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GS 2 : Polity, Governance, International Relations

1. At UNHRC, 'grave concerns' raised over Xinjiang

Context:

- Ongoing 47th session of the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) in Geneva.

Details:

- More than 40 countries led by Canada voiced grave concerns about China's actions in Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, Hong Kong and Tibet.
 - This comes amid reports of arbitrary detention of over a million people in Xinjiang, widespread surveillance of Uighurs and members of other minorities and **restrictions on fundamental freedoms** and Uighur culture. There have also been reports of **torture and inhumane treatment or punishment**, forced sterilisation, sexual and gender-based violence, and forced separation of children from their parents.
- The joint statement urged China to give the UN rights chief and other independent observers access to Xinjiang.

2. Afghan violence has risen: Jaishankar

Context:

- Virtual meeting of the UN Security Council on Afghanistan.

Background:

- Talks between the Afghanistan government and the Taliban have reached a stalemate.
- **Afghanistan has seen an increasing level of violence in recent months, as the Taliban makes territorial gains.** Not only has the Taliban captured more territory in recent months but it also seems poised to take over key cities once the foreign troops pull out.
 - The increase in violence has been reported by the **UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA).**

- There has been increased violence against women, girls and ethnic and religious minorities and Afghan security forces.

Details:

- The Indian External Affairs Minister has expressed deep anguish at the increasing level of violence in Afghanistan.
- While **reiterating India's support for the Intra-Afghan negotiations**, the External Affairs Minister has **called for the United Nations to play a "leading role" in the reconciliation process.**
- The minister has raised concerns over Afghanistan being used by terrorist groups to launch attacks on other countries and called for **ending any terrorist safe havens and terrorist supply chains that aid cross border terrorism.**
 - This comes amid reports of the Taliban keeping its links with the al-Qaeda and Pakistan-based terror groups including the Lashkar-e-Toiba and the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan.
- While acknowledging the **significance of the economic development of Afghanistan**, India has stressed the need to ensure continued trade to and from Afghanistan via unhindered access to the high seas.

3. What is Chicago Convention of 1944?

A private commercial flight was forced to make an emergency landing in Minsk by a MiG-29 fighter jet of Belarus. The incident received considerable global attention.

How justified was Belarus in taking such a decision?

- The answer lies at the junction of Belarus's domestic laws as a sovereign country and international laws governing the action that states can legitimately take to deal with threats to security, real or perceived.
- The issue of the use of military aircraft to neutralize potential threats posed by civilian aircraft acquired a different kind of urgency in the aftermath of terrorist attacks in the US on September 11, 2001.
- Generally speaking, international law grants sovereignty to nations over their airspace as it does in territorial waters.

The Chicago Convention of 1944

- The Convention on International Civil Aviation, better known as the Chicago Convention of 1944, to which Belarus is a signatory state, prohibits any unlawful intervention against a civilian aircraft.
- At the same time, it has various provisions under Article 9 which permit a sovereign state the right to impose restrictions.
- This includes enforced landings at a designated airport in its territory, in “exceptional circumstances or during a period of emergency, or in the interest of public safety”.
- Once a flight has landed, Article 16 provides the host country the right to board/search the aircraft.
- This is probably the clause that provided cover for the local authorities to board Mr. Morales’s aircraft in Austria in 2013.
- But the Chicago Convention applies only to civilian aircraft of the contracting parties.

Other such laws

- International law might also have to be examined in light of the International Air Services Transit Agreement (IASTA), also concluded in Chicago in 1944.
- According to this agreement, contracting states grant to one another the freedom of air transit in respect of scheduled international air services, that is, the privilege to fly across territories without landing.
- Belarus is not a signatory of IASTA.

4. ‘Tying reforms, incentives helped widen adoption’

Background:

Reform linked additional borrowing limits:

- In May 2020, as part of the **Aatmanirbhar Bharat package**, the Centre had announced that state governments would be allowed enhanced borrowing for 2020-21. **An extra 2% of GSDP (gross state domestic product) was allowed**, of which 1% was made **conditional on the implementation of certain economic reforms**.
- The four citizen-centric areas for reforms identified were:
 - Implementation of One Nation One Ration Card System
 - Ease of doing business reform
 - Urban local body/utility reforms
 - Power sector reforms.

Details:

- Many states have implemented the proposed reforms.
- Twenty-three States have availed of additional borrowings of ₹1.06 lakh crore out of a potential ₹14 lakh crore.

Significance:

Shift in approach:

- The reform-linked borrowing by states amounts to a new model of public finance in India.
- This approach marks a shift from a model of 'reforms by stealth and compulsion' to a **new model of 'reforms by conviction and incentives'**, which would be more efficient and effective.

Nudge for reforms:

- In a **country plagued by undue operational delays of schemes and reforms**, this nudge for reform is a much welcome move. Experts have suggested that without the incentive of additional funds, the enactment of the proposed policies would have taken years.

