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**MAY 2021**

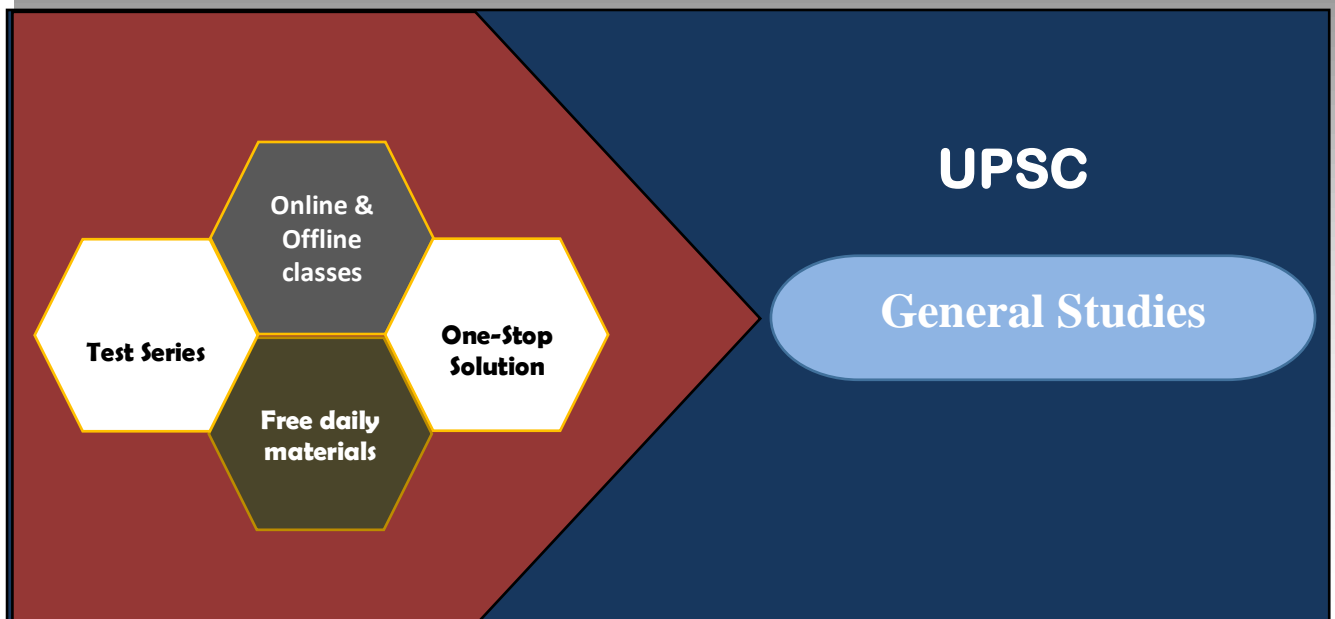
**Monthly current affairs magazine**

# **CURRENT AFFAIRS**

A MAGAZINE FOR CIVIL SERVICES PREPARATION

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



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

### **1. Yaas may become a very severe cyclonic storm: IMD**

#### Context:

- Cyclone Yaas developing in the Bay of Bengal

#### Background:

- Given India's location in the North Indian Ocean, it continues to remain vulnerable to tropical cyclones both on the east and west coast.
- The **North Indian Ocean cyclone season** occurs between April and November, with peaks in **late April to May and October to November**.
- The current pre monsoon cyclonic season of April-May had the **cyclone Tauktae** make landfall on the western coast of India.

#### Details:

- A **low pressure area** has formed over the east-central Bay of Bengal and the adjoining north Andaman Sea.
- As per the India Meteorological Department (IMD), this low pressure area is very likely to concentrate into a **depression** and further intensify into a **cyclonic storm** and **very severe cyclonic storm** in the days to come.
- The cyclone is very likely to move north-north-westwards and make **landfall on the Odisha and West Bengal coasts**.

#### Measures being taken:

- Odisha and West Bengal are reviewing the **disaster management preparedness for the impending Yaas cyclone** and taking the following measures to mitigate the impact.
  - Fishermen have been advised to return from the seas
  - Early evacuation from coastal & riverine areas to rescue shelters including cyclone & flood shelters are being undertaken
  - Deployment of State and National Disaster Response Force is taking place
  - Stocking and preparing for the relief and rehabilitation operations is being ensured
  - 24x7 control rooms have been set up for assistance to the citizens

## 2. Very severe cyclone Yaas to hit north Odisha coast

### Context:

Developments with respect to Cyclone Yaas in the Bay of Bengal.

### Background:

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## 3. Bay of Bengal, fomenting Yaas, hotter than normal for season



### Context:

- **Cyclone Yaas** expected to make landfall on the Odisha and West Bengal coastal districts.

### Background:

#### Cyclones in India:

- Cyclones in the Bay of Bengal are an annual phenomenon in the **pre monsoon period** during late April- May.
- They are attributed to **increased ocean surface temperatures** of the North Indian Ocean during this season.
- Traditionally the cyclones originating in the Bay of Bengal area have been more in number than those originating in the Arabian Sea area because of more favourable conditions for cyclone formation in the Bay of Bengal waters.
- Also the cyclones originating in the Bay of Bengal region have caused maximum damage in India given the **counter clockwise movement of these cyclones thus making landfall on the eastern Indian coastal areas**.
- About 60% of the cyclones that form in these seas make landfall in India causing significant damage and devastation.
- Example: **Amphan super cyclone** of 2020 in West Bengal, **Super cyclone of 1999** in Odisha, **Fani cyclone of 2019** in Odisha etc.
- Unlike these comparatively lower number of cyclones originating in the Arabian sea make their landfall on Indian coasts.
- However there seems to be a **change in this trend with a relative decrease in the number of cyclones in the Bay of Bengal and a rise in the Arabian Sea** as being observed in the last 4 years.
- The cyclones are an important phenomenon from a climatological point of view as these **pre monsoon cyclones are favourable for drawing in the monsoon** into the Andamans and subsequently to the Kerala coast.

### Details:

- Climate scientists say the **temperature in the North Bay of Bengal waters has reached temperatures up to 32 degrees Celsius**. This is at least two degrees warmer than what is normal for this time of the year.
  - The higher temperature will lead to more evaporation of water and result in **more intense cyclones**.

- However, given that the **distance to landfall is short**, this has prevented the cyclone from drawing the excess thermal energy from the warm waters and intensifying into an extremely severe cyclone.
  - Cyclone Yaas is predicted to make landfall as a very severe cyclone.

#### Concern with respect to storm surge:

- The storm surges are expected to be 2 -4 meters above astronomical tide levels along the West Bengal and Odisha coasts.
  - A storm surge is a **rise in sea level that occurs during tropical cyclones**. The storms produce strong winds that push the water into shore, which can lead to flooding. This makes storm surges very dangerous for coastal regions.
  - It is measured as the rise in water level above the normal tidal level, and does not include waves.
- The storm surge is a matter of concern because the **cyclone will coincide with the full moon tide** and the water level in the seas and river may rise further leading to breach of embankments.
  - Tides are the rise and fall of sea levels caused by the combined effects of the gravitational forces exerted by the Moon and the Sun, and the rotation of the Earth.
  - During the new moon and full moons, the tidal force due to the Sun reinforces that due to the Moon. **The tide's range is then at its maximum; this is called the spring tide.**

## GS 2 : Polity, Governance, International Relations

### 1. A WTO waiver on patents won't help us against covid

#### Waiver from TRIPS

- Last October, India and South Africa moved a motion at the WTO asking its council on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) to provide a waiver on intellectual property protection for pharmaceutical patents.
- Many developing countries have since supported the joint move.
- While most advanced countries, home to the world's major pharmaceutical companies, have opposed it.

- Nobel economist Joseph Stiglitz, along with activist Lori Wallach, penned an opinion piece making a case for such a waiver.

### Voluntary licensing

- Alternative to waiver could be **voluntary licensing arrangements** between pharmaceutical companies and countries that wish to make vaccine doses for their own use.
- This is exactly what has occurred in India's case, with a licensing **agreement between AstraZeneca and Serum Institute of India**.
- The recent difficulties with this arrangement are a result of India diverting some doses intended for export (or for Covax) to its domestic vaccination drive.
- But India will soon begin making other important global vaccines under similar licence arrangements, and a waiver would do nothing to speed up this process.

### Compulsory licensing

- In the event that India needs to ramp up production more than is feasible via licences from global manufacturers, there is another alternative available, **which is 'compulsory licensing'**.
- Such an approach would not permit the **export of vaccine** doses made under a compulsory licence.
- This approach should be taken by any developing country, if, for some reason, global pharmaceutical companies are unwilling to license a life-saving vaccine for domestic manufacture and distribution in that nation.

