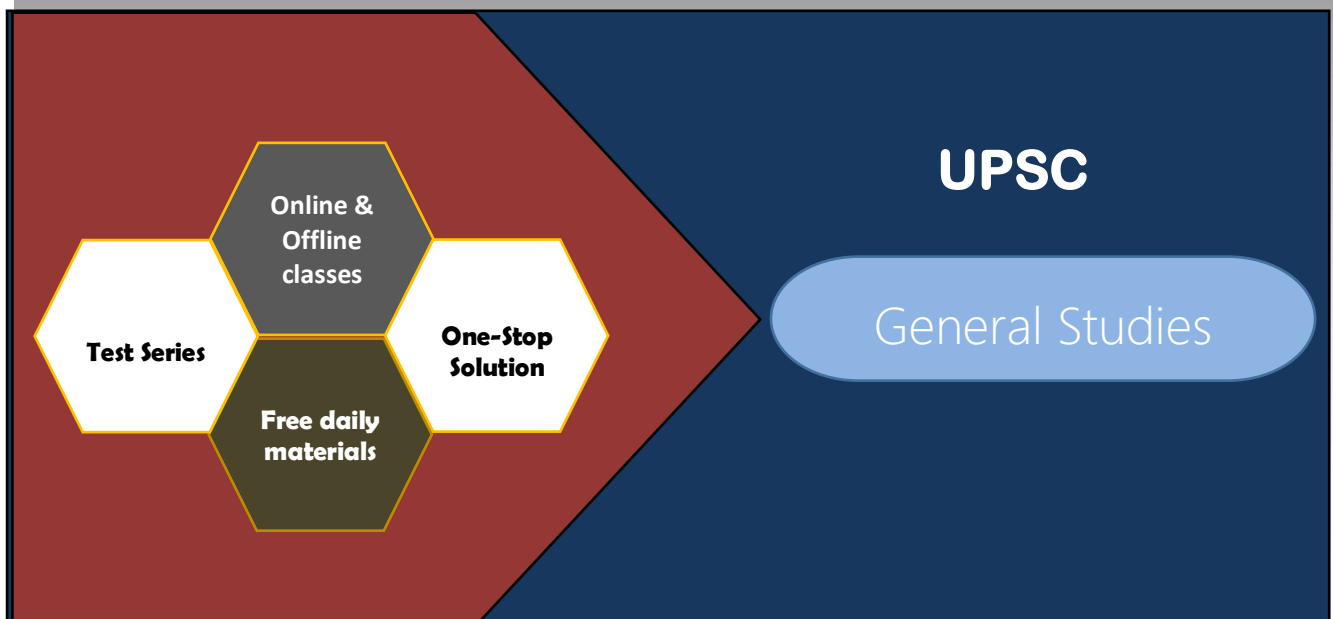
Monthly current affairs magazine

CURRENT AFFAIRS

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**Articles of the day
THE HINDU & INDIAN EXPRESS**



Contents

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

1. Centre reconstitutes panel on mythical Sarasvati river

GS 2 : Polity, Governance, International Relations

1. A wolf in watchdog's clothing
2. Big brother is watching you
3. Master and the roster
4. U.S. to keep hard line on China trade
5. India and Japan back in new Sri Lanka port project
6. Pak. has given 'pension' to terrorists, says India
7. The anatomy of a spring ceasefire
8. Freedom in the World Report, 2021
9. Voicing dissent against govt. is not sedition: SC
10. India, 17 countries face U.S. anti-dumping tax
11. Not so stellar in protecting personal liberty
12. OTT platforms will not have to register: Centre
13. Ending the war in Yemen
14. India reaffirms Lanka defence ties
15. India's rebuttal to Freedom House Report
16. Health first, fiscal prudence later
17. China gives green light for first downstream dams on Brahmaputra
18. 'Only half of govt. schools, anganwadis have tap water'

19. SC seeks States' views on 50% cap on quota
20. Ploughing a new furrow in the agri-regulatory system
21. Quad: strategic opportunity or quagmire?
22. Bharat Bangla Maitri Bridge
23. Indo-Pacific is key priority: White House
24. India, Japan space agencies review ties
25. Licensing Conditions for Telecom Companies Amended
26. A moral test
27. Bureaucrats cannot be State Election Commissioners: SC
28. Relooking the Mandal verdict and quota cap
29. Future force for future wars
30. Centre likely to allow residents to fill their NPR details online
31. Biden seeks to boost Asia alliances
32. The limits of POCSO
33. Bill to define Delhi L-G's powers moved in LS
34. Rajya Sabha passes MTP Bill
35. We need to urgently invest in public health
36. Serious issue if 3 cr. ration cards were cancelled, says SC
37. 'India has assured Sri Lanka of support'
38. SC to hear plea against sale of electoral bonds
39. Delhi undermined
40. India, United States resolve to intensify defence cooperation
41. Corrective voice from top court against stereotyping women

42. SC walks a tightrope over vacancies
43. China, Russia look to deepen 'best' ties
44. U.P., M.P. sign agreement on Ken-Betwa interlinking work
45. OTT case: SC stays all pleas in HCs
46. LS clears Bill on allied healthcare
47. RS approves Bill empowering Delhi L-G amid Oppn. Walkout
48. SC suggests posting retired judges to clear backlog in HCs
49. Remove the wedges in India-Bangladesh ties
50. 'Move health to Concurrent list'
51. Linking the East with the West
52. Amid Bangladesh liberation anniversary, role of India, U.S. in 1971 in spotlight
53. The Afghan endgame
54. UN in dialogue with China for 'unrestricted' Xinjiang visit
55. Japan to Fund Projects in India
56. Good neighbours

GS 3 : Economy, Science and Technology, Environment

1. Eviction of prawn gherries restarts at Chilika Lake
2. ISRO puts Brazil's Amazonia-1, 18 other satellites into orbit
3. India seeks TRIPS waiver for Vaccines
5. IIT-Delhi researchers develop technology to recycle e-waste
6. Recalibrating relations with EU

7. Centre garners 77,815 crore in spectrum auction, Jio top bidder
8. Climate and consciousness
9. 14 Trojans found in servers, says Minister
10. 'OPEC+ move to hit recovery'
11. New space
12. 'Red Echo' over India
13. DAC to take up deals for armed drones, submarines
14. State of Water Supply in Schools and Anganwadis
15. SC questions delay in setting up environment regulator
16. Govt. asks refiners to diversify oil imports after OPEC+ move
17. A case for a revamped, need-based PDS
18. National Employability Through Apprenticeship Program
19. 'Govt. owning bad bank is more capital efficient'
20. Petition in HC seeks expansion of ambit of electric vehicles scheme
21. Bring down benzene emission at fuel outlets, says panel
22. 'Centre to infuse 14,500 cr. into banks under PCA soon'
23. Retrospective laws and the Cairn tax dispute
24. Optical monitoring of power line health
25. The job crunch and the growing fires of nativism
26. Forestalling a cyber Pearl Harbour
27. 'India's arms imports down by 33%'
28. WPI inflation quickens to 27-month high
29. Responsible AI – the need for ethical guard rails

30. Delhi remains most polluted capital: report
31. Re-evaluating inflation targeting
32. Looking beyond privatisation
33. Auto firms see scrappage policy boosting sector
34. Mining threat looms over Aravalis in Haryana
35. Doubling down on a resilient India
36. 'Workers in govt. contracts must possess skill certificate'
37. Market Infrastructure Institutions
38. Skill Certification
39. 'Define unfair trade practice for e-com'
40. 'No digital tax if goods sold via India arm'
41. New species of red algae seen in west, south east Indian coast
42. 27 migratory birds found dead at wildlife sanctuary in Himachal
43. Large Hadron Collider beauty Experiment
44. A road to progress
45. Researchers find new butterfly species

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

1. Centre reconstitutes panel on mythical Sarasvati river

Context:

The Centre has reconstituted an advisory committee to chalk out a plan for studying the mythical Sarasvati river, after the earlier panel's term ended in 2019.

Details:

- The ASI had first set up the committee on December 28, 2017 for a period of two years.
- The committee would continue to be chaired by the Culture Minister.
- It includes officials from the Culture, Tourism, Water Resources, Environment and Forest, Housing and Urban Affairs Ministries; representatives of the Indian Space Research Organisation; officials from the governments of Gujarat, Haryana and Rajasthan; and an ASI official.
- There is a 27-member panel among the “non-official members”.

River Saraswati – the mystery

- Scientists, geologists as well as scholars have identified the Saraswati with many present-day defunct rivers.
- The river originated from the Har-Ki-Dun glacier in Garhwal (Uttarakhand).
- Saraswati river **flowed through Haryana, Rajasthan and the northern part of Gujarat.**
- According to experts who have studied the map of underground channels, it also flowed through Pakistan before meeting the Western Sea through Rann of Kutch and was approximately 4,000 km in length.
- The report by the panel said:
 - The Himalayan-born Satluj “of the PAST”, which flowed through the channels of present-day Ghaggar-Patialwali rivulets, represents the western branch of the ancient river.
 - On the other hand, it said, Markanda and Sarsuti represented the western branch of Saraswati, known as Tons-Yamuna.
- The confluence of the branches was near Shatrana, 25 km south of Patiala. And suddenly, it flows crossing the desert (Rann of Kutch) and meets the gulf of the western sea.

GS 2 : Polity, Governance, International Relations

1. A wolf in watchdog's clothing

The article talks about the recently introduced Information Technology (Guidelines for Intermediaries and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021.

Concerns:

- They represent a dramatic, dangerous move by the Union Government towards cementing increased censorship of Internet content and mandating compliance with government demands regarding user data collection and policing of online services in India.
- This has happened in the absence of open and public discussion of the full swathe of regulatory powers the government has sought to exercise, and without any parliamentary study and scrutiny.
- The ability to issue rules under a statute i.e. to frame subordinate legislation is by its nature a limited, constrained power.
 - When the Union Government issues subordinate rules, it is limited to the substantive provisions laid out by Parliament in the original act passed by the latter – the executive branch is subordinate to what Parliament has permitted it and cannot use its rule-making power to seek to issue primary legislation by itself.
- The Government of India already has significant legal powers, with practically no institutionalised oversight or true checks and balances, to force censorship and surveillance on Internet platforms and other web services in India.

Criticisms:

- The rules will end up giving the government a good deal of leverage over online news publishers and intermediaries, which holds troubling implications for freedom of expression and the right to information.
- These rules mandate digital news publishers and video streaming services to adhere to a cumbersome three-tier structure of regulation, with a government committee at its apex.
 - This is unprecedented in a country where the news media have been given the space all along to self-regulate, based on the mature understanding that any government presence could have a chilling effect on free speech and conversations.
- That the new rules pertain only to digital news media, and not to the whole of the news media, hardly provides comfort.

- Digital news media is increasingly becoming a prime source of news and views.
- The purview of the IT Act, 2000, has been expanded to bring digital news media under its regulatory ambit without legislative action.
- According to the rules, “Any person having a grievance regarding content published by a publisher in relation to the Code of Ethics may furnish his grievance on the grievance mechanism established by the publisher.”
 - Anyone could force a digital platform to take up any issue.
 - It has to be taken up first, under the new rules, by the digital platform’s grievance officer.
 - If there is no resolution or if the complainant is dissatisfied, this can be escalated to a self-regulating body of publishers. This can then be escalated to the highest level, the government’s Oversight Mechanism.
 - The potential for misuse is enormous.
- The new rules have increased the compliance burden for social media platforms too.
 - The bigger of these platforms will have to appoint chief compliance officers, to ensure the rules and the laws are adhered to, and a nodal officer, with whom the law enforcement agencies will be coordinating, apart from a grievance officer.
- The platforms in the messaging space will have to enable the identification of the first originator of the information on its computer resource based on a judicial order.

Conclusion:

- Some amount of tightening of policy is inevitable given new challenges.
- The government’s involvement in grievance redress could prove counterproductive in a country where the citizens still do not have a data privacy law to guard themselves against excesses committed by any party.
- Regulation has an important place in the scheme of things. The laws to combat unlawful content are already in place. What is required is their uniform application.
- Given an environment where people are sensitive to content, the regulatory mechanism could become an operational nightmare.
- Creativity and freedom of expression could be affected.

2. Big brother is watching you

The article argues how the new guidelines to regulate digital content i.e, Information Technology (Guidelines for Intermediaries and Digital Media Ethics

Code) Rules, 2021 gives the executive unbridled power without any checks and balances.

Details:

- The guidelines include social media sites, messaging apps, over-the-top streaming services (popularly known as OTT services), and digital news publishers.
- Under the guidelines, it appears as if the citizens have been empowered and that there is now a fair grievance redressal mechanism for users of digital platforms.

Issue:

- The new governmental guidelines to regulate digital content raise a fundamental legal and ethical question: are they contra constitutional?
- For many advocates of the freedom of expression, the guidelines virtually undermine the enabling provisions of Article 19 of the Constitution.
- It weaponises the restrictive clause of reasonable restriction, without really spelling out what constitutes reasonable restriction.

Concerns:

Tricky Rule:

- The tricky new rule states that big social media companies will have to take down unlawful content within a specific time frame of being served either a court order or notice by an appropriate government agency.
 - There has been no satisfactory answer from the government on what basis it issues a takedown instruction to major social media platforms.

More opacity:

- The new rules pave the way for more opacity and secrecy rather than transparency and accountability.

Unbridled power for the executive:

- While the earlier regulatory framework was murky with many lines blurred and the onus of responsibility constantly oscillating between the originator and the intermediaries, the new guidelines give the executive unbridled power without any checks and balances.
- From arbitrary takedown notices to selective shutting down of Internet services, the executive has been arming itself against the citizens, and the two

important estates of democracy – the legislature and the judiciary – are not sufficiently reflecting on the question of overreach.

- In a polarised environment, an informed debate is restricted to some print and online organisations.

Issues relating to individual privacy:

- To ensure individual privacy on social media platforms, the introduction of end-to-end encryption was seen as a technical solution to a truly vexatious issue.
- However, under the new rule, social media intermediaries must enable tracing of the originator of information on their platform if required by a competent authority, yet again raising the question of individual privacy.

3. Master and the roster

Context:

- The Supreme Court **proceedings in the case of the alleged conspiracy to threaten the independence of the judiciary** on the basis of sexual harassment allegations against the former Chief Justice of India (CJI), Ranjan Gogoi.
- The proceedings into the case have ended and the proceedings have remained inconclusive.

Details:

Master of the Roster system:

- The article laments that the SC proceedings failed to recognise the threat to judicial independence posed by the singular power of the CJI as the Master of the Roster.
 - The Master of the Roster system **vests exclusive discretion in the Chief Justice to constitute benches and allocate cases.**
- The Master of the Roster power enjoyed by the CJI lay at the heart of the controversy surrounding the proceedings the Court has now closed.
 - The Master of the Roster power enjoyed by Justice Gogoi allowed him to institute suo motu proceedings despite being an accused and even presided over it. The case was labelled as a matter of judicial independence.

Concerns:

Threat of becoming a singular power:

- The Master of the Roster power makes the CJI's office a high stakes one placing all the powers in the hands of the CJI and making the **CJI the sole point of defence of the Court against executive interference.**
- With the CJI as the sole Master of the Roster, any executive seeking to influence the Supreme Court needs only a pliant CJI. A pliant Master of the Roster carries the danger of producing a pliant Court. Hence, this system **threatens the principle of judicial independence.**

Lack of scrutiny:

- The CJI's Master of the Roster power is enjoyed without scrutiny.
- **A group of senior judges of the SC have previously levelled allegations of favouritism in how CJI Dipak Misra allocated cases,** through a press conference.

Reluctance of the higher judiciary to reform:

- The Supreme Court has been reluctant to dilute the Master of the Roster power.
 - In **Asok Pande v. Supreme Court of India (2018)**, a three-judge bench of the Court held that Master of the Roster is the CJI's exclusive power.
 - The two-judge bench in **Shanti Bhushan v. Supreme Court of India (2018)** rejected the plea that the Master of the Roster should be interpreted as the collegium.

Challenges in judiciary:

- The existing system despite the progressive reform like the institution of the collegium system in the appointment process has **failed to prevent executive interferences in the judiciary** due to the following two reasons.
 - Lure of **post-retirement jobs**
 - The CJI's allocation of cases remains an unchecked power owing to the Master of the Roster powers enjoyed by CJI.

Way forward:

- Future judicial reforms should address the above two issues in the following ways.
 - **A cooling-off period between retirement and a post-retirement appointment** needs to be introduced.

- The power of Master of the Roster needs to be diversified beyond the CJI's exclusive discretion. Rather it could involve a **system similar to the collegium system** associated with the appointment process.

4. U.S. to keep hard line on China trade

Context:

2021 President's Trade Agenda and 2020 Annual Report were submitted by the U.S. Trade Representative (USTR) to Congress.

Details:

- According to the report, the Biden administration's trade agenda will make pandemic recovery a top priority and focus on the American workers.
- The administration will:
 - Push for labour standards in its trade agreements.
 - Negotiate environmental standards.
 - Address China's coercive and unfair trade practices.
- The new administration is also likely to follow an aggressive agricultural trade policy.

Take on China:

- The ongoing comprehensive review of U.S. trade policy towards China is integral to the development of the Administration's overall China strategy.
- It committed to using all tools available to counter practices it calls unfair and harmful to the U.S.
- It will also collaborate with allies to address the market distortions created by the industrial overcapacity issue.
- Addressing human rights abuses against the Uighurs and others will be a top priority for the administration, as per the report.

Reforms at WTO:

- It will work with allies to implement necessary reforms to the World Trade Organisation's (WTO) substantive rules and procedures to address the challenges facing the global trading system, including growing inequality, digital transformation, and impediments to small business trade.

Issues from 'Make in India' policy:

- The report states that the country tried to resolve long-standing market access impediments affecting U.S. exporters during 2020 with India.
- Also, it called India's policies trade-restrictive.
- It stated that the Indian emphasis on import substitution through "Make in India" epitomises the challenges to the trade relationship.

5. India and Japan back in new Sri Lanka port project

Context:

Sri Lanka has announced that it would develop the West Container Terminal (WCT) at the Colombo Port, along with India and Japan.

Details:

- Approval has been granted to develop the WCT with private investors nominated by India and Japan.
- The decision comes a month after the Rajapaksa government ejected the two partners from a 2019 tripartite agreement to jointly develop the East Container Terminal (ECT), citing resistance to foreign involvement.
- Sri Lanka had backed out of an agreement with India and Japan to develop the East Container Terminal (ECT) at the Colombo Port. Both India and Japan had expressed displeasure about Colombo unilaterally pulling out of the 2019 agreement.

West Container Terminal (WCT) development:

- In the ECT project agreed upon earlier, the Sri Lanka Ports Authority (SLPA) was to hold a majority 51%, but in the WCT proposal, India and Japan will be accorded an 85% stake, as is the case in the nearby Colombo International Container Terminal (CICT).
- China Merchants Port Holdings Company Limited holds an 85% stake in CICT.
- While the ECT was partially in use, the WCT has to be built from scratch, requiring a much higher investment.
- The WCT is adjacent to the China-run CICT and just a couple of kilometres away from the China-backed Port City being built on reclaimed land.
 - This makes WCT a strategically desirable spot for India.

Timing of Sri Lanka's move:

- The alternative offer comes at a time when Sri Lanka is seeking support from India at the ongoing UN Human Rights Council session, where a resolution on its rights record will soon be put to vote.

6. Pak. has given 'pension' to terrorists, says India

What's in News?

46th session of the Human Rights Council.

- At the session, India reiterated that Kashmir is an inalienable part of its territory and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation has no locus standi to raise matters related to the region on international platforms.
- Using the Right of Reply at the session, India's diplomatic team said Pakistan has given 'pension' to terrorists and urged Islamabad to focus on its poor economic condition and improve the lives of its minority communities.
- Challenges faced by the religious and ethnic minorities of Pakistan were highlighted stating that 'holy' sites of the minority groups had been attacked by Pakistan.

The tough exchange came days after India and Pakistan agreed to adhere to the 2003 ceasefire agreement. Despite the positive signs at the bilateral level, Pakistan

and the OIC raised the Kashmir issue at the HRC which drew a sharp response from India.

7. The anatomy of a spring ceasefire

What's in News?

India and Pakistan have issued a joint statement for the first time in years, announcing that they would observe the 2003 ceasefire along the Line of Control (LoC). The announcement has triggered widespread speculation about the durability, significance and implication of the for bilateral relations in general.

Indication of peace:

- While the development comes with a surprise factor, there have been some indications about warming up of relations between the traditional rivals.
- Pakistan Army Chief had stated that "It is time to extend hand of peace in all directions", and on the Indian side, the Army Chief "with our continuous engagement with Pakistan, we will be able to prevail over them (for border peace)... as unsettled borders help no one".

- India allowed the use of its airspace by Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan's special aircraft to fly to Sri Lanka and just a day before the ceasefire announcement.
- In Colombo, Mr. Khan said, "Our only dispute is Kashmir and it can only be resolved through dialogue."

Significance of the ceasefire:

Specifics of the declaration:

- Two distinct features make the recent ceasefire announcement different:
 - This was a joint statement by the two DGsMO
 - Unlike the previous declarations, the recent agreement mentions a specific date, i.e., the night of February 24-25, to begin the ceasefire.

In the wake of growing cease fire violations:

- It is one of the most significant military measures by India and Pakistan in over 18 years to reduce violence along the LoC in Kashmir.
- The agreement is path-breaking from a conflict management point of view.
 - It comes in the wake of over 5,000 ceasefire violations in 2020 (the highest in 19 years since 2002).
- Also, the November 2003 ceasefire agreement was also announced in the wake of a high level of violence.

Geo-political significance:

- New Delhi was stuck in an ugly two-front situation and a feeling of being boxed in by an inimical Pakistan and an aggressive China.
- Dealing with it was neither easy nor practical.
- That the Indian Army had to redeploy forces from the western border with Pakistan to the northern border with China is indicative of the serious material challenges it could throw up.
- The best way to deal with the two front challenge then, New Delhi could have reasoned, was to defuse at least one front. The LoC was a natural candidate.

Return to back channel:

- What is also significant to note about the ceasefire agreement between the two DGsMO is that this was preceded by high-level contacts through the back channel.

A brief history:

- The history of India Pakistan ceasefire pacts and war termination agreements is both complex and instructive.
- The Karachi agreement of 1949, which ended the first war between newly formed India and Pakistan, was the first ceasefire agreement between the two countries which, signed under the good offices of the United Nations, created the India Pakistan boundary in Kashmir called the Ceasefire Line or CFL.
- The United Nations Military Observer Group in India and Pakistan (UNMOGIP) was mandated to monitor the ceasefire along the CFL.
- The 1965 India-Pakistan war also ended in a ceasefire, but since status quo ante bellum was restored after the Tashkent Agreement, the CFL in Kashmir remained unaltered.
- However, the India-Pakistan war of 1971 would change that. The ceasefire which ended the 1971 war was enshrined into the Simla Agreement the following year.
- But unlike 1965, status quo ante bellum was not restored by the Simla Agreement, a decision that would have important implications for bilateral relations.
- The Suchetgarh Agreement of 1972 delineated the 'line of control' in Jammu and Kashmir which resulted from the ceasefire of December 1971 thereby renaming the CFL as the LoC.
- By this smart move, Indian negotiators not only changed the nomenclature of the India-Pakistan dividing line in Kashmir and the physical alignment of the border in Jammu and Kashmir, but also made the UNMOGIP presence in Kashmir irrelevant.
- The UN force was mandated to ensure a ceasefire on the CFL, but there was no CFL after 1972, and, more so, the UN was not even a party to the Simla Agreement unlike the Karachi Agreement.

Way Forward:

- A ceasefire does not observe itself. It requires a clearly articulated and mutually-agreed upon set of rules and norms for effective observance along with an intent to observe them.
- The latest ceasefire is an expression of such an intent, but without the rules and norms to enforce it.
 - The Simla Agreement or the Suchetgarh Agreement do not have those rules either.
- The Karachi Agreement, on the other hand, has clearly laid down provisions on how to manage the CFL which, of course, was overtaken by the LoC.
- Ironically, therefore, armed forces deployed on either side of the LoC in Kashmir often have to resort to the strictures enshrined in the long-defunct Karachi Agreement to observe the ceasefire mandated by the Simla Agreement. This needs to change.

- Now that ceasefire has been declared, the next logical step is to arrive at a set of rules to govern that ceasefire.
- An unwritten ceasefire, experiences from conflict zones around the world show, tend to break down easily and trigger tensions in other domains.

8. Freedom in the World Report, 2021

US-based human rights watchdog Freedom House has accused the present government of driving India toward authoritarianism with a lockdown scapegoating of minorities and a crackdown on critics, and downgraded India's status from 'Free' to 'Partly Free', in its annual report.

Freedom in the World Report

- It is Freedom House's flagship annual report, assessing the condition of political rights and civil liberties around the world.
- It is composed of numerical ratings and supporting descriptive texts for 195 countries and 15 territories.
- The report has been published since 1973, allowing Freedom House to track global trends in freedom over more than 40 years.
- Freedom House, which is largely funded through U.S. government grants, has been tracking the course of democracy since 1941.

What did the report say?

Political and civil rights

- India's freedom score, calculated using indicators of political rights and civil liberties, dropped four points to 67 this year, pulling the country down into the 'Partly Free' category.
- India appears to have abandoned its potential to serve as a global democratic leader, elevating narrow nationalist interests at the expense of its founding values of inclusion and equal rights for all.

Reference to Kashmir

- In a year when social media censorship has been hotly seated, while the government shut down Internet connectivity in Kashmir as well as on Delhi's borders, India's Internet freedom score dropped to just 51.

Crackdown on protesters

- Last year, the government intensified its crackdown on protesters opposed to a discriminatory citizenship law and arrested dozens of journalists who aired criticism of the official pandemic response.

Judicial Independence

- It noted that judicial independence had also come under strain.
- It pointed to the case of a Delhi HC judge who was transferred immediately after reprimanding the police for taking no action during riots in the capital that leftover 50 people dead.

Religious freedom

- Minorities were disproportionately blamed for the spread of the virus and faced attacks by vigilante mobs.
- Uttar Pradesh's law prohibiting forced religious conversion through interfaith marriage was also listed as a concern.

Rising Authoritarianism

- Rather than serving as a champion of democratic practice and a counterweight to authoritarian influence from countries such as China, the government is tragically driving India itself toward authoritarianism, the report stated.

9. Voicing dissent against govt. is not sedition: SC

Context:

The supreme court said that voicing dissent against the government does not amount to sedition.

Details:

- The Supreme Court made this clear while rejecting a plea to terminate the Lok Sabha membership of National Conference leader Farooq Abdullah and book him for sedition.
- "The expression of a view which is a dissent from a decision taken by the Central government itself cannot be said to be seditious," the court said.