Public friendly reforms:

- The proposed reforms were both directly and indirectly linked to **improving the ease of living for the public**.

Promoting fiscal sustainability:

- This model promoted fiscal sustainability in the long run while also raising adequate resources for public welfare.

GS 3 : Economy, Science and Technology, Environment

5. Policy creep

Context:

- **Amendments suggested to the Consumer Protection (E-Commerce) Rules, 2020** by the Department of Consumer Affairs.

Background:

- **E-commerce has been witnessing tremendous growth in recent times.** The Indian e-commerce market is expected to grow to US\$ 200 billion by 2026.
- The increasing prominence of e-commerce along with a rise in associated consumer complaints indicated the **need to regulate the booming sector.**
- The Consumer Protection Act, 2019 came into force in July 2020 and the **Consumer Protection (E-commerce) Rules, 2020**, were subsequently notified.

Arguments in favour:

Regulating the e-commerce platforms:

- There have been concerns over the business practices of the leading e-commerce platforms in India.
 - They have been accused of having **pricing practices** that are skewed to favour select sellers on their platforms.
 - Their **deep discounting policies** have adversely impacted offline retailers and have been termed as **unfair trade practice.**
- The proposed amendments will further **strengthen the regulatory regime to curb the prevalent unfair trade practices.**
- The proposed amendments will bring the much-desired **transparency in the e-commerce platforms** and help prevent unfair trade practices by them.
- The ban on flash sales and deep discounting would **encourage free and fair competition in the market.**

Protecting consumer interests:

- There has been a massive increase in the number of consumer complaints against e-commerce platforms.
 - **E-commerce tops the National Consumer Helpline's complaints chart.**
- The amendments are aimed at protecting the interests of consumers.
- The **provisions on mis-selling and fall back liability** empower the customers against the e-commerce platforms to a great extent.
 - Mis-selling is selling goods and services by deliberate misrepresentation of information.

Arguments against:

Risks of over-regulation:

- The article argues that the draft e-commerce amendments are indicative of the Government's increasing keenness to exercise greater oversight over online platforms and warns that such an approach may **prove detrimental in the longer run**.
- **Overregulation risks retarding growth and job creation** in the hitherto expanding e-commerce sector.

Impact on platforms:

- The latest amendments aimed at preventing direct selling would also adversely impact several platforms that retail products supplied by vendors with arm's length ties. This could have a **detrimental impact on their functioning** thus adversely affecting not just the prospects of the company but also that of the lakhs of employees that these platforms employ.

6. Need to acknowledge the state of India's poor

Counting the number of the poor

- If the state of the Indian economy is to be repaired, we need to meticulously **count the number of the poor and to prioritise them**.
- The **World Bank \$2-a-day poverty line** might be inadequate but it would be a start and higher than the **last line proposed by the C. Rangarajan committee**.
- A survey in 2013 had said India stood at 99 among 131 countries, and with a median income of \$616 per annum, it was the lowest among BRICS and fell in the lower-middle-income country bracket.
- Since 2013 three important data points have made it clear that the **state of India's poor needs to be acknowledged** if India is to be lifted.
- The first being, **the fall in the monthly per capita consumption** expenditure of 2017-18 for the first time since 1972-73.
- Second is the fall of India in the **Global Hunger Index to 'serious hunger' category**.
- Third, health census data or the recently concluded National Family Health Survey or NFHS-5, which had worrying markers of **increased malnutrition, infant mortality and maternal health**.
- A fourth statistic, **Bangladesh bettering India's average income statistics**, must also be a reason for Indians to introspect.

Increase in number of poor in India

- In 2019, the global **Multidimensional Poverty Index** reported that **India lifted 271 million citizens out of poverty between 2006 and 2016.**
- Since then, the **International Monetary Fund, Hunger Watch, SWAN** and several other surveys show a decided slide.
- In March, the Pew Research Center with the World Bank data estimated that 'the number of poor in India, on the basis of an income of \$2 per day or less in purchasing power parity, has more than **doubled to 134 million from 60 million in just a year due to the pandemic-induced recession**'.
- In 2020, **India contributed 57.3% of the growth of the global poor.**
- This has thrown a spanner in the so far **uninterrupted battle against poverty since the 1970s.**
- Urgent solutions are needed within, and the starting point of that would be only when **we know how many are poor.**

Debate on the poverty line

- In 2011, the **Suresh Tendulkar Committee** report at a 'line' of **₹816 per capita per month** for rural India and **₹1,000 per capita per month** for urban India, calculated the poor **at 25.7% of the population.**
- The anger over the 2011 conclusions, led to the setting up of the C. Rangarajan Committee.
- In 2014, C. Rangarajan Committee estimated that the **number of poor were 29.6%**, based on persons spending below **₹47 a day** in cities and **₹32** in villages.
- The **National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector in 2004**, had concluded that **836 million Indians** still remained marginalised.
- The Commission's conclusion was ignored – **that 77% of India was marginalised** – emphasising that it was a problem of a much bigger magnitude, than the figure of 25.7% conveyed.