### Why TRIPS waiver won't help

- India's limiting factors are a **shortage of raw materials** and **low production capacity**, neither of which would be cured with the supposed magic bullet of a WTO waiver.
- Not only would a WTO waiver not do anything to address the real bottlenecks that constrain the global production and distribution of vaccines, it would also **set a bad precedent**.
- It is true that governments, including the US and others, have significantly subsidized or incentivized in other ways the research and development activities of private pharmaceutical companies that now hold patents for major covid vaccines.
- Yet, these governments **required the ingenuity of private enterprise to invent these vaccines**.

## Conclusion

While it may seem appealing, a WTO waiver on intellectual property protection is an inappropriate priority. It's a distraction from the heavy lifting needed to create the capacity to fight the scourge of covid.

## 2. International Labour Day

### Why in News

Every year 1<sup>st</sup> May is observed as May Day and is also known as **International Labour Day** worldwide.

- The day is observed as an occasion to **commemorate the contributions of labourers and the working class.**
- The **International Labour Organization**, a United Nations agency, works towards setting international labour standards.

### Key Points

- **History and Significance:**
  - **United States:**
    - Labour Day **has its origins in the labour union movement in the United States** in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.
      - However, the **USA and Canada celebrate Labour day on the first Monday of September, every year.**
    - Labour day was designated as a day in support of workers by trade unions and socialist groups in the memory of the **Haymarket affair of 1886 in Chicago, USA.**
      - **Haymarket Affair** was a peaceful rally in support of workers which led to a violent clash with the police, leading to severe casualties. Those who died were hailed as "Haymarket Martyrs".
    - Workers' rights violations, straining work hours, poor working conditions, low wages and child labour were the issues highlighted in the protest.
  - **Europe:**
    - May Day was **first celebrated on 1<sup>st</sup> May, 1890**, after it was declared by the first **International Congress of Socialist Parties** in Europe in July 1889.

- USSR:
  - The Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc nations **started celebrating the Labour day after the Russian Revolution, 1917.**
    - New ideologies such as **Marxism and Socialism** inspired many socialist and communist groups and they attracted peasants and workers and made them an integral part of national movement.
- **India:**
  - The first Labour's Day was celebrated in 1923 in Chennai. This day was observed by the **Labour Kisan Party of Hindustan.**
  - On this day, communist leader **Malayapuram Singaravelu Chettiar** asked the government that 1<sup>st</sup> May should be considered as a national holiday to symbolise the efforts and work of the workers.
  - This day is also known as Kamgar Divas, Kamgar Din and Antarrashtriya Shramik Divas in India.

### Constitutional Provisions Related to Labour

- Indian constitution provides numerous safeguards for the protection of labour rights. These safeguards are in the **form of fundamental rights and the Directive principle of State policy.**
- **Article 14** commands the State to **treat any person equally before the law.**
- **Article (19) (1) (c)** grants citizens the **right to form associations or unions.**
- **Article 21** promises **protection of life and personal liberty.**
- **Article 23** **prohibits forced labour.**
- **Article 24** **prohibits employment of children below the age of fourteen years.**
- **Article 39(a)** provides that the State shall **secure to its citizens equal right to an adequate means of livelihood.**
- **Article 41** provides that within the limits of its economic capacity the State shall **secure for the Right to work and education.**
- **Article 42** instructs the State to make provisions for securing just and humane conditions of work and for maternity relief.
- **Article 43** orders the State to secure a **living wage, decent conditions of work and social and cultural opportunities** to all workers through legislation or economic organisation.
- **Article 43A** provides for the **participation of workers in Management of Industries through legislation.**

### Legal Provisions

- Parliament has passed **3 labour code bills** aimed at labour welfare reforms covering more than 50 crores organized and unorganized workers in the country.
- These three Bills are
  - **Social Security Code, 2020.**
  - **Code on Occupational Safety, Health & Working Conditions Code, 2020**
  - **Industrial Relations Code, 2020**

### 3. Vande Bharat Mission: One of Top Civilian Evacuations

#### Why in News

The **Vande Bharat Mission (VBM)**, which started repatriating Indians stranded abroad due to Covid-19 and the resultant lockdowns since May 2020, has become **one of the largest evacuations of civilians by a country.**

#### Key Points

- **Vande Bharat Mission (VBM):**
  - It is the **biggest civilian evacuation exercise to bring back Indian citizens stranded abroad amidst the corona virus-induced travel restrictions.**
  - It has **surpassed the large-scale airlift of 1,77,000 people in 1990 at the onset of the Gulf War.**
  - The mission is **undergoing its 10<sup>th</sup> phase** and has **carried 32 lakh passengers approximately both inbound and outbound.**
  - **National carrier Air India**, alongwith its **budget carrier Air India Express (AIE)** carried out the bulk of air transfers under the mission.
    - **AIE used its fleet to lift agricultural products**, mainly fruits and vegetables (the most sought-after items among the NRI Indians), **to West Asian countries**, Singapore and Kuala Lumpur.
  - Besides, helping distressed rural farmers and the NRIs, the aim of the mission is to **keep the supply chain intact.**
  - While overseas Indians from as many as 93 countries have availed repatriation through the VBM, the government has entered into special travel arrangements called '**air travel bubbles**' with 18 different countries so far.
    - **Transport bubbles or air travel arrangements** are temporary arrangements between two countries aimed at restarting

- commercial passenger services when regular international flights are suspended as a result of the pandemic.
- **It allows carriers of both the countries to fly passengers either way** without any restrictions.
  - Reciprocal in nature, the bilateral pact aims to benefit airlines from both countries with faster repatriations.
  - Due to a **recent spurt in Covid-19 cases** in the country and many countries of late, **patronage has come down in the VBM flights.**
  - **Other Civilian Rescue Missions:**
    - **Evacuation from the Gulf (1990-91):**
      - Until VBM, **India's evacuation of civilians from Kuwait during the 1990-91 Gulf war** had been the world's largest evacuation exercise of civilians by air.
      - Around 1,77,000 Indians were caught in the war which left millions homeless and many dead. Air India, at that time, operated around 500 flights over two months.
    - **Operation Raahat:**
      - It was **launched by the Indian Armed Forces**, to evacuate 4,640 Indian citizens and 960 foreign nationals of 41 countries from Yemen **during the 2015 Yemen Crisis.**
      - The evacuation took place **both by sea and the air.**
    - **Operation Maitri:**
      - The rescue and relief operation was carried out by the government of India and Indian armed forces in the **aftermath of the April 2015 Nepal earthquake.**
      - The Indian Armed Forces evacuated around 5,188 persons, while nearly 785 foreign tourists were provided transit visas.
    - **Operation Safe Homecoming:**
      - It was **launched by the Indian government on 26<sup>th</sup> February, 2011** to evacuate its citizens, fleeing from the **Libyan Civil War.**
      - The air-sea operation was conducted by the Indian Navy and Air India. Around 15,000 civilians were rescued in the operation.
    - **Operation Sukoon:**
      - It was an operation **carried out by the Indian Navy** to evacuate Indian, Sri Lankan and Nepalese nationals, from the conflict zone during the **2006 Lebanon War.**
      - It was one of the largest evacuations conducted by the Indian Navy in which a total of 2,280 people were evacuated.

#### **4. Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan Border Tension**

## Why in News

Recently, a **ceasefire on the border between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan** appeared to be holding after a day of intense **fighting between the two countries** that has killed about 40 people and wounded about 175.

- **Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan** belong to the central asia region. Other countries of the region are Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.