Sedition Law:

- Section 124A, IPC states: "Whoever, by words, either spoken or written, or by signs, or by visible representation, or otherwise, brings or attempts to bring

into hatred or contempt, or excites or attempts to excite disaffection towards, the Government established by law in India, shall be punished with imprisonment for life, to which a fine may be added; or, with imprisonment which may extend to three years, to which a fine may be added; or, with fine.”

- According to the law, disaffection includes disloyalty and all feelings of enmity. However, disapprobation (criticism) of the measures or administrative action of the government to obtain their alteration by lawful means is not an offence.
- It is classified as “cognisable” and “non-bailable” – the accused cannot get bail as a matter of right, but is subject to the discretion of the session’s judge.
- As far as the history of this particular provision itself is concerned, this was brought at a certain point of time when the British Indian Government wanted to clamp down on people who were asking for independence.

Concerns:

- The episode highlights a trend that has caused concern in recent times.
 - The tendency to treat instances of dissent, especially involving strident criticism of policies and laws as attempts to provoke disaffection and disloyalty.
- It is significant that the judge not only saw freedom of speech and expression, but went on to say that an attempt to reach a global audience is part of that freedom.
- In the backdrop of the claim that those who prepared the toolkit made common cause with Khalistani separatists, the judge showed refreshing clarity in maintaining that mere interaction with a group with dubious credentials could not be used to consider someone culpable.

Conclusion:

- The bail order must be routine judicial responses to cases in which there is a mismatch between the accusation and the evidence.
- There is no place in a modern democracy for a colonial-era legal provision such as sedition.
- The article suggests that Sedition Law, too broadly defined, prone to misuse, and functioning as a handy tool to repress activism deserves to be scrapped.

10. India, 17 countries face U.S. anti-dumping tax

Context:

The U.S. Department of Commerce is preparing to tax aluminium sheet exporters from 18 countries after determining that they had benefited from subsidies and dumping.

Details:

- According to a department statement, the US International Trade Commission (ITC), an independent body, must approve the final decision to impose anti-dumping or countervailing duties.
- The investigation, launched under the Donald Trump administration, had been requested by nearly a dozen U.S. aluminium alloy manufacturers, including Arconic and Aleris Rolled products.
- They felt that they were being harmed by competing imports at lower prices.
- President Joe Biden's administration determined that imports from Germany in particular (\$287 million in 2019) benefited from dumping, ranging from 40% to 242%.
- Imports from India (\$123 million in 2019) have benefited from subsidies for 35% to 89%.

11. Not so stellar in protecting personal liberty

The article throws light upon the recent outcomes from the judiciary with respect to liberty, free thought and speech.

Judiciary - a tribune of people's rights:

Few of the recent judgements gave a glimmer of hope that the judiciary serves as a tribune of people's rights.

1. Acquittal of the journalist, Priya Ramani, who was accused of criminal defamation for voicing out the sexual harassment she faced at the workplace.
 - A Delhi court discharged her of the accusations and recognised that a woman's right to dignity superseded any claims over reputation.
 - The court also held that a survivor of sexual harassment had the freedom to place her grievance at any point of time after the occurrence of the event and on any platform of her choice.
2. Grant of bail to Disha Ravi, a 22-year-old woman who was arrested in Bengaluru and taken to New Delhi on charges of sedition.
 - Her alleged crime was helping edit and sharing, a toolkit that was meant to lend support to protests against the Union government's new farm laws.

- The court of the additional sessions judge noted that the prosecution had failed to produce even an iota of evidence linking Ms. Ravi to an act of violence.
- It found the toolkit to be innocuous and the actions of the Delhi police, in restraining her liberty, to be based on propitious anticipations.
- The judge also stated that, in a democracy, the right to dissent is fundamental.

Concerns:

- While rulings like the ones discussed above are appreciated, the article argues that such rulings are now far from routine.
- For instance, the Allahabad High Court denied anticipatory bail to Ms. Aparna Purohit, head of Amazon Prime Video's India Originals, which ran the web series Tandav.
 - It mattered little to the court that deriding a person's belief is not an offence, not even under India's (draconian) blasphemy laws.
- Free speech is a condition of legitimate government. The Constitution permits reasonable restrictions on speech on a variety of stated grounds. Determining what is reasonable and what falls within the bounds of those permitted limitations can sometimes be an exercise fraught with difficulty.
 - But India's Parliament has chosen to allow colonial-era laws to do the government's bidding.
 - It has legislated new rules that treat the restriction as their chief goal and purpose.

Tools of defamation, sedition:

- Criminal law does not exist to make prosecutable acts that are essentially private in nature.
- By making ostensibly slanderous talk a punishable offence, the state imposes a chilling effect on all manners of legitimate speech.
 - It is for this reason that almost every democratic nation of the world has revoked laws criminalising defamation.
 - But in India, it remains.
 - It is routinely invoked by individuals, governments in positions of authority and by corporations looking to protect their commercial interests.
- Sedition was incorporated by the British government into the Indian Penal Code with the explicit aim of repressing all forms of dissent against the regime.
 - The Supreme Court has held that speech can be criminalised only when it bears a proximate connection to disorder.

- But despite the imposition of these confines, the offence of sedition continues to be weaponised to restrict even the most inoffensive forms of dissent.
- Sections of India's blasphemy laws like:
 - Section 153A, which deals with speech that seeks to promote enmity between different communities.
 - Section 295A, which criminalises speech that outrages religious feelings are vestiges of colonialism.
- Rather than aiding in dealing with genuine cases of hate speech, the laws permit governments to target acts that so much as offend a person's belief, dislodging, in the process, the very foundation of free expression.

Conclusion:

- Critics have repeatedly highlighted, India's bail jurisprudence suffers from a systemic malaise, where the manner in which offences are classified and the manner in which judicial discretion is vested invariably leads to arbitrary outcomes.
- When this uncertainty is coupled with the prevailing distrust in the values of personal liberty, of free thought and expression, it leads to the complete erasure of the rule of law.
- Many thousands continue to languish in jail as a result of sedition or defamation charges.
- The courts must ensure that they continue to remain the first line of defence against the deprivation of the personal liberty of citizens. Deprivation of liberty even for a single day is one day too many.

12. OTT platforms will not have to register: Centre

Context:

The government has announced a regulatory and grievance redressal mechanism for over-the-top (OTT) platforms, social media and digital media in the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021.

Details:

- The Information Technology (Guidelines for Intermediaries and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021 also mandate that social media and messaging platforms will have to adhere to new requirements in assisting investigative agencies of the government.

- The Electronics and Information Technology Minister called it a soft-touch oversight mechanism to deal with issues such as the persistent spread of fake news and other misinformation.

Broadly, what do the new rules require digital platforms to do?

- The broad themes of the guidelines revolve around grievance redressal, compliance with the law, and adherence to the media code.
- Social media platforms will have to appoint a grievance officer to deal with users' complaints.
- The platforms whose registered users in India are above the threshold notified by the government must appoint a 'Chief Compliance Officer', who will have to ensure that the rules are followed.
 - The officer shall be liable in any proceedings relating to any relevant third-party information, data or communication link made available or hosted by that intermediary.
 - The intermediaries will also have to appoint a nodal contact person for 24×7 coordination with law enforcement agencies.
- A social media intermediary would have to enable the identification of the first originator of the information on its computer resource as may be required by a judicial order.
- For digital publishers of news and current affairs as well as video streaming services, an identical three-tier structure for grievance redressal has been mandated.
 - This structure will look into grievances in relation to a Code of Ethics, which is listed in the appendix to the rules.
 - Among other things, the Code of Ethics includes the 'Norms of Journalistic Conduct' as prescribed by the Press Council of India, as also content that shall not be published and the Programme Code under the Cable Television Networks (Regulation) Act, 1995.
 - The guidelines also require streaming services to classify content based on its nature and type

Details:

- The Ministry of Information and Broadcasting has clarified that over-the-top (OTT) platforms will not have to register with the government, and no government nominee will be present in the self-regulatory body.
- The government would create an inter-departmental committee to look at complaints that remain unresolved at the self-regulatory level.
- The minister clarified that the rules focus on self-classification of content instead of any form of censorship.

- While there were regulations for cinema and TV bodies, none existed for the OTT industry. He stated that in this background, the government came out with a progressive institutional mechanism for OTT players to develop a level playing field with the idea of self-regulation.

13. Ending the war in Yemen

Context:

Ending the crisis in Yemen, which amidst a multipolar civil war and Saudi bombing, has descended into chaos and is witnessing a humanitarian catastrophe.

Details:

- One of the first key foreign policy decisions that President Joe Biden took after assuming office was to end the U.S.'s support for Saudi Arabia's six-year-long war on Yemen.
- He took several measures such as:
 - Halted weapons sales to Saudi Arabia.
 - Appointed a Special Envoy for Yemen.
 - Removed the Shia Houthi rebels, who control the northwestern parts of the Arab country, from the list of foreign terrorist organisations.

The war in Yemen:

- The crisis in Yemen is not only about the Saudi-Houthi conflict. It has many more dimensions: humanitarian, civil, geopolitical and sectarian.
- When Saudi Arabia, the UAE and their allies went to Yemen in March 2015, they had a clearly defined objective: drive the Houthis, who are backed by Iran, out of the capital Sana'a and stabilise the country under the government of Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi that they support.
- The Saudi-led coalition imposed a blockade on Yemen, which they hoped would eventually weaken the Houthis, and started a bombing campaign aimed at wrecking the rebels militarily.
- This campaign was a failure as the Houthis entrenched themselves in the north-west despite the military and economic challenges.
- But the Saudi-backed government failed to consolidate its position even in the south.
- A separatist group, the Southern Transitional Council (STC), has established its rule in southern Yemen.
 - The UAE, which backs the STC, has pulled out of the Saudi-led coalition.

Issue:

- The humanitarian situation in Yemen is worsening by the day.
- The war has killed over 10,000 people and pushed the country to the brink of famine.
- According to the UN, 50,000 Yemenis are starving to death and 16 million will go hungry this year. They are depending on food assistance to survive, but the war is making it difficult for aid groups to operate in the country.
- Many more are dying due to preventable diseases as Yemen lacks proper health infrastructure and essential medicines.
- Continued Houthi rocket and drone attacks have left a hole in Saudi Arabia's national security umbrella.

Way Forward:

- The last six years of war prove that the Saudi strategy of blockade and bombing was a failure.
- The Houthis continued to amass weapons, even technologically advanced drones which they use to attack Saudi targets across the border, despite the blockade, while the Yemeni people continue to suffer.
- Finding a solution to such a vexed, multipolar conflict will not be easy.
- Their immediate focus should be on tackling the humanitarian situation in Yemen.
- Even the limited humanitarian work cannot be sustained if there is no reprieve in the fighting.

Role of the U.S:

- The Houthis, if they want international legitimacy, should start talks with other stakeholders.
- A ceasefire is in everybody's interest but the question is who initiates it.
- The Biden administration should use its leverage to pressure Saudi Arabia to lift the blockade, a key Houthi demand, as a confidence-building measure and push for talks for a lasting ceasefire.
- Once a ceasefire between the two main rival blocs is achieved, the U.S. and its regional allies could call for a multilateral conference involving all stakeholders to discuss Yemen's future.
- Yemen can find a way out of the current crisis provided the war is brought to an immediate end and the country is given diplomatic assistance.

14. India reaffirms Lanka defence ties

Context:

India sought to reaffirm its strong defence cooperation with Sri Lanka with its participation in a three-day event in Colombo to mark the 70th anniversary of the Sri Lanka Air Force (SLAF).

Details:

- The last time Indian aircraft took part in such an event was in 2001, on the occasion of the SLAF's 50th year.
- A team of 4 Sarang Advance Light Helicopters, Surya Kiran (Hawks), Tejas Fighter Aircraft, Tejas Trainer and the Dornier Maritime Patrol Aircraft from India were in Sri Lanka to participate in a fly past and acrobatic display event with the SLAF.

India - Sri Lanka defence ties:

- During Sri Lanka's over three decade-civil war, India played a crucial role, politically and at times, using its military.
- While the controversial Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) presence in Sri Lanka, and 'Operation Poomalai' of 1987 when the Indian Air Force dropped food supplies in Jaffna drew criticism from sections, the Indian military's support was repeatedly acknowledged by Sri Lanka's national leaders.
- In Sri Lanka's post-war era, the Indo-Lanka military partnership has focused mostly on training and capacity building.
- In 2020, Indian Navy and Coast Guard personnel helped the Sri Lankan Navy in a crucial fire-fighting operation, when an oil tanker went up in flames, off the island's east coast.

Note:

- Sri Lanka's strategic location makes it a crucial partner for all countries in the region.
- Over the years, Sri Lanka is known to have maintained strong military ties with several partners in the region and beyond.
- Domestically, its defence sector is accorded high priority by all governments.

15. India's rebuttal to Freedom House Report

The Freedom House report titled "Democracy under Siege" in which it has been claimed that India's status as a free country has declined to "partly free", is misleading, incorrect, and misplaced.

Rebuttal to specific points

(1) Discriminatory policies against Minorities

- The GoI treats all its citizens with equality as enshrined under the Constitution of the country and all laws are applied without discrimination.
- Due process of law is followed in matters relating to law and order, irrespective of the identity of the alleged instigator.
- With specific reference to the North East Delhi riots in February 2020, the law enforcement machinery acted swiftly in an impartial and fair manner.
- Proportionate and appropriate actions were taken to control the situation.
- Necessary legal and preventive actions were taken by the law enforcement machinery on all complaints/calls received, as per law and procedures.

(2) Use of Sedition Law

- “Public Order’ and ‘Police’ are State subjects under India’s federal structure of governance.
- The responsibility of maintaining law and order, including investigation, registration, and prosecution of crimes, protection of life and property, etc., rests primarily with the concerned State governments.
- Therefore, measures as deemed fit are taken by law enforcement authorities to preserve public order.

(3) Government response to COVID-19 through Lockdown

- Between March 16 to 23, most State governments/UT resorted to partial or full Lockdown in their respective State/ UT based on their assessment of the COVID-19 situation.
- Any mass movement of people would have spread the disease rapidly throughout the country.
- The government was fully conscious that during the period of an inevitable Lockdown, people should not face undue distress.
- India has, on a per capita basis, registered one of the lowest rates of active COVID-19 cases and COVID-19 related deaths globally.

(4) Government response on human rights organizations

- The Indian Constitution provides for adequate safeguards under various statutes, including the Protection of Human Rights Act 1993 for ensuring the protection of human rights.
- This Act provides for the constitution of an NHRC and SHRC in the States for better protection of human rights and for matters connected to this subject.

(5) Intimidation of academics and journalists and crackdown on expressions of dissent by media

- The Indian Constitution provides for freedom of expression under Article 19. Discussion, debate, and dissent are a part of Indian democracy.
- The GoI attaches the highest importance to the safety and security of all residents of the country, including journalists.
- It has issued a special advisory to States and UTs on the safety of journalists requesting them to strictly enforce the law to ensure the safety and security of media persons.

(6) Internet shutdowns

- Temporary suspension of the telecom services, including the internet, is governed under the provisions of the Temporary Suspension of Telecom Services (Public Emergency or Public Safety) Rules, 2017.
- Hence, the temporary suspension of telecom/internet services is resorted to with the over-arching objective of maintaining law and order under strict safeguards.

(7) FCRA amendment leading to freezing of Amnesty International's assets has led to declining in ranking

- Amnesty International had received permission under the FCRA Act only once and that too 20 years ago.
- Since then Amnesty International, despite its repeated applications, has been denied FCRA approval by successive governments since as per law it is not eligible to get such approval.
- However, in order to circumvent the FCRA regulations, Amnesty U.K. remitted large amounts of money to four entities registered in India, by misclassifying the remittance as FDI.
- A significant amount of foreign money was also remitted to Amnesty India without MHA's approval under FCRA.
- This malafide rerouting of money was in contravention of extant legal provisions.
- Owing to these illegal practices of Amnesty, the previous government had also rejected the repeated applications of Amnesty to receive funds from overseas.

16. Health first, fiscal prudence later

Context:

- **Subsidised LPG prices have increased** by a massive 50% in the given financial year.

Background:

Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana (PMUY):

- Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana (PMUY) was launched in 2016 to **distribute LPG connections to women of Below Poverty Line (BPL) families**. It provided an upfront connection subsidy of ₹1,600 for eligible beneficiaries.
- Since 2016, PMUY has provided LPG connections to 8 million poor households to reduce women's drudgery and indoor air pollution.
- PMUY has helped **expand LPG coverage to more than 85% of households**, in comparison to less than a third of Indian households in 2011 who used LPG as their main cooking fuel.
- The government is offering 1 crore new connections under Ujjwala 2.0 in Financial Year 22.

Rising prices of LPG:

- India determines domestic LPG prices based on imported LPG price as **India imports more than 50% of the total LPG consumption in India**.
- As the pandemic set in, the LPG subsidised price began to rise, even when global LPG prices plummeted, due to **higher tax rates** which were contributing to the government finances.
- Currently, the **LPG prices are rising globally** and the government move to go in for a 50% **reduction in the LPG subsidy budget** for FY22 (versus FY21) will only further push LPG prices upwards.

Concerns:

- The rising LPG prices could have a detrimental impact on the substantial gains made under the Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana.

Further reduce affordability:

- Multiple studies assessing PMUY have concluded that while access has increased, many **new beneficiaries are not consuming LPG in a sustained manner**.

- Large-scale primary surveys by the Council on Energy, Environment and Water (CEEW) suggest that, on average, recent PMUY beneficiaries consumed only about half the LPG compared to long-standing regular consumers.
- **Limited uptake of LPG among poor households** is due to the inability of the poor households to afford LPG, despite the subsidy.

Impact on public health:

- Limited uptake of LPG among poor households is also attributable to the **easy availability of biomass in rural areas**, making it difficult for LPG to displace it.
- The rising LPG prices may push more users towards biomass usage which does not augur well for the health of the users. **Biomass is a major cause of indoor air pollution.** Biomass use for cooking contributes up to 30% to the ambient PM2.5 at the national level.

Recommendations:

- The Central government will have to work towards balancing LPG subsidies and ensuring sustained clean fuel consumption in poorer households.

Better targeting of LPG subsidy:

- The government should work towards better targeting of LPG subsidy.
- Currently, the government provides a uniform subsidy per cylinder to all LPG consumers (PMUY or otherwise). The **economically poor households need a greater subsidy** to make it affordable for them to use LPG as their main cooking fuel.

Eliminating subsidy leakage:

- The **de-duplication efforts to weed out households with multiple LPG connections** must be accelerated to avoid subsidy leakages.

Conclusion:

- The continued support to the economically poor for sustaining LPG use is not merely a fiscal subsidy but also a **social investment to free-up women's productive time and reduce India's public health burden.**
- This social investment will yield rich dividends in the years ahead through a **healthier and productive population.**

17. China gives green light for first downstream dams on Brahmaputra

Context:

A draft of China's new Five-Year Plan (FYP) 2021-2025 has given the green light for the first dams to be built on the lower reaches of the Yarlung Zangbo river, as the Brahmaputra is known in Tibet before it flows into India.

Details:

- The draft outline of the FYP for 2025 and long-range objectives through the year 2035, specifically mentions the building of hydropower bases on the lower reaches of the river as among the priority energy projects to be undertaken in the next 5 years.
 - The lower reaches refer to the sections of the river in Tibet before it flows into India.
- The inclusion of the projects in the draft plan suggests the authorities have given the go-ahead to begin tapping the lower reaches for the first time.
 - This marks a new chapter in the hydropower exploitation of the river.
- Other major projects include the construction of coastal nuclear power plants and power transmission channels.
- The draft is all set to be formally approved.

Concerns for India:

- The FYP's backing for the projects also suggests that a number of long-pending proposals from Chinese hydropower companies to build dams on the lower reaches, including near the border with India, may be given approval.
- India has expressed concerns to China over the four planned dams on the upper and middle reaches.
- However, Indian officials have said the dams are not likely to greatly impact the quantity of the Brahmaputra's flows in India because:
 - They are only storing water for power generation.
 - The Brahmaputra is not entirely dependent on upstream flows with an estimated 35% of its basin in India.
- Dams on the lower reaches and at the Great Bend would, however, raise fresh concerns because of the location across the border from Arunachal Pradesh and the potential impact downstream.

Note:

- In 2015, China operationalised its first hydropower project at Zangmu in Tibet.

- Three other dams at Dagu, Jiexu and Jiacha are being developed, all on the upper and middle reaches of the river.

18. 'Only half of govt. schools, anganwadis have tap water'

Context:

- Parliamentary Standing Committee on Water Resources submits report to the Lok Sabha.

Background:

- A 100-day campaign to provide potable piped water supply for drinking and cooking purposes and **tap water for washing hands and in toilets in every school, Anganwadi and ashramshala or residential tribal school** was launched on October 2, 2020.
- The 100-day period should have ended on January 10, 2021.

Progress made:

- Seven States, Andhra Pradesh, Goa, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Telangana and Punjab have achieved the target 100% coverage.
- A number of other states have also made significant progress with the **construction of greywater management structures and rainwater harvesting structures** being in schools and Anganwadi centres.

Concerns:

Low coverage:

- According to the report, **only half of the government schools and anganwadis have a tap water supply**. Less than 8% of schools in Uttar Pradesh and 11% in West Bengal have it, while it is available in only 2-6% of anganwadis in Assam, Jharkhand, Uttar Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Bengal.

Health concerns:

- Such a scenario does not augur well given that schools and anganwadis are just starting to reopen after a year-long shutdown and COVID-19 safety protocols require repeated handwashing by students and teachers.
- **Children are more susceptible to water-borne diseases.**

19. SC seeks States' views on 50% cap on quota

Context:

- The Supreme Court has decided to examine whether its judgment in the Indra Sawhney case of 1992 which fixed reservation for the marginalised and the poor in government jobs and educational institutions at 50% needs a relook.

Background:

Indra Sawhney v Union of India & Ors case, 1992:

- The Supreme Court had set the **upper limit for reservation in jobs and education at 50%, except in “extraordinary circumstances”**.
- The court in the Indra Sawhney case tried to come up with a solution that is reasonable and strikes a fine balance between the society and rights of the backward classes.
- However, over the years, several **States, such as Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu, have crossed the upper limit of 50%** and passed laws that allow reservation to be as high as 60%.

Maratha quota law:

- The Maharashtra State Reservation for Socially and Educationally Backward Classes (SEBC) Act of 2018 originally provided 16% reservation to Marathas (based on the recommendation by the **Gaikwad Commission**) and came after years of protests by the community.
- In June 2019, the Bombay high court trimmed the quantum of the quota to **12% in education and 13% in jobs**. In its order, the high court said the 50% cap could be breached in exceptional circumstances.
- The Maratha reservation had been challenged in the SC and a five-judge Bench was set up to hear the same.

Details:

- The bench will look into whether the **Maharashtra State Reservation for Socially and Educationally Backward Classes (SEBC) Act of 2018**, which provides quota benefits for the Maratha community, thus taking the reservation percentage in the State across the 50% mark, was enacted under “extraordinary circumstances”.

- The Indra Sawhney judgment notes that the **50% rule could be crossed in certain exceptional and extraordinary situations** for bringing far-flung and remote areas' population into the mainstream.
- The five-judge bench looking into the Maratha reservation issue has expanded the ambit of the case and has framed the following questions to be looked into by the court.

Relook at the upper limit for reservation:

- The court will be looking into whether the Indra Sawhney verdict of 1992, fixing 50% limit on quota, needs to be relooked by a larger Bench of more than nine judges.
- The Bench has made other States party to the case and has asked them to make their stand clear on the question of whether reservation should continue to remain within the 50% boundary or not.

Impact of the 102nd Amendment Act:

- The bench will also judge whether the Constitution (One Hundred Second Amendment) Act of 2018, which introduced **the National Commission for Backward Classes (NCBC)**, interferes with the authority of the State legislatures to provide benefit to the socially and educationally backward communities in their own jurisdiction.
 - The 102nd Constitutional Amendment Act introduced **Articles 338B and 342A in the Constitution**.
 - Article 338B deals with the NCBC.
 - **Article 342A empowers the President to specify the socially and educationally backward communities in a State.** Thus it strips the State legislatures of their discretionary power to include their backward communities in the State List.
 - The Constitutional amendment empowers the Parliament to include a community in the Central List for socially and backward classes for grant of reservation benefits.

Conclusion:

- The potential reconsideration of the Indra Sawhney case ruling, also popularly referred to as the Mandal case, could alter the structure of reservations that has been in place for decades.

20. Ploughing a new furrow in the agri-regulatory system

Context:

- World Bank's **Enabling the Business of Agriculture (EBA) 2019 report**.

Background:

- The small landholding farmers across India face various constraints in carrying out farming activities. They include **constraints in accessing agricultural inputs, markets, finance, human resources, and information**, which are critical for increasing farmers' competitiveness.
- The existing institutional set up that controls farm production often fails to ease these constraints for the farmers.

Enabling the Business of Agriculture index:

- The EBA measures the extent to which government regulatory systems in 101 countries worldwide make it easier for their farmers to operate agricultural activities.
- **Enabling the Business of Agriculture (EBA) index is based on eight indicators**. The indicators are supplying seed, registering fertilizer, securing water, registering machinery, sustaining livestock, protecting plant health, trading food, and accessing finance.

India's performance:

- **Among 101 countries covered, India ranked 49 on the EBA aggregate score.**
- Among emerging groups of 20 (EG 20) countries, India has the second least favourable regulatory environment for farming activities after South Africa.
- Notably, **India lags behind its close competitors in world agriculture, namely China, Brazil, and the Russian Federation.**

Areas of concern:

- India has exhibited **weak performance on five out of eight indicators**. They are registering fertilizer and machinery, securing water, sustaining livestock, and protecting plant health indicators.
 - Inadequate access to quality agricultural inputs such as fertilizers, water, and mechanical power can **cause productivity loss, higher cost of food production and uncertainty**, and lower capacity of farmers to produce surpluses, adopt new plant varieties and accept new opportunities to improve their income.
 - A vibrant agricultural sector is not just significant for India and its economy but also has **global ramifications** since the future of world agriculture and food production is expected to increasingly depend on middle-income countries such as China, India, Brazil, and Indonesia.

Areas of good performance:

- The comparative score of India on **supplying seed, trading food, and accessing finance indicators is high.**
 - A robust seed supply system is required for improving yield and adopting new crop varieties.
 - The trading food indicator assesses laws and regulations that facilitate the exporting of farm products by farmers.

Conclusion:

- The EBA results reveal that the strength of **India's agricultural regulatory environment is weak on the whole and more so with respect to some key performance indicators.**
- India needs to put in place an agricultural regulatory system that would make it easier for its farmers to conduct agricultural activities, thereby improving their productivity, competitiveness, and income.
- Governments must enact laws and regulations that influence farmers' access to agricultural inputs, cost of production, farmers' participation in agricultural markets and value chains, the competitiveness of farmers, and private investment in the farming sector.