Why counting the poor matters?

1) Helps in forming public opinion

- Knowing the numbers and making them public makes it possible to get public opinion **to support massive and urgent cash transfers.**
- The world outside India has moved onto propose **high fiscal support, as economic rationale** and not charity.
- In India too, a dramatic reorientation would get support only once numbers are honestly laid out.

2) It helps in evaluating success of policies

- Recording the data helps to evaluate all policies on the basis of **whether they meet the needs of the majority**.
- Is a policy such as bank **write-offs of loans amounting to ₹1.53-lakh crore** last year, which helped corporates overwhelmingly, beneficial to the vast majority?
- This would be possible to transparently evaluate only when the numbers of the poor are known and established.

3) Helps in addressing the concerns of real majority

- If government data were to honestly account for the exact numbers of the poor, it may be more realistic to expect the public debate to be conducted on the concerns of the real majority.
- Such data would also help in **creating a climate that demands accountability** from public representatives.

4) To gauge the rising inequality

- India has clocked a massive rise in the market capitalisation and the fortunes of the richest Indian corporates, even as millions of Indians have experienced a massive tumble into poverty.
- To say that the stock market and the Indian economy are ‘not related’ is ingenuous.
- Indians must have the right to question whether there is a connection and if the massive rise in riches is not coincidental, but at the back of the misery of millions of the poor.
- If billionaire lists are evaluated in detail and reported upon, the **country cannot shy away from counting its poor**.

Conclusion

The massive slide into poverty in India that is clear in domestic and international surveys and anecdotal evidence must meet with an institutional response.

7. First-ever genetically modified rubber planted in Assam

A Rubber Board research farm on the outskirts of Guwahati now sports the world’s first genetically modified (GM) rubber plant tailored for the climatic conditions in the Northeast.

GM rubber

- The GM rubber has additional copies of the gene MnSOD, or manganese-containing superoxide dismutase, inserted in the plant.
- The plant was developed at the Kerala-based Rubber Research Institute of India (RRII).
- It is expected to tide over the severe cold conditions during winter – a major factor affecting the growth of young rubber plants in the region.

Why need GM rubber?

- Natural rubber is a native of warm humid Amazon forests and is not naturally suited for the colder conditions in the Northeast, which is one of the largest producers of rubber in India.
- Growth of young rubber plants remains suspended during the winter months, which are also characterized by progressive drying of the soil.
- This is the reason for the long immaturity period of this crop in the region.

What does MnSOD gene offer?

- The MnSOD gene has the ability to protect plants from the adverse effects of severe environmental stresses such as cold and drought.
- Laboratory studies conducted at the RRII showed the GM rubber plants overexpressed the MnSOD gene as expected, offering protection to the cells.
- The plant is thus expected to establish well and grow fast in the region.
- There was no risk of genes flowing from the GM rubber into any other native species, a concern often raised by environmental groups against GM plants in general.

8. Species in news: Pygmy Hogs

Few captive-bred pygmy hogs, the world's rarest and smallest wild pigs, were released in the Manas National Park of western Assam under the Pygmy Hog Conservation Programme (PHCP).

Pygmy Hogs

- The pygmy hog (*Porcula salvania*) is a native to alluvial grasslands in the foothills of the Himalayas at elevations of up to 300 m (980 ft).
- Today, the only known population lives in Assam, India and possibly southern Bhutan.
- As the population is estimated at less than 250 mature individuals, it is listed as Endangered on the IUCN Red List.

- It is designated as a Schedule I species in India under the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972, and offences against them invite heavy penalties.

About Pygmy Hog Conservation Programme (PHCP)

- The PHCP is a collaboration among Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust of UK, Assam Forest Department, Wild Pig Specialist Group of IUCN and Union Environment Ministry.
- It is currently being implemented by NGOs Aaranyak and EcoSystems India.
- Six hogs – two males and four females – were captured from the Bansbari range of the Manas National Park in 1996 for starting the breeding programme.
- The reintroduction programme began in 2008 with the Sonai-Rupai Wildlife Sanctuary (35 hogs), Orang National Park (59) and Barnadi Wildlife Sanctuary (22).

THE INDIAN EXPRESS

GS 2 : Polity, Governance, International Relations

1. Why does China consistently beat India on soft power?

What is soft power?

- **Joseph Nye**, who gave us the notion of soft power, suggests that it consists of **foreign policy, cultural and political influence**.
- Foreign policy influence comes from the **legitimacy and morality** of one's dealings with other countries.
- Cultural influence is based on **others' respect for one's culture**.
- Political influence is how much others are inspired by one's political values.
- Soft power is **difficult to measure**.

The Lowy Institute in Australia has produced various measures which correspond roughly to foreign policy influence, cultural influence and political influence.