## Key Points

- **Background:**
  - Both nations have **claimed the area around the water supply facility in Kok-Tash, a dispute dating back decades to when they were both part of the Soviet Union.**
  - The current configuration of the Kyrgyz-Tajik border is the **product of Soviet mapmakers** drawing the dividing lines for Soviet republics, after the **Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) collapsed in late 1991.**
  - The meandering boundary between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan is particularly tense as over a third of its **1,000-km length is disputed. Restrictions on access to land and water** that communities regard as theirs have often led to **deadly clashes in the past.**
- **International Response:**
  - Russia and **European Union (EU)** welcomed the ceasefire deal and emphasised the **need for a lasting and peaceful solution.**
- **Importance of Central Asia for India:**
  - **Political:**
    - India has a very wide array of interests in Central Asia covering **security, energy, economic opportunities etc.**
    - Security, stability and prosperity of Central Asia is **imperative for peace and economic development of India.**
    - Central Asia serves as a **land bridge between Asia and Europe, making it geopolitically axial for India.**
    - Both **India and Central Asian Republics (CARs)** share many **commonalities and perceptions** on various regional and world issues and can play a crucial role in providing regional stability.
  - **Economic:**
    - The region is **rich in natural resources** such as petroleum, natural gas, antimony, aluminum, gold, silver, coal and uranium which **can be best utilized by Indian energy requirements.**



- Central Asia has **huge cultivable areas lying barren** and without being put to any productive use, offering enormous opportunity for cultivation of pulses.
- CARs are fast getting linked to the global market for production, supplies of raw materials and services. They are also increasingly getting integrated into the **East-West Trans-Eurasian transit economic corridors**.
- **Indian Initiatives:**
  - India intends **expansion of International North South Transport Corridor (INSTC)** to Afghanistan and Uzbekistan.
    - It will act as a vital gateway to access Eurasian markets and optimally operationalize its use, requiring a Central Asian state joining the project as a direct stakeholder.
  - **India-Central Asia Dialogue:**
    - India has proposed setting up of 'India-Central Asia Development Group' to take forward development partnership between India & Central Asian countries.
    - This group will help India to expand its footprints in the resource-rich region amid China's massive inroads and to fight terror effectively, including in Afghanistan.

## India-Kyrgyzstan

- **Political:**
  - India has enjoyed **strong bilateral ties with Kyrgyzstan since 1991**.
  - India was **one of the first countries to establish diplomatic ties with Kyrgyzstan in 1992**.
- **Culture & Economic:**
  - **Since 1992, the two countries have many agreements**, including on Culture, Trade and Economic Cooperation, Civil Aviation, Investment Promotion and Protection, Avoidance of Double Taxation, Consular Convention etc.
- **Military:**
  - In 2011, the joint '**Khanjar**' series of exercises was started.
- **Indian Diaspora:**
  - In Kyrgyzstan, about **9,000 Indian students** are studying medicine in various medical institutions in the country. Also, **there are many businessmen living in Kyrgyzstan** who are involved in trade and several other services there.
- **Strategic:**
  - The Kyrgyz leaderships have been **largely supportive of India's stand on Kashmir**.

- They also support India's bid for a permanent seat at the **United Nations Security Council (UNSC)**.

## India-Tajikistan

- **Political:**
  - India and Tajikistan elevated bilateral relations to the level of a **Strategic Partnership in 2012**.
  - Tajikistan supported India's membership to the **Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)** and also permanent membership of an expanded UNSC.
  - India supported Tajikistan's accession to the **World Trade Organization** in 2013.
- **Culture & Economic:**
  - Trade between two sides is **not to expectations despite efforts from both countries, due to more transit time and lack of readily accessible trade routes**.
  - Despite limitations, trade in food processing, mining, pharmaceuticals, textiles, skill development, science & technology, Information Technology, culture and tourism are continued between two countries.
- **India's Assistance:**
  - India delivered **major food assistance** in 2001-02. To overcome a crisis caused by an unprecedented harsh winter in January-February **2008**, **India gave a grant of USD 2 million** (USD 1 million as cash assistance and USD 1 million in kind, such as power cables, generators and pump sets).
  - India provided **2 million doses of oral polio vaccine** through the **United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)** in November 2010.
  - In March 2018, India gifted **10 Russian-made ambulances** to various regions of Tajikistan drawing substantial media coverage and appreciation from high offices.
- **Indian Diaspora:**
  - The **total number of Indians is estimated at about 1550**, out of which more than 1250 are students.

## Way Forward

- Geography has placed central asia at the nexus of crucial political and economic transformations for centuries. With the actualization of the **Belt and Road Initiative, India's Connect Central Asia policy**, and the EU's new Central Asia strategy, the 21st century could possibly be the most decisive period for the region.

- Stemming from its historic cultural and economic bonds, **India is now well placed to take a more active role in the development of the region.** India's growing global visibility and key contributions to multilateral forums like the SCO have catapulted India from an observer into a critical stakeholder in the region.
- As India looks beyond its borders, **Central Asia provides India with the right platform to leverage its political, economic and cultural connections to play a leading role in Eurasia.**

### 5. No access to images of our nuclear sites: Iran

#### Context:

Iran's Parliament speaker said that international inspectors may **no longer access surveillance images of the Islamic Republic's nuclear sites.**

#### Details:

- The latest development has led to **escalating tensions amid diplomatic efforts in Vienna to save the Iran nuclear accord** with world powers.
- It underscored **more hurdles for the U.S. and others to reach terms with Iran.**
- The Islamic Republic is already **enriching and stockpiling uranium at levels far beyond those allowed by its 2015 nuclear deal - Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action.**

#### Note:

- **Iran's parliament** in December 2020 **approved a bill that would suspend part of U.N. inspections of its nuclear facilities** if European signatories did not provide relief from oil and banking sanctions by February 2021.
- The IAEA had struck a three-month deal with Iran to have it hold the surveillance images.
- However, Iran had threatened to delete them later if no deal had been reached.

## 6. On N. Korea, Biden to chart his own course

### Context:

- U.S. administration officials have completed a **review of U.S. policy toward North Korea**

### Background:

- The U.S. considers **North Korea nuclearization** as one of the greatest and most vexing national security threats facing the U.S. and its allies and seeks to stop North Korea's nuclear programme.

### Details:

- The U.S. administration would seek a **middle ground between Mr. Trump's "grand bargain" and Mr. Obama's "strategic patience" approaches.**
  - **President Barack Obama's dual-track policy** involved keeping engagement open for North Korea's good behaviour while seeking to impose sanctions for its bad behaviour.
- While the policy goal continues to remain the complete de-nuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula, the new administration is trying to set the stage for **incremental progress**, in which denuclearisation steps by the North would be met with corresponding actions, including sanctions relief, from the U.S.

## 7. U.S. begins final phase of Afghan pullout

### Context:

- The final phase of ending America's war in Afghanistan formally began with the **withdrawal of the last U.S. and NATO troops.**

### Background:

- **The U.S. and its NATO allies went into Afghanistan in October 2001** to hunt the al-Qaeda perpetrators of the **9/11 terrorist attacks** who lived under the protection of the country's Taliban rulers.
- The Taliban was defeated and al-Qaeda fighters and their leader, Osama bin Laden, were on the run.

### Details:

- The U.S. President Joe Biden had set May 1 as the official start of the withdrawal of the remaining U.S. troops and NATO soldiers.

#### U.S.'s stand:

- The U.S. claims that its initial mission was accomplished when U.S. Navy SEALs killed bin Laden in his hideout in Pakistan.
- The **al-Qaeda has been degraded** and is on the wane.
- The **terrorist threat has “metastasised” into a global phenomenon** that cannot be contained by focussing only on one country like Afghanistan.
- The U.S. is trying to keep up its part of **Peace deal with the Taliban** signed in February 2020, which said that it would withdraw all its troops from Afghanistan by May 1.

#### Concerns:

- The period since 2001, there have been over 47000 Afghanistan civilians killed. Millions more have been displaced inside Afghanistan or have fled to Pakistan, Iran and Europe.
- **Peace talks between the Taliban and Afghan government have made very little progress.** Afghanistan's security forces are expected to come under **increasing pressure from the Taliban** after the withdrawal if no peace agreement is reached in the interim.
- There has been **continuing violence in Afghanistan** despite the historic February 2020 deal. The terrorist attacks have continued.

### 8. CEC moves SC against Madras HC's comments

#### Context:

- The **Chief Election Commissioner of India has filed a special leave petition in the Supreme Court** seeking legal protection against any action based on the oral comments being attributed to the judges of the Madras High Court on the Election Commission and its officials.

#### Special leave petition

- **The Constitution of India under Article 136** vests the Supreme Court of India, with a special power to grant special leave, to appeal against any judgment or order or decree in any matter or cause, passed or made by any Court/tribunal in the territory of India (except military tribunal and court martial).

- It is to be used in case any substantial constitutional question of law is involved, or gross injustice has been done.
- It is discretionary power vested in the Supreme Court of India and the court may in its discretion refuse to grant leave to appeal.

### Background:

#### Madras High Court judge oral comments:

- During the hearing of elections-related cases, the concerned bench of the Madras High Court has been reported to have made some oral comments against the Election commission and its officials, portraying them as responsible for the surge in the COVID-19 pandemic.
- It has also been reported that the judge called for concerned officers to be put up for murder charges.
- The ECI has said the oral observations have led to the filing of a criminal complaint against the officer(s) of the Election Commission of India.