Additional information:

Warehouse receipts:

- Warehouse receipt operators accept deposits of crops and provide warehouse receipts to farmers as evidence of deposited crops. By **using warehouse receipts as collateral**, farmers can receive credit.
- A robust warehouse receipts system enables the farmers to obtain the credit needed to invest in agriculture.

21. Quad: strategic opportunity or quagmire?

Background of India's engagement with Quad

- India's engagement with the Quad goes back to China's **expanding footprint in South Asia and the Indian Ocean Region** over the last few years.
- China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative rang alarm bells in India as the projects were viewed as **encroachments into India's strategic space.**

- The U.S.'s focus on the west Pacific due to aggressive Chinese maritime activity gradually pulled India into the ambit of the **Indo-Pacific** that views the western Pacific and the Indian Ocean as an integrated geopolitical space.
- Besides the U.S. navy, India **expanded its maritime ties** with other regional states, the most high-profile of the interactions being the Quad.

Core structural problems with Quad

- The Quad has a core structural problem as well in that it pivots around the U.S.
- The Quad riles China as a hostile grouping, but hardly serves the security interests of its members.
- The U.S. views China's rise as a threat to the world order it has led since the Second World War.
- Despite rhetoric relating to the promotion of a 'rules-based' world order, the Quad neither shares a strategic vision nor is it animated by a shared agenda.
- This is obvious not only from its inability to deter China in the west Pacific, but also by its members' anxiety to maintain close ties with China.

Implications for India

- By affiliating with the U.S.-led maritime coalition, India ignored the principal areas of its security concerns which is an **undemarcated 3,500-km land border with China**.
- From April 2020, Indian and Chinese forces had their latest border face-off in Ladakh, abruptly ending a long period of productive relations.
- In retrospect, this confrontation appears to be China's sharp response to the steady shift in India's regional posture in favour of an alignment with the U.S. and its allies against China.
- The stand-off at Ladakh has been a bitter experience for India: it has affirmed the **limits of India-U.S. security ties**, the folly of Indian involvement in the Quad.
- The stand-off has also underscored need to focus **national attention and resources** in areas of abiding interest for India – the border, the neighbours and the Indian Ocean.

Lessons for India

- Ladakh also offers some valuable lessons for India.
- One, the rebuilding of ties with China will have to be a priority concern.
- India need to **dilute its focus on the Indo-Pacific and the Quad** and accept that the borders and the Indian Ocean are where its crucial interests lie.
- Two, the Ladakh experience has highlighted certain deficiencies at home:

- It hardly needs reiteration that India's capacities can only be built by a united people committed to the national cause.
- Finally, foreign policy cannot be a part-time concern of the national leadership; in terms of priority and attention, it should be on a par with domestic affairs.

Conclusion

As the global scenario gets more complex and India's ambitions increase, a cohesive strategic vision would give substance and drive to India's pursuit of its interests over the long term.

22. Bharat Bangla Maitri Bridge

Why in News

Recently, the Prime Minister inaugurated **Bharat Bangla Maitri Bridge** in Tripura's South district.

Key Points

- **About:**
 - The bridge '**Maitri Setu**' has been built over the **Feni river** which flows between Indian boundary in Tripura State and Bangladesh.
 - Feni originates in the **South Tripura district**. The river passes through Sabroom town on the Indian side, and **meets the Bay of Bengal** after it flows into Bangladesh.
 - The **1.9 Km** long bridge joins **Sabroom (in Tripura) with Ramgarh (in Bangladesh)**.
 - The name '**Maitri Setu**' **symbolises growing bilateral relations** and friendly ties between India and Bangladesh.
- **Constructed by and Cost:**
 - The construction was taken up by the **National Highways and Infrastructure Development Corporation Ltd** at a project cost of **Rs. 133 crore**.
 - The National Highways and Infrastructure Development Corporation Limited is a **fully owned company of the Government of India**.
 - It is responsible for **development & maintenance of National Highways & Strategic Roads** of India.
- **Significance:**
 - Now **Agartala** (capital of Tripura) **will become the nearest city to an international sea port** in India.

- Tripura will become the ‘Gateway of North East’ with access to **Chittagong** Port of Bangladesh, which is just 80 km from Sabroom.
 - Bangladesh and India have a long standing and time-tested **Protocol on Transit and Trade** through inland waterways.
- It would serve as a **new trade corridor** between the two countries, helping the **Northeast states grow**. It will **enhance people-to-people contact**.

23. Indo-Pacific is key priority: White House

Context:

- The first-ever **Quad leaders’ summit-level meeting** under the Biden administration.

Details:

- The planned meeting would be a virtual meeting between U.S. President Joe Biden, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Prime Minister Scott Morrison of Australia and Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga of Japan.
- A range of issues is likely to be discussed, including **COVID-19, economic cooperation and the climate crisis**.

Significance:

Reiterating U.S.’s commitment to Indo-pacific and the Quad:

- This would be one of President Biden’s earliest multilateral engagements. The early scheduling of the Quad summit signifies the group’s importance for the Biden administration and also the importance the administration places on the Indo-Pacific.
- It signals the **U.S.’s commitment to the Indo-Pacific**. It portrays the U.S intent to deepen its engagement with the Quad nations.

Scope for cooperation and collaboration:

- The Quad carries the potential for the member nations to pool their capabilities and build habits of cooperation to address some of the common interests, with **maritime security** being the foremost.

The China angle:

- Despite labelling China as its biggest competitor, the Biden administration has been careful to not portray the Quad as being China focussed. However, the Quad provides a unique platform to **counter the increasing assertiveness of the Chinese in the Indo-Pacific.**

24. India, Japan space agencies review ties

Context:

- Bilateral meeting between the **Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO)** and the **Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency (JAXA).**

Background:

India-Japan space collaboration:

- India and Japan are working on a **joint lunar polar exploration (LUPEX) mission.**
 - The Lunar Polar Exploration mission is a robotic lunar mission concept by the Indian Space Research Organisation and Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency that would send a **lunar rover and lander to explore the South Pole region of the Moon in 2024.**

Details:

- Indian and Japanese space agencies have reviewed cooperation in earth observation, lunar cooperation and satellite navigation, and also agreed to explore opportunities for cooperation in “**space situational awareness and professional exchange programme**”.
- With respect to earth observation collaboration, ISRO and JAXA have signed an Implementing Arrangement for collaborative activities on rice crop area and air quality monitoring using satellite data.

Additional information:

Space diplomacy:

Italy:

- India and Italy have decided to explore opportunities in earth observation, space science and robotic and human exploration.

Australia:

- India and Australia are in discussions for Australia to host vital **tracking infrastructure to support India's planned Gaganyaan manned space flight mission.**
- Such space diplomacy will only help further **consolidate the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between India and Australia.**

25. Licensing Conditions for Telecom Companies Amended

Why in News

The **Department of Telecommunications (DoT)** has amended **licensing conditions for telecom companies.** The new norms will be implemented from **15th June 2021.**

- In March 2021, the Union Cabinet approved **the Production-Linked Incentive (PLI) scheme for the telecom sector to reduce imports and move towards self-reliance.**

Key Points

- **New Licensing Conditions:**
 - **Aim:**
 - To include **defence and national security as parameters** when purchasing **'trusted telecom products'** and sourcing equipment from **'trusted telecom equipment sources'.**
 - **Provisions:**
 - Telecom companies can use **telecom products only from trusted sources** in its network and **must take permission** from the designated authority (**National Cyber Security Coordinator**) if they plan to upgrade their existing network **using telecom equipment that has not been designated as a trusted product.**
 - The new norms **will not impact the annual maintenance contracts or upgrades to existing equipment** already being used by the telcos in their networks.
- **Trusted Telecom Products/Trusted Telecom Equipment Source:**
 - **About:**
 - It is simply a **product, a company, or a technology that has been deemed safe by the government** of a nation for use in its crucial and critical infrastructure.
 - **Classification:**
 - In December 2020, India's Cabinet Committee on Security had approved the setting up of a new **National Security Directive** on the telecommunication sector with an intent **to classify telecom products** and their sources under the **'trusted'** and **'non-trusted'** categories.

- **National Cyber Security Coordinator** has been made the **designated authority for deciding on the list of trusted and non-trusted telecom** equipment sources and products.
 - Its decisions will be made based on approval of a committee headed by the deputy **National Security Advisor (NSA)**.
 - Apart from the deputy NSA, **the expert committee will have members from other departments and ministries, and independent experts as well** as two members from the industry.
- **Impact:**
 - The new policy could potentially make it more **difficult for Chinese telecom equipment vendors** like Huawei and ZTE to supply equipment to Indian telecom players in the future.
 - Both Huawei and ZTE **have been under global scrutiny for allegedly installing 'backdoor' or 'trapdoor' vulnerabilities and spying for the Chinese government** and have been banned by several countries.
- **Significance:**
 - Telecom equipment plays a vital role in telecom connectivity and data transfer, which has a direct impact on the national security of India therefore this change will **help in strengthening national security of India**.
 - Demand for local equipment will rise which will further promote the vision of **Make-in-India** and **Atmanirbhar Bharat**.

26. A moral test

Context:

With a year having passed after the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic, UN Secretary-General António Guterres has criticised vaccine nationalism and hoarding in the world.

Issue:

- In spite of pressure by international organisations and efforts to pool resources in a way that all countries could at the earliest begin vaccinating at least a fraction of their most vulnerable population, several countries were unable to administer a single dose.
 - This was despite vaccines being stockpiled since November 2020.

- In Africa, only 13 countries have begun vaccinating. In contrast, over 10% of the U.S. population has been fully vaccinated, or got both doses, as has 3% of the EU.
- The percentages nearly double when accounting for their populations that have got at least one dose, reaching as high as 34% in the U.K.
- The U.S. contracted with many vaccine companies for several times the doses it needed. It was precisely this that had led to concerns of 'vaccine nationalism'.
- The pipeline of supply was largely dependent on India and China.
- The pharma companies are private entities bound by contracts to the highest bidders, and not necessarily the Indian government.

India's Vaccine Diplomacy:

- India is the third biggest vaccinator among countries.
- It has administered about 1.91 doses per 100 people.
- But it has fully vaccinated only 0.3% of its population.
- India has earned laurels for its vaccine diplomacy and Vaccine Maitri initiatives.

Shortcomings:

- Along with the global inequity in accessing vaccination, India is seeing a version of it play out since vaccinations began.
- There are several public health centres, villages and districts where no vaccines have been administered.
- India aims to inoculate at least 250 million with two doses from March-July – or over 3.3 million doses per day. But at best, India has administered 1.8 million doses per day.
- There is an apparent "class divide" with the rich and those better informed disproportionately getting vaccinated as compared to the poor.

Conclusion:

- While the reprieve is that more vaccines are in the pipeline, there will always be the concern that the poor, the old and the digitally naive will be left out.
- The UN and WHO must continue to exert pressure on the privileged nations to improve global availability as well as bear upon countries to improve equitable access within their territory too.

27. Bureaucrats cannot be State Election Commissioners: SC

Context:

The Supreme Court has held that independent persons and not bureaucrats should be appointed State Election Commissioners.

Details:

- The SC directed that the States should appoint independent persons as Election Commissioners all along the length and breadth of the country, stating that the independence of Election Commissions cannot be compromised.
- It stated that giving government employees the additional charge of State Election Commissioners is a mockery of the Constitution.
- Asserting that its directions be followed strictly, it called for the government employees holding the post of State Election Commissioners as an additional charge to give up the post.

State Election Commission:

- The State Election Commission (SEC) is vested with the superintendence, direction and control of the preparation of electoral rolls for, and the conduct of all elections to the Panchayats and the Municipalities.
- The State Election Commissioner is appointed by the Governor.
- However, the State Election Commissioners can only be removed by impeachment.
- State governments should abide by orders of the SECs during the conduct of the panchayat and municipal elections, just like they follow the instructions of the Election Commission (EC) during Assembly and Parliament polls.
- In other words, the SECs enjoy the same status as the EC.

28. Relooking the Mandal verdict and quota cap

Context:

- The Supreme Court has decided to examine whether its judgment in the Indra Sawhney case of 1992 which fixed reservation for the marginalised and the poor in government jobs and educational institutions at 50% needs a relook.

Background:

Indra Sawhney v Union of India & Ors case, 1992:

- The Supreme Court had set the **upper limit for reservation in jobs and education at 50%, except in “extraordinary circumstances”**.
- The court in the Indra Sawhney case tried to come up with a solution that is reasonable and strikes a fine balance between the society and rights of the backward classes.
- However, over the years, several **States, such as Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu, have crossed the upper limit of 50%** and passed laws that allow reservation to be as high as 60%.

Maratha quota law:

- The Maharashtra State Reservation for Socially and Educationally Backward Classes (SEBC) Act of 2018 originally provided 16% reservation to Marathas (based on the recommendation by the **Gaikwad Commission**) and came after years of protests by the community.
- In June 2019, the Bombay high court trimmed the quantum of the quota to **12% in education and 13% in jobs**. In its order, the high court said the 50% cap could be breached in exceptional circumstances.
- The Maratha reservation had been challenged in the SC and a five-judge Bench was set up to hear the same.

Details:

- The bench will look into whether the **Maharashtra State Reservation for Socially and Educationally Backward Classes (SEBC) Act of 2018**, which provides quota benefits for the Maratha community, thus taking the reservation percentage in the State across the 50% mark, was enacted under “extraordinary circumstances”.
 - The Indra Sawhney judgment notes that the **50% rule could be crossed in certain exceptional and extraordinary situations** for bringing far-flung and remote areas’ population into the mainstream.
- The five-judge bench looking into the Maratha reservation issue has expanded the ambit of the case and has framed the following questions to be looked into by the court.

Relook at the upper limit for reservation:

- The court will be looking into whether the Indra Sawhney verdict of 1992, fixing 50% limit on quota, needs to be relooked by a larger Bench of more than nine judges.
- The Bench has made other States party to the case and has asked them to make their stand clear on the question of whether reservation should continue to remain within the 50% boundary or not.

Impact of the 102nd Amendment Act:

- The bench will also judge whether the Constitution (One Hundred Second Amendment) Act of 2018, which introduced **the National Commission for Backward Classes (NCBC)**, interferes with the authority of the State legislatures to provide benefit to the socially and educationally backward communities in their own jurisdiction.
 - The 102nd Constitutional Amendment Act introduced **Articles 338B and 342A in the Constitution**.
 - Article 338B deals with the NCBC.
 - **Article 342A empowers the President to specify the socially and educationally backward communities in a State**. Thus it strips the State legislatures of their discretionary power to include their backward communities in the State List.
 - The Constitutional amendment empowers the Parliament to include a community in the Central List for socially and backward classes for grant of reservation benefits.

Conclusion:

- The potential reconsideration of the Indra Sawhney case ruling, also popularly referred to as the Mandal case, could alter the structure of reservations that has been in place for decades.

29. Future force for future wars

Context

- Prime Minister Narendra Modi recently asked the country's top military leadership to develop the military into a future force while taking note of the rapidly changing technological landscape.

Background

- Earlier, wars used to be easy to define. One could say whether the country was engaged in war or was it at peace. We could identify whom we were fighting with and at which front.
- The character of war was demonstrated depending upon the norms and ideology of society, technology, and anonymity.
- Now, times have changed leading to what is called 'hyper', 'hybrid', 'compound', 'non-linear', 'fourth-generation', 'next-generation' and 'contactless' war.

Hybrid warfare

- It is an emerging, but ill-defined notion in conflict studies.
- It refers to the use of unconventional methods as part of a multi-domain warfighting approach.
 - Hybrid warfare also refers to using **non-military tools** to achieve dominance or damage, subvert or influence.
 - These tools include “information pollution, perception management and propaganda.”

Traditional Idea

- The term hybrid warfare originally referred to irregular non-state actors with advanced military capabilities.
- For example, in the 2006 Israel-Lebanon War, Hezbollah employed a host of different tactics against Israel.

Modern hybrid war

- Practitioners apply “conventional capabilities, irregular tactics and formations, use of cyber warfare and terrorist acts including indiscriminate violence, coercion, and criminal activity” simultaneously.
- Under this model, war takes place in a variety of operating environments, has synchronous effects across multiple battlefields, and is marked by asymmetric tactics and techniques.
- These tactics are difficult to defeat for militaries that lack the flexibility to shift mindsets on a constant basis, especially since the interconnected nature of modern society is such that hybrid war takes place on distinct battlefields.

War, at its core, is organised violence, waged for political purposes. The real purpose is domination.

Third Offset Strategy

For peace to prevail or be enforced, the development of future force capability based on a **Third Offset Strategy** was announced by the U.S. in 2014.

- It deals with multi-threat and multi-actor security environment.
- It consists of cutting-edge technology, exploration of new operational concepts for utilising such technology, and retaining the best and brightest in human resource to achieve the objective of peace. Although still in its inchoate stages, it focuses on promising technology areas such as robotics and system autonomy, miniaturisation, Big Data, and advanced manufacturing.
- It provides for autonomous learning systems, collaborative decision-making between humans and machines, assisted human operations, advanced

manned-unmanned systems operations, network-enabled autonomous weapons, and high-speed projectiles.

Way forward

- To prepare for accelerated future wars, countries need to master the 'hybridised effect' of warfare that our adversaries are increasingly adopting.
- Confluence technology and a whole-of-government approach, which are absent, need to drive new strategies and tactics.

30. Centre likely to allow residents to fill their NPR details online

What's in News?

The Centre will allow residents to fill the National Population Register (NPR) form on their own, through the online mode, a month before the door-to-door enumeration by Census officials starts.

National Population Register

- National Population Register is a register of the usual residents of the country.
- NPR is different from both the decennial census and the National Register of Citizens (NRC).
- The objective of the NPR is to create a comprehensive identity database of every usual resident in the country.
- It is mandatory for every usual resident of India to register in the NPR.
- The decision exempts the state of Assam from NPR-2020.
- For the purpose of the NPR, a usual resident is defined as a person who has resided in a local area for six months or more or a person who intends to reside in that area for the next six months or more.
- The database would contain demographic as well as biometric particulars.
- It will be the next round of recording biometric and family tree details of Indian citizens.
- The NPR earlier collated in 2010 and 2015 has an electronic database of more than 119 crore residents.
- It is prepared at the local (village and sub-town), sub-district, district, state and national levels under provisions of the Citizenship Act, 1955 and the Citizenship (Registration of Citizens and Issue of National Identity Cards) Rules, 2003.

Note:

- The NPR's link with the proposed National Register of Citizens (NRC) and the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), 2019, has been opposed by many states and civil society groups.
- The Citizenship Rules framed in the year 2003 say that the NPR is the first step towards the compilation of the National Register of Indian Citizens (NRIC), or the NRC.
- The CAA passed by the Parliament in 2019, allows citizenship on the basis of religion to six undocumented communities from Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh, who entered India on or before December 31, 2014.
- Though the government has denied that the CAA and the NRC are linked, there are apprehensions that the CAA followed by a countrywide NRC, will benefit non-Muslims excluded from the proposed citizens' register, while excluded Muslims will have to prove their citizenship.

31. Biden seeks to boost Asia alliances

Context:

- U.S. Secretary of State and National Security Adviser are set to meet their Chinese counterparts in Alaska, in the first face-to-face interaction between the Biden administration and China.
- The meeting is happening after a volley of diplomatic efforts by the Biden administration to strengthen America's relations with its allies and partners in Asia.

Biden's foreign policy approach towards China:

- There is a consensus within the Biden administration that China, not Russia, is America's primary rival.
 - The Interim National Security Strategic Guidance, released by the administration, calls China the only competitor potentially capable of combining its economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to mount a sustained challenge to a stable and open international system.
 - According to the Secretary of State, the U.S.'s relationship with China will be the biggest geopolitical test of the 21st century.
- The Alaska meet suggests that the Biden administration would seek to engage with China on matters of mutual interest even if overall relations remain tense.
 - Climate change and the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic are such areas.
- There are geopolitical areas as well where both sides can continue cooperation.

- The U.S. has already proposed a multilateral UN-led conference involving the representatives of China, Russia, India, Iran, Pakistan and the U.S. to find a lasting solution to the Afghan conflict.
- The Biden administration has made its intention clear to revive the Iran nuclear deal.
- China, along with other permanent members of the UN Security Council and Germany and the EU, is a signatory to the deal.
- The U.S. would need China's diplomatic support in its effort to bring the nuclear accord back on track.
- The main theatre of the U.S.-China rivalry is set to be the Indo-Pacific region.
 - That a Quad summit was held within the first 50 days of the Biden administration points to the high priority Mr. Biden gives to the grouping in its Indo-Pacific strategy.

America's Indo-Pacific Alliance:

- Among the Quad countries, India is the only country that shares a land border with China.
- For Japan, South Korea and Australia, China is their top trade partner and uninterrupted trade with China is important for their continued prosperity.
- However, all these countries share security concerns with a fast-rising China.
- The same is the case with countries in the region such as Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and even communist Vietnam.
- The U.S. is trying to tap these concerns while seeking to stitch together an Indo-Pacific alliance system.

Conclusion:

While the U.S. has been a strong proponent of a stronger Quad, it is to be seen whether Mr. Biden would be able to regroup the Quad and other American allies in the region such as South Korea against China in an emerging bipolar contest.

32. The limits of POCSO

Context

- A single bench of the Madras High Court recently allowed a petition seeking to quash a case of kidnap, aggravated penetrative sexual assault and aggravated sexual assault of a minor.

Aggravated Penetrative Sexual Assault

- These include cases when a police officer, a member of the armed forces, or a public servant commits penetrative sexual assault on a child.

- It also covers cases where the offender is a relative of the child, or if the assault injures the sexual organs of the child or the child becomes pregnant, among others.

Aggravated sexual assault

- Under the Act, “sexual assault” includes actions where a person touches the vagina, penis, anus or breast of a child with sexual intent without penetration.
- “Aggravated sexual assault” includes cases where the offender is a relative of the child, or if the assault injures the sexual organs of the child, among others.

Minor’s consent is ‘no consent in eyes of law’

- Under POCSO, the consent of a person under the age of 18 is irrelevant, regardless of the nature and circumstance of the sexual interaction, or the particulars of the person with whom it takes place.
- This means that any sex with a minor is rape.

Sexual tendencies of adolescents

- The act has provisions that criminalize consensual sexual intercourse between two people below the age of 18.
- The court while analyzing the case has taken a view that adolescence and young adulthood form a continuum because of the physical, biological, neurological, and social changes that occur during adolescence.
- So the court came to a conclusion that the relationship of the **minor ‘victim’** with the **accused respondent** is a loving, rather than an abusive, one.

What did the Court say?

- The judgment echoes the arguments that child rights activists have been making for years: by ignoring the natural sexual tendencies of adolescents, POCSO can and does become a tool for the persecution of young people in consenting sexual relations.
- The judgment concluded that the case could be quashed because it was purely individual in nature and doing so would not affect any overriding public interest.
- It held “Punishing an adolescent boy who enters into a relationship with a minor girl by treating him as an offender, was never the objective of the POCSO Act”.

Violation of established precedents

- In following the above-mentioned reasoning the court has ignored the established precedent against quashing cases of rape, a heinous and serious offence, held by the Supreme Court to be a public concern, and not a private matter.

Views of the Parliamentary Committee (Rajya Sabha)

- The committee had considered the POCSO Bill, 2011 and it criticized the clause providing for the possibility of consent in cases of sexual intercourse with minors between the ages of 16 and 18.
- It believed that a uniform age of 18 would ensure that trials of child rape would focus on the conduct of the accused and the circumstances of the offence, instead of putting victims on trial as is often the case when the consent of the victim is in question.
- This would indicate that adolescent sexuality was not meant to be an exception to POCSO's bright-line approach.

Law and Justice

- It has thus forced courts to choose between applying the law and doing justice, especially in cases where the minor victim has willingly eloped with or married the accused or is carrying his child, for imprisoning him would only do her harm.

Way forward

- POCSO should be amended to take such cases into consideration.
- The legislature should take into consideration cases of this nature involving adolescents involved in relationships and swiftly bring in necessary amendments under the Act.

Conclusion

- Therefore, the judgment was intuitively just, even though it was not in line with precedent.
- It highlighted the urgent need for a reconsideration of the absolutist approach of POCSO when it comes to the sexual interactions of adolescents with other young people.

33. Bill to define Delhi L-G's powers moved in LS

Context:

The bill to define the powers of Delhi's Lieutenant-Governor moved in Lok Sabha.

Key highlights of the bill:

- The bill moved by the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) proposes that the “government” in the National Capital Territory of Delhi meant the Lieutenant-Governor of Delhi.
- The Bill gives discretionary powers to the L-G even in matters where the Legislative Assembly of Delhi is empowered to make laws.
- It also seeks to ensure that the L-G is necessarily granted an opportunity to give her/his opinion before any decision taken by the Delhi Cabinet is implemented.
- The Bill proposes to amend Sections 21, 24, 33 and 44 of the 1991 Act.

The Union Territory of Delhi

Delhi is a Union Territory with a legislature and it came into being in 1991 under Article 239AA of the Constitution inserted by the Constitution (Sixty-ninth Amendment) Act, 1991.

- As per the existing Act, the Legislative Assembly has the power to make laws in all matters except public order, police and land.

34. Rajya Sabha passes MTP Bill

Context:

The Rajya Sabha passed the Medical Termination of Pregnancy (Amendment) Bill, 2020. The Bill was passed in March 2020 in the Lok Sabha. The original Bill was framed in 1971.

- Under the Indian Penal Code, 1860, voluntarily terminating a pregnancy is a criminal offence.
- The Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act, 1971 allows for aborting the pregnancy by medical doctors (with specified specialisation) on certain grounds.

Details:

- The Act regulates the conditions under which a pregnancy may be aborted.
- The bill increases the time period within which an abortion may be carried out.
- Women would need a nod from a medical board in the case of pregnancies beyond 24 weeks.

- Currently, abortion requires the opinion of one doctor if it is done within 12 weeks of conception, and two doctors if it is done between 12 and 20 weeks.
- The Bill allows abortion to be done on the advice of one doctor up to 20 weeks, and two doctors in the case of certain categories of women, between 20 and 24 weeks.
- For a pregnancy to be terminated after 24 weeks in case of substantial foetal abnormalities, the opinion of the State-level medical board is essential.

Medical Termination of Pregnancy:

- Medical Termination of Pregnancy (MTP) is a legalized method of termination of pregnancy, intentionally, before its full term.
- It is also known as induced abortion or intentional or voluntary termination of pregnancy.

35. We need to urgently invest in public health

The efforts of healthcare personnel, from ASHA workers to highly specialised intensive care physicians, have saved countless lives and made India proud. The editorial throws light upon how the pandemic has demonstrated the importance of healthcare and public health in times of a health crisis.