1) India's foreign policy influence

- In **diplomatic influence**, overall, India ranks sixth and China ranks **first among 25 Asian powers**.
- On **networks**, India nearly matches China in the number of regional embassies it has but is considerably behind in the number of embassies worldwide (176 to 126).
- Multilaterally, India matches China **in terms of regional memberships**, but, crucially, its contributions to the UN capital budget are completely dwarfed by Chinese contributions (11.7 per cent to 0.8 per cent of the total).
- In surveys of foreign policy leadership, ambition, and effectiveness, China ranks first or fourth on four measures while India ranks between fourth and sixth in Asia.

2) Cultural influence

- Lowy's overall measure of **cultural influence** ranks India in fourth place and China in second place in Asia.
- Cultural influence is then divided into three elements, of which "**cultural projection**" and "**information flows**" are the most important.
- **In cultural projection**, India scores better on Google searches abroad of its newspapers and its television/radio broadcasts.
- India also exports more of its "**cultural services**" defined as "services aimed at satisfying cultural interests or needs".
- China does better on several other indicators.
- For instance, India has only nine brands in the list of the top 500 global brands whereas China lists 73.
- **On the number of UNESCO World Heritage sites**, India has **37 while China has 53**.
- Respect for the Indian passport also lags.
- Chinese citizens can travel visa-free to 74 countries while Indians can only do so to 60.
- **In terms of information flows**, in 2016-17, India hosted a mere **24,000 Asian students** in tertiary education institutions whereas China hosted 2,25,000.
- On total tourist arrivals from all over the world, India received **17 million**, while China received **63 million**.

3) Political influence

- In 2017 the two were not ranked that far apart in political influence.
- The **governance effectiveness index** shows India scoring in the top 43 per cent countries worldwide and ranked 12th and China scoring in the top 32 per cent and ranked 10th.

- On “political stability and absence of violence/terrorism”, India ranked 21st, and China ranked 15th.

Conclusion

Soft-power theorists suggest that the ability to persuade rests on the power of attraction. We in India may think we are more attractive than China. The numbers show otherwise.

2. What is Recusal of Judges?

In the last week, two Supreme Court judges have recused themselves from hearing cases relating to West Bengal.

What is the Recusal of Judges?

- Recusal is the removal of oneself as a judge or policymaker in a particular matter, especially because of a conflict of interest.
- Recusal usually takes place when a judge has a conflict of interest or has a prior association with the parties in the case.
- For example, if the case pertains to a company in which the judge holds stakes, the apprehension would seem reasonable.
- Similarly, if the judge has, in the past, appeared for one of the parties involved in a case, the call for recusal may seem right.
- A recusal inevitably leads to delay. The case goes back to the Chief Justice, who has to constitute a fresh Bench.

Rules on Recusals

- There are no written rules on the recusal of judges from hearing cases listed before them in constitutional courts. It is left to the discretion of a judge.
- The reasons for recusal are not disclosed in an order of the court. Some judges orally convey to the lawyers involved in the case their reasons for recusal, many do not. Some explain the reasons in their order.
- The decision rests on the conscience of the judge. At times, parties involved raise apprehensions about a possible conflict of interest.

Issues with recusal

- Recusal is also regarded as the abdication of duty. Maintaining institutional civilities are distinct from the fiercely independent role of the judge as an adjudicator.

- In his separate opinion in the NJAC judgment in 2015, Justice Kurian Joseph highlighted the need for judges to give reasons for recusal as a measure to build transparency.
- It is the constitutional duty, as reflected in one's oath, to be transparent and accountable, and hence, a judge is required to indicate reasons for his recusal from a particular case.

3. India-US: PASSEX

Why in News

Indian naval ships will join maritime patrol and other aircraft to participate in a **Passage Exercise or PASSEX** with the US Navy's **Ronald Reagan Carrier Strike Group** during its transit through **Indian Ocean Region (IOR)**.

- A passage exercise is **normally undertaken whenever an opportunity arises**, in contrast to pre-planned maritime drills.
- Earlier, the Indian Navy had **also conducted similar PASSEXs with the Japanese Navy and the French Navy**.

Key Points

- **About:**
 - Indian Naval Ships **Kochi** and **Teg** along with **P8I** (maritime patrol aircraft) and (Indian ship based) **MiG 29K** aircraft are participating in the PASSEX.
 - The Indian Naval warships along with **aircraft from Indian Navy and Indian Air Force (IAF)** will be engaged in joint multi-domain operations with the US Carrier Strike Group.
 - The exercise is in the IAF's Southern Air Command's area of responsibility and the IAF forces will include **Jaguars, Sukhoi-30 MKI fighters, Air-to-Air Refueller aircraft, Airborne Warning And Control System (AWACS) and Airborne Early Warning and Control (AEW&C)**.
 - High tempo operations during the exercise include **advanced air defence exercises, cross deck helicopter operations and anti-submarine exercises**.
- **Previous PASSEX with US:**
 - The Indian Navy conducted as PASSEX with the **USS Ronald Reagan in October 2020**.
 - Indian naval ships conducted another PASSEX with the **USS Nimitz in July 2020**.