#### EC petition in Madras High Court:

- Following the reports in the media on the oral comments, the Election Commission tried to obtain an order from the Madras High Court to gag the media from reporting oral observations made by judges. The High Court, however, refrained from passing any such order.

#### Details:

- The Chief Election Commissioner of India has appealed to the Supreme Court against the oral comments.
- The special leave petition urges the top court to direct the police not to register cases for murder against Election Commission officials or take any coercive action on the basis of media reports on oral observations attributed to the High Court judges.

#### EC's stand:

#### Impact on the democratic process:

- The EC argues that given the derogatory nature of the oral comments, it **would tarnish the image of the Election Commission** (Constitutional body). The oral comments would impact or **lower the faith of the masses in the poll body and the democratic process.**

#### Against principle of natural justice:

- The petition claims that the Bench of the HC should have given the ECI an opportunity to place the entire factual position on record before making the allegations orally. It amounted to a violation of the principles of natural justice. The ECI has said the HC should have refrained from making such **allegations without evidence.**

## 9. Public buildings and fire safety rules

### Context:

- The recent **fires in hospital buildings** at Bharuch in Gujarat, Virar a suburb of Mumbai, and Mumbra near Thane.

### Background:

- Fires occur in many public buildings in India every year, killing a large number of people and injuring many.
- **The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) notes that 330 people died in commercial building fires in 2019.**

### Reasons for the fires:

- **Electrical faults** are cited as the leading cause of fires in most public buildings.
- **Hospital ICUs (intensive care units)** are a great fire risk because they are oxygen-suffused.

### Fire safety compliance in public buildings:

#### National Building Code of India:

- The National Building Code of India is the main standard set for fire safety compliance in public buildings.
  - Part 4 of the National Building Code deals with Fire and Life Safety
- The **NBC recommends the location of buildings** by type of use in specific zones to ensure that industrial and hazardous structures do not coexist with residential, institutional, office and business buildings. It also specifies the technical requirements for special buildings.
- The code provides **specifications and guidelines for design of buildings and use of certified fire-resistant materials** that reduce the threat of fires.
  - It also stipulates the **compulsory incorporation of technologies to sound alerts in case of a fire and also fire threat reduction**

**technologies.** Example: Automatic fire detection and alarm system, down-comer pipelines connected to a roof tank, dry riser pipelines that fire-fighters can use to douse upper floors, automatic sprinklers and water sprays, fireman's lift, fire barriers, escape routes, markings etc.

- These measures can avert deadly fires, giving occupants sufficient time to exit safely.

### NDMA guidelines:

- The **National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA)** has stipulated requirements for fire safety in public buildings, including hospitals, which incorporate elements of the NBC, besides design guidelines on maintaining minimum open safety space, protected exit mechanisms, dedicated staircases, and crucial drills to carry out evacuations.

### State laws:

- **Maharashtra has a Fire Prevention and Life Safety Measures Act** since 2008. Section 3 of the Act makes the provisions of the NBC mandatory and Schedule I of the State's law is borrowed from the Code.
- In Kerala, obtaining an NOC [no-objection certificate] from the fire department for hospitals requires furnishing exhaustive information on design and infrastructure. The rules prescribe fire fighting equipment and installations that meet "Indian Standards".

### Concerns:

#### Recommendatory nature of NBC:

- As per the Union Home Ministry's Directorate-General for Fire Services, Civil Defence & Home Guards, **the National Building Code (NBC), published by the Bureau of Indian Standards, is a "recommendatory document"**, and States have been asked to incorporate it into their local building bylaws, making the recommendations a "mandatory requirement".
- However, the states aren't strictly following these regulations while preparing their own laws.

#### Scope for exemptions:

- Notably the NBC says that for various types of buildings, "in case of practical difficulty or to avoid unnecessary hardship, without sacrificing reasonable safety, **local head, fire services may consider exemptions from the NBC.**
- This could lead to **watering down of safety measures** in lieu of bribes from the approval seeking entities.



### Under capacity of state administration:

- Despite the existence of a state law in Maharashtra, reports in the wake of recent fire accidents indicate that the authorities have been unable to keep up with inspection requirements for thousands of buildings.
- The **States lack the manpower to inspect and ensure compliance with safety codes**, including the NBC even though it is mandatory.

### Laxity on the part of states:

- State governments are widely criticised for **being lax with building safety laws and for failing to equip public buildings with modern fire safety technology**.
  - A Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) report for the period 2010 to 2015 noted that in Maharashtra, a physical inspection of 53 government buildings/hospitals/educational institutions/commercial establishments in eight selected MCs [municipal corporations] revealed that only fire extinguishers were installed in 11 of 53 buildings and the remaining 42 buildings were not equipped with any of the fire-fighting installations.
- Though fire safety rules exist in every State, but the provisions of the Code are ignored in practice, and even **mandatory certifications do not reflect compliance**.

### Measures being taken:

- As per the central government's statement in parliament, a Fire Safety Committee conducts periodical audits on fire installation, heating, ventilation and air-conditioning, electrical sub-stations and other electrical equipment in the Union government's hospitals.
- The Health Ministry has circulated strict guidelines in September 2020 stipulating **third-party accreditation for fire safety** and calling for a **fire response plan** to be mandatorily in place.
- In December 2020, the Supreme Court directed all States to carry out **fire safety audits** of dedicated COVID-19 hospitals.

### Recommendations:

- The state should also consider mandating **heavy fire liability insurance for all public buildings**, which would offer protection to occupants and visitors and also bring about external inspection of safety.
- Fire department professionals have earlier demanded **third-party audits by licensed professionals**. This they feel would apart from addressing the under

capacity of the state to ensure compliance will also address the laxity on the part of state administration.

## 10. U.S. clears sale of six P-8I patrol aircraft to India

### Context:

- The U.S. State Department has approved the proposed sale of P-8I patrol aircraft and related equipment to India.

### Details:

- P-8I is a **long-range, multi-mission maritime patrol aircraft** manufactured by Boeing for the Indian Navy. It is a **variant of the P-8A Poseidon** operated by the US Navy.
- The P-8I aircraft is designed to protect the vast coastline and territorial waters of India. It can conduct **anti-submarine warfare**, intelligence, maritime patrol, and surveillance and reconnaissance missions.

## 11. A 'One Health' approach that targets people, animals

The article analyses how the battle against COVID-19 could be used as an opportunity to meet **India's 'One Health' targets**.

### The 'One Health' approach:

- The World Veterinary Day (April 24) discussions focused on acknowledging the **interconnectedness of animals, humans, and the environment, an approach referred to as "One Health"**.
- In 1856, the father of modern pathology, Rudolf Virchow, emphasised that **there are mostly no dividing lines between animal and human medicine**.
- The concept of 'One Health' becomes more relevant as the world continues to grapple with the COVID-19 pandemic.
- The transboundary impact of viral outbreaks in recent years such as the **Nipah virus, Ebola, Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) and Avian Influenza** has further reinforced the need for us to **consistently document the linkages between the environment, animals, and human health**.

### Diseases spreading across the species barrier:

- Studies indicate that **more than two-thirds of existing and emerging infectious diseases are zoonotic**.
  - Zoonotic diseases are those which **can be transferred between animals and humans, and vice versa**.
  - The pathogen in question **originates in any life form but circumvents the species barrier**.
- Another category of diseases, **anthropozoonotic infections get transferred from humans to animals**.

### India's framework, plans:

- **India's 'One Health' vision derives its blueprint from the agreement between the tripartite-plus alliance** comprising the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE), the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) – a global initiative supported by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the **World Bank under the overarching goal of contributing to 'One World, One Health'**.
- India established a **National Standing Committee on Zoonoses** as far back as the 1980s, **for keeping with the long-term objectives**.
- In 2021, funds were sanctioned for setting up a **'Centre for One Health' at Nagpur**.
- The Department of Animal Husbandry and Dairying (DAHD) **has launched several schemes to mitigate the prevalence of animal diseases since 2015**, with a funding pattern along the lines of 60:40 (Centre: State); 90:10 for the Northeastern States, and 100% funding for Union Territories.
- DAHD will also **establish a 'One Health' unit** within the Ministry.
- **13,343 crore** have been sanctioned for **Foot and Mouth disease and Brucellosis control**, under the **National Animal Disease Control Programme**.
- The government is also working to **revamp programmes that focus on capacity building for veterinarians**.
- It is **upgrading the animal health diagnostic system** such as **Assistance to States for Control of Animal Diseases (ASCAD)**.
- There is **increased focus on vaccination against livestock diseases and backyard poultry**.
- DAHD has partnered with the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare in the National Action Plan for **Eliminating Dog Mediated Rabies**. This initiative is for sustained **mass dog vaccinations** and public education to render the country free of rabies.