- That healthcare is science-based was convincingly demonstrated.
- Lab diagnosis, clinical assessments, management discriminating between useful and useless therapeutic modalities all gave society a glimpse of how modern medicine works.
- A good grounding in theory, long years in basics and specialisation, and apprenticing to gain experience in ethical, evidence-based medical practice are essential for the making of caring medical and nursing professionals.

Healthcare and public health:

- While the health-care capability in India ranks among the world's best, it is not the case when it comes to public health. There is a need to distinguish between the two.
- Healthcare refers to the transaction between one caregiver and one sick person at a time.
- For public health, the client is the community at large and the goal is disease prevention and control.
- Disease control is the deliberate, intervention-based and quantified reduction of disease burden. It has to be data-driven.

- Reliable data must be collected from all sources including every healthcare provider, for monitoring disease burden by diagnosis and outcomes; for this exercise, the total population is the denominator.
 - For instance, data collection for HIV control is sample-based, under the unique Indian design of sentinel surveillance, established in 1986 and still continuing.
 - Counting of acute flaccid paralysis (AFP) and laboratory tests for polioviruses were crucial for polio elimination in India.

Issues:

- The health management system in India does not have a way of prospectively collecting data on all diseases and deaths by diagnosis.
 - That is precisely the task of public health.
- There is no comprehensive and quantified profile of any disease in the entire population, including those under vertical programmes – tuberculosis, malaria, leprosy, AIDS.
- The sero-surveys on random samples was an attempt to derive the totality of infections. It reported widely disparate figures and failed to give us a reasonably reliable picture.
- In the absence of public health infrastructure, India's AIDS Task Force designed and successfully applied 'social vaccine' during the HIV/AIDS epidemic and this was continued by the National AIDS Control Organization (NACO).
- Sadly, there was no crosstalk between the COVID-19 programme and NACO; hence principles of social vaccine, so effectively deployed in AIDS prevention, were not adopted for COVID-19 prevention.

Way Forward:

- Social vaccine is the way forward. Social vaccination is another function of public health.
- Where India fell short is timely and comprehensive public education with authoritative and authentic information communicated effectively to the public for self-motivated behaviour modification.
- For COVID-19, there are non-pharmacological preventive interventions such as face masks, hand hygiene, physical distancing.
- Pharmacological prevention is by vaccination.
- Now, during the COVID-19 vaccine roll-out, authentic health education regarding vaccination is conspicuously lacking, leading to considerable vaccine hesitancy among even healthcare staff.
- Post-vaccination surveillance, vital for assessing vaccine efficacy and safety, must be conducted. There exists this lacuna in public health.

- COVID-19 has strong social determinants of infection transmission. In countries where public health is given equal status with healthcare, public health addresses both social and environmental determinants and controls these diseases.
- India's style of mounting ad hoc responses only when there is a pandemic is no longer tenable. Currently, our healthcare institutions are cluttered with too many infectious diseases that are amenable to control if only we had public health.
- Investment in public health will result in health, wealth and prosperity.

36. Serious issue if 3 cr. ration cards were cancelled, says SC

Context:

The Supreme Court said it was a very serious matter if the Centre had really cancelled around three crore ration cards.

Background:

- A petition was filed alleging that the cancellation of ration cards solely because they could not be biometrically linked with Aadhaar led to starvation deaths across the country.
- It was pointed out that the ration cards of tribal people and the poor were cancelled.

Details:

- According to the Union of India, the insistence on Aadhaar and biometric authentication had led to the cancellation of nearly four crore ration cards in the country.
- The Union of India casually gives an explanation that these cancelled cards were bogus.
- However, the petition points out that the real reason was technological system based on iris identification, thumb prints, non-possession of Aadhaar, non-functioning of the Internet in rural and remote areas, etc., led to largescale cancellation of ration cards, without notice to the family concerned.
- While the states were in a denial mode, blaming the deaths on diarrhoea and malaria, the petition blamed lack of food and starvation for deaths.

Issue:

- Even as the government highlighted the redressal mechanism within the Food Security Act as the right place to go, none of the States have appointed

independent nodal officers or district grievance redressal officer under the Act.

- All the States have granted additional designations to existing officers. In many cases, the officers given additional designations are from the Food Supply Department leading to a conflict of interest.
- The Hunger Watch Report of the Right to Food Campaign in 2020 characterised the hunger situation in India as “grave”.
- India ranks 94 out of 107 countries in the Global Hunger Index 2020 and is in the ‘Serious Hunger Category’.

Way Forward:

- Right to food, which the ration card symbolised, cannot be curbed or cancelled because of lack of Aadhaar.
- The Supreme Court in the Swaraj Abhiyan cases on the implementation of the Food Security Act, had given a slew of directions which included social audits, framing of rules and setting up vigilance committees. These directions must be diligently adhered to.

37. 'India has assured Sri Lanka of support'

Context:

A new resolution on Sri Lanka's human rights record will be put to vote at the UN Human Rights Council.

Background:

- The human rights situation in Sri Lanka has worsened since Gotabaya Rajapaksa became President in 2019.
- Tamil communities in the north and the east fear increasing abuses.

Details:

- Sri Lankan Foreign Secretary has said that India has assured Sri Lanka of its support at the UN Human Rights Council.
- Sri Lanka had sought India's proactive support at the UN Human Rights Council, where a resolution on the country will be soon put to vote.

Issue:

- Tamil communities in the north and the eastern parts of Sri Lanka fear increasing abuses.
- Tamil parties continue demanding full implementation of the 13th Amendment since the civil war ended in 2009.
- Despite Tamil parties seeking greater power devolution within an undivided, indivisible Sri Lanka, their demands are viewed as leaning towards separatism.

Sri Lanka's Dilemma:

- The foreign secretary expressed concerns that while a developing country should be able to make decisions based on economics and needs, unfortunately, a country like Sri Lanka "is not free to make that decision".
- Sri Lanka's foreign policy dilemma is that before making an economic decision, the strategic consideration of the powers in the Indian Ocean Region must be taken into account.
- He asserted that they are determined to balance factors such as seeing how best it can maintain neutrality, maintaining friendly relations for economic purposes with all the countries, and keeping India's strategic security concerns in mind.

India's vote:

- The appeal comes at a time when Indo-Lanka bilateral ties have come under strain, following a series of decisions taken by Colombo on development projects involving India and China.
- It remains to be seen how India might vote on the Sri Lanka resolution.
- The resolution draws from UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet's damning report on Sri Lanka's alarming path towards the recurrence of grave human rights violations.
 - Colombo has categorically rejected the report.

38. SC to hear plea against sale of electoral bonds

Context:

Chief Justice of India has agreed to urgently hear a plea by an NGO, Association for Democratic Reforms to stay the sale of a new set of electoral bonds on April 1, before the Assembly elections in crucial states such as West Bengal and Tamil Nadu.

Issue:

- The NGO voiced serious apprehensions about the sale of electoral bonds before elections.
- The NGO argued that the data obtained through RTI had shown that illegal sale windows had been opened in the past to benefit certain political parties.
- It said that the scheme had opened doors to unlimited political donations, even from foreign companies, thereby legitimising electoral corruption at a huge scale, while at the same time ensuring complete non-transparency in political funding.
- It reminded the court that both the RBI and the Election Commission had objected to the electoral bond scheme.
- Further, advocate Prashant Bhushan said that the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) and the Election Commission had both said that the sale of electoral bonds had become an avenue for shell corporations and entities to park illicit money and even proceeds of bribes with political parties.

Electoral Bonds:

- Electoral bonds are instruments/securities that are used to donate funds to political parties.
- The Finance Act of 2017 introduced the use of Electoral Bonds. They are exempt from disclosure under the Representation of People's Act, 1951.
- Contributions received by any eligible political party in the form of electoral bonds will be exempt from income tax.

39. Delhi undermined

Context

- The Center has introduced the Government of National Capital Territory of Delhi (Amendment) Bill, 2021 in the Lok Sabha.
- The Centre claims that the amendment bill seeks to give effect to the Supreme Court's (SC) interpretation and that it "further defines" the responsibilities of the elected government and the Lt Governor in line with the constitutional scheme.

What did the SC say?

- In its 2018 verdict, the five-judge Bench had held that the L-G's concurrence is not required on issues other than police, public order and land.
- It had added that decisions of the Council of Ministers will, however, have to be communicated to the L-G.
 - "It has to be clearly stated that requiring prior concurrence of the Lieutenant Governor would absolutely negate the ideals of

- representative governance and democracy conceived for the NCT of Delhi by Article 239AA of the Constitution.”
- “The status of the Lieutenant Governor of Delhi is not that of a Governor of a State, rather he remains an Administrator, in a limited sense, working with the designation of Lieutenant Governor”.
 - The L-G was bound by the aid and advice of the Council of Ministers. It had also pointed out that the elected government must keep in mind that Delhi is not a state.

The Government of National Capital Territory of Delhi (GNCTD) Act, 1991

- Delhi’s current status as a Union Territory with a Legislative Assembly is an outcome of the 69th Amendment Act through which Articles 239AA and 239BB were introduced in the Constitution.
- The GNCTD Act was passed simultaneously to supplement the constitutional provisions relating to the Assembly and the Council of Ministers in the national capital.
- For all practical purposes, the GNCTD Act outlines the powers of the Assembly, the discretionary powers enjoyed by the L-G, and the duties of the Chief Minister with respect to the need to furnish information to the L-G.

What does the Bill say?

- According to proposed amendments, Section 21 of the Act – dealing with restrictions on laws passed by legislative assembly with respect to certain matters – is sought to be revised to clarify that the expression “government” referred to in any law to be made by the legislative assembly shall mean the “Lieutenant Governor”.
- The Bill through amendments in various sections makes it mandatory for the government to send files to/seek the opinion of the Lieutenant Governor before taking any administrative decisions.
- The Bill gives discretionary powers to the L-G of Delhi even in matters where the Legislative Assembly of Delhi is empowered to make laws.
- The Bill seeks to add a provision in the original GNCTD Act, 1991, barring the Assembly or its committees from making rules to take up matters concerning day-to-day administration, or to conduct inquiries in relation to administrative decisions.

Criticism of the proposed amendments

- The amendment places more powers in the hands of the L-G, despite the Supreme Court ruling of 2018 saying that the Chief Minister will have greater say in all matters barring land, police and law and order.

- The Bill, if it becomes law, will wholly undermine the Court's efforts to strengthen the elected government vis-à-vis the appointed Lieutenant Governor.
- It is also being said that the proposed amendments to the Government of National Capital Territory of Delhi (GNCTD) Act, 1991, if passed would impact the powers of the Delhi Assembly committees to probe the day-to-day functioning of the administration.
- It curtails the power of a democratically elected government, is against the will of the people and the spirit of federalism.

Why has the Centre proposed Amendments?

- The Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) statement on "objects and reasons" of the Bill stated that Section 44 of the 1991 Act deals with the conduct of business and there is no structural mechanism for effective time-bound implementation of the said section.
 - "Further, there is no clarity as to what proposal or matters are required to be submitted to Lieutenant Governor before issuing order".
- Section 44 of the 1991 Act says that all executive actions of the L-G, whether taken on the advice of his Ministers or otherwise shall be expressed to be taken in the name of the L-G.

Conclusion

- The 'Union Territory' concept is one of the many ways in which India regulates relations between the Centre and its units. It should not be used to subvert the basis of electoral democracy.

40. India, United States resolve to intensify defence cooperation

Context:

- Talks between Indian Defence Minister Rajnath Singh and the visiting U.S. Secretary of Defense General Lloyd James Austin III (retd).

Background:

India- U.S. defence co-operation:

- India and the U.S. have been involved in a number of **bilateral and multilateral military exercises**.
- The **foundational agreements, LEMOA, COMCASA and BECA** have also been signed between India and the U.S.

- Recently the Leaders' Summit of India, U.S., Japan and Australia was held under the **Quadrilateral Framework**.

Details:

- The bilateral discussion covered “military-to-military engagement across services, information sharing, cooperation in emerging sectors of defence, and mutual logistics support”.
- India resolved to intensify **defence cooperation with the U.S. Central Command in Florida and with the U.S. Commands in the Indo-Pacific region and Africa**.
- The U.S. Secretary of Defense described the partnership with India as a “central pillar” of the American policy for the Indo-Pacific.

Significance:

- The visit marks the first of the Secretary of Defense after taking charge as part of the Biden-Harris administration. This could indicate the continued support for deepening the relationship with India even under the new Presidentship.
- The deepening of the defence co-operation between the two countries could help realise the full potential of the foundational agreements for mutual benefit.
- Austin's visit is also crucial as it comes in the midst of expectations that the U.S. is likely to deliver a message over India's plans to acquire the Russian S-400 missile defence system. The move could attract U.S. sanctions under the **Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act**.
- The subtle reference to Beijing's growing military activities in the South China Sea region could help India use the U.S. as a counter balance the increasingly assertiveness of the Chinese.

41. Corrective voice from top court against stereotyping women

Context:

Recently, the Supreme Court in a judgement forbade judges from making gender-stereotypical comments.

Details:

- A judgment by the Supreme Court forbidding judges from making gender-stereotypical comments came as a corrective voice from within the highest level of judiciary in India.
- The judgment stopped courts from trying to mandate marriage or compromise between a sex offender and his victim.

- It is one among a series of interventions with which the top court has clamped down on abuse and sex stereotyping of women.

Note:

- Some notable judgments which have lashed out at sex stereotyping include:
 - The framing of the Vishaka Guidelines on sexual harassment of women at workplaces.
 - Justice D.Y. Chandrachud's historic judgment giving women Armed Forces officers equal access to Permanent Commission while debunking the establishment's claim that women were physiologically weaker than men.
 - In the Anuj Garg case, the Supreme Court had rebuked the notion of romantic paternalism, which, in practical effect, put women, not on a pedestal, but in a cage.

42. SC walks a tightrope over vacancies

Context:

The Supreme Court Collegium is striving to reach a consensus on recommendations to fill the five vacancies.

Details:

- The names of several High Court judges are in the zone of consideration.
- The Collegium is discussing diverse opinions from within on issues like proportionate representation from various High Courts and seniority among High Court judges before finalising the names to recommend to the government for appointment.
- Proportionate representation from High Courts and seniority carry weight during the appointment process.
 - However, these are only conventions and not constitutional or legal mandates.

Issue:

- The past several months have seen the Supreme Court function under a series of challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, even as its judicial strength faded to 29 with the retirement of Justice Indu Malhotra.
 - The maximum possible strength is 34.
- The year 2021 will see four retirements in the top court.
 - As per the Constitution of India, judges of the Supreme Court retire at the age of 65.

Appointment of Judges to the Supreme Court:

- The Collegium System of the Supreme court of India deals with the appointment and transfer of judges.
- Memorandum of Procedure (MoP) is an agreement between the Government and the judiciary that has a set of guidelines for the appointment of judges of the Supreme Court.
- The MoP was formulated after the Third Judges Case in order to govern the process of how the Collegium System would make recommendations to the executive.

43. China, Russia look to deepen 'best' ties

Context:

Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov is on a key visit to China.

Details:

- The visit comes shortly after the China-U.S. dialogue in Alaska. It follows the first leaders' summit of the Quad (India, Australia, Japan and the U.S.) grouping.
- He asserted that Russia's relations with China were currently at the best in their entire history.
- He argued that the formation of a truly multipolar and democratic world is, unfortunately, being hindered by Western countries, particularly the United States as they seek to continue to dominate at any cost on global economy and politics and impose their will and requirements on others.
- He said, "In response, Russia and China are promoting a constructive and unifying agenda and hope that the international governance system would be fair and democratic, run smoothly and be based on extensive interaction between countries and their integration initiatives,".

Areas of Discussion:

- Both countries are expected to discuss deepening coordination against the threat of sanctions from the West.
- Recently, the EU imposed sanctions on four Chinese officials for human rights violations in Xinjiang, the first sanctions since the 1989 arms embargo.
- Lavrov called on both countries (permanent members of the UN Security Council) to work under the UN framework on the immediate end to unilateral coercive measures and to take the opportunity to enhance their scientific and technological innovation and improve their national strength in response to the sanctions.

- Trade ties are also on the agenda.
 - China is Russia's biggest trade partner.

Note:

- 2021 marks the 20th anniversary of the Treaty of Good-neighbourliness and Friendly Cooperation signed in July 2001.
- This treaty was credited by Russia for deepening strategic relations and creating a model of interaction between Russia and China that is absolutely free from any ideological constraints, not subject to any opportunistic factors nor against any third country.

Strategic Angle:

- Experts in Russia believe that the China-Russia relationship could counterbalance the Quad.
- Russia's continuing close relations with India is a potential destabilising factor for the Quad's potential.
- They believe that India would not destroy its relations with Russia just because it wants to seek courtship with the U.S. to deal with China. From this perspective, if Russia-India relations continue in a stable way, they will to some extent restrain India-US ties from further deepening.

Strategic Triangle:

- As early as December 1998, the then Russian Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov expressed hope that Russia, China and India could establish a 'strategic triangle' that would be in the interests of peace and security.
- Currently, China and India have undergone twists and turns in their relations due to border tensions.
- Russia has actually played an active role between China and India.
- Russia has maintained relatively close ties with India, which has thereupon become a counterbalance to the Quad group.

44. U.P., M.P. sign agreement on Ken-Betwa interlinking work

Context:

The governments of Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh have signed an agreement that nudges forward a long-stalled multi-crore, controversial project to link the Ken and the Betwa rivers.

Ken-Betwa interlinking Project:

- The project aims to irrigate the water-deficient Bundelkhand region, spread over both States, and provide electricity.
- The project involves transferring surplus water from the Ken river in Madhya Pradesh to the Betwa in Uttar Pradesh and irrigating 3.64 lakh hectares in the Bundelkhand region of both States.
- The project involves building a 77-metre-tall and a 2-km-wide Dhaudhan dam and a 230-km canal.
- The Centre was originally to fund 90% of the cost (₹37,611 crore in 2018) but a final decision is still outstanding.

Obstacles:

Several obstacles have dogged the project.

- Nearly 8,650 hectares of forest land including part of Panna National Park in Madhya Pradesh will be submerged if the project is to become a reality.
 - It will also have an adverse impact on tiger reserves and wildlife sanctuaries in the region. This has led to widespread opposition from conservationists.
 - It would also affect the habitat of vultures and jackals. After years of protests, however, it was finally cleared by the apex wildlife regulator, the National Board for Wildlife, in 2016.
- There have been disagreements between the two state governments. Eg: disagreement between the States on the share of water.
 - While there is a 2005 agreement between the two States on how water would be shared, Madhya Pradesh says these assumptions are no longer valid and the only way to meet the increased water requirements would be to include local management projects – the Kotha barrage, Lower Orr and Bina complex that were envisaged in the second phase of the project – in the first phase.
 - This would increase project costs.
- The project has been delayed due to political and environmental issues.

In the latest development, the agreement has been signed by both Chief Ministers.

45. OTT case: SC stays all pleas in HCs

Context:

The Supreme Court has stayed the proceedings in High Courts in cases seeking regulation of content shown on over-the-top (OTT) platforms.

Details:

- While the Information and Broadcasting Ministry said that the Rules were based on a globally recognised model and keep a fine balance, it is being criticised as lacking teeth to punish violators or to screen offensive content.

Details:

- The Information Technology (Guidelines for Intermediaries and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021 also mandate that social media and messaging platforms will have to adhere to new requirements in assisting investigative agencies of the government.
- The Electronics and Information Technology Minister called it a soft-touch oversight mechanism to deal with issues such as the persistent spread of fake news and other misinformation.

Broadly, what do the new rules require digital platforms to do?

- The broad themes of the guidelines revolve around grievance redressal, compliance with the law, and adherence to the media code.
- Social media platforms will have to appoint a grievance officer to deal with users' complaints.
- The platforms whose registered users in India are above the threshold notified by the government must appoint a 'Chief Compliance Officer', who will have to ensure that the rules are followed.
 - The officer shall be liable in any proceedings relating to any relevant third-party information, data or communication link made available or hosted by that intermediary.
 - The intermediaries will also have to appoint a nodal contact person for 24×7 coordination with law enforcement agencies.
- A social media intermediary would have to enable the identification of the first originator of the information on its computer resource as may be required by a judicial order.
- For digital publishers of news and current affairs as well as video streaming services, an identical three-tier structure for grievance redressal has been mandated.
 - This structure will look into grievances in relation to a Code of Ethics, which is listed in the appendix to the rules.
 - Among other things, the Code of Ethics includes the 'Norms of Journalistic Conduct' as prescribed by the Press Council of India, as also content that shall not be published and the Programme Code under the Cable Television Networks (Regulation) Act, 1995.
 - The guidelines also require streaming services to classify content based on its nature and type.

What is the context in which these rules have been framed?

- Questions about how social media platforms can be made accountable for the spread of fake news and pornographic content have been raised in Parliament and by the Supreme Court in recent years.
- The question of stricter regulation of digital media came up in 2020 when the Supreme Court was hearing a case involving Sudarshan TV. In the course, it asked the government for suggestions to improve the self-regulatory mechanism for electronic media.
- Recently, there has also been a face-off between the government and Twitter over its non-compliance with the government order to block several hashtags and handles of journalists, activists and politicians in the backdrop of the ongoing farmers' protests.

What has changed from earlier?

- The scope of regulation of the digital space has been expanded.
- The new guidelines replace the Information Technology (Intermediaries Guidelines) Rules, 2011.
- They also regulate digital news publishers and streaming services, which was not the case earlier.
- Under Section 79 of the Information Technology Act, the intermediaries are not liable for user-generated content, provided they adhere to the rules – “an intermediary shall not be liable for any third-party information, data, or communication link made available or hosted by him,” it states. These rules have been tightened now.

Criticisms:

- For digital news media, these guidelines will subject it to governmental regulation in a way.
- The three-tier structure of regulation will entail oversight by a government committee at the highest level.
- Any grievance that does not get satisfactorily solved at the self-regulatory levels will get escalated to the government panel.
- The Internet Freedom Foundation (IFF), a digital liberties organisation, refers to this as “excessive governmental control over digital news and OTT content”.
- The other rule that has been criticised by the IFF is the requirement of traceability of the originator of a problematic message.
- The rules have also been criticised for increasing the potential for censorship and surveillance.

46. LS clears Bill on allied healthcare

Context:

The Lok Sabha cleared the National Commission for Allied and Healthcare Professionals Bill, 2021. The Bill has already been passed by the Rajya Sabha.

- The Bill defines an 'allied health professional' as an associate, technician, or technologist trained to support the diagnosis and treatment of any illness, disease, injury, or impairment.
 - Such a professional should have obtained a diploma or degree under this Bill.
- A healthcare professional includes a scientist, therapist, or any other professional who studies, advises, researches, supervises, or provides preventive, curative, rehabilitative, therapeutic, or promotional health services.
 - Such a professional should have obtained a degree under this Bill.
- Allied and healthcare professions that are mentioned in the Bill include professionals working in life sciences, trauma and burn care, surgical and anaesthesia related technology, physiotherapists, and nutrition science.

Details:

- The bill seeks to set up a commission to regulate the allied healthcare sector, standardise training and qualifications across the country.
- The functions of the proposed National Commission include:
 - Framing of standards for education and practice.
 - Creating and maintaining an online Central Register of all registered professionals.
 - Providing basic standards of education.
 - Providing for a uniform entrance and exit examination.
- Under the legislation, only those enrolled in a State Register or the National Register as a qualified allied and healthcare practitioner would be allowed to practice as an allied and healthcare practitioner.

Significance:

- Union Health Minister said that the legislation is aimed at fulfilling long-pending demands of the sector, and enhance employment opportunities for professionals.
- There is an immense demand for qualified healthcare professionals and the legislation will provide the necessary impetus in providing affordable healthcare to the people.

- The paramedics and allied healthcare workers are a critical part of the medical profession and their contribution is similar to doctors, if not more. The group of allied professionals is large and the bill is trying to regulate this field, by providing dignity to their roles.

47. RS approves Bill empowering Delhi L-G amid Oppn. Walkout

Context:

The Rajya Sabha passed the Government of National Capital Territory of Delhi (Amendment) Bill.

Details:

- The bill seeks to empower the Lieutenant-Governor in Delhi.
- The Bill states that the government in the national capital territory of Delhi means the Lieutenant-Governor.
- The legislation says that the L-G is necessarily granted an opportunity to give her/his opinion before any decision taken by the Council of Ministers (or the Delhi Cabinet) is implemented.

Criticisms:

- The opposition argued that the Bill would smother an elected government stating that the Bill is akin to dismissing the government.
- The proceedings saw a vociferous protest by the Opposition members accusing the government of going against democracy.

48. SC suggests posting retired judges to clear backlog in HCs

Context:

The Supreme Court pushed for the appointment of retired judges to battle the pendency of cases in High Courts.

Issues:

- There are suits pending in chartered courts, and in North India, some courts have cases pending for 30 years.
- Judicial pendency has become a great cause of concern.

Details:

- A Bench led by Chief Justice of India Sharad A. Bobde said retired judges could be chosen on the basis of their expertise in a particular field of dispute and allowed to retire once the pendency in that zone of law was over.
- It said retired judges who had handled certain disputes and fields of law for over 15 years could deal with them faster if brought back into harness as ad-hoc judges.
- The court orally outlined prospective guidelines for the appointment and functioning of an ad hoc judge.
- The Chief Justice said the appointment of ad-hoc judges was provided for in the Constitution under Article 224A.
 - Under the Article, the Chief Justice of a High Court for any State may at any time, with the previous consent of the President, request any person who has held the office of judge of that court or of any other High Court to sit and act as a judge of the High Court for that State.

49. Remove the wedges in India-Bangladesh ties

Introduction

- 2021 marks 50 years since the independence of Bangladesh. India has played a key role in Bangladesh's Liberation War and the friendship continues to grow. India lent its support on the political, diplomatic, military and humanitarian front, and India's soldiers gave up their lives and an estimated 10 million Bangladeshi refugees took shelter in India.

Tracing the journey of the relationship

- The relationship between India and Bangladesh has vacillated through highs and lows depending on the regimes in power.
- It had remained cordial until the assassination of Bangladesh's founding President Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1975, followed by a period of military rule and the rise of General Ziaur Rahman who became President and also assassinated in 1981.
- It thawed during the period of 1982-1991 when a military-led government by General H.M. Ershad ruled the country.
- Since Bangladesh's return to parliamentary democracy in 1991, we have seen drastic developments. In the last decade, India-Bangladesh relations have warmed up, entering a new era of cooperation, and moving beyond historical and cultural ties to become more assimilated in the areas of trade, connectivity, energy, and defence.

Achievements and Progress

- Both the countries have solved the border issues amicably by ratifying the historic Land Boundary Agreement in 2015, where enclaves were exchanged allowing inhabitants to choose their country of residence and become citizens of either India or Bangladesh.
- The Bangladesh government led by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has uprooted anti-India insurgency elements from its borders, making the India-Bangladesh border one of the region's most peaceful.
- This has allowed India to make a massive redeployment of resources to its more contentious borders elsewhere along India's borders and tension prone areas.