- **Impact:**
 - **Establish Rule Based Order:**
 - It underscores the **shared values as partner navies, in ensuring commitment to an open, inclusive and a rule-based international order.**
 - **Increased Interoperability:**
 - It will **enhance aspects of interoperability**, nuances of international integrated maritime search and rescue operations and exchange of **best practices in the maritime airpower domain.**
 - **Counter China's Expansionism:**
 - The exercise comes a week after the Indian defence minister called for an open and inclusive order in the **Indo-Pacific region**, including the **South China Sea** at the **8th ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting (ADMM) Plus Meeting.**
 - The Indian Navy is carrying out **round-the-clock surveillance in the IOR**, which, it believes, **China will inevitably try to enter in its quest to become a global power**, just as it has laid claim to large portions of the disputed South China Sea.
- **India-US Joint Exercises:**
 - **Vajra Prahar** (Army).
 - **Yudh Abhyas** (Army).
 - **Cope India** (Air Force).
 - **Red Flag** (USA's multilateral air exercise).
 - **Malabar Exercise** (trilateral naval exercise of India, USA and Japan).

GS 3 : Economy, Science and Technology, Environment

4. Compensation for Covid deaths

The Supreme Court has reserved its verdict seeking compensation of Rs 4 lakh to the kin of those who have died of Covid-19 or related complications. The Centre has stated that state governments cannot afford to pay this, and had argued in favor of a broader approach including health interventions.

Provisions for Compensation

- Last year, the Centre declared Covid-19 as a notified disaster under the Disaster Management Act.

- Section 12(iii) of the Act says the National Authority shall recommend guidelines for the minimum standards of relief to be provided to persons affected by disaster.
- It includes “ex gratia assistance on account of loss of life as also assistance on account of damage to houses and for restoration of means of livelihood”.
- The Centre revises this amount from time to time.

What is the latest amount?

- On April 8, 2015, the Disaster Management Division of the Home Ministry wrote to all state governments and attached a revised list of “norms of assistance”.
- Under “ex gratia payment to families of deceased persons”, it specified: Rs 4 lakh per deceased person including those involved in relief operations or associated in preparedness activities.
- This is subjected to certification regarding cause of death from appropriate authority.

So, what about compensation for Covid?

- Last year the Home Ministry wrote to state governments that the central government has decided to treat it (Covid-19) as a notified disaster for the purpose of providing assistance under SDRF.
- It attached a partially modified list of items and norms of assistance.
- It did not specify payment of ex gratia to families of deceased.
- Some states have decided to pay, but not for all deaths.

How has the government responded to the petition?

- The Centre has submitted that ex gratia of Rs 4 lakh is beyond the affordability of state governments.
- It argued that if Rs 4 lakh is paid to the kin of each, it “may possibly” consume the entire amount of the State Disaster Relief Fund (SDRF).
- This would leave states with insufficient funds for organizing a response to the pandemic, or to take care of other disasters.
- The centre argued that the term ex gratia itself means the amount is not based on legal entitlement.

Way ahead

- A broader approach, which involves health interventions, social protection, and economic recovery for the affected communities would be a more prudent, responsible, and sustainable approach.

5. Why is China targeting Cryptocurrencies?

China's crackdown against cryptocurrencies, which are those that aren't sanctioned by a centralized authority and are secured by cryptography, is said to have a lot to do with the crashing of the value of cryptocurrencies.

Background

- The price of the world's most prominent cryptocurrency Bitcoin has more than halved in the last two months after hitting a peak in mid-April.
- The second-most valuable cryptocurrency, Ether, has seen a similar fall from its peak last month.

What is Cryptocurrency?

- A cryptocurrency is a form of digital asset based on a network that is distributed across a large number of computers.
- This decentralized structure allows them to exist outside the control of governments and central authorities.
- The word "cryptocurrency" is derived from the encryption techniques which are used to secure the network.
- Blockchains, which are organizational methods for ensuring the integrity of transactional data, are an essential component of many cryptocurrencies.
- Many experts believe that blockchain and related technology will disrupt many industries, including finance and law.
- Cryptocurrencies face criticism for a number of reasons, including their use for illegal activities, exchange rate volatility, and vulnerabilities of the infrastructure underlying them. However, they also have been praised for their portability, divisibility, inflation resistance, and transparency.

What has China done?

- In recent weeks, China has reportedly cracked down on crypto mining operations.
- The country has over the years accounted for a large percentage of the total crypto mining activity that takes place.
- In purpose, Bitcoin miners play a similar role to gold miners – they bring new Bitcoins into circulation.
- They get these as a reward for validating transactions, which require the successful computation of a mathematical puzzle.

- And these computations have become ever-increasingly complex, and therefore energy-intensive in recent years. Huge mining operations are now inevitable if one is to mine Bitcoins.

Why is Crypto mining booming in China?

- Access to cheap electricity has made mining lucrative in China.
- According to the Cambridge Bitcoin Electricity Consumption Index, China accounted for nearly two-thirds of the total computational power last year.