### Challenges in achieving targets under 'One Health' vision:

- Veterinary manpower shortages.
- Lack of information sharing between human and animal health institutions.
- Inadequate coordination on food safety at slaughter, distribution, and retail facilities.

#### Way Forward:

- WHO estimates that rabies (a zoonotic disease) costs the global economy approximately \$6 billion, annually. Considering that **97% of human rabies cases in India are attributed to dogs**, interventions for disease management in dogs are considered crucial.
- Scientists have observed that **many of the 1.7 million viruses circulating in wildlife are zoonotic**.
  - This implies that unless there is timely detection, India risks facing many more pandemics in times to come.
- There is a **need for consolidating existing animal health and disease surveillance systems** such as the **Information Network for Animal Productivity and Health** and the **National Animal Disease Reporting System**.
- **Best-practice guidelines for informal market and slaughterhouse operation** and creating **mechanisms to operationalise 'One Health'** at every stage down to the village level must be developed.
- **Awareness generation and increased investments toward meeting 'One Health' targets** is the need of the hour.

## 12. Myanmar ethnic guerrillas say they shot down helicopter

### Context:

An **ethnic rebel group (Kachin Independence Army) in northern Myanmar** said it shot down a government military helicopter during heavy fighting over a strategic position.

### Details:

- The Kachin are one of several ethnic minorities who have allied themselves with the nationwide protest movement against the military's ouster of the elected government of Aung San Suu Kyi, who remains in detention.
- It would be the first aircraft shot down during recent hostilities between the government and ethnic guerrilla armies.

- Government offensive is underway against the **Kachin and the Karen (another ethnic minority in eastern Myanmar)** that maintains its own armed force and also has been the target of airstrikes.
- The fighting in Kachin and Karen states has displaced more than 45,000 villagers.

### 13.7 Myanmar refugees can approach UNHCR: HC

#### Context:

The **High Court of Manipur** allowed **seven Myanmar nationals**, who entered India secretly following the military coup in the country, to travel to New Delhi to seek protection from the **United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees**.

#### Details:

- Though **India is not a party to the UN Refugee Conventions**, the court observed that the **country is a party to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights of 1966**.
- It noted that the far-reaching and multitude **protection afforded by Article 21 of the Indian Constitution encompasses the right of non-refoulement**.
  - **Non-refoulement** is the principle under international law that **a person fleeing from persecution from his own country should not be forced to return**.

#### Note:

- Thousands of other Myanmar nationals are taking shelter in the bordering villages of Manipur without any support and protection apart from the hospitality and warmth of the poor villagers.
- **India and Myanmar share a 1,643-km border** and people on either side have familial ties.
- People including policemen and women from Myanmar have fled to India, following a military crackdown.

### 14. Provide food, rations to stranded workers: SC

#### Context:

- A two judge bench of the Supreme Court is hearing a case on **the plight of the migrant labourer families during the second wave of the pandemic.**

### Background:

- The lockdowns in several states have left many migrant workers **unemployed.**
- The loss of jobs and incomes has **pushed a large proportion of the population into poverty and nutritional insecurity.**

### Details:

- Noting the difficulties being faced by the migrant labour population, the bench has emphasized the need for immediate government support for the stranded migrant labourer families.
- It has directed the concerned authorities to undertake the **distribution of dry rations and cooked food** and also explore the proposals to provide life support for migrant workers.

### Important observations of the bench:

#### *Lack of national database on migrant workers:*

- The Court lamented the **inordinate delay in completing a national database to identify and register migrant workers.**
- Such a database would make it easier for the government to identify and provide essential support and benefits to the migrant workers under its different schemes. The lack of proper registration and identity cards would render the implementation of welfare schemes difficult on the ground level.
- The bench impressed upon the Central government and the State Governments to complete the process of registration of organised workers as early as possible.
- The court noted that the immediate handing out of dry rations and cooked food during the second wave should not depend on the completion of registration of workers and the database.

#### *Need to ensure inclusion of even those without ration cards:*

- Noting that the **central government's Atmanirbhar scheme** ensured providing of dry rations only to migrant workers covered under the Food Security Act, that is, people with ration cards, the court observed that the unorganised labourers, wandering from one place of work to another in mega cities, could not be expected to have ration cards.

- In this direction, the SC has asked the States to file affidavits indicating the mechanism by which the states plan to **distribute dry ration to migrant workers who do not possess a ration card**.
- The Bench directed that **“wide publicity” should be given to welfare schemes** for migrant workers, including locations of community kitchens, so that needy persons would benefit.

#### *Cash transfers:*

- Despite the potential advantage of a direct cash transfer to the migrant labourers, the court refused to entertain the plea to direct States to provide direct cash transfers to migrant workers, saying this was a **matter of policy concerning individual States or UTs**.
  - Direct cash transfers would allow the destitute workers to purchase essentials.
  - Given that such money would generate demand in the economy, it is bound to help in economic revival as well.

### **15. Won't limit functions till new data law: WhatsApp**

#### **Context:**

- Facebook-owned WhatsApp has told the government that it will not limit functionality for users and will only continue reminding the users about the **privacy policy update** until the **Personal Data Protection law** comes into effect.

#### **Background:**

- The government of India had sent a notice to WhatsApp asking it to withdraw the controversial update to its privacy policy

#### **Background:**

Whatsapp has come up with a new privacy policy in January 2021. In this new policy, WhatsApp made two significant changes which are:

- Almost all the data of the users will now be shared with Facebook and all other associates of the company. It not only means that WhatsApp is sharing the data with the parent company but also with the associates.
  - As a user, one does not have any idea who is going to have access to his/her data.

- Whatsapp is only making sure that the chats and calls are safe and end to end encrypted.
- Other than that, each and every piece of information will be shared which includes the locational data, IP address of the user, business name of the user, personal information of the user, etc.
- This is totally against the privacy guaranteed by the Constitution under Article 21.
- The second change is the discriminatory nature of this privacy policy. This type of data collection or data sharing policy is not allowed in European countries because they have Global Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) under which privacy of residents of the European Union is protected.

### **Indian Government's reaction to this new privacy policy:**

- The Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology sent a notice to WhatsApp asking the company to withdraw its latest privacy policy update. The Ministry said that "We have a sovereign responsibility to protect the rights and interests of Indian citizens. The government will consider various options available under the law."
- The IT Ministry said that changes to the privacy policy undermine the values of informational privacy, data security, and user choice for Indian users and harms the rights and interests of Indian citizens.
- This is the second communication by the IT Ministry to WhatsApp asking to withdraw its controversial privacy policy. In January, the Ministry had written to Whatsapp, asking that the latest privacy and policy update be withdrawn.
- In the new notice sent, the IT Ministry reiterated the "discriminatory" treatment meted out to Indian WhatsApp users compared to those in Europe.
- "Many Indian citizens depend on WhatsApp to communicate in everyday life. It is not just problematic, but also irresponsible, for WhatsApp to leverage this position to impose unfair terms and conditions on Indian users, particularly those that discriminate against Indian users vis-à-vis users in Europe," the new notice reads.
- The Competition Commission of India is also looking into the privacy policy unveiled by WhatsApp.

### **Whatsapp's argument on the notice:**

- Despite the threat of legal action and some strong observations by the Ministry, WhatsApp seems undeterred.



- Apart from this, the company has also said that a majority of its users have already accepted the new privacy policy, but the company refused to specify the exact number.
- According to Whatsapp, for regular WhatsApp users, the new update doesn't mean anything. There is end-to-end encryption for chats and calls so that the personal conversation will remain private.

### **Status of Privacy Law in India:**

- In Justice K. S. Puttaswamy (Retd) Vs Union of India case, the Supreme Court of India said that the Right to Privacy is a fundamental right under Article 21. Read more on the Puttaswamy Case.
- The B.N.Srikrishna committee framed the draft of the Personal Data Protection Bill. The data protection bill is pending in parliament.

### **Why do these companies have the edge to introduce such policies in India?**

- Lack of dedicated privacy law has given an opportunity to such tech giants to ignore privacy-related concerns. When the government of the country is not serious about enacting such laws, and the government is not sure about how much privacy should be maintained, the companies have an edge to present before various courts to defend themselves.
- Therefore, we can say that these companies are taking advantage of such loopholes present in the system to monetize and expand their businesses by using the data of the users.

### **Way Forward:**

- Strict laws, whether it is based on the model of GDPR of European countries or not, should be enacted in India to protect the data of the Indian users.
- Users should also resist such policies which are discriminatory and harmful to their privacy. People can switch to other platforms such as Signal, which is a rival of Whatsapp.