Bilateral trade between India and Bangladesh

- Bangladesh today is India's biggest trading partner in South Asia with exports to Bangladesh in FY 2018-19 at \$9.21 billion and imports at \$1.04 billion.
- India has offered duty-free access to multiple Bangladeshi products.
- India has extended three lines of credit to Bangladesh in recent years amounting to \$8 billion for the construction of roads, railways, bridges, and ports.

Issues

- In the last eight years until 2019, only 51% of the first \$800 million line of credit has been utilised whilst barely any amount from the next two lines of credit worth \$6.5 billion has been mobilised.
- This delay and progress is due to red-tapism from India's end and from Bangladesh's side, it may be due to the slow implementation of the project.

The connectivity boost

Connectivity between the two countries has greatly improved.

- A direct bus service between Kolkata and Agartala runs a route distance of 500 km, as compared to the 1,650 km it would have run through the Chicken's Neck, to remain within India.
- There are three passenger and freight railway services running between the two countries, with two more routes on their way to be restored.
- Recently, a 1.9-kilometre long bridge, the Maitri Setu, was inaugurated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, connecting Sabroom in India with Ramgarh in Bangladesh.

Enhanced cooperation in shipping and inland water trade.

- Bangladesh allows the shipment of goods from its Mongla and Chattogram (Chittagong) seaports carried by road, rail, and waterways to Agartala (Tripura) via Akhura; Dawki (Meghalaya) via Tamabil; Sutarkandi (Assam) via Sheola, and Srimantpur (Tripura) via Bibirbazar.
- This allows landlocked Assam, Meghalaya and Tripura to access open water routes through the Chattogram and Mongla ports.

Bones of contention

- Despite the remarkable progress, the unresolved Teesta water sharing issue looms large.
- Border killings are yet to stop. The year 2020 saw the highest number of border shootings by the Border Security Force. The shots are fired at civilians, usually cattle traders, who are usually unarmed, trying to illegally cross the border.
- The government's proposal to implement the National Register of Citizens across the whole of India may result in a bleak atmosphere between the countries.
- It remains to be seen how India addresses the deportation of illegal Muslim immigrants, some of whom claim to have come from Bangladesh.

China's influence in the region

- In spite of its 'Neighborhood First Policy', India has been losing its influence in the region to China.
- Sri Lanka, Nepal and the Maldives, once considered traditional Indian allies, are increasingly tilting towards China due to the Asian giant's massive trade, infrastructural and defence investments in these countries.
- Bhutan also does not abide by Indian influence as evinced by its withdrawal from the BBIN (Bhutan-Bangladesh-India-Nepal) motor vehicles agreement.
- China, in lieu of its cheque-book diplomacy, is well-entrenched in South Asia, including Bangladesh, with which it enjoys significant economic and defence relations.

Way forward

- India-Bangladesh relations have been gaining positive momentum over the last decade.
- Going forward India has to be generous enough to let the water flow (the Teesta issue has to be settled) and the issues concerning illegal migration has to be addressed by well-established protocols of both countries.
- Trade could be more balanced if non-tariff barriers from the Indian side could be removed.

- These small but important steps can remove long-standing snags in a relationship that otherwise is gradually coming of age in 50 years.

Conclusion

- To make the recent gains irreversible, both countries need to continue working on the three Cs – cooperation, collaboration, and consolidation.

50. 'Move health to Concurrent list'

Context:

Fifteenth Finance Commission's Chairman's address at the NATHEALTH summit.

Suggestions:

Healthcare to be shifted to Concurrent List:

- Chairman of the Fifteenth Finance Commission, N.K. Singh asserted that Health should be shifted to the Concurrent list under the Constitution.
 - He opined that bringing health into the Concurrent list would give the Centre greater flexibility to enact regulatory changes and reinforce the obligation of all stakeholders towards providing better healthcare.

Set up developmental finance institution (DFI) dedicated to healthcare:

- He suggested that a DFI dedicated to healthcare investments be set up.
 - DFI would increase healthcare access in tier-2 and tier-3 cities and also come in with technical assistance that ensures proper usage of funds, he said.

Enhance government spending on health:

- He made a case for increasing the government's spending on health to 2.5% of GDP by 2025.
- He said primary healthcare should be a fundamental commitment of all States in particular and should be allocated at least two-thirds of such spending.

Universalising healthcare insurance:

- He emphasised the importance of universalising healthcare insurance as a large section of the society still remained uncovered.

- While the PMJAY covers the bottom two income quintiles, commercial insurance largely covers the top-income quintile, thereby creating a missing middle class.
- This refers to people in the middle two income quintiles, where the population is not rich enough to afford commercial insurance and not poor enough to be covered under government-sponsored health insurance schemes.

51. Linking the East with the West

Context:

- The grounding of a container ship in the Suez Canal has blocked off traffic along the critical shipping lane.
 - The 193-km-long **Suez Canal across Egypt's Isthmus of Suez connects the Mediterranean Sea in the north and the Red Sea in south.**
 - The man-made channel has been a critical artery for global trade since 1869

Background:

Construction of Suez Canal:

- In the mid-19th century, French diplomat and engineer Ferdinand de Lesseps won permission from Egypt's Ottoman-appointed ruler to start building the canal.
- In 1858, Universal Suez Ship Canal Company was formed to execute the project and construction work began a year later. Britain, which controlled the route around the African continent, continued to oppose the project as a new waterway would hurt its interests. But in 1869, the canal was officially opened for traffic.
- The Egyptian government, straddled with financial problems, sold its stake in the canal to London in 1875. Since then, France and Britain operated the canal, until **Egypt's socialist President Gamal Abdel Nasser nationalised the Suez canal in 1956.**

Suez crisis:

- Three months after Nasser nationalised the canal, Israeli troops attacked the Egyptian Sinai. French and British troops joined in later. The plan was to retake control of the canal and remove Nasser. By March 1957, the invading troops were fully withdrawn and Egypt's authority over the canal was recognised. The **Suez crisis** marked Great Britain's dwindling influence in

West Asia, a region it controlled since the fall of the Ottoman Empire, and the arrival of the U.S. as the new great power in the region.

- The canal was closed again during the **1967 war**. It would be reopened only in 1975 after Egyptian-Israeli relations started warming following the 1973 Yom Kippur War.

Details:

- About 19,000 ships passed through the Suez Canal in 2020 carrying 1.2 billion tonnes of cargo. As much as 13% of all maritime trade, from oil to automobiles, pass through the canal every year.
- **A delay in reopening the channel will have a huge impact on export businesses, commodities, ship and cargo companies and even Egypt's national economy.**

52. Amid Bangladesh liberation anniversary, role of India, U.S. in 1971 in spotlight

Context:

- Bangladesh commemorates 50 years of its Liberation movement.

Background:

- On March 26, 1971 **Bangladesh Liberation movement** began with the declaration of Independence by the **Mukti Bahini (Freedom Fighters)** led by **Sheikh Mujibur Rahman**.
- Following which Pakistani troops launched **Operation Searchlight** that targeted Bangladeshi freedom fighters and activists brutally, with millions of casualties.
 - Approximately 2 to 3 million people were killed, over 200,000 women were raped in organised rape camps, and over 10 million people were displaced, most finding refuge in India.

Details:

India's response:

- A few days after the Mujib declaration, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi moved a resolution in Parliament condemning the Pakistani crackdown as "genocide".
- The government offered support to the Bangladeshi freedom fighters. The government was also involved in training and arming the Mukti Bahini cadres

- The then Prime Minister also played a significant role in garnering international support for the Bangladeshi cause.
- While the U.S. was against India's stand, Mrs. Gandhi found some support in Moscow, and the **Indo-Soviet treaty of Peace and Cooperation** was signed in August 1971. The Soviet treaty dented India's non-aligned policy, but Soviet naval support and military supplies assisted New Delhi in the 1971 war.

American response:

- The U.S. had a pro Pakistan policy. The U.S. under President Richard Nixon moved its "Seventh fleet" into the Bay of Bengal in an attempt to deter the Indian Army from advancing towards Dhaka (Dacca) during the two-week war in December 1971.

53. The Afghan endgame

Context:

- S. Afghanistan Policy under the Presidentship of Joe Biden.

Details:

- As per the **S.-Taliban deal**, May 1 is the deadline for pulling out all American troops from Afghanistan. However, given the continued violence in Afghanistan, there are growing doubts over U.S. pull out from Afghanistan.
 - No U.S. troops have been targeted by Taliban militants in the past year, but **violence against Afghan civilians**, particularly women, journalists, students and activists has gone up manifold, and despite the peace agreement, more than 3,000 civilians were killed in 2020.

Options available for the U.S.:

- **The U.S. could negotiate with the Taliban for an extension of the agreement**, offering other incentives like the release of more prisoners and the delisting of sanctioned Taliban terrorists. The other option is that the U.S. could scrap the 2020 agreement and back the Ashraf Ghani government to continue towards a negotiated settlement, even as U.S. troops remain in Afghanistan to stabilise the security situation.
 - The recent statements by senior U.S. administrators make it clear that the U.S. is not in favour of completely scrapping the 2020 agreement. The U.S. has shown impatience with the Ghani government, believing that it is dragging its feet on intra-Afghan negotiations.

- Notably, the U.S. President has stated that he did not foresee U.S. troops staying in Afghanistan “for a long time” or until 2022, but that adhering to the May 1 commitment at this point would be “hard”.
- The U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken has proposed a **new peace plan** to revive the ongoing talks.

Dialogue platforms:

- Apart from the **intra-Afghan negotiations in Doha**, there have been other ongoing efforts to resolve the deadlock in Afghanistan.
- “**Troika**” (U.S., Russia and China) along with Pakistan, Turkey, Qatar and Afghanistan and Taliban leaders.
- The U.S. secretary of state has also proposed another mechanism for regional envoys to be led by the United Nations, which would include India and Iran as well.

Afghanistan government’s plan:

- Afghanistan President Ashraf Ghani has proposed his own peace plan.
- The plan would involve a **full ceasefire, inviting the Taliban to participate in early elections in Afghanistan**, and then the serving President Mr. Ghani would hand over power to the elected government.
- The Afghanistan government has **reached out to India for support**. The Current Afghan administration has repeatedly reiterated the significance of India in the peace process. India is an important development partner of Afghanistan.

India’s stand:

- India’s position has been to **back an “Afghan-owned, Afghan-led, Afghan-controlled” peace process**. It has always backed the elected government in Kabul, and it **has not yet held talks with the Taliban directly**. India has been pitching for constitutional methods that guarantees a democratic process and rights of women and minorities.
- Notably, India has not foreclosed the option of talking to the Taliban if it does join the government in Afghanistan.
- Though the Indian government has not yet announced a special envoy on Afghanistan who could be a part of the UN-led process for regional countries, India has made it clear that it seeks to be an integral part of the process.

54. UN in dialogue with China for ‘unrestricted’ Xinjiang visit

Context:

The UN is in negotiations with Beijing for a visit without restrictions to Xinjiang to see how the Uighur minority is being treated.

Details:

- According to U.S. and Australian rights groups, at least one million Uighurs and people from other mostly Muslim groups have been held in camps in the north-western region (Xinjiang).
- They accuse Chinese authorities of forcibly sterilising women and imposing forced labour.
- China has repeatedly denied criticism of its treatment of the group.

Details:

- Britain's Foreign Secretary recently introduced import controls on firms that may have sourced goods from the region in northwest China using forced labour from the mainly Muslim Uighur community.
- He opposes efforts underway in Parliament to give U.K. courts the power to declare a genocide in Xinjiang, which would bar the government from proceeding with any free-trade agreement with China.

Note:

- China is facing mounting global criticism over its treatment of the Uighur population in Xinjiang province – with claims of forced labour camps and mass sterilisation.
- However, China denies allegations and says it equally protects the rights and interests of its ethnic minorities.

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.

55. Japan to Fund Projects in India

Why in News

Japan has finalised loans and a grant totalling around 233 billion yen for several key infrastructure projects in India, including for a project in the Andaman and Nicobar islands.

Key Points

- **Grant for Andaman and Nicobar Islands (ANI):**
 - **About the Grant:**
 - A grant of 4.01 billion yen for a project for the **improvement of power supply in strategically located Andaman and Nicobar Islands.**
 - The grant would be used to procure **15MWh batteries** as well as **power system stabilisers** to allow better utilisation of **solar power generated in South Andaman.**
 - This grant is **Japan's first ever Official Development Assistance (ODA)** to a project in the A&N islands.
 - **About Official Development Assistance (ODA):**
 - ODA is defined as **government aid designed to promote the economic development and welfare of developing countries.**
 - Loans and credits for military purposes are excluded.
 - **India has been the top recipient of the Japanese government's financial aid** under the ODA.
- **Japan's Aid for Other Projects:**
 - For **Delhi Metro's** fourth phase.
 - For Metro lines under **Namma Metro's** second phase in Bengaluru.
 - For **crop diversification** in Himachal Pradesh.
 - For **mitigating fluorosis** in Rajasthan's Jhunjhunu and Barmer districts.
- **Other Recent Developments Between India and Japan:**
 - Recently, the **first summit of the leaders' of the QUAD** (Quadrilateral Framework) was held virtually.
 - QUAD is a four-nation alliance of India, Australia, USA and Japan.
 - In 2020, India and Japan signed a **logistics agreement** that will allow armed forces of both sides to coordinate closely in services and supplies. The agreement is known as the **Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA).**

- In 2019, India and Japan held the first-ever ministerial-level **2+2 dialogue**. This dialogue involved the Defence and Foreign Ministers on both sides and is seen as an endorsement of the special strategic partnership between **India and Japan**.
- A “**India-Japan Digital Partnership (I-JDP)**” was launched during the visit of the Prime Minister of India to Japan in October 2018, furthering existing areas of cooperation as well as new initiatives within the scope of cooperation in S&T/ICT, focusing more on “Digital ICT Technologies”.
- In 2014, India and Japan upgraded their relationship to '**Special Strategic and Global Partnership**'.
- The **India-Japan Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA)** that came into force in August 2011 covers trade in goods, services, movement of natural persons, investments, Intellectual Property Rights, custom procedures and other trade related issues.
- India and Japan defence forces organize a series of bilateral exercises namely, **JIMEX** (naval), **SHINYUU Maitri** (Air Force), and **Dharma Guardian** (Army). Both countries also participate in **Malabar exercise** (Naval Exercise) with the USA.

Significance of Andaman and Nicobar Islands

- The Andaman and Nicobar Islands (ANI) are located at the **junction of the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea**.
- It is a **group of 572 islands**, which straddles some of the busiest trade routes in the world.
- ANI spans 450 nautical miles in a roughly north-south configuration **adjacent to the western entrance to the Malacca Strait**, which is itself a major Indian Ocean chokepoint.
- Geopolitically, the **ANI connects South Asia with South-East Asia**. While the northernmost point of the archipelago is only 22 nautical miles from Myanmar, the southernmost point, Indira Point, is a mere 90 nautical miles from Indonesia.
- The islands **dominate the Bay of Bengal, the Six Degree and the Ten Degree Channels** that more than sixty thousand commercial vessels traverse each year.
- The Andaman and Nicobar Islands **constitute just 0.2% of India's landmass but provide near 30% of its Exclusive Economic Zone**.
- Due to the presence of ANI in the Bay of Bengal, **India has a better position to play a vital role in Indo-Pacific**.
- Recently, the Prime Minister has declared that the **ANI will be developed as a "maritime and startup hub"**.

Fluorosis

- Fluorosis is a cosmetic condition that affects the teeth.
- It's caused by overexposure to fluoride during the first eight years of life. This is the time when most permanent teeth are being formed.
- After the teeth come in, the teeth of those affected by fluorosis may appear mildly discolored.

Way Forward

- India needs sophisticated technology from Japan, so more collaboration and cooperation can prove beneficial to both nations.
- There is a huge potential with respect to **Make in India**. Joint ventures could be created by merging Japanese digital technology with Indian raw materials and labour.
- Close cooperation is the best measure **to combat China's growing role in Asia and Indo-Pacific**, in physical as well as digital space.

56. Good neighbours

Context:

Prime Minister Narendra Modi recently visited Bangladesh to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the war of liberation and the centenary year of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

Tracing the journey of the relationship

- The relationship between India and Bangladesh has vacillated through highs and lows depending on the regimes in power.
- It had remained cordial until the assassination of Bangladesh's founding President Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1975, followed by a period of military rule and the rise of General Ziaur Rahman who became President and also assassinated in 1981.
- It thawed during the period of 1982-1991 when a military-led government by General H.M. Ershad ruled the country.
- Since Bangladesh's return to parliamentary democracy in 1991, we have seen drastic developments. In the last decade, India-Bangladesh relations have warmed up, entering a new era of cooperation, and moving beyond historical and cultural ties to become more assimilated in the areas of trade, connectivity, energy, and defence.

Achievements and Progress

- Both the countries have solved the border issues amicably by ratifying the historic Land Boundary Agreement in 2015, where enclaves were exchanged allowing inhabitants to choose their country of residence and become citizens of either India or Bangladesh.
- The Bangladesh government led by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has uprooted anti-India insurgency elements from its borders, making the India-Bangladesh border one of the region's most peaceful.
- This has allowed India to make a massive redeployment of resources to its more contentious borders elsewhere along India's borders and tension prone areas.

Bilateral trade between India and Bangladesh

- Bangladesh today is India's biggest trading partner in South Asia with exports to Bangladesh in FY 2018-19 at \$9.21 billion and imports at \$1.04 billion.
- India has offered duty-free access to multiple Bangladeshi products.
- India has extended three lines of credit to Bangladesh in recent years amounting to \$8 billion for the construction of roads, railways, bridges, and ports.

Issues

- In the last eight years until 2019, only 51% of the first \$800 million line of credit has been utilised whilst barely any amount from the next two lines of credit worth \$6.5 billion has been mobilised.
- This delay and progress is due to red-tapism from India's end and from Bangladesh's side, it may be due to the slow implementation of the project.

The connectivity boost

Connectivity between the two countries has greatly improved.

- A direct bus service between Kolkata and Agartala runs a route distance of 500 km, as compared to the 1,650 km it would have run through the Chicken's Neck, to remain within India.
- There are three passenger and freight railway services running between the two countries, with two more routes on their way to be restored.
- Recently, a 1.9-kilometre long bridge, the Maitri Setu, was inaugurated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, connecting Sabroom in India with Ramgarh in Bangladesh.

Enhanced cooperation in shipping and inland water trade.

- Bangladesh allows the shipment of goods from its Mongla and Chattogram (Chittagong) seaports carried by road, rail, and waterways to Agartala (Tripura) via Akhura; Dawki (Meghalaya) via Tamabil; Sutarkandi (Assam) via Sheola, and Srimantpur (Tripura) via Bibirbazar.
- This allows landlocked Assam, Meghalaya and Tripura to access open water routes through the Chattogram and Mongla ports.

Bones of contention

- Despite the remarkable progress, the unresolved Teesta water sharing issue looms large.
- Border killings are yet to stop. The year 2020 saw the highest number of border shootings by the Border Security Force. The shots are fired at civilians, usually cattle traders, who are usually unarmed, trying to illegally cross the border.
- The government's proposal to implement the National Register of Citizens across the whole of India may result in a bleak atmosphere between the countries.
- It remains to be seen how India addresses the deportation of illegal Muslim immigrants, some of whom claim to have come from Bangladesh.

China's influence in the region

- In spite of its 'Neighborhood First Policy', India has been losing its influence in the region to China.
- Sri Lanka, Nepal and the Maldives, once considered traditional Indian allies, are increasingly tilting towards China due to the Asian giant's massive trade, infrastructural and defence investments in these countries.
- Bhutan also does not abide by Indian influence as evinced by its withdrawal from the BBIN (Bhutan-Bangladesh-India-Nepal) motor vehicles agreement.
- China, in lieu of its cheque-book diplomacy, is well-entrenched in South Asia, including Bangladesh, with which it enjoys significant economic and defence relations.

Way forward

- India-Bangladesh relations have been gaining positive momentum over the last decade.
- Going forward India has to be generous enough to let the water flow (the Teesta issue has to be settled) and the issues concerning illegal migration has to be addressed by well-established protocols of both countries.
- Trade could be more balanced if non-tariff barriers from the Indian side could be removed.

- These small but important steps can remove long-standing snags in a relationship that otherwise is gradually coming of age in 50 years.

Conclusion

- To make the recent gains irreversible, both countries need to continue working on the three Cs – cooperation, collaboration, and consolidation.

GS 3 : Economy, Science and Technology, Environment

1. Eviction of prawn gherries restarts at Chilika Lake

Context:

The Odisha government has started evicting illegal prawn enclosures in Chilika Lake.

- A few years ago, satellite imageries had found 14,590 hectares of the lagoon under manmade gherries for illegal prawn cultivation.

Significance:

- Eviction of illegal enclosures is likely to improve the ecological health of the lake.
- Endangered Irrawaddy dolphins are the first beneficiaries of the eviction drive.
 - The mammals can move unhindered in Chilika Lake.
- In the Rambha sector, dolphins were sighted for the first time in three decades after the eviction drive. Besides, there was a sudden increase in the population of ducks who prefer to dive in open water.

Chilika Lake

- Chilika Lake is Asia's largest brackish water lagoon.
- It is the largest coastal lagoon in India and the largest brackish water lagoon in the world after the New Caledonian barrier reef.
- The lake is located at the mouth of the Daya River.
- It is a designated Ramsar Site under Ramsar Convention.
- The endangered Irrawaddy Dolphins are found in the lake.

2. ISRO puts Brazil's Amazonia-1, 18 other satellites into orbit

Context:

The Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) successfully launched Brazil's optical earth observation satellite, Amazonia-1, and 18 co-passenger satellites from the Satish Dhawan Space Centre at Sriharikota.

Details:

- Among the 18 co-passenger satellites, five are from India and 13 from the U.S.
 - Of the 13 satellites from the U.S., one is a technology demonstration satellite and the remaining are for two-way communications and data relay.
 - The mission was undertaken under a commercial arrangement with Spaceflight Inc., U.S.
- The satellites were carried onboard the Polar Satellite Launch Vehicle PSLV-C51.
 - It is the 53rd flight of ISRO's workhorse launch vehicle.
- This is the first dedicated mission of its commercial arm, NewSpace India Ltd.
 - NewSpace India Ltd. was set up as a PSU under the Department of Space in 2019.

Amazonia-1:

- Amazonia-1 has a mission life of 4 years.
- Weighing 637 kg it will monitor deforestation in the Amazon region.
- It belongs to the Brazilian National Institute for Space Research (INPE).

Satellites from India:

- The Satish Dhawan SAT (SDSAT) built by Space Kidz India, a nano-satellite intended to study the radiation levels, space weather and demonstrate long-range communication technologies.
- The UNITYsat, a combination of three satellites for providing radio relay services.
- A satellite belonging to the DRDO.

Significance:

- The successful launch of Brazil's Amazonia-1 satellite by ISRO marks a new high point in space cooperation between the two countries that began nearly two decades ago.

- The Indian Prime Minister called it a historic moment in India-Brazil space cooperation.
- The unique relationship between both countries has ensured support for each other's satellites and the use of each other's ground stations, including tracking India's Chandrayaan-1&2 missions and the 2013 Mangalyaan Mars Orbiter Mission using Brazilian earth stations Alcantara and Cuiaba.
- Brazil and India first signed an MoU between the Department of Space and AEB in March 2002, followed by a Framework Agreement in 2004, that is reviewed by a Joint Working Group.
- In 2007, they inked a special arrangement that allows Indian scientists access to Brazilian ground stations to remote sensing data from the Indian satellites.
- Also, according to the ISRO Chairman, this particular mission is special because these five Indian satellites are coming under the new space reform announced by the Government of India.

Note:

- ISRO has till date launched 342 foreign satellites from 34 countries.

3. India seeks TRIPS waiver for Vaccines

India and South Africa have jointly moved a proposal at the WTO's Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) council for a waiver to help more countries get access to medicines and vaccines during the pandemic.

What is the TRIPS Agreement?

- The TRIPS is an international legal agreement between all the member nations of the World Trade Organization (WTO).
- It establishes minimum standards for the regulation by national governments of different forms of intellectual property (IP) as applied to nationals of other WTO member nations.
- Its agreement was negotiated at the end of the Uruguay Round of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) between 1989 and 1990 and is administered by the WTO.
- The TRIPS agreement introduced intellectual property law into the multilateral trading system for the first time and remains the most comprehensive multilateral agreement on intellectual property to date.

Why did India move such a proposal?

- TRIPS waiver would deal with the question of equity along with global growth and livelihoods.
- It is not only that we are coming in the way of life but it is very simple economics, asserted India's ambassador.
- For a commercial business of \$30-40 billion of annual vaccine output of a few companies, we are coming in the way of \$6-7 trillion of global GDP output in one year.

Premise behind it

- In 2001, developing countries, concerned that developed countries were insisting on an overly narrow reading of TRIPS, initiated a round of talks that resulted in the Doha Declaration.
- The Doha declaration is a WTO statement that clarifies the scope of TRIPS, stating for example that TRIPS can and should be interpreted in light of the goal "to promote access to medicines for all."

Global response for the move

- Fifty-seven WTO members have backed the proposal brought out by India.
- But the EU, U.S., Japan and Canada have opposed the idea stressing the importance of intellectual property for innovation.

4. Chinese cyber-attack foiled: Power Ministry

Context:

The Union Power Ministry said that the State-sponsored Chinese hacker groups targeted various Indian power centres.

Details:

- It was stated that the Chinese state-sponsored threat actor group known as Red Echo is targeting the Indian Power sector's Regional Load Dispatch Centres (RLDCs) along with State Load Dispatch Centres (SLDCs).
- These groups have been blocked after government cyber agencies warned them about their activities.
- It also confirmed that no data breach/ data loss has been detected due to these incidents.
- Officials said they had been warned by the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology's (MeitY's) Cyber Emergency Response Team (India) (CERT-in) about the threat from a malware called "ShadowPad" in November 2020, and by the NTRO's National Critical Information

Infrastructure Protection Centre (NCIIPC) in February 2021, of the threats, weeks before the Recorded Future report was released.

Note :

- The Indian Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT-In) is an office within the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology.
- It is the nodal agency to deal with cybersecurity threats like hacking and phishing.
- It strengthens the security-related defence of the Indian Internet domain.

5. IIT-Delhi researchers develop technology to recycle e-waste

What's in News?

The researchers at the Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi have developed a zero-emission technology to manage and recycle e-waste to wealth.