For an 'unregulated' market

- Actually, there is little change in the policy as far as China is concerned. It first imposed restrictions on cryptocurrencies way back in 2013.
- It then barred financial institutions from handling Bitcoin.
- Four years later, it barred what are called initial coin offerings, under which firms raise money by selling their own new cryptocurrencies.
- This is largely an unregulated market.

What does China want?

- An inter-ministerial committee report in India two years ago noted that in 2017, the government of China also banned trading between RMB (China's currency renminbi) and cryptocurrencies.
- Before the ban, RMB made up 90% of Bitcoin trades worldwide.
- The fact that cryptocurrencies bypass official institutions has been a reason for unease in many governments.
- Not just that. The anonymity that it offers aids in the flourishing of dark trades online.
- While many countries have opted to regulate the world of cryptocurrencies, China has taken the strictest of measures over the years.
- According to observers, the latest set of measures are to strengthen its monetary hold and also project its new official digital currency.

For a digital Yuan

- China launched tests for a digital yuan in March.
- Its aim is to allow Beijing to conduct transactions in its own currency around the world, reducing dependency on the dollar which remains dominant internationally.

6.4th Tiger Reserve in Rajasthan

Why in News

Recently, the **Ramgarh Vishdhari wildlife sanctuary** received a nod from the **National Tiger Conservation Authority's (NTCA)** technical committee to become the **4th Tiger reserve** of Rajasthan.

- This will be the **52nd Tiger Reserve of India**.
- The **Global Tiger Day**, celebrated on **29th July**, is an annual event marked to raise awareness about tiger conservation.

Project Tiger

- It was launched in **1973 with 9 tiger reserves** for conserving our national animal, the tiger.
- It is an ongoing **Centrally Sponsored Scheme** of the Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change.
- Currently, the Project Tiger coverage has increased to 51 Tiger reserves, spread out in 18 tiger range states which amounts to around 2.21% of the geographical area of our country.
- The tiger reserves are **constituted on a core/buffer strategy**. The core areas have the legal status of a national park or a sanctuary, whereas the buffer or peripheral areas are a mix of forest and non-forest land, managed as a multiple use area.
- The **NTCA was launched in 2005**, following the recommendations of the Tiger Task Force. It is a **statutory body of the Ministry**, with an overarching supervisory/coordination role, performing functions as provided in the **Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972**.
- **M-STrIPES** (Monitoring System for Tigers - Intensive Protection and Ecological Status) is an app based monitoring system, launched across Indian tiger reserves by the NTCA in 2010.

Protection Status of Tiger

- **Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972**: Schedule I
- **International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN)** Red List: Endangered.
- **Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES)**: Appendix I.

Key Points

- **Ramgarh Vishdhari wildlife sanctuary:**
 - **Location:**
 - This Sanctuary is located at a distance of 45 Km from Bundi City on Bundi-Nainwa Road near Village Ramgarh, District Bundi, Rajasthan.
 - **Established:**
 - It was notified in the Year 1982 and is spread over an area of 252.79 Sq. Km.
 - **Area of Tiger Reserve:**
 - The total area of 1,017 sq. km has been identified as the reserve area comprising two forest blocks of Bhilwara, territorial forest block of Bundi and Indargarh, which falls under the buffer zone of Ranthambore Tiger Reserve (RTR).
 - **Biodiversity:**
 - Its **flora consists of** Dhok, Khair, Salar, Khirni trees with some Mango and Ber trees.
 - The **Fauna consists of** birds and animals like Leopard, Sambhar, Wild boar, Chinkara, Sloth bear, Indian Wolf, Hyena, Jackal, Fox, deer and Crocodile.
- **Other Three Tiger Reserves:**
 - Rajasthan has three tiger reserves with over 90 big cats at **Ranthambore Tiger Reserve (RTR)** in Sawai Madhopur, **Sariska Tiger Reserve (STR)** in Alwar, and **Mukundra Hills Tiger Reserve (MHTR)** in Kota.
- **Other Protected Areas in Rajasthan:**
 - **Desert National Park, Jaisalmer**
 - **Keoladeo National Park, Bharatpur**
 - **Sajjangarh wildlife sanctuary, Udaipur**
 - **National Chambal Sanctuary** (on tri-junction of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh).

7. Great Barrier Reef

Why in News

Recently, the **UNESCO World Heritage Committee** has recommended that the Australia's Great Barrier Reef should be added to a list of **"in danger" World Heritage Sites**.

- Placement on the **"in-danger list"** is **not** considered a **sanction**.