### **Conclusion:**

- The people of India and the government should stand united against such tech giants who want to use the personal data of the people to monetize their businesses. Parliament should enact data protection laws to hold such corporations accountable.

## 16. G7 seeks common front on China

### Context:

The Group of Seven wealthy democracies discussed **how to form a common front towards an increasingly assertive China** at the Foreign Ministers' first in-person talks in two years.

### Key Areas of Discussion:

- The focus was on the **nuclear programmes of Iran and North Korea**.
- The G7 also discussed **China, whose growing military and economic clout and willingness to exert its influence at home and abroad have increasingly unnerved Western democracies**.
- The U.S secretary of state pledged robust cooperation with Britain in pressuring China over the **Xinjiang region** and over a **clampdown against civil rights in Hong Kong**.
  - The **nations of the G7** which also include Canada, France, Germany, Italy and Japan mostly share **concerns about China** but some have different approaches.
  - **Japan has historic tensions with China** but has held off on joining Western nations with sanctions, **cautious about inflaming relations with its trading partner**.
- The Ministers also discussed the **spiralling crisis in Myanmar** and **climate change** among other topics.

### G7

- The G7 or the Group of 7 is a group of the seven most advanced economies as per the International Monetary Fund (IMF).
- The seven countries are **Canada, the USA, UK, France, Germany, Japan and Italy**.

## 17. Supply oxygen or face contempt: HC to Centre

### Context:

The Delhi High Court has directed the Centre to show cause why contempt should not be initiated against it for failing to comply with orders to supply oxygen to Delhi for COVID-19 patients.

### Background:

In the backdrop of the oxygen crisis and other COVID-19 related issues that Delhi was grappling with, a **Supreme Court order directed the Centre to supply 700 MT oxygen daily to Delhi**, followed by a **direction by the Delhi High Court**.

### Details:

The Delhi High Court has asserted that the **Centre would face contempt if its orders are not followed**.

### Contempt of court

- Contempt of court is a concept that seeks **to protect judicial institutions from motivated attacks and unwarranted criticism**, and as a **legal mechanism to punish those who lower its authority**.
- Being impolite to legal authorities in the courtroom, or rebelliously failing to follow a court order may draw Contempt of Court proceedings.

### What are the kinds of contempt of court?

- The law codifying contempt classifies it as **civil and criminal**.
- **Civil contempt** is committed when **someone wilfully disobeys a court order, or wilfully breaches an undertaking given to court**.
- **Criminal contempt** consists of three forms:
  - Words, written or spoken, signs and actions that **scandalise or tend to scandalise or lower or tends to lower the authority of any court**.
  - **Prejudices or interferes with any judicial proceeding**.
  - **Interferes with or obstructs the administration of justice**.

### What is the statutory basis for contempt of court?

- When the Constitution was adopted, contempt of court was made one of the **restrictions on freedom of speech and expression**.
- Separately, **Article 129** of the Constitution conferred on the **Supreme Court the power to punish contempt of itself**. **Article 215** conferred a corresponding power on the **High Courts**.
- The **Contempt of Courts Act, 1971**, gives **statutory backing** to the idea.

## **18. A CT scan for COVID merits a word of caution**

### Context:

- The widespread use of **computerised tomography (CT) scans** of the thorax as a diagnostic test for the treatment of the novel coronavirus pandemic.

### Background:

- In clinical medicine, diagnostic tests play three important functions:
  - **Diagnosis** (what is the disease?)
  - **Etiognosis** (what caused a disease?)
  - **Prognosis** (how will the disease evolve?)

### CT scan:

- A computerized tomography scan (CT scan) is a medical imaging technique used in radiology to get detailed images of the body noninvasively for diagnostic purposes.
- It **uses computers and rotating X-ray machines** to create cross-sectional images of the body.
- These images provide **more detailed information than normal X-ray images**. They can show the soft tissues, blood vessels, and bones in various parts of the body.

### Arguments against the widespread use of CT scans:

#### **Inaccuracy in diagnosis:**

- Various studies based on available data note that a chest CT is likely to **diagnose only 62% of all individuals having COVID-19, making it a relatively inaccurate test for diagnosis**.
- A normal CT chest does not exclude COVID-19, and, therefore, should not be a reason to come out of isolation, especially when the CT is done very early in the disease.

#### **Inaccuracy in etiognosis:**

- Studies have found that when radiologists convincingly labelled a CT pattern as being consistent with COVID-19 disease, they **mislabeled 20% of those who did not have the disease as having COVID-19**, getting the etiognosis wrong in a significant proportion of individuals. Thus the CT scans have not been very accurate in deciphering the cause of an abnormal CT scan.
- Telling someone who does not have COVID-19 that they do have the disease has serious implications, leaving the **real diagnosis undetected**, and subjecting the individual to the psychosocial consequences of the knowledge that she/he has the disease.

### **Possibility of misguiding prognostication:**

- CT scans are being prescribed for prognostication.
  - The severity of lung involvement as seen on a CT is reflective of the status of the lungs at that point in time and based on that treatments are being decided.
  - Intensivists have on occasion used CT scans to optimise ventilator strategies for individuals with severe COVID-19 disease.
- However it is to be noted that lung involvement is a dynamic process, i.e., a limited involvement at an early stage could progress with time to severe involvement. Thus the **low lung involvement in the CT scans done in the early stages of the diseases could misguide the doctors** into a false sense of safety and thus affect treatment processes.

### **Limited usefulness:**

- CT scans are being touted as being a monitoring test that provides unique information that cannot be obtained by easier means.
- However, given the fact that a CT scan is unlikely to give a treating physician more information than a **simple tool such as an oximeter**, CT scans can in fact be avoided altogether in people with mild symptoms.

### **Risks:**

#### *Cancer:*

- One of the major concerns associated with the widespread use of CT is the associated **increased radiation exposure** incurred by patients. Various studies have indicated that some proportion of **cancer cases can be attributable to the radiation** from CT studies.
  - A study published in The New England Journal of Medicine in 2007 postulated that “0.4% of all cancers in the United States may be attributable to the radiation from CT studies”, and further speculated that the current estimate could be in the range of 1.5%-2%.
- In addition to this risk to the individual undergoing the scan, there are risks to radiology technicians, staff and doctors that need to be accounted for.

#### *Potential for spread of COVID-19:*

- CT scanners need to be kept in **closed air-conditioned spaces**. The risk of transmission of the coronavirus at such centres cannot be ruled out.

### **Conclusion:**

- Going by data and the risk factors, the widespread use of CT scan in diagnosing infectious disease needs to be questioned.
- The author calls for more informed decisions on the use of CT scans and argues that they should be the exception, not the norm.

### 19. Maratha quota unconstitutional, violates right to equality, says SC

#### Context:

A five-judge Constitution Bench of the Supreme Court unanimously declared the Maharashtra State Reservation for Socially and Educationally Backward Classes (SEBC) Act of 2018, unconstitutional.

- The Maharashtra law provides reservation benefits to the Maratha community **taking the quota limit in the State in excess of 50%**.
- The law granted reservation to the Maratha community in admissions and government jobs in the state.

#### Details:

- The Bench, led by Justice Ashok Bhushan, found there were **no “exceptional circumstances” or “extraordinary situation” in Maharashtra**, which required the State government to **break the 50% ceiling limit** to bestow quota benefits on the Maratha community.
- All five judges agreed that the **Marathas are a dominant forward class** and are **in the mainstream of national life**. The above situation is not extraordinary.
- The **SC struck down the findings of the Justice M.G. Gaikwad Commission**, which led to the enactment of the **Maratha quota law**, and set aside the Bombay High Court judgment which validated the **Maharashtra State Reservation for Socially and Educationally Backward Classes (SEBC) Act of 2018**.

#### State Government’s Argument:

- The state government's argument was that **since the population of the backward class is 85% and the reservation limit is only 50%**, an increase in reservation limit would qualify as an **extraordinary circumstance**.
- **All five judges disagreed with this argument.**

### Supreme Court Verdict:

- The High Court, in June 2019, reduced the quantum of reservation for Marathas from the 16% recommended by the Gaikwad Commission to 12% in education and 13% in employment.
  - The Supreme Court concluded that even the **reduced percentages were ultra vires**.
- The Supreme Court held that a separate reservation for the Maratha community **violated Articles 14 (right to equality) and 21 (due process of law)**.
- "The ceiling of 50% with the 'extraordinary circumstances' exception, is the just balance – what is termed as the '**Goldilocks solution**' – i.e. the **solution containing the right balance that allows the State sufficient latitude to ensure meaningful affirmative action to those who deserve it and at the same time ensures that the essential content of equality,**" Justice S. Ravindra Bhat on the Bench agreed.