- The team adopted a methodology that uses e-waste as an “Urban Mine” for metal recovery and energy production.
 - The e-waste is shredded and pyrolyzed to yield liquid and gaseous fuels, leaving behind a metal-rich solid fraction.
 - On further separation using a novel technique, the leftover solid residue yields a 90-95% pure metal mixture and some carbonaceous materials.
 - The carbonaceous material is further converted to aerogel for oil spillage cleaning, dye removal, carbon dioxide capture, and use in supercapacitors.
- The technology is an outcome of a Department of Science and Technology-funded project and developed technology.
- The project will cater to the need of “Smart Cities,” “Swachh Bharat Abhiyan,” and “Atmanirbhar Bharat” initiatives of the government.

6. Recalibrating relations with EU

The article talks about the need and opportunity for India to forge stronger ties with the European Union to revitalise its exports, in the backdrop of BREXIT and India's Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyan.

India's vision of self-reliance:

- The Atmanirbhar Bharat programme and the Budget 2021-22 have set the tone and tenor to bolster supply chains and achieve self-reliance.
- However, it does not mean that India looks at being economically insular.

- Realising the vision of a self-reliant India would entail localising an increasing share of value added along supply chains through investments and phase-wise reduction of import tariffs with strategic partners such as the European Union (EU).

Export potential:

- India has an untapped export potential of \$39.9 billion in the EU and Western Europe.
- The top products with export potential include apparel, gems and jewellery, chemicals, machinery, automobile, pharmaceuticals and plastic. India benefits from tariff preferences under the EU's Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) for several of these products.
- In fact, India is among the major beneficiaries of the EU's GSP.
 - Exports under the GSP are valued at nearly \$19.4 billion in 2019, accounting for nearly 37% of India's merchandise exports to the EU.

Concerns:

- There are several products where India has export potential in the EU, but these have graduated or are at the brink of graduation under EU GSP.
 - Product graduation applies when average imports of a product from a beneficiary country exceed 17.5% of EU-GSP imports of the same product from all beneficiary countries over three years.
- India's exports of products such as textiles, inorganic and organic chemicals, gems and jewellery, iron, steel and their articles, base metals and automotives are already out of the ambit of EU-GSP benefits.
- There is also a likelihood of losing EU-GSP benefits in other categories such as apparel, rubber, electronic items, sports goods and toys due to product graduation.
- Meanwhile, India's competitors in apparel exports such as Bangladesh would continue to receive tariff benefits in the EU under Everything but Arms Initiative.
- Another competitor, Vietnam, concluded a free trade agreement (FTA) with the EU in 2019.

Cautious approach to FTA's:

- India's negotiation for a Broad-based Trade and Investment Agreement, which commenced in 2007, is yet to materialise due to lack of concurrence in areas like automotives and dairy and marine products.
- India's cautious approach to FTAs is due to its past experience of an unequal exchange of benefits in several FTAs signed by the country.

Way Forward:

- In light of the declining preferential access and the likely erosion of competitiveness in the EU market, there is clearly a need to deepen trade and investment ties with the region.
- A thorough assessment of the benefits from FTA for domestic producers is warranted.
- India must consider the impact of FTA on sensitive sectors, and possibility of inclusion of safeguards such as sunset clause on concessions for some items.
- There should also be provisions for aspects such as investment and non-tariff measures (NTMs).
 - As far as NTMs are concerned, India faces as many as 414 NTMs in the EU, in a wide array of sectors.
 - FTAs have some institutional arrangements for NTMs.
 - India should critically review the availability of such arrangements in its negotiations, as also their operationalisation and effectiveness.
- India also needs to negotiate on investment-related aspects with the EU to enhance bilateral investments and foster stronger value chains, especially in technology-intensive sectors in which the EU has a comparative advantage.

Conclusion:

- Post-Brexit EU finds itself in the midst of a growing need for recalibrating ties with its partner countries.
- Forging stronger ties with EU through a mutually beneficial agreement could help strengthen Indian manufacturing and revitalise exports.

7. Centre garners 77,815 crore in spectrum auction, Jio top bidder

Context:

The telecom spectrum auctions concluded with the Centre garnering ₹77,814.8 crore in revenues.

Spectrum Auctions:

- Devices such as cellphones and wireline telephones require signals to connect from one end to another. These signals are carried on airwave.
- The airwaves are called spectrum, which is subdivided into bands that have varying frequencies.

- A firm can bid for spectrum only as per the eligibility point allocated based on its deposit.
- Foreign companies are also eligible to bid for the airwaves. But, they will have to either set up a branch in India and register as an Indian company, or tie up with an Indian company to be able to retain the airwaves after having won the spectrum in the bid.
- The Union government owns all the publicly available assets within the geographical boundaries of the country including airwaves.

Details:

- The amount exceeded the expectations of the government as well as analysts. Analysts had predicted a low-key bidding at the auctions.
- The auction is the first in nearly five years.
- The spectrum will be assigned to bidders for a period of 20 years.
- No bids were received for the premium 700 MHz and 2500 MHz bands. The 700 MHz band remained unsold during the 2016 auctions as well due to the high prices.

8. Climate and consciousness

Fingerprints of global warming in Uttarakhand floods and Texas cold snap

- The melting of the Himalayan glaciers that prompted the floods and landslides in Uttarakhand have the fingerprints of global warming.
- The United States has already witnessed **many deadly avalanches since the beginning of 2021.**
- Furthermore, as glacier cover is replaced by water or land, the **amount of light reflected decreases**, aggravating warming.
- The extreme cold weather in Texas, like the double-digit negative temperatures seen in Germany earlier this year, is connected to **Arctic-peninsula warming, at a rate almost twice the global average.**

Global warming causing the movement of cold air

- Usually, there is a **collection of winds around the Arctic** keeping the cold locked far to the north.
- But global warming has **caused gaps in these protective winds**, allowing intensely cold air to move south – a phenomenon that is accelerating.

India needs to announce carbon neutrality target

- When the public connects cause and effect, responses are usually swift.
- Global warming is still seen as a danger that lies over the horizon.

- For India, the **third-largest carbon emitter after China and the United States**, a decisive switch is needed from highly polluting coal and petroleum to cleaner and renewable power sources.
- China has announced carbon neutrality by 2060, Japan and South Korea by 2050, but **India is yet to announce a target**.
- HSBC ranks India at the top among **67 nations in climate vulnerability (2018)**, German watch ranks India fifth among 181 nations in terms of climate risks (2020).
- But public spending does not reflect these perils.

Including policies for climate mitigation in the Budget

- A vital step should be **explicitly including policies for climate mitigation in the government budget**.
- Growth targets should include timelines **for switching to cleaner energy**.
- The government needs to launch a major campaign to **mobilise climate finance**.
- India's Central and State governments **must increase allocations for risk reduction**, such as better defences against floods, or agricultural innovations to withstand droughts.

Neglect of warnings and lack of policy response

- The Uttarakhand government and the Centre have been diluting, instead of strengthening, **climate safeguards** for hydroelectric and road projects.
- Studies had flagged **ice loss across the Himalayas**, and the dangers to densely populated catchments, **but policy response has been lacking**.
- Similarly, Kerala ignored **a landmark study calling for regulation of mining, quarrying and dam construction** in ecologically sensitive places, which contributed to the massive floods and landslides in 2018 and 2019.

Conclusion

- Events like Uttarakhand and Texas should be treated as lessons to change people's minds and for the public to demand urgent action.

9. 14 Trojans found in servers, says Minister

What's in News?

A report prepared by Maharashtra's cyber cell on a possible cyberattack that caused the power outage in Mumbai and parts of Mumbai Metropolitan Region (MMR) found that 14 Trojan programs had entered the Maharashtra State Electricity Transmission Company (MahaTransco) servers.

- The firewalls of the information technology [IT] and operational technology [OT] servers, which are essential for power transmission, were affected by these Trojan horses.

Trojan Programs:

- A Trojan horse or Trojan is a type of malware that is often disguised as legitimate software.
- Trojans can be employed by cyber-thieves and hackers trying to gain access to users' systems.
- It is a program that generally impairs the security of a system.
- Trojans are used to create back-doors (a program that allows outside access into a secure network) on computers belonging to a secure network so that a hacker can have access to the secure network.

10. 'OPEC+ move to hit recovery'

Context:

OPEC+ agreed not to increase oil supply as they await a more substantial recovery in demand amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Crude prices rose after the announcement and are up 33% this year.

OPEC+

- The Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and its allies as a grouping are known as OPEC+.
- OPEC+ is also referred to as the Vienna group.
- It is a grouping of oil-producing nations, made up of the OPEC members and 10 other non-OPEC members.
- OPEC+ comprises Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Brunei, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Mexico, Oman, Russia, South Sudan and Sudan.

Details:

- As one of the largest crude-consuming countries, India is concerned that such actions by producing countries have the potential to undermine consumption-led recovery and more so hurt consumers.
- India, hit hard by the soaring oil prices, urged producers to ease output cuts and help the global economic recovery from the pandemic.
- In India, rising oil prices are posing fiscal challenges, where heavily-taxed retail fuel prices have touched record highs. This is threatening the demand-driven recovery.

Note:

- India is the world's third-biggest oil importer.
- It imports about 84% of its oil and relies on West Asian supplies to meet over three-fifths of its demand.

11. New space

Context:

The Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) successfully launched Brazil's optical earth observation satellite, Amazonia-1, and 18 co-passenger satellites from the Satish Dhawan Space Centre at Sriharikota.

Details:

- With the recent launch, a new chapter has begun in India's space history.
- Even in the past, NSIL has organised launches of foreign satellites aboard an Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) launch vehicle.
- However, the primary satellites aboard both these missions were Indian satellites – the RISAT-2BRI and the EOS-01 with smaller satellites from several other countries, as well as India, piggybacking on them.
- India has so far launched 342 foreign satellites from 34 countries using its Polar Satellite Launch Vehicle platform and many of them have involved ISRO's first commercial entity, the Antrix Corporation.
 - There is still confusion on how exactly the responsibilities of NSIL differ from those of Antrix.

Developments:

- There is a potential explosion of market opportunities from space applications on the anvil for India.
 - This is in the backdrop of the formation of the Indian National Space Promotion and Authorization Center (IN-SPACe) – a regulatory agency.
- There are plans for an independent tribunal to adjudicate disputes among private space entities.
- For ISRO, there are now several companies that offer myriad services.
- Many of these companies want to launch their own satellites, of varying dimensions.

Way Forward:

- Similar to how unfettered access to the Internet has produced industries that were inconceivable, space applications and mapping have not yet been exploited, in terms of the opportunities that they can create.
- NSIL has a broad ambit and will be involved in collaborations spanning from launches to new space-related industries.
- NSIL is also expected to be more than just a marketer of ISRO's technologies; it is to find newer business opportunities and expand the sector itself.
- NSIL must endeavour to be continuously in start-up mode. It must conceive of ways to aid space start-ups to reach out to rural India and facilitate more recruits from India's young to facilitate careers in space applications and sciences.
- It must see itself both as an Indian ambassador and disruptor in the space arena.

12. 'Red Echo' over India

Context:

- Reports of **State-sponsored Chinese hacker groups targeting Indian power grid utilities.**

Background:

- United States-based cybersecurity firm Recorded Future had reported that a group linked to the Chinese government, which it called '**Red Echo**', had targeted 10 vital nodes in India's **power distribution system and two seaports.**
- It has raised the possibility that the massive **power outage in Mumbai in October 2020** could have been the result of an attack by this Chinese state-sponsored group.

Details:

- The Maharashtra Power Minister Nitin Raut has announced that a State Cyber Cell probe found 14 Trojan horses in the servers of the Maharashtra State Electricity Transmission Company, with the potential to disrupt power distribution.

Modus operandi:

- RedEcho was using the **AXIOMATICASYMPTOTE server infrastructure** to carry out its intrusions into the networks of Indian organisations,

- AXIOMATICASYMPTOTE servers act as command-and-control centres for a malware known as ShadowPad.
- **ShadowPad is a backdoor Trojan malware**, which means it opens a secret path from its target system to its command-and-control servers. Information can be extracted or more malicious code delivered via this path. ShadowPad is built to target supply-chain infrastructure in sectors like transportation, telecommunication, energy and more.
- **Trojanised softwares**, or softwares that have dangers hidden in them are the primary mode of delivery for ShadowPad.

Targets:

- Suspected targets include: Power System Operation Corporation Limited, NTPC Limited, NTPC Kudgi STPP, Western Regional Load Despatch Centre, Southern Regional Load Despatch Centre, North Eastern Regional Load Despatch Centre, Eastern Regional Load Despatch Centre, Telangana State Load Despatch Centre, Delhi State Load Despatch Centre, DTL Tikri Kalan (Mundka), Delhi Transco Ltd (substation), V. O. Chidambaranar Port and Mumbai Port Trust.
- All the twelve targeted entities have been **classified as critical infrastructure by the National Critical Information Infrastructure Protection Centre (NCIIPC)**.

The Chinese link:

- RedEcho group was Chinese state-sponsored.
- RedEcho has an overlapping modus operandi with several **other known Chinese groups such as APT41, Winnti group and Barium**.
 - Many security firms have noted with high confidence that 'APT41' carries out Chinese state-sponsored espionage activity in addition to financially motivated activity potentially outside of state control.

Concerns:

- RedEcho's intrusions were part of a **sustained strategic and targeted campaign against Indian organisations**.
- Though the kind of infrastructure sought to be accessed by Red Echo, such as Regional Load Despatch Centres, has minimal espionage possibilities, they pose significant concerns over **potential pre-positioning of network access to support Chinese strategic objectives**.
- Prepositioning in cyber warfare means to have malware assets in crucial places that can be called on when an actual attack is launched.

13. DAC to take up deals for armed drones, submarines

Drones:

- India is seeking to acquire **30 MQ-9 Reaper or Predator B armed drones** from the U.S., 10 each for the three services.
 - MQ-9B has an endurance of 48 hours and a range of over 6,000 nautical miles. It comes with nine hard-points, capable of carrying sensors and laser-guided bombs besides air-to-ground missiles, with a maximum payload of two tonnes.
- The Navy had inducted two **MQ-9B Sea Guardian unarmed drones** on lease under emergency procurement.

Project-75I:

- The Project 75I-class submarine is a follow-on of the Project 75 Kalvari-class submarine for the Indian Navy.
- Under this project, the Indian Navy intends to acquire six diesel-electric submarines, which will also feature **advanced air-independent propulsion systems** to enable them to stay submerged for a longer duration and substantially increase their operational range.
- The Indian Navy's Project 75I (P75I) Scorpene submarine development for six latest-generation attack boats is expected to be completed by 2022.
- The P75I Scorpene-class diesel-electric/air-independent propulsion (AIP) submarines are based on the Scorpene-class submarines, which were designed by French naval shipbuilding firm DCNS in partnership with Spanish shipbuilding firm Navantia.
- The new submarines are being built by Mazagon Dock in Mumbai, India, using the technology and training provided by DCNS.
- The Indian Navy intends to use the submarines for missions such as area surveillance, intelligence gathering, anti-submarine warfare, anti-surface warfare and minelaying operations.

14. State of Water Supply in Schools and Anganwadis

Why in News

According to information provided to the **Parliamentary Standing Committee on Water Resources**, only half of government schools and **anganwadis** have tap water supply, despite a **100-day campaign for 100% coverage** being launched by the **Jal Shakti Ministry** in October 2020.

- The Committee also noted the progress of the flagship **Jal Jeevan Mission**.

Key Points

- **About the Campaign:**
 - The campaign aims to provide **potable piped water supply** for **drinking and cooking purposes** and tap water for **hand washing** and in toilets in every school, anganwadi and ashramshala or residential tribal school.
 - It was launched on **2nd October, 2020 (Gandhi Jayanti)**.
 - The 100-day period should have ended on 10th January, 2021.
 - However, some States/ UTs have indicated that they need more time to complete the task and sustain the efforts. Therefore, the campaign has been **extended till 31st March, 2021**.
- **Related Observations:**
 - - As of now, only **48.5% of anganwadis** and **53.3% of schools** had **tap water supply**.
 - **Less than 8% of schools in Uttar Pradesh** and **11% in West Bengal** have it, while it is available in **only 2-6% of anganwadis in Assam, Jharkhand, U.P., Chhattisgarh and Bengal**.
 - **Seven States** - Andhra Pradesh, Goa, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Telangana and Punjab - **achieved 100% coverage**.
 - Around 1.82 lakh **grey water management structures** and 1.42 lakh **rainwater harvesting structures** were also constructed in schools and anganwadi centres.
 - **Health Issues of Children Emanating from Contaminated Water:**
 - Children are more susceptible to **water borne diseases (Diarrhea, Cholera, Typhoid)**, more so, when there is also a **need for repeated washing of hands as a precautionary measure during the pandemic**.
 - Other **nutritional issues and the health hazards** emerge in children from on account of lack of potable drinking water.
 - **About Jal Jeevan Mission:**
 - **Jal Jeevan Mission (JJM)** envisages supply of **55 litres of water per person per day to every rural household** through **Functional Household Tap Connections (FHTC) by 2024**.
 - JJM focuses on integrated demand and supply-side management of water at the local level.
 - Creation of local infrastructure for source sustainability measures as mandatory elements, like **rainwater harvesting, groundwater recharge and management of household wastewater for reuse**,

would be undertaken in convergence with other government programmes/schemes.

- The Mission is based on a **community approach to water** and includes extensive Information, **Education and Communication** as a key component of the mission.
- JJM looks to create a **jan andolan for water**, thereby making it everyone's priority.
- **Funding Pattern:** The fund sharing pattern between the Centre and states is **90:10 for Himalayan and North-Eastern States, 50:50 for other states, and 100% for Union Territories.**
- In the **Budget 2021-22, Jal Jeevan Mission (Urban)** has been announced under the **Housing and Urban Affairs Ministry to provide universal coverage of water supply to all households** through functional taps in all statutory towns in accordance with **Sustainable Development Goal- 6.**
- **Suggestions:**
 - The Standing Committee noted that **mere provision** of tap connection without ensuring assured availability of water in the pipeline **would not serve the purpose** and would defeat the very objective of JJM.
 - It called for **real-time monitoring of water supply at the district level.**
 - The centre government should take measures to set up **water purification or reverse osmosis (RO)** plants on an urgent basis so that children do not suffer due to contamination of drinking water.

Grey water

- Grey water is defined as wastewater that is produced from household processes (e.g. washing dishes, laundry and bathing).
- Grey water can contain harmful bacteria and even faecal matter that contaminates soil and groundwater.

15. SC questions delay in setting up environment regulator

Context:

The Supreme Court has asked the government to explain why it had not set up an independent environment regulator to oversee green clearances.

Background:

- In the 'Lafarge mining case', the Supreme Court had ordered the setting up of a national environment regulatory body to ensure independent oversight of green clearances, in July 2011.

Details:

- The court had asked the Centre to appoint a national regulator for:
 - Appraising projects
 - Enforcing environmental conditions for approvals
 - Imposing penalties on polluters
- The court had explained the need for an independent regulatory mechanism.
- It had stated that the identification of an area as a forest area is solely based on the declaration to be filed by the user agency [project proponent]. The project proponent was required to undertake EIA by an expert body/institution.
- The court had made it clear that till such mechanism was put in place, the Environment Ministry (MoEF) should prepare a panel of accredited institutions from which alone the project proponent should obtain the Rapid Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) and, that too, on the Terms of Reference to be formulated by the MoEF.

16. Govt. asks refiners to diversify oil imports after OPEC+ move

What's in News?

India has asked state refiners to speed up the diversification of oil imports to gradually cut their dependence on West Asian suppliers.

- This is in the backdrop of OPEC+ deciding to largely continue production cuts.

Details:

- India, the world's third-biggest oil consumer, imports about 84% of its crude needs with over 60% of that coming from West Asian countries, which are typically cheaper than those from the West.
- Iraq and Saudi Arabia are the two biggest suppliers of crude oil to India.
- India, hit hard by rising oil prices, has urged producers to ease output cuts and help the global economic recovery.
 - In response, the Saudi energy minister told India to dip into strategic reserves filled with cheaper oil bought in 2020.
- India now plans to import oil from new producer Guyana. Indian Oil Corp has also renewed its oil import contract with Russia.

17. A case for a revamped, need-based PDS

Context:

- The recent Economic Survey has flagged the issue of **the growing food subsidy bill in India**. As per the government's own admission the food subsidy bill is increasingly becoming unmanageably large.

Background:

National Food Security Act:

- The National Food Security Act (NFSA) came into force in July 2013.
- It extended **entitlements of food grains to almost two-thirds of the country's population**.
- The law requires the authorities to provide to **each beneficiary 5 kg of rice or wheat per month**.

Details:

- The withdrawal of food grains by States from the central pool under various schemes has increased over the years.
- During the last three years, the quantity of food grains annually drawn by States has hovered around 60 million tonnes to 66 million tonnes. However, by December 2020, the Centre set apart 94.35 million tonnes to the States under different schemes including the NFSA and additional allocation, meant for distribution among the poor free of cost.

Concerns:

Rising food subsidy:

- Food subsidy has been on a perpetual growth trajectory.
 - During 2016-17 to 2019-20, the subsidy amount, clubbed with loans taken by the Food Corporation of India (FCI) under the National Small Savings Fund (NSSF) towards food subsidy, was in the range of Rs. 1.65-lakh crore to Rs. 2.2-lakh crore. **In future, the annual subsidy bill of the Centre is expected to be about Rs. 2.5-lakh crore.**
 - The COVID-19 pandemic has further expanded this with the revised estimate of the food subsidy pegged at about ₹23-lakh crore, excluding the extra-budgetary resource allocation of ₹84,636 crore.

Issue prices:

- Though the NFSA in 2013, envisaged a price revision after three years, **the Central Issue Price (CIP) has remained at Rs. 2 per kg for wheat and Rs. 3 per kg for rice for years now.**

Political compulsions:

- It would be extremely difficult to reduce the economic cost of food management in view of rising commitment towards food security and **the government's reluctance to not disturb the NFSA norms or increase the prices owing to political compulsions.**

Financial viability:

- The insistence of **keeping the retail prices of food grains at fair price shops at the present low levels**, even after the passage of nearly 50 years and achieving substantial poverty reduction in the country goes against the financial sustainability of the system.
 - As per the **Rangarajan group's estimate in 2014, the share of people living below the poverty line (BPL) in the 2011 population was 29.5% (about 36 crore).**
- The mere increase in the CIPs of rice and wheat without a corresponding rise in the issue prices by the State governments would only increase the burden of States, which are already reeling under financial stress.

Way forward:

- PDS is a **useful tool to counter the challenge of extreme poverty and hunger** and hence the dismantling of it is not a solution.
- Also, given the fact that the PDS system **helps support the farmers through government procurement of their produce**, it might not be advisable to replace the in-kind provision of food subsidy of the PDS system with Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT).
- The Centre should have a **relook at the overall food subsidy system.**

Revising NFSA coverage:

- The centre should revisit NFSA norms and coverage. The government **could look at decreasing the quantum of coverage under the law, from the present 67% to around 40%.**
- For all ration cardholders drawing food grains, a "give-up" option, as done in the case of cooking gas cylinders, can be made available.
- Though the States have been allowed to frame criteria for the identification of PHH cardholders, the Centre can play a critical role in nudging the states into pruning the number of beneficiaries under the NFSA system.

Relook at the pricing mechanism:

- With respect to the pricing mechanism, **the existing arrangement of flat rates should be replaced with a slab system.** Leaving the poor and needy sections, other beneficiaries can be made to pay a little more for a higher quantum of food grains.

Conclusion:

- A revamped, need-based PDS is required not just for **cutting down the subsidy bill** but also for reducing the scope for leakages. There should be a political will to take the necessary steps.

Additional information:

- Diversion of food grains and subsidy leakage is another serious cause of concern.
- Reforms implemented in the PDS through various steps, including end-to-end computerisation of operations, digitisation of data of ration cardholders, seeding of Aadhaar, and automation of fair price shops have helped address this concern to an extent.

18. National Employability Through Apprenticeship Program

Why in News

The **National Employability Through Apprenticeship Program (NETAP)** has released its latest edition of the **Apprenticeship Outlook Report** for 2021 (January-June 2021).

- **Apprenticeship is a Skill Training program** wherein a person is engaged by a company as an apprentice and gains classroom (theory) learning for a short period, followed by on-the-job (practical) training.

Key Points

- **About the National Employability through Apprenticeship Program:**
 - It was set up in 2014 as a 100% employer-funded **Public-Private Partnership (PPP)**.
 - The program was launched by the **Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship** and TeamLease Skills University (Gujarat).
 - It is in accordance with the **National Employability Enhancement Mission** of the AICTE.

- NETAP was structured to **overcome the challenges of the Apprenticeship Act, 1961.**
 - NETAP **proposed to appoint 2 lac apprentices every year** for the next 10 years. At peak capacity, it will be the world's largest apprenticeship program.
- It will help the unemployed youth to build skills through **Learning by doing and Learning while earning** along with providing them with access to practical skills.

National Employability Enhancement Mission

- It is a pioneering initiative taken **jointly by AICTE and Government of India.**
- Introduced in **2013**, the NEEM aims to **offer practical trainings to enhance employability** of any person who:
 - Is either pursuing graduation/ diploma in any technical or non-technical stream, or
 - Have discontinued studies of degree or diploma courses.
- A NEEM Trainee is any registered person who has a **minimum education up to Class X** and is **between 16 to 40 years** of age.
- A total of **23 industries** have been listed in the NEEM where a trainee can be enrolled. It includes the automobile industry, pharmaceuticals, electronics & hardware, food processing, healthcare services and the financial sector.
- The NEEM is envisioned to place at least 10,000 students per year in registered companies or registered industries for the purpose of providing training.
- **Key Findings of the Apprenticeship Outlook Report:**
 - **India's Apprenticeship Ecosystem:** Some 41% of the employers in India are keen on hiring apprentices while 58% of enterprises want to increase the quantum of their apprenticeship hiring this year.
 - **Leading Cities:** **Chennai** has emerged as the most apprentice friendly city.
 - Among non-metro cities, **Ahmedabad and Nagpur** are the most promising cities for apprenticeship.
 - **Leading Sectors:** The manufacturing, automobiles and ancillaries, and retail are the leading sectors.
 - **Positive Trend for Hiring Women Apprentices:** Overall the preference for women apprentices has increased by 10% from the previous half year.
 - This trend was more visible in **Bengaluru, Mumbai and Kolkata.**
- **Significance:**

- India's working-age population is estimated to continue to increase through 2041. This will have major implications on the required rate of job creation in the economy.
- Statistics show that **approximately 3% of children dropout after grade 5th and 8th in the country** owing to socio-economic challenges. Apprenticeship can be an important mechanism for seamless transitioning from school to work and bridging of skill-gap in the workforce.
- **Other Initiatives to Promote Apprenticeships:**
 - Apprenticeship Act of 1961 (and the Amendments to the Act).
 - **Scheme for Higher Education Youth in Apprenticeship and Skills (SHREYAS)**
 - National Apprenticeship Promotion Scheme (NAPS)
 - **Skills Strengthening for Industrial Value Enhancement Scheme**
 - **YuWaah Youth Skilling Initiative**
 - Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana

19. 'Govt. owning bad bank is more capital efficient'

Context:

- In the Union Budget 2021, Finance Minister announced the creation of a bad bank.