- Some nations have their sites added to **gain international attention and help to save them.**

Key Points

- **Reason behind this Move:**
 - It was recommended to add to the list because of the **impact of climate change.**
 - Despite **Reef 2050**, the **coral reef ecosystem** has suffered three major **bleaching** events since 2015 due to **severe marine heatwaves.**
 - The **Reef 2050 Long-Term Sustainability Plan** is the **Australian and Queensland Government's** overarching framework for protecting and managing the Great Barrier Reef by 2050.
 - When corals face stress by changes in conditions such as temperature, light, or nutrients, they expel the symbiotic algae zooxanthellae living in their tissues, causing them to turn completely white. This **phenomenon** is called **coral bleaching.**
 - **Marine heatwave** is an event of anomalous warm sea surface temperatures (SST) from several days to years.
- **Repercussions:**
 - It prompted environmental groups to take aim at the Australian government's reluctance to take stronger climate action.
 - Australia, which is one of the **world's largest carbon emitters per capita**, has remained reluctant to commit to stronger climate action and has cited **jobs as a major reason to back the country's fossil fuel industries.**
 - It has **not updated its climate goals since 2015.**
- **About Great Barrier Reef:**
 - It is the **world's most extensive** and spectacular **coral reef ecosystem** composed of over 2,900 individual reefs and 900 islands.
 - The reef is located in the **Coral Sea (North-East Coast)**, off the coast of Queensland, Australia.
 - It can be seen from outer space and is the world's biggest single structure made by living organisms.
 - This reef structure is composed of and built by billions of tiny organisms, known as **coral polyps.**
 - They are made up of **genetically identical organisms** called **polyps**, which are tiny, soft-bodied organisms. At their base is a hard, protective limestone skeleton called a calicle, which forms the structure of coral reefs.
 - These polyps have **microscopic algae called zooxanthellae** living within their tissues. The corals and algae have a mutualistic (symbiotic) relationship.

- It was selected as a **World Heritage Site in 1981**.
- **Initiatives to Protect Corals:**
 - A number of global initiatives are being taken to address the issues, like:
 - **International Coral Reef Initiative**
 - **Global Coral Reef Monitoring Network (GCRMN)**
 - **Global Coral Reef Alliance (GCRA)**
 - **The Global Coral Reef R&D Accelerator Platform**
 - Similarly, the **Ministry of Environment and Forests and Climate Change (MoEF&CC), India** has included the studies on coral reefs under the **Coastal Zone Studies (CZS)**.
 - In India, the **Zoological Survey of India (ZSI)**, with help from Gujarat's forest department, is attempting a process to restore coral reefs using "**biorock**" or **mineral accretion technology**.
 - **National Coastal Mission Programme**, to protect and sustain coral reefs in the country.

Coral Reef

- **Largest Coral Reef Area:**
 - **Indonesia** has the **largest coral reef area in the world**.
 - **India, Maldives, Sri Lanka and Chagos** have the **maximum coral reefs in South Asia**.
 - The **Great Barrier Reef of the Queensland coast of Australia** is the **largest aggregation of coral reefs**.
- **Coral Reef Areas in India:**
 - India has four coral reef areas: **Gulf of Mannar, Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Lakshadweep islands** and the **Gulf of Kutch**.
- **Benefits:**
 - Protect humanity from natural calamities.
 - Provide revenue and employment through tourism and recreation.
 - Provide habitats for fishes, starfish and sea anemones.
- **Use:**
 - They are used in jewellery.
 - Coral blocks are used for buildings and road construction.
 - The lime supplied by corals is used in cement industries.
- **Threats:**
 - Due to **anthropogenic activities** such as coastal development, destructive fishing methods and pollution from domestic and industrial sewage.
 - Due to **increased sedimentation, over-exploitation** and **recurring cyclones**.

- **Coral diseases** such as **black band and white band** due to infectious microorganisms introduced by the human population that live on the coastal regions.
- **Role of Mangroves:**
 - **Mangrove forests** play a crucial role in **helping the coral reef system** by acting as filters and providing protection from **cyclones**, storms and tsunamis.

Prelims Practice Questions

1. Consider the following statements regarding North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO):

1. NATO was established by the Washington Treaty.
2. All the NATO decisions are taken by the consensus of all the 30 members of the organisation.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

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

Answer : C

Explanation

- The **North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO)** was established by the North Atlantic Treaty (**also called the Washington Treaty**) of 4th April, 1949, by the United States, Canada, and several Western European nations to provide collective security against the Soviet Union. **Hence, statement 1 is correct.**
 - It is headquartered at Brussels, Belgium.
- A "**NATO decision**" is the expression of the collective will of all 30 member countries since **all decisions are taken by consensus**. **Hence, statement 2 is correct.**
- The recently held North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) summit for the first time has explicitly described China as a security risk.

- The other two threats identified by the NATO 'declaration' are Russia and terrorism.

2. Consider the following statements regarding Delimitation:

1. The delimitation exercise is carried out by the Union Government of India.
2. As per Article 82 of the Indian Constitution, the Parliament enacts a Delimitation Act after every Census.
3. The first delimitation exercise was carried out in 1950-51.

Which of the statements given above is/are not correct?