### Revisiting 1992 Indra Sawhney judgment:

- The Supreme Court **declined to revisit its 1992 Indra Sawhney judgment**, which fixed the reservation limit at 50%.
- The Indira Sawhney judgment had categorically said "**50% shall be the rule**, only in certain **exceptional and extraordinary situations** for bringing far-flung and remote area population into mainstream, **50% rule can be relaxed.**"
- The court said that the **50% ceiling, although an arbitrary determination by the court in 1992, is now constitutionally recognised.**

### On 102<sup>nd</sup> Constitutional Amendment:

- The Constitution (One Hundred and Second Amendment) Act, 2018 gives **constitutional status to the National Backward Classes Commission**. The Amendment also **gives the President powers to notify backward classes**.
- Several states raised questions on the interpretation of the Amendment and argued that it curtails their powers.
- The **Bench unanimously upheld the constitutional validity** of the 102<sup>nd</sup> Amendment.
  - The Court has ruled that, henceforth, **there will only be a single list of socially and educationally backward classes** with respect to each State and Union Territory notified by the President of India.

- The Supreme Court held that “the **final say in regard to inclusion or exclusion (or modification of lists) of socially and economically backward classes (SEBCs) is firstly with the President under Article 342A (1), and thereafter, in case of modification or exclusion from the lists initially published, with the Parliament**”.
- In the task of **identification of SEBCs**, the President shall be guided by the **Commission set up under Article 338B**; its advice shall also be sought by the state in regard to policies that might be framed by it.
- The **Centre alone is empowered to identify Socially and Educationally Backward Classes (SEBC)** and include them in the Central List for claiming reservation benefits.
- While the **identification of SEBCs will be done centrally, state governments retain the power to determine the extent of reservation** and make specific policy in the spirit of “cooperative federalism”.
- The **President’s prerogative** as regards the identification and inclusion of SEBCs in the List **would not affect the States’ power to make reservations in favour of particular communities or castes, the quantum of reservations, the nature of benefits and the kind of reservations**, and all other matters falling within the ambit of **Articles 15 and 16**.

## 20. Expanding the scope of POCSO

### Context:

- The article argues for expanding the scope of the POCSO Act to enable prosecution of historical child sexual abuse.

### Details:

- While the **Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act (POCSO)** has been a step in the right direction to protect children from offences of sexual assault, sexual harassment and pornography, the POCSO Act has several deficiencies which need to be addressed to make it truly effective.
- A fundamental defect of POCSO is its **inability to deal with historical cases of child abuse**.
  - Historical child sexual abuse refers to incidents that are reported late.

### Significance of including historical cases:

- The step to include prosecution of historical cases of child sexual abuse would be in line with the **growing international jurisprudence** around this issue.



- It would also help uphold the provisions of the **UN Convention on the Rights of the Child**.

#### Concerns:

#### Contrary to established legal principles:

- The proposal seems to run counter to the **established principle of criminal law that requires an act of crime to be reported at the earliest**.
- Any delay in filing the complaint dilutes the efficacy of the prosecution's case.

#### Counter arguments:

- The circumstances around child sexual abuse cannot and must not be viewed in the same manner as other criminal offences.

#### Lack of understanding at the age:

- In the case of child sexual abuse, it is difficult for the child to report the offence or offender at the earliest point in time.
- It requires time and support for the child to recognise and comprehend the gravity of what transpired to report the offence.

#### Impeding factors:

- **Intra-familial abuse accounts for a large proportion of child abuse cases.**
- The delays in reporting sexual abuse may be due to factors such as **threats from the perpetrator, fear of public humiliation, and absence of trustworthy confidant for the child**.
- Sometimes a child keeps the abuse a secret because of the fear that no one will believe the abuse, which leads to accommodative behaviour on the part of the child.

#### Challenges in implementation:

#### Legal provisions:

- **Provisions in the Criminal Procedure Code (CrPC)** prohibit judicial magistrates from taking cognisance of cases beyond a specific time period. Reporting of an offence, under Section 354 of the IPC, more than three years after the date of the incident would be barred by the CrPC. Given such provisions, the **historical reporting of child sexual offences would be legally implausible**.

### Availability of evidence:

- One of the major drawbacks of delayed reporting would be the lack of evidence to advance prosecution. There are **very few chances for gathering direct physical and medical evidence in such cases.**

### Recommendations:

#### Changes in POCSO law:

- With growing research and empirical evidence pointing to behaviour justifying delayed reporting, there is a need to amend the law to allow delayed reporting and prosecution with regard to incidents of child sexual offences.
- India must **revise its legal and procedural methods to deal with historical child sexual abuse.**

#### For cases before 2012:

- The Union Ministry of Law and Justice's clarification that no time limit shall apply for POCSO cases is a welcome step and would help strengthen the POCSO jurisprudence, however, it does not help in cases that deal with incidents before 2012.
- Hence the Union government must **also frame guidelines to direct effective and purposeful prosecution in cases that are not covered by the POCSO.**

## 21. Taliban captures key dam in Afghanistan

### What's in News?

The Taliban has captured **Dahla Dam**.

- **Dahla Dam is Afghanistan's second-biggest dam.**

The dam's capture comes amidst clashes, shortly after the U.S. military formally began withdrawing its troops from Afghanistan.

### Background:

- President Joe Biden announced, "It's time to end America's longest war with the unconditional withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan, where they have spent two decades in a bloody, largely fruitless battle against the Taliban".

- He said the U.S. will begin its final withdrawal from Afghanistan on May 1, 2021.

#### Details:

- Around 7,000 non-U.S. forces from mainly NATO countries, also from Australia, New Zealand and Georgia, outnumber the 2,500 U.S. troops in Afghanistan.
- A key reason for a coordinated withdrawal is the fact that NATO relies on U.S. airlift capabilities and shipping to move valuable equipment in and out of landlocked Afghanistan.
- After withdrawing, the U.S. and NATO aim to rely on Afghan military and police forces, which they have developed with billions of dollars in funding, to maintain security though peace talks are struggling and the insurgency is resilient.

#### Resolute Support:

- An integral part of NATO's current mission, **Resolute Support**, is to train and equip Afghan security forces fighting the Islamist Taliban.
  - Taliban was ousted from power by a U.S. invasion in late 2001 and has since waged an insurgency.
- With non-U.S. troop numbers reaching as high as 40,000 in 2008, Europe, Canada and Australia have moved in tandem with the U.S., also providing long-term funding to rebuild Afghanistan despite the resurgence of Taliban-led violence and endemic official corruption in the country.

## 22. What's Facebook's Oversight Board

### What's in News?

Facebook's Oversight Board upheld Facebook's January decision to block the then-U.S. President Donald Trump from its platform.

- Trump was blocked for "inciting violent insurrection against a democratically elected government".
- Facebook then referred the case to its Oversight Board.

### Facebook's Oversight Board:

- The Oversight Board has been set up as an **independent body** that will help Facebook figure out what content can be allowed on the platform and what ought to be removed.

- It was said to have emerged out of the tensions around the often-conflicting goals of maintaining Facebook as a platform for free speech and effectively filtering out problematic speech.
- The board is autonomous in the exercise of independent judgment.
- Facebook as well as its users can refer cases to the board. The decisions of the board are binding on Facebook.

### 23. G7 Foreign Ministers' Meet

#### Why in News

Recently, Foreign Ministers from the **Group of Seven (G7) countries (USA, UK, Canada, France, Germany, Italy and Japan)** held a meeting in London, UK.

- The **47<sup>th</sup> G7 Summit** will be held in **June 2021**. The **UK** is the **host country**.

#### Key Points

- **About:**
  - **Invited Guests:**
    - **Australia, India, South Korea, South Africa** and the **Chair (Brunei Darussalam)** of the **Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)**.
      - **Australia, India, South Korea and South Africa will also join the G7 Summit in June.**
  - **Discussions:**
    - **Russia's Irresponsible and Destabilising Behaviour:** This includes the **large build-up of Russian military forces on Ukraine's borders** and in **illegally-annexed Crimea**.
    - **Related to China:** Human rights violations and **abuses in Xinjiang and in Tibet, especially the targeting of Uyghurs**, members of other ethnic and religious minority groups.
      - **Called on China to respect Hong Kong's high degree of autonomy** and rights and freedoms (**Basic Law**).
    - **Condemned the military coup in Myanmar.**
    - **Indo-Pacific:**
      - Support for the **centrality of ASEAN on the Indo-Pacific**.
      - Reiterated the **importance of maintaining a free and open Indo-Pacific** which is inclusive and based on the rule of

law, democratic values, territorial integrity, transparency, the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms, and the peaceful resolution of disputes.