Background:

Non Performing Assets issue in India:

- According to the figures released by the RBI, the total size of bad loans in the balance sheets of Indian banks at a gross level was around Rs. 9 lakh crore as of March 31, 2020.
- The **proportion of banks' gross non-performing assets is expected to rise sharply from 7.5% of gross advances in September 2020 to at least 13.5% of gross advances in September 2021** given the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Bad bank:

- The proposed bad bank will be based on an **asset management company-asset reconstruction company** model to absorb the stressed assets in the banking system.
- The bad bank will purchase Non-performing assets (NPAs) from banks at a discount. The entity will then attempt to achieve resolution in such accounts through a professional approach.

Details:

- Amid confusing reports about the control of the proposed bad bank, a report from the Bank of America has argued for a government ownership model given the following benefits.
 - State-funding of bad banks would be **more capital efficient**. Government ownership **would not impact the fiscal numbers**; as otherwise, the government will have to keep on recapitalising the state-owned lenders which would strain the already fragile fiscal position of the country. The public sector banks would be the biggest beneficiaries of the proposed bad bank.
 - State ownership would help **speed up the implementation of the proposed bad bank** as there would not be the need to incentivize the private sector and wait.
 - Also, the state backed bad bank is expected to **lower the credit costs for the banks**. As per the Bank of America report, a state backed bad bank could lower the credit charge on banks to a fifth in the worst-case scenario from the 100% now.

20. Petition in HC seeks expansion of ambit of electric vehicles scheme

Context:

- A petition filed before the Delhi High Court has sought a direction to expand the ambit of the **FAME (Faster Adoption and Manufacturing of Electric Vehicles) India Phase-II scheme** to the hydrogen energy infrastructure.

Details:

- The petition seeks to ask the government to allocate a part of the unutilised funds from the FAME India Phase-II Scheme for promoting and **incentivising demand for hydrogen fuel cell electric vehicles and construction and operation of hydrogen refuelling stations**.
 - There has been inadequate utilization of budget allocation made towards the FAME scheme. Out of a total budget of Rs. 700 crore for setting up charging infrastructure, only Rs.20 crore has been disbursed until now.

Significance of hydrogen energy:

- The adoption of hydrogen as a fuel will **help reduce the dependence of India's transport sector on imported oil and gas**.

- The hydrogen energy system can be **conceived as a circular process**. Hydrogen can be manufactured by the hydrolysis of water using renewable energy. This would make hydrogen a **truly sustainable fuel source**.
- The emission or by-product of hydrogen gas is water vapour. This would **help decarbonize the energy mix**. This augurs well for mitigating the GHG emissions.

National Hydrogen Energy Mission:

- The government has announced a National Hydrogen Energy Mission [NHEM] during the budget speech in February 2021.
- The National Hydrogen Energy Mission (NHM) will draw up a road map for using hydrogen as an energy source. NHEM initiative will capitalise on one of the most abundant elements on earth (Hydrogen) for a cleaner alternative fuel option.
- The National Hydrogen Energy Mission will **focus on the generation of hydrogen from green power resources** and will aim to link India's growing renewable capacity with the hydrogen economy.

Conclusion:

- The government should support and incentivize alternate fuel technologies, such as **hydrogen-powered fuel cell electric vehicles**.

21. Bring down benzene emission at fuel outlets, says panel

What's in News?

A joint committee appointed by the National Green Tribunal (NGT) to study air pollution in Kerala has recommended the installation of vapour recovery system at fuelling stations and retrofitting of diesel vehicles with particulate filters to improve air quality.

- The report pointed out that petrol refuelling stations were a major source of benzene emissions, volatile organic compounds, and particulate matter 2.5 concentrations.
- Therefore, it suggested that the installation of vapour recovery system is an important step in improving air quality.

22. 'Centre to infuse 14,500 cr. into banks under PCA soon'

Context:

The Finance Ministry is likely to decide on the infusion of ₹14,500 crore mainly in banks that are under the RBI's prompt corrective action (PCA) framework, to improve their financial health.

Details:

- For the current financial year, the government had allocated ₹20,000 crore for capital infusion into PSBs to help them meet their regulatory requirements.
- The capital infusion will help these banks to come out of the RBI's enhanced regulatory supervision.
- Indian Overseas Bank, Central Bank of India and UCO Bank are currently under the PCA framework.
- PCA framework places several curbs, including on lending and management compensation.

Prompt Corrective Action (PCA) framework:

- Prompt Corrective Action (PCA) is a framework in which banks with weak financial records are placed under the supervision of the Reserve Bank of India.
- The Prompt Corrective Action framework deems banks as risky if they slip some trigger points – capital to risk weighted assets ratio (CRAR), net NPA, Return on Assets (RoA) and Tier 1 Leverage ratio.

Note:

Most large state-owned lenders like State Bank of India, Punjab National Bank, Bank of Baroda, Canara Bank, Union Bank of India and Indian Bank have already raised money from market sources, including share sale on a private placement basis.

23. Retrospective laws and the Cairn tax dispute

Context:

- In the ruling by a three-member tribunal at the Permanent Court of Arbitration against India in the tax dispute with the U.K.-based oil and gas company Cairn Energy Plc and a subsidiary, Cairn UK Holdings Ltd, the tribunal ordered India to pay about \$1.4 billion to the company.
- Cairn Energy has successfully moved courts in five countries, including the United States, Netherlands, France Canada and the United Kingdom, to recognise its claim as per the arbitration award.

Details:

- In the latest development, Cairn Energy Plc has threatened that, unless the government resolves the issue, it may be forced to begin attaching Indian assets including bank accounts in different world capitals.
- In a letter to the Indian High Commission in London Cairn's top leadership has said that the necessary preparations have been made for the verdict to be enforced against Indian assets in jurisdictions around the world if India failed to discuss paying the amount awarded.
- The assets already under consideration could include Embassy bank accounts, non-diplomatic premises, Air India planes and state-owned ships in several places including the U.K., Holland, France, Canada and the U.S.
- The move would be similar to the action against a Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) plane that was seized in Malaysia over a dispute with an Irish company, or the seizure of a Venezuelan ship ordered by a court in favour of U.S. company ConocoPhillips in 2018.
- Cairn has stressed in the letter that it would only consider this extreme option if the Indian government did not respond.
- It has cited clauses in the U.K.-India Bilateral Investment Treaty, the UNCITRAL arbitration rules, and the New York Convention to which India is a signatory, that would be breached if India fails to pay the dues.
 - The dues include about \$220 million in accrued interest in addition to the \$1.2 billion award.

Note:

In a similar arbitration case, India lost against Vodafone, the government has filed an appeal in a Singapore court to defend the retrospective tax demand on the telecom firm. The officials have stressed that the government's sovereign right to levy taxes cannot be questioned under bilateral pacts.

24. Optical monitoring of power line health

Context:

- Researchers at IIT Madras have demonstrated that by using Raman thermometry on fibre optic cables, they can achieve monitoring of power transmission cables.

Raman thermometry:

- In the **Raman effect**, when light is scattered off an object, say a molecule, **two bands are observed, with higher and lower frequency than the original light, called the Stokes and anti-Stokes bands, respectively.**

- By studying the relative intensity of the two bands, it is possible to estimate the temperature of the object which scatters the light. This principle is used in Raman Thermometry.
- Any current flowing through a conductor would cause a temperature rise due to the Joule heating effect. Hence the flow of current through the power cables results in heating of the power cables.

Significance:

- The use of Raman thermometry technique allows the operators to get the **results for actual temperature measurements over tens of kilometres.**
- Alternative methods of measuring the temperature of power cables include using a thermal camera to manually monitor their length, which is cumbersome. The present method devised by the team is **both economical and provides real-time information.**

25. The job crunch and the growing fires of nativism

Context

- The Haryana government has recently passed legislation that mandates companies in Haryana to provide jobs to local Haryanvis first, before hiring people from outside the State thereby providing 75% reservation in the private sector to job seekers from the state.

A look at stats

- As per data from the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE), the unemployment rate in Haryana is the highest of all states in India.
- A whopping 80% of women in Haryana who want to work cannot find a job.
- More than half of all graduates in Haryana are jobless.
- The jobs situation in Haryana is staggeringly dismal.

Provisions of the legislation

- According to the government, the Haryana State Employment of Local Candidates Bill, 2020 provides reservations to local people in private-sector jobs that offer a salary of less than Rs 50,000 a month. However, the reservation will initially apply for 10 years.

- The state government said the reservation law will discourage the influx of migrants seeking low-paid jobs.

Which companies are covered under the law?

- According to the state government, the reservation law covers private companies, societies, trusts, and partnership firms in the state.
- The Haryana reservation law also provides training to eligible local candidates when qualified people are not available.
- The law defines local candidates as those domiciled in the state. For the domicile status, a person should be born in Haryana or have lived there for at least 15 years.

Similar examples

- The cabinet of the government of Jharkhand approved similar legislation to reserve jobs for Jharkhand residents.
- The Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) in Tamil Nadu announced a similar proposal to reserve jobs for Tamils in its manifesto.

States and key parameters

- Job creation is obviously an outcome of the performance of the larger economy.

When will a company invest in a State?

- If a company, for example, Amazon believes that the Indian economy is poised to grow robustly, it may choose to expand its operations in India.

Who gets to decide in which State the company has to invest?

- It is the management of the company which decides where the company will make its investments.
- It depends not only on the 'ease of doing business' parameters provided by the state government but also on multiple other factors.
- It includes:
 - Skilled manpower in the region.
 - It is a function of many decades of social progress of the State and cannot be retooled immediately.
 - The existence of what economists term as the 'agglomeration effect'.
 - The most critical factor in the choice of a location for a large business is the ecosystem of the supply chain, talent, good living conditions and so on.

- A State with an already well-established network of suppliers, people, schools, etc. are at a greater advantage to attract even more businesses than the states that are left behind.

Inference

- Therefore, the Chief Minister of a State in India and the state government have limited control over the company operations.
- Even if State governments can compete to lure Amazon to their State and provide land at affordable prices, uninterrupted supply of electricity, water and other such 'ease of business' facilities for its expansion, it is the company that decides where they have to establish and expand their bases on the basis of market growth and competition in the region.

Taxes

- After the introduction of the Goods and Services Tax (GST), State governments in India have lost their fiscal autonomy and have no powers to provide any tax concessions to businesses.
- In America, states compete against each other vigorously using tax concessions and land offers to bring new jobs to their states.

Concerns

- This leads to a cycle of the more prosperous states growing even faster at the expense of the lagging states.
- The three richest large states (Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka) are three times richer than the three poorest large States (Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh), in per-capita income, compared to 1.4 times in 1970.
- This gap between the richer and poorer states in India is only widening rapidly and not narrowing, due to the agglomeration impact of modern economic development paradigms.
- In the absence of a level playing field and with no fiscal autonomy, it is enormously difficult for developing states in India to attract new investments and create new jobs.

Conclusion

- Growing inter-state disparities, a 'rich states get richer' economic development model, an impending demographic disaster and shrinking fiscal autonomy for elected state governments in a politically and culturally diverse democracy will inevitably propagate nativistic sub-nationalism among the various states of India.

- Till we reduce the inter-state inequalities and offer the states more fiscal autonomy “don’t protect but create jobs” will only remain a topic of a hollow lecture and moral sermons.

26. Forestalling a cyber Pearl Harbour

Context

- The article analyses the threats posed by the Chinese hacking groups which had targeted various Indian power centres.

Background

- Recorded Future is a private U.S. cybersecurity company. The company specializes in the collection, processing, analysis, and dissemination of threat intelligence.
- According to Recorded Future, the Mumbai power outage in October 2020 was part of a coordinated cyber-attack by China.

Details

- The firm found that in the lead up to the deadly clash along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), they noticed an increase in malware targeting the government, defence organisations and the public sector.
- Recorded Future has said the attackers (which it calls **RedEcho**) targeted at least “10 distinct power sector organisations” with malware known as **ShadowPad**.
 - ShadowPad is a network intrusion malware affiliated to both the Chinese Ministry of State Security and the People’s Liberation Army.
 - ShadowPad is depicted as a “back-door ‘Trojan’ malware which creates a secret path from a targeted system to a command and control server to extract information”.
- Recorded Future said that in the lead-up to the May 2020 border skirmishes, it observed a noticeable increase in the provisioning of **PlugX malware C2 infrastructure**, much of which was subsequently used in intrusion activity targeting Indian organisations.

Was the functioning of the power sector impacted?

- Hours after the disclosure made by the New York Times, the Union Power Ministry said it had received inputs from Indian agencies – first in November and then again in February 2021 – about the threat of infection from ShadowPad, prompting remedial measures.

- It said there was no impact on any of the functionalities carried out by the **Power Sector Operations Corporation (POSOCO)** due to the referred threat. No data breach/data loss has been detected due to these incidents.

Confusion

- State authorities in Maharashtra attributed the blackout to the attack by the Chinese cyber group, but authorities in Delhi blamed it on human error.

Inference

- More than the blame games and coming to a conclusion that it has not impacted the power sector, India should realize that the threat from China is real and that China had deployed cyber weapons to target India.
- The reported events are a wake-up call for India, and it would be a grievous error if India were to underestimate the extent of the cyber threat posed to it by China.

An analysis of Chinese offensive capabilities in cyberspace

- Across the world, Beijing does appear to be engaged in a major cyber offensive, directed not only against countries like India but against many advanced nations as well.

How is the attack initiated?

- Software companies from western countries may have deliberately left open a loophole that they may use at an opportune time for their advantages and gains.
- These loopholes are now being exploited by the Chinese, and the companies are now at the receiving end of such antics, having 'left vulnerabilities for future exploitation'.

Examples:

- Chinese cyber espionage sets no limitations on targets. Hacking groups aligned with the Chinese have been sending out malicious email attachments that were directed to disturb vaccine distribution supply chains around the world.
 - Their objective seems to have been targeting vaccine research, gaining future access to corporate networks, and seeking sensitive information relating to COVID-19 vaccine distribution.
- Several thousands of U.S. organisations were hacked in an unusually aggressive Chinese espionage campaign. The Chinese group, Hafnium, which

has been identified as being responsible for this breach, exploited a series of flaws in the Microsoft software, enabling attackers to gain total remote control over affected systems.

Cyberwarfare by others

- The West, the United States, and Russia may also act similarly to what China is accused of doing.
 - The focus currently might be on China but other western countries do engage in cyber espionage but little is publicized.
- The U.S. in the past has criticized Russia for related acts of cyber reconnaissance.
 - Russia's cyber interference in the U.S. presidential elections in 2016.
 - Russia is the prime suspect in one of the greatest data breaches concerning the U.S. Federal government, involving the Departments of Defence, Energy, State, Homeland Security, Treasury, etc.
 - The 'SolarWinds hack' is one where the hackers secretly broke into SolarWind's systems and added malicious code into the company's software system.

Way forward

- Nations should be aware of and be warned about how cyber-attacks can bring a nation to its knees.
- Unprecedented hack of Ukraine's Power Grid:
 - The attacks were carried out by skilled cybersecurity professionals, who had planned their assaults over many months, testing the quality of the malware, carrying out detailed logistics planning, and conducting a very sophisticated operation.
 - The Ukraine example should be a wake-up call for India and the world.

There are three reasons for China to maintain and utilize aggressive cyber capability:

- to deter other states by infiltrating their critical infrastructure;
- to gain increased knowledge through espionage in cyberspace, which makes it possible for it to advance more quickly in their military development;
- to make economic gains where technological progress has been achieved – for example, through industrial espionage.

Part of Beijing's world view

- 'Cyber' could well be one of China's main threat vectors employed against countries that do not fall in line with China's world view.

- China's 2021 Defence Budget (amounting to \$209 billion) gives special weightage to the Strategic Support Force (SSF), which embraces cyber warfare – an ominous portent that bodes little good for countries that posit a challenge to China's ambitions, such as India.

Conclusion

- If indeed the future is digital, and if China has indeed embarked on an all-out offensive, India needs to adopt comprehensive measures to forestall a potential 'Cyber Pearl Harbour', as far as India is concerned.

27. 'India's arms imports down by 33%'

Context:

According to a report from a Swedish think tank, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), India's arms imports decreased by 33% between 2011-15 and 2016-20.

Key findings of the report:

- Despite a fall in imports, India continues to remain the second-largest arms importer after Saudi Arabia.
- A drop in arms imports between 2011-15 and 2016-20 seems to be mainly due to its complex and lengthy procurement processes, combined with its attempts to reduce its dependence on Russian arms by diversifying its network of arms suppliers.
- Russia was the largest arms supplier in both periods.
- Russia's deliveries dropped by 53% between the two periods and its share of Indian arms imports fell from 70 to 49%.
- The U.S. was the second-largest arms supplier to India in 2011-15 but in 2016-20, India's arms imports from the U.S. were 46% lower than in the previous five-year period, making the U.S. the fourth-largest supplier in 2016-20.
- France and Israel were the second and third largest arms suppliers in 2016-20.

India's plans over the next 5 years:

- As India perceives increasing threats from Pakistan and China and as its ambitious plans to produce its own major arms have been significantly delayed, it is planning large-scale programmes for arms imports.

- Based on its outstanding deliveries of combat aircraft, air defence systems, ships and submarines, India's arms imports are expected to increase over the coming 5 years.

28. WPI inflation quickens to 27-month high

What's in News?

The wholesale price-based inflation rose for the second consecutive month to a 27-month high of 4.17% in February 2021 as food, fuel and power prices spiked.

- The Wholesale Price Index (WPI) is the price of a representative basket of wholesale goods.
- WPI reflects changes in the average prices of goods at the wholesale level – that is, commodities sold in bulk and traded between businesses or entities rather than goods bought by consumers.
- WPI is released by the Economic Advisor in the Ministry of Commerce and Industry.

Wholesale price-based inflation:

- While retail inflation looks at the price at which the consumer buys products, WPI is measured based on prices at the wholesale level.
- WPI does not include services.
- The extent of the rise in WPI is used to measure the level of wholesale inflation in the economy.
- WPI provides estimates of inflation at the wholesale transaction level for the economy overall.
- It also helps in timely intervention by the government to monitor inflation before the price hike spills over to retail prices.

29. Responsible AI – the need for ethical guard rails

The article talks about the need for adequate safeguards while applying artificial intelligence (AI), failing which, social and economic schisms could be widened, leading to discriminatory outcomes.

AI's growth:

- The use of Artificial Intelligence has seen exponential growth.
- And the more AI is used, the more data is generated, and the smarter it gets.
- In just the last decade, AI has evolved with unprecedented velocity.

- Automation, big data and algorithms will continue to sweep into new corners of our lives.
- AI has immense potential. Just as electricity enabled us to radically alter virtually every aspect of existence, AI can leapfrog us toward eradicating hunger, poverty and disease – opening up new and unimaginable pathways for climate change mitigation, education and scientific discovery.

AI's potential:

- AI has helped increase crop yields, raised business productivity, improved access to credit and made cancer detection faster and more precise.
- It could contribute more than \$15 trillion to the world economy by 2030 adding 14% to global GDP.
- Google has identified over 2,600 use cases of “AI for good” worldwide.
- A study reviewing the impact of AI on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) finds that AI may act as an enabler on 79% of all SDG targets. On the flip side, it states that AI can actively hinder 35% of SDG targets.

Concerns:

- AI requires massive computational capacity, which means more power-hungry data centres and a big carbon footprint.
- Robotics and AI companies are building intelligent machines that perform tasks typically carried out by low-income workers, but the day is not far when many desk jobs will also be edged out by AI.
- Without clear policies on reskilling workers, the promise of new opportunities will in fact create serious new inequalities.
- Investment is likely to shift to countries where AI-related work is already established, widening gaps among and within countries.
- Without adequate safeguards, AI would exacerbate existing problems.
 - There have been AI facial recognition and surveillance technology discriminating against people of colour and minorities.
 - Also, an AI-enhanced recruitment engine, based on existing workforce profiles, taught itself that male candidates were preferable to female.
- AI also presents serious data privacy concerns. The algorithm's never-ending quest for data has led to our digital footprints being harvested and sold without our knowledge or informed consent.

Need for safeguards:

- Without ethical guard rails, AI will widen social and economic schisms, amplifying any innate biases at an irreversible scale and rate and lead to discriminatory outcomes.

- It is neither enough nor is it fair to expect AI tech companies to solve all these challenges through self-regulation. They are not alone in developing and deploying AI; governments also do so.

Conclusion:

- Many countries, including India, are cognisant of the opportunities and the risks, and are striving to strike the right balance between AI promotion and AI governance – both for the greater public good. NITI Aayog’s Responsible AI for All strategy is a case in point.
 - It recognises that our digital future cannot be optimised for good without multi-stakeholder governance structures that ensure the dividends are fair, inclusive, and just.
- Only a whole of society approach to AI governance will help in developing broad-based ethical principles, cultures and codes of conduct for AI to flourish and bring about the extraordinary breakthroughs it promises.
- Given the global reach of AI, such a “whole of society” approach must rest on a “whole of world” approach.
- The UN Secretary-General’s Roadmap on Digital Cooperation is a good starting point.
- Also, UNESCO has developed a global, comprehensive standard-setting draft Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence to the Member States for deliberation and adoption.
- Agreeing on common guiding principles is an important first step. But the challenging part is in the application of the principles. It is where principles meet reality that the ethical issues and conundrums arise in practice.
- For this, we must be prepared for deep, difficult, multi-stakeholder ethical reflection, analyses and resolve. Only then will AI provide humanity with its full promise.

30. Delhi remains most polluted capital: report

Context:

According to a report from IQ Air, Delhi remained the most polluted capital city in the world.

Details:

- IQ Air is a Swiss air quality technology company specialising in protection against airborne pollutants, and developing air quality monitoring and air cleaning products.

- In the 2020 report, 106 countries were evaluated.
- The pollution levels are weighted averages, meaning that the population of a country influences the pollution values reported.

Key findings:

- Of the 106 monitored countries, only 24 met the World Health Organization annual guidelines for PM 2.5
- Bangladesh and Pakistan were the countries in 2020 with worse average PM2.5 levels than India.
- When ranked by cities, Hotan in China was the most polluted followed by Ghaziabad in Uttar Pradesh.

India:

- Delhi's PM2.5 concentration level in 2020 saw a 15% improvement from that recorded in 2019 when the city was ranked the world's most polluted capital for the second straight year.
 - This was based on data from the Central Pollution Control Board.
- Average pollution levels were 51.9 $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ in 2020 compared with 58.1 $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ in 2019, making India the third most polluted country in 2020, unlike in 2019, when it was ranked fifth.
- Of the 15 most polluted cities in the world, 13 were in India.
- In spite of being a pandemic year, 2020 was particularly severe for agricultural burning. Farm fires in Punjab increased by 46.5% over 2019. Read more on stubble burning in the link.

31. Re-evaluating inflation targeting

Context:

- March 31st will mark the end of the term of **monetary policy framework agreement between the Centre and the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) on inflation targeting.**
- The given article evaluates the effectiveness of the monetary policy.

Background:

Inflation targeting:

- Inflation control is a legitimate objective of economic policy given the correlation between inflation and macro-economic stability.
- Inflation targeting is one of the many inflation control policies.

- Unlike the money-supply targeting policy of inflation control, **inflation targeting method prescribes the use of the interest rate to target inflation.** Given that the policy interest rate, is under the direct control of the central bank, this method is believed to be more effective than the monetarist approach.

Details:

- Though the **inflation rate has remained within the prescribed band of 2% to 6%** since 2016 and the RBI has succeeded in anchoring inflationary expectations, the **available evidence and observed trends are not conclusive on the efficacy claimed for inflation targeting.**

Logical vulnerabilities in the assumed model:

- The economic model that underlies inflation targeting revolves around the proposition that inflation reflects “overheating”, or economic activity at a level greater than the “natural” level of output, having been taken there by central banks that have kept interest rates too low, at a level lower than the “natural” rate of interest. This necessitates the need to raise the **rate of interest (‘repo’ rate)** to control inflation.
- Inflation in India entered the prescribed band of 2% to 6% two years before inflation targeting was adopted in 2016-17. In fact, inflation had fallen steadily since 2011-12, halving by 2015-16. This by itself suggests that there is a mechanism driving inflation other than what is imagined in inflation targeting.
- The decline in inflation has been mainly led by the relative price of food. **The vagaries of the price of food are a major determinant in inflation rate and the adopted model fails to acknowledge this aspect.**

Impact of inflation targeting:

- Five variables namely growth, private investment, exports, non-performing assets (NPAs) of commercial banks, and employment would be analyzed here.
 - The economy’s trend rate of growth actually began to decline after 2010-11. This trend was observed despite falling inflation trend. It indicates that the **sharply falling inflation could do nothing to revive growth**, belying the proposition that low inflation is conducive to growth.
 - The swing in the real interest rate of over 5 percentage points in 2013-14 was powered further in 2016, when inflation targeting was adopted, and could have contributed to a declining private investment rate. This

indicates that the **higher interest rates, the toolkit for inflation targeting, may have been harmful for private investment in the economy.**

- Exports and employment rates have fared poorly since inflation targeting was adopted in 2016.
- It has long been recognised that **a central bank focusing on inflation may lose control of financial stability.** NPAs have grown since 2016, and the cases of IL&FS, PMC Bank, PNB and YES Bank are indicative of the poor management and malfeasance in the financial sector, given the excessive focus of the central bank on inflation targeting.

Conclusion:

- Though Inflation control will always be relevant for macroeconomic stability, there is no conclusive evidence that the policy has worked in India as the presumed benefits of low inflation are yet to become evident.
- Infact **inflation targeting may end up raising interest rates to higher and higher levels which bring out many negative impacts** as discussed above, without lowering inflation.

32. Looking beyond privatisation

Context:

- The Union government has announced its **intent to privatise Public Sector Banks (PSBs)** in the recent Budget session.

Details:

- The article argues against the proposed move to privatise Public Sector Banks based on the following arguments.

Wrong notion:

- The failure of innumerable private banks around the world, challenge the notion that only private banks are efficient. The large **volumes of NPAs observed in private corporate entities** also challenge the notion of private enterprises being the epitome of efficiency.

Positive role played by public banks:

- The **nationalisation of 14 private banks in 1969, followed by six more in 1980**, transformed the banking sector and ensured the following benefits.

- Neglected areas like agriculture, poverty alleviation plans, rural development, health, education, exports, infrastructure, women's empowerment, small scale and medium industry, and small and micro industries, have witnessed **increased credit disbursal rates from the public sector banks**.
- The nationalization of banks helped in promoting more **equitable regional growth**. The increased number of bank branches in rural areas has reduced the poor people's dependence on moneylenders and thus helped **move out of the vicious cycle of poverty**.
- Bank nationalization **helped create jobs**. They also improved the working conditions of employees in the banking sector, as the state ensured higher wages, security of services, and other fringe benefits.
- As an institution, PSBs have been vehicles of the Indian economy's growth and development. They have also **contributed significantly to infrastructural development**.