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

Answer : A

Explanation

- Delimitation is the act of fixing or redrawing the limits or boundaries of territorial constituencies (Assembly or Lok Sabha seat) in a country or a province having a legislative body, as per the Election Commission.
 - The delimitation exercise is **carried out by an independent high-powered panel** known as the **Delimitation Commission** whose orders have the force of law and cannot be questioned by any court. **Hence, statement 1 is not correct.**
- Under **Article 82** of the Indian Constitution, the **Parliament enacts a Delimitation Act after every Census. Hence, statement 2 is correct.**
 - Under Article 170, States also get divided into territorial constituencies as per Delimitation Act after every Census.
- The **first delimitation exercise was carried out by the President** (with the help of the Election Commission) in 1950-51. **Hence, statement 3 is correct.**
 - The Delimitation Commission Act was enacted in 1952.

3. With reference to the Power Sector in India, consider the following statements:

1. Electricity is a concurrent subject in the Seventh Schedule of the Indian Constitution.

2. Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in the power sector is permitted upto 74% under automatic route.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

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

ANSWER : A

Explanation

- India's power sector is one of the most diversified in the world. Sources of power generation range from conventional sources such as coal, lignite, natural gas, oil, hydro and nuclear power to viable non-conventional sources such as wind, solar, and agricultural and domestic waste.
- India is the third-largest producer and second-largest consumer of electricity in the world.
- Electricity is a **concurrent subject** (Seventh Schedule of the Constitution). **Hence, statement 1 is correct.**
- The Ministry of Power is primarily responsible for the development of electrical energy in the country.
 - It administers the Electricity Act, 2003 and the Energy Conservation Act, 2001.
- The Government has released its roadmap to achieve 175 GW capacity in renewable energy by 2022, which includes 100 GW of solar power and 60 GW of wind power.
 - The Government is preparing a 'rent a roof' policy for supporting its target of generating 40 gigawatts (GW) of power through solar rooftop projects by 2022.
 - The Ministry of New and Renewable Energy (MNRE) is the nodal Ministry for all matters relating to new and renewable energy.
- **100% FDI (Foreign Direct Investment) is permitted under automatic route in the power sector. Hence, statement 2 is not correct.**

4. Which of the following are the components of fiscal policy?

1. Roll out of Goods and Services Tax
2. Deciding Minimum Support Prices

3. Deciding the buffer stocks of Food Grains
4. Grants to states

Select the correct answer using the codes given below:

- a. 1 and 4 only
- b. 2 and 3 only
- c. 1, 2 and 4 only
- d. 1, 2, 3 and 4

Answer : c

- Fiscal policy means the use of taxation and public expenditure by the government for stabilization or growth.
- Fiscal Policy is the means by which a governments adjusts its levels of revenue and spending in order to monitor and influence a nation's economy.

5. Jiyo Parsi Scheme is initiated by which of the following ministries?

- a. Ministry of Home Affairs
- b. Ministry of External Affairs
- c. Ministry of Culture
- d. Ministry of Minority Affairs

Answer : d

Jiyo Parsi Scheme

- The Ministry of Minority Affairs initiated the Jiyo Parsi Scheme in 2013 to check the declining Parsi population.
- The main objective of the scheme was to arrest the declining trend of the Parsi population by adopting a scientific protocol and structured interventions, in order to stabilize their population and thereby increasing the population of Parsis in India.
- The scheme also offers cash assistance to encourage Parsi couples to have children.
- The scheme is applicable to all couples, irrespective of their financial status.

6. With reference to the National Food Security Act (NFSA), consider the following statements:

1. Foodgrains under NFSA are made available to beneficiaries free of cost.
2. NFSA caters to the food demands of the families under Below Poverty Line (BPL).

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

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

Answer : D

Explanation

- NITI Aayog, through a discussion paper, has recommended reducing the rural and urban coverage under the National Food Security Act (NFSA), 2013, to 60% and 40%, respectively.
- **National Food Security Act (NFSA), 2013** was notified on 10th September, 2013. Foodgrains under NFSA are made available to **beneficiaries at subsidized prices. Hence, statement 1 is not correct.**
- NFSA aims to provide for food and nutritional security in the human life cycle approach, by ensuring access to adequate quantities of quality food at affordable prices to people to live a life with dignity.
- NFSA covers **75% of the rural population** and upto **50% of the urban population** for receiving subsidized foodgrains under Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS). Overall, NFSA caters to 67% of the total population. **Hence, statement 2 is not correct.**

Mains Practice Questions

1. Discuss the developments in the field of art and architecture during the Gupta period.

Approach:

- Give a brief introduction about Gupta period.
- Then discuss the developments in the various fields of art and architecture such as temple architecture, sculptures, numismatics, literature etc. in this period.
- Conclude accordingly.

2. Discuss why enacting appropriate land leasing laws should be given priority in India.

Approach:

- Introduce by giving a brief background on the objectives of land reform in India.
- Mention the fallouts in terms of meeting these objectives.
- Discuss the benefits of an appropriate land leasing framework.
- On the basis of aforementioned points, make a brief conclusion.