Threat posed by privatization of banks:

- Placing the huge network of bank branches and the infrastructure and assets in the hands of private enterprises or corporates may turn out to be detrimental given the **risks of monopoly and cartelisation of the crucial financial sector** and this could lead to denial of economical banking services to the common man.

Unfair criticism of Public sector banks:

- It is unfair to blame PSBs alone for the alarming rise of NPAs.
- **Wilful default by large corporate borrowers and subsequent recovery haircuts and write-offs**, have put a big dent on the balance sheets of PSBs.
- The lack of strong recovery laws and lack of criminal action against wilful defaulters is a major lacuna in the system.

Recommendations:

- Stringent measures are required to recover large corporate stressed assets.
 - There is an urgent need to bring in a **suitable statutory framework to consider wilful defaults on bank loans a "criminal offence"**.
 - There should be a system to examine top executives of PSBs across the country which will help in **improving accountability among the top executives of the bank**.

Conclusion:

- Privatisation of PSBs is not a definitive panacea for the problems of the banking sector in India.

33. Auto firms see scrappage policy boosting sector

Context:

Auto majors have welcomed the new vehicle-scrappage policy saying it would encourage people to replace older vehicles, thus boosting demand in the sector.

- The new policy presents a huge business opportunity for original equipment manufacturers (OEMs) and can significantly cut pollution while bolstering road safety.

Details:

- The toll collection will happen via GPS.
- 93% of the vehicles have already started paying toll using FASTag – a system that facilitates electronic payment of fee at toll plazas seamlessly – but the remaining 7% had still not adopted it despite paying double the toll.

Vehicle Scrapping Policy:

- Details of the vehicle scrapping policy were also shared.
- It was first announced in the Union Budget for 2021-22.
- The new policy provides for fitness tests after the completion of 20 years in the case of privately owned vehicles and 15 years in the case of commercial vehicles. Any vehicle that fails the fitness test or does not manage the renewal of its registration certificate may be declared as an 'End of Life Vehicle'.
- All government vehicles and those owned by PSUs will be de-registered after 15 years.
- According to the policy, the automobile industry in India will see a jump in turnover to ₹10 lakh crore from 4.5 lakh crore.
- It would reduce pollution, improve fuel efficiency, and increase the government's revenue collection from the sale of new vehicles.
- To encourage owners to take their old vehicles to scrapping centres, the government has announced several incentives, including advisories to the States to give up to 25% rebate in road tax for personal vehicles and up to 15% rebate for commercial vehicles.
- The government will also offer a waiver of registration fees on the purchase of new vehicles.
- Timeline:
 - The policy will kick in for government vehicles from April 1, 2022.

- Mandatory fitness testing for heavy commercial vehicles will start from April 1, 2023.
- For all other categories of vehicles, including personal vehicles, it will start in phases from June 1, 2024.
- The Ministry has proposed that commercial vehicles be de-registered after 15 years in case of failure to get the fitness certificate, and a private vehicle will be de-registered after 20 years if it fails fitness certification.

34. Mining threat looms over Aravalis in Haryana

Context:

- Haryana State government's moves to seek Supreme Court's permission to resume mining in the Aravalli hill region.

Details:

- The State government has moved the Supreme Court to seek permission to begin mining in the Aravalis in Gurugram, Faridabad and Nuh.
 - Mining has been banned in Gurugram and adjoining districts for more than a decade now as per the Supreme Court orders.

Concerns:

- The environmentalists have strongly opposed legalising of mining in the Aravalis in the National Capital Region based on the following arguments.

Impact on air quality:

- The environmentalists argue that the move to legalize mining could cause colossal damage to the environment, especially when the region is already grappling with poor air quality.
- **Faridabad has the worst air quality in Haryana and figures among the most polluted cities in the world.** Gurugram, too, had topped the list of most polluted cities in the world in 2018. It is also argued that Gurugram and Faridabad have a high population density, but low per capita forest cover. The ban on mining in Gurugram and Faridabad, had resulted in a significant improvement in the forest cover.
- The destruction of the Aravalis would worsen the NCR air pollution situation. The poor air quality could have a **detrimental impact on the city residents' health.**

Impact on groundwater resources:

- The Aravalis with their natural cracks and fissures have the potential to accommodate two million litres of water per hectare in the ground every year.
- The resumption of mining in the region could prove detrimental to the **already fast depleting groundwater level** in the region posing a water security threat to the residents of the region.

Impact on wildlife:

- The wildlife surveys show that Gurugram and Faridabad hills act as a **significant wildlife habitat and corridor**, especially for the leopards. There is also movement from and into the Asola wildlife sanctuary. The resumption of mining here will be disastrous for the wildlife.
 - The Aravalli mountain range is a biodiversity hotspot with 400-odd species of trees, shrubs and herbs; 200-odd native and migratory bird species; 100-odd butterfly species; 20-odd reptile species and 20-odd mammal species, including leopards.

Desertification:

- The Aravalli mountain range is the only **natural barrier against desertification**.
- The resumption of mining activity in the region would lead to further deforestation in the region further exacerbating the threat of desertification in the region.

Threat posed by illegal mining:

- A very high number of illegal mining have been reported from the state.
- Mining, when earlier allowed, was carried out in a haphazard manner without adhering to the norms causing huge damage to the environment and the wildlife.

Counter-arguments:

- As per the Economic Survey of Haryana 2020-21, the collection from mining for 2020-21 till January is ₹770.00 crore, the highest since 2005-06. This amounts to a substantial **stream of revenue for the state government**.
- The mining in this region would not just help **meet the demand for construction material** but also **generate employment**.

Way forward:

Selecting suitable areas for mining:

- Mining should not be done in NCR districts adjacent to Delhi which are important wildlife habitats and corridors, have poor air quality and high population. Mining should also not be allowed in thick forest areas. Mining should be confined to isolated hillocks in distant areas with minimal impact on wildlife corridors and air quality.
- This would result in minimum damage to environment and help **ensure sustainable development**.
- A survey needs to be conducted to identify the possible areas for mining.

Creating conservation zones:

- The government could consider notifying 50,000 acre of Aravalis as deemed forest and retaining all Aravalis in south Haryana as **natural conservation zone**.

Afforestation measures:

- The government should come up with a three-year road map to **take the legal native forest cover in the State to 20% as per the Haryana Forest Department policy target**. This move could help offset some of the negative impacts of deforestation carried out for mining operations.

35. Doubling down on a resilient India

Context

- The article speaks about India's investment climate.

FDI inflows

- Despite India experiencing economic contractions due to covid-19, India saw the fastest growth in Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) inflows among all the major economies in 2020.
- Google, Facebook, Walmart, Samsung, Foxconn, and Silver are some of the companies which have placed trust in the Indian markets.

But India still remains a complex place to do business.

Challenges

- Companies usually are concerned about market access as they encounter obstacles or conditions which are tough for them to achieve when it comes to operating in India.

- Policies change quite often which shows a lack of planning and frequent changes in rules, laws, create a complex environment for executing an action plan.
- The government's push to build a "self-reliant" India has rattled investors.
- Smaller companies lack the resources and monetary advantages to navigate on-the-ground hurdles.

Still, leading corporate investors see the Indian market differently. They have the vision to understand that these are risks worth taking given the scale of the India Opportunity.

India an essential part of their growth story

1. First, sheer demographics.

- What India offers through its nearly 1.4 billion people and their growing purchasing power is uniquely valuable for multinationals with global ambitions.
- No other country outside of China has a market that houses nearly one in six people on the planet and a rising middle class of 600 million.

2. Second, shifting geopolitics.

- Trade war and rising tensions between the USA and China are making companies rethink on its strategies as they are moving to different production hubs.
- Savvy countries such as Vietnam have capitalised on this opportunity to great effect, but India is only finally getting serious about attracting large-scale production and exports.
- Major multinational companies such as Samsung have invested billions in the Indian market, and manufacturers such as Cisco, Nokia, Ericsson, and Flex are reportedly weighing new investments that take advantage of fresh incentive programs.

3. Third, rising digital connectivity.

- India's digital landscape has further expanded due to cheap mobile data and India has an estimated 700 million active internet users.
- This is the primary reason why leading global tech companies are investing in India and weathering acute policy pressure.
- Domestic Indian companies have also demonstrated their ability to innovate and deliver high-quality services at scale.
- The partnerships and FDI flows linking multinationals and Indian tech firms will continue to unlock shared market opportunities for years to come.

4. Fourth, national resilience.

- Despite facing the scourge of the novel coronavirus head-on, India has managed the pandemic better than many of its western peers and restored economic activity even before implementing a mass vaccination programme.

Way forward

- Companies should continuously demonstrate their commitment to India.
 - Successful companies do this by placing shared value creation at the heart of their business strategy. They tie corporate success to India's growth and development.
 - They forge enduring partnerships and lasting relationships, elevate and invest in Indian talent, align products with Indian tastes, and ultimately tackle the hardest problems facing India today.

36. 'Workers in govt. contracts must possess skill certificate'

Context:

The government has decided that all workers executing government contracts must have official certification for their skills.

Issue:

- Government contractors' preference for low-wage informal workers was creating a dichotomy where the government was trying to promote skilling in the workforce without insisting on the use of skilled manpower for its projects.
- The new stipulation would make more people seek certification and influence industry hiring practices, the Ministry said.

Details:

- The Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship has told all government departments to mandate this requirement for all contracts issued under their watch.
- The government aims to train and certify skilled workers, in contrast to contractors' preference to employ informal workers at lower wages.
- A phase-wise application is being thought about where it could be mandated that up to 10% of the strength of skilled workers utilised in 2021-22 will be certified skilled workers, which would be progressively increased to 100% by 2026-27.

Note:

- As per the Periodic Labour Force Survey of 2018-19, only 2.4% of India's workforce is formally trained.

37. Market Infrastructure Institutions

Why in News

The **Securities & Exchange Board of India (SEBI)** has asked **Market Infrastructure Institutions (MIIs)** to begin operations from disaster recovery sites within **45 minutes** of a disruption to critical systems, including trading.

- The directive comes against the backdrop of a technical glitch at the **National Stock Exchange (NSE)** on **24th February** that halted trading for nearly four hours.

Key Points

- **SEBI's Latest Directive:**
 - **New Framework for MIIs:**
 - SEBI has come out with a new framework for **Business Continuity Plan (BCP)** and **Disaster Recovery (DR)** of **Market Infrastructure Institutions (MIIs)** - stock exchanges, clearing corporations and depositories.
 - Business Continuity (BC) and Disaster Recovery (DR) are closely related practices that **support an organization's ability to remain operational after an adverse event.**
 - **Guidelines:**
 - In the event of **disruption of any one or more of the 'critical systems'**, the **MII** would, **within 30 minutes** of the incident, **declare that incident as 'disaster'**.
 - **Critical systems for an exchange or clearing corporation** would include **trading, risk management, collateral management, clearing and settlement and index computation.**
 - **Critical systems' for a depository** shall include **systems supporting settlement process and inter-depository transfer systems.**
 - MIIs have been directed **to move to disaster recovery sites within 45 minutes** of declaring an incident a 'disaster'.
 - A **disaster recovery site** is a place that a company can temporarily relocate to following a security breach or natural disaster.

- It ensures that a company can continue operations until it becomes safe to resume work at its usual location or a new permanent location.
- **Mobile- and cloud-based disaster recovery sites** are becoming increasingly popular.
- **The new guidelines should be implemented within 90 days.**
- **Market Infrastructure Institutions (MIIs):**
 - **Stock exchanges, depositories and clearing corporations** are collectively referred to as securities Market Infrastructure Institutions (MIIs).
 - According to the **Bimal Jalan Committee (2010)**, these institutions are systemically important for the country's financial development and serve as the infrastructure necessary for the securities market.
 - The **stock exchange** in India serves as a **market where financial instruments like stocks, bonds and commodities are traded.**
 - **Depositories** may be organizations, banks, or institutions that hold securities and **assist in the trading of securities.**
 - A **clearing corporation is an organisation/entity affiliated with a stock exchange** whose primary objective is to oversee the handling of confirmation, settlement, and delivery of transactions.

SEBI

- The **Securities and Exchange Board of India** was established on 12th April, 1992 in accordance with the provisions of the **Securities and Exchange Board of India Act, 1992.**
- Major Function:
 - To protect the interests of investors in securities.
 - To regulate the securities market.

NSE

- The **National Stock Exchange of India Limited (NSE)** is India's largest **financial market.**
- **Incorporated in 1992**, the NSE has developed into a sophisticated, electronic market, which ranked fourth in the world by **equity** trading volume.
 - NSE was the first exchange in India to provide modern, fully automated electronic trading.
 - The NSE is the largest private wide-area network in India.
- The **NIFTY 50 is the flagship index on the National Stock Exchange of India Ltd. (NSE).** The Index tracks the behavior of a portfolio of blue chip companies, the largest and most liquid Indian securities. It includes 50 of the approximately 1600 companies listed on the NSE.

38. Skill Certification

Why in News

The **Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship** has asked all government departments to ensure that workers executing government contracts must have official certification for their skills.

- Initially, up to **10% of the strength of workers** utilized in 2021-22 can be certified. This can be progressively **increased to 100% by 2026-27**.

Key Points

- **Need of the Move:**
 - **Low Level of Trained Workforce:** Only 2.4% of India's workforce is formally trained as per the **Periodic Labour Force Survey** of 2018-19.
 - India's skill regulator, the **National Council for Vocational Education and Training**, has standardised skill certification systems for 4,000-odd job roles, as part of an effort to change the labour market structure from a largely unskilled one to a predominantly formally skilled workforce.
 - **Informal and Low Wage:** Government contractors prefer to rely on informal workers with low salaries for meeting their labour needs.
 - **Paradoxical Situation:** This is a paradoxical situation wherein the government is trying to promote skilling in the workforce without insisting on the use of skilled manpower for its own project.
- **Advantage:**
 - **Increase Demand For Skill:** Demand for skilling would start coming from the industry and labour force itself, which will prefer to pay for skilling itself, doing away with the present system of the Government trying to drive skilling through funding.
 - **Improvement in Wages : Improvement in wages** for the skilled manpower hired.
 - **Culture of Certified Skilling:** Given the quantum of manpower engaged in government and government contract works, this would help in making skilling aspirational for our youth and spread the culture of certified skilling.
 - **Enhance Productivity and Quality:** This will lead to higher productivity and output quality in government contract works.
- **Challenges:**
 - **Insufficient Training Capacity:** Insufficient job-linked training is leading to low employability rate in India.

- **Low Industry Interface:** Low industry interface in training institutes is leading to poor placements and lower salaries.
- **Low Student Mobilization:** The enrolment in skill institutes like ITIs, and polytechnics, remains low as compared to their enrolment capacity. This is due to low **awareness levels among youths** about the skill development programmes.
- **Employers' Unwillingness:** India's joblessness issue is not only a skills problem, it is representative of the lack of appetite of industrialists and SMEs for recruiting.
 - Due to limited access to credit because of Banks' **Non-Performing Assets (NPAs)**, investment rate has declined and thus a negative impact on job creation.

Some Schemes Related to Skill Development

- **Industrial Training Centres (ITIs):** Conceptualized in the year 1950, aims to expand and modernize the existing Long-Term Training ecosystem in India.
- **Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY):** Launched in 2015, it aims to provide free skill training avenues to youths of India.
 - **Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana 3.0:** It is launched 2021 in a bid to empower India's youth with employable skills by making over 300 skill courses available to them.
- **Recognition of Prior Learning:** It was launched in 2015 to recognize the prior skills acquired by individuals. It is one of the key components of Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY).
 - Under this an individual with a certain set of skills or with prior learning experience is assessed and certified under RPL with grade according to the **National Skills Qualification Framework (NSQF)**.
- **National Career Service Project:** Launched in 2015 to offer free online career skills training through its National Career Service (NCS) project for job-seekers registered with it.
- **Skill Management and Accreditation of Training Centres (SMART):** It provides a single window IT application that focuses on the accreditation, grading, Affiliation and Continuous monitoring of the Training Centres (TC) in the skill ecosystem.
- **Skills Acquisition and Knowledge Awareness for Livelihood (SANKALP):** Its focus is on district-level skilling ecosystem through convergence and coordination. It is a Centrally Sponsored Scheme which is collaborated with the World Bank.
- **Skills Strengthening for Industrial Value Enhancement (STRIVE):** Launched in 2016, the main focus of the scheme is to improve the performance of ITIs. Skills Strengthening for Industrial Value Enhancement (STRIVE) scheme is a World Bank assisted-Government of India project with

the objective of improving the relevance and efficiency of skills training provided through Industrial Training Institutes (ITIs) and apprenticeships.

- **Pradhan Mantri YUVA Yojana (Yuva Udyamita Vikas Abhiyan):** Launched in the year 2016, it aims at creating an enabling ecosystem for Entrepreneurship development through Entrepreneurship education and training; Advocacy and easy access to entrepreneurship support network and Promoting social enterprises for inclusive growth.
- **Kaushalacharya Awards:** Launched to recognize the contribution made by skill trainers and to motivate more trainers to join the Skill India Mission.
- **Scheme for Higher Education Youth in Apprenticeship and Skills (SHREYAS):** The scheme is to provide industry apprenticeship opportunities to the general graduates exiting in April 2019 through the National Apprenticeship Promotion Scheme (NAPS).
- **Atma Nirbhar Skilled Employee Employer Mapping (ASEEM):** Launched in 2020, it is a portal to help skilled people find sustainable livelihood opportunities.

39. 'Define unfair trade practice for e-com'

Context:

A parliamentary panel tabled its report on 'The Consumer Protection (E-Commerce) Rules, 2020' in Parliament.

Concerns:

- The panel noted that while e-commerce enterprises offer many benefits, the development of the segment has rendered consumers vulnerable to new forms of unfair trade practices, violation of privacy and issues of unattended grievances.
- It warned that there was a risk that predatory pricing by e-commerce firms may result in the competition being wiped out and prove detrimental to consumers in the long run.
- However, it added that from a legal standpoint it was very hard to substantiate allegations of predatory pricing, since the impact of such practice on the competition in the market would be very difficult to prove.

Recommendations:

- The panel has recommended that the government should offer a more clear-cut definition of what constitutes unfair trade practice as well as spell out a practical legal remedy to tackle the issue.
- It recommended fixing a cap on delivery charges levied by e-commerce firms.
- The panel also suggested that the Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution should issue broad guidelines for the fixation of delivery charges charged by the marketplace entities along with a cap on the highest limits of the delivery charges in peak hours of service.
- It said that the Ministry should also clearly define 'drip pricing' wherein the final cost of the product goes up due to additional charges, and provide for protecting consumers against this by including penal provisions for violation.
- It asked the government to provide penal provisions for violation of rules related to misinformation.
- It asked the Ministry to clearly distinguish in the Rules itself the cases of misinformation, no information and the information which is otherwise correct but creates a false impression and provide for penal provisions accordingly.

40. 'No digital tax if goods sold via India arm'

What's in News?

In a bid to provide a level-playing field, the government has decided not to levy 2% digital service tax if goods and services are sold through an Indian arm of foreign e-commerce players.

- The amendment to the Finance Bill 2021 clarifies that offshore e-commerce platforms don't have to pay the levy if they have a permanent establishment or they pay any income tax here.
- However, foreign firms that do not pay any tax will have to pay the levy.

Note:

The digital tax, introduced in April 2020, applies only to non-resident companies with annual revenues in excess of 2 crore, and covers online sales of goods and services to Indians.

41. New species of red algae seen in west, south east Indian coast

- Two new species of seaweed named **Hypnea indica** and **Hypnea bullata** have been discovered by a group of marine biologists.
- While *Hypnea indica* was discovered Kanyakumari in Tamil Nadu, and Somnath Pathan and Sivrajpur in Gujarat, *Hypnea bullata* was discovered from Kanyakumari and Diu island of Daman and Diu.
- The seaweeds are part of the genus *Hypnea* or red seaweeds. The **genus *Hypnea* consists of calcareous, erect, branched red seaweeds.**
- They grow in the **intertidal regions** of the coast, namely the area that is submerged during the high tide and exposed during low tides.
- Species of *Hypnea* contain the biomolecule carrageenan, which is **widely used in the food industry.**
- Several recent studies have shown that algae with calcareous mineral deposits are prone for the damage from **ocean acidification** – an aftermath of climate change. As carbon dioxide in the atmosphere gets dissolved in ocean waters, the seawater becomes more acidic. Algae like *Hypnea* cannot survive in acidic seawater.
- The study also reports one other species of *Hypnea* for the first time in Indian coasts, *Hypnea nidifica*.

42. 27 migratory birds found dead at wildlife sanctuary in Himachal

What's in News?

As many as 27 migratory birds have been reported dead on account of avian influenza in the Pong Dam Wildlife Sanctuary area of Himachal Pradesh.

Pong Dam Wildlife Sanctuary:

- The Pong Dam also called the Beas dam is an artificial embankment Dam constructed across the Beas river in Himachal Pradesh.
- The Reservoir created by the dam is called Maharana Pratap Sagar and is a renowned Bird Sanctuary.
- The dam was constructed for hydroelectric power generation and irrigation.
- Pong Dam Wildlife Sanctuary is also a Ramsar Site.
- Maharana Pratap Sagar is located in the wetland zone of Shivalik Hills.

Note:

- Earlier in January 2021, avian influenza (H5N1) led to the death of over 5,000 migratory birds in the Pong Dam Wildlife Sanctuary area.

43. Large Hadron Collider beauty Experiment

The LHCb experiment at CERN (European Council for Nuclear Research) has announced the results of their latest analysis of data.

LHCb Experiment: An easy explanation

- LHCb is an experiment set up to explore what happened after the Big Bang that allowed the matter to survive and build the Universe we inhabit today.
- Fourteen billion years ago, the Universe began with a bang.
- Crammed within an infinitely small space, energy coalesced to form equal quantities of matter and antimatter.
- But as the Universe cooled and expanded, its composition changed.
- Just one second after the Big Bang, antimatter had all but disappeared, leaving the matter to form everything that we see around us – from the stars and galaxies to the Earth and all life that it supports.

What is the new finding?

- CERN scientists are excited enough to reveal that if the anomaly they had detected was confirmed.
- Because, if confirmed, it would require a new physical process, such as the existence of new fundamental particles or interactions.

What is this excitement all about?

It is necessary to delve into the world of elementary particles to understand this.

(1) Particle zoo

Until now it is believed that the electron, muon and tauon and their antiparticles, though they differ in mass, behave similarly in particle interactions.

- Broadly speaking, elementary particles are classified into the particles called baryons – which include protons, neutrons and their antiparticles the antiprotons etc.
- The “middle mass” particles, roughly speaking, are called the mesons and they include members such as the K and B particles.
- We then have the leptons, which include the electron and its cousins the muon and tau particles and the anti-particles.
- At a still smaller scale, there are tiny particles called quarks and gluons.

- There are six flavours of quarks: up, down, truth, beauty, charm and strange. They too have antiquarks associated with them.

In this particle zoo, while the baryons are made up of combinations of three quarks, the mesons contain two quarks, more accurately a quark and antiquark pair, and the leptons are truly fundamental and are thought to be indivisible.

By interactions here, is meant the following:

- If a huge particle accelerator such as the LHC were to accelerate beams of hadrons (such as protons) to very high speeds, a fraction of that of light, and then cause them to collide.
- Basically, smash through the repulsive nuclear forces and shatter them, the hadrons would break up into constituents which would recombine to form short-lived particles, which would decay into stabler states.
- Roughly speaking, during this process, they are imaged in a huge multistorey detector and the number of specific processes and particles are counted.

(3) Lepton universality principle

- One such process that was measured was the decay of a meson B (which contained the beauty quark) into K-meson (which contains the strange quark) and a muon-antimuon pair, and this was compared with the decay of B into K and an electron-antielectron pair.
- The expectation is that the ratio of the strengths of these two sets of interactions would be just one.
- This is because the muons are not essentially different from the electrons as per the Standard Model, the presently accepted theoretical model of all elementary particle interactions.
- This is called the lepton universality principle.

44. A road to progress

The article discusses how cooperatives and unions are a pathway to financial stability for women dairy farmers.

White Revolution:

- Women dairy farmers have contributed immensely to India's 'White Revolution'.
- Their success despite a majority of dairy farmers owning only small landholdings (typically households own two to five cows) is also a testament to the success of the dairy cooperatives models that were at the heart of Operation Flood.

- The approach made it possible to enhance backward and forward linkages in the dairy value chain, paving the way for freeing small farmers from the clutches of middlemen, and guaranteed minimum procurement price for milk.

Challenges facing Small Dairy Farmers:

- A major challenge in this sector is information asymmetry among farmers.
- Statistics indicate that small and marginal farmers have access to only 50-70% of the resources that large and medium farmers have.
- The majority of the dairy farmers own small landholdings.
- Many of the dairy farmers have not had a formal education and lack financial literacy.

Training the dairy farmers:

- A study by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) indicates that 93% of women farmers who receive training alongside financial support succeed in their ventures, compared to the 57% success rate of those who receive financial aid alone.
- The National Dairy Development Board (NDDB) organises farmer orientation programmes across the country, under which women farmers are trained in scientific best practices on animal health, fodder quality, clean milk production, and accounts management.

Enhanced incomes:

- There are more than 1,90,000 dairy cooperative societies across the country, with approximately 6 million women members.
- A study conducted on Women Dairy Cooperative Society (WDCCS) members across Rajasthan showed that with the income generated through dairying, 31% of the women had converted their mud houses to cement structures, while 39% had constructed concrete sheds for their cattle.

Enhancing Bargaining Power of Women:

- The presence of collectives in the form of cooperatives and milk unions plays a significant role in enhancing the knowledge and bargaining power of women.
- Women-led cooperatives also provide fertile ground for grooming women from rural areas for leadership positions.
- In many instances, this becomes the first step for women in breaking free from traditional practices.

Conclusions:

Many individual women dairy farmers have not had a formal education, but through the process of dairying and working with larger collectives, such as milk unions and cooperatives, they have mastered the nuances of finance and marketing. These unions and cooperatives provide a pathway to success and financial stability.

45. Researchers find new butterfly species

What's in News?

A new species has been added to the expanding list of butterflies in India.

- “*Nacaduba sinhala ramaswamii*” found in the Agasthyamala in the Western Ghats a decade ago has been added to the Journal of Threatened Taxa.
- The new taxon of Lycaenid butterflies belongs to the *Nacaduba* genus.
- Line Blues are small butterflies belonging to the subfamily Lycaenidae and their distribution ranges from India and Sri Lanka to the whole of southeastern Asia, Australia and Samoa.
- It is the first time that a butterfly species was discovered by an all-Indian research team from the Western Ghats.