- **International Rules-based Order:**

- This can be described as a shared commitment by all countries to conduct their activities in accordance with agreed rules that evolve over time, such as international law, regional security arrangements, trade agreements, immigration protocols, and cultural arrangements.

- **Group of Seven (G7):**

- **About:**

- It is an **intergovernmental organisation** that was **formed in 1975**.
- The bloc **meets annually** to discuss issues of common interest like global economic governance, international security and energy policy.
- The **G7 does not have a formal constitution or a fixed headquarters**. The **decisions** taken by leaders during **annual summits** are **non-binding**.
  - The **groundwork for the summit**, including matters to be discussed and follow-up meetings, is **done by the “sherpas”**, who are generally personal representatives or members of diplomatic staff such as ambassadors.
  - The **leaders of important international organizations** like **European Union, IMF, World Bank** and the **United Nations** are also invited.

- **Issues:**

- Not all of the **G7 countries** are among the most advanced now. India is both a military and economic giant but isn't part of the G7. So, its expansion, just like that of the United Nations Security Council, is called for.

- **India and G7:**

- **Previous Participation:**

- The **participation of India at the 45<sup>th</sup> summit in Biarritz, France, in August 2019** is a reflection of deepening strategic partnership and **recognition of India as a major economic power**.
- India was **also invited for the 2020 summit hosted by the USA** which could not take place due to the pandemic.
- Previously **India had attended the G8 summit** (it became G7 from G8 with the expulsion of Russia in 2014) **five times between 2005 and 2009**.

- **Significance of India's Engagement with G7:**

- It provides an opportunity for India to develop cordial relations with developed countries.
- It will boost security cooperation with member countries in Indo-Pacific, particularly the Indian ocean.
- As current president of Brazil-Russia-India-China-South Africa (BRICS) and G20 president in 2023, India will play a key role driving in multilateral cooperation helping to build back better around the world.

## 24. CJI nominates four vacation Benches

### Context:

Chief Justice of India N.V. Ramana **nominated four separate Benches of the Supreme Court** to sit consecutively in May 2021, to hear extremely urgent cases.

### Details:

- The decision to have two separate Division Benches sitting in a week during vacations is significant considering the fact that petitions may be filed concerning COVID management and connected human rights issues.
- The Vacation Benches will hear the cases virtually.

### What is Vacation Bench of Supreme Court?

- A Vacation Bench of the Supreme Court is a special bench constituted by the Chief Justice of India.
- The court takes two long vacations each year, the summer and winter breaks, but is technically not fully closed during these periods.
- Litigants can still approach the Supreme Court and, if the court decides that the plea is an urgent matter, the Vacation Bench hears the case on its merits.
- While there is no specific definition as to what is an “urgent matter”, during vacations the court generally admits writs related to habeas corpus, certiorari, prohibition and quo warranto matters for enforcement of any fundamental right.

### Note:

The High Courts and trial courts too have Vacation Benches to hear urgent matters under their jurisdiction.

## 25. 'Immediate measures needed for welfare of children'

### Context:

- The **Supreme Court Juvenile Justice Committee**, in coordination with **UNICEF** has highlighted the need to urgently provide care and protect children suddenly made vulnerable by the loss of one or both parents to the second wave of COVID-19.

### Background:

- The Supreme Court has been nudging the Centre to prepare for the **third wave of the pandemic**.
- Recently, a Bench led by Justice D.Y. Chandrachud had highlighted reports that children **would be affected in the third wave**.

### Details:

- The Juvenile Justice Committee has noted the need for concerted efforts to provide **interim care for children who have been orphaned, abandoned or even left unaccompanied in their own homes**.

### Recommendations:

- Setting up of **State-level nodal officers and a district task force** for rapid response for the care and protection of such children.
- **Sponsorship for children** who had lost parent/s or bread-earners or were facing economic hardship.
- Clear guidance has to be published on steps to be taken in the event when such children in an extremely vulnerable state had been exposed to the virus or showed symptoms of infection. **Care measures for their isolation and treatment** needed to be stepped up.
- **Childcare institutions should be declared "essential services"**.
- The caregivers and employees of childcare institutions – both government and private – should be vaccinated as frontline professionals.
- The state should focus on ensuring heightened medical watch for children in institutional care.

## 26. E.U., India relaunch FTA talks, sign connectivity partnership

### Context:

- **U.-India leaders virtual meeting.**
  - 27 European leaders had gathered in Porto, Portugal

### Details:

#### Free trade agreement:

- India and the European Union have agreed to relaunch free trade negotiations by resuming talks on the **Bilateral Trade and Investment Agreement (BTIA)**.
  - The talks had begun in 2007, and stalled in 2013, over differences on issues like market access issues, and tariffs by India on products like wine, dairy and automotive parts, as well as E.U. resistance over visas for Indian professionals.
- India and the E.U. have agreed to work towards a **balanced, comprehensive and mutually beneficial trade agreement**.
- They would also launch negotiations for a **stand-alone investment protection agreement** and a **separate agreement on “geographical indications”** pertaining to intellectual property rights.
  - India had in 2015 scrapped all **Bilateral Investment Treaties (BITs)**. This has posed hurdles for new E.U. investments in India.
- The relaunched talks would be steered by the recently set up High-Level dialogue between Indian Commerce Minister and his counterpart, EU Trade Commissioner.
- The relaunch of free trade talks holds immense significance given the timing of the talks which comes as the **U.’s negotiations with China on their Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI)** have run into trouble.

#### Connectivity partnership:

- **The India-E.U. connectivity partnership** has committed the two sides to work together on **digital, energy, transport, people to people connectivity** that was transparent, viable, inclusive, sustainable, comprehensive, with a rules-based approach.
- The Connectivity Partnership document outlines plans to cooperate on **digital and infrastructure projects**.
- The partnership is seen as a response to China’s Belt and Road Initiative.



### COVID related talks:

- The meeting also discussed **COVID recovery plans and vaccine cooperation.**

### Temporary waiver for TRIPS:

- India has failed to secure the support of the European leaders for its proposal at the World Trade Organisation for patent waivers for COVID vaccine.
  - The support of a major bloc like the E.U. is crucial to passing the resolution at the WTO by consensus.

## 27. Outreach and overreach

### Context:

- Supreme Court order forming a **national task force** for the effective and transparent allocation of medical oxygen to the States and Union Territories.

### Background:

### Judicial intervention:

- There have been numerous **proceedings in different High Courts** relating to the allocation and availability of oxygen.
  - Example – The Karnataka High Court ordered the Centre to supply 1,200 tonnes of medical oxygen daily to the State.
- Several High Courts and even the Supreme Court are also examining different aspects of the pandemic response, including the availability of beds.

### Concerns expressed by the executive:

- The centre has been arguing that if every High Court started entertaining petitions on the equitable allocation of oxygen, **pandemic management would become unworkable.**
- The increasing trend of judicial orders by the High Courts has raised concerns about the **judiciary encroaching on the executive domain.**
  - The allocation of resources based on a formula related to the present and projected requirements of each State comes across as an executive function.
- The Central government while challenging the orders by the various High Courts at the Supreme Court had submitted that an **expert committee may be**

constituted, consisting of persons drawn from public and private healthcare institutions, to facilitate a fresh assessment of the basis for the allocation.

#### Counter arguments:

- Given the steep rise in daily infections and death toll, the judiciary felt obliged to take it upon itself to **protect the right to life and good health of the population.**
- The Bench hearing the suo motu proceedings, has clarified that the Court was **not usurping the executive's role**, but only wanted to facilitate a dialogue among stakeholders.

#### Mandate of the task force:

- The 12-member national task force would work towards **effective and transparent allocation of medical oxygen** to the States and Union Territories "on a scientific, rational and equitable basis". It would facilitate audits by sub-groups within each State and UT.
- The task force would make **recommendations on augmenting the supply** based on present and projected demands.
- It is also mandated to **review and suggest measures for ensuring the availability of essential drugs and remedial measures** to meet future emergencies during the pandemic.

#### Conclusion:

- The national task force has become a judicially empowered group that may significantly guide the handling of the health crisis set off by the second pandemic wave.
- Judicial intervention should be seen as a response to the ongoing health crisis. As long as the court does not usurp the executive's role, **action to mitigate a crisis is welcome and the present intervention need not be seen as a dangerous judicial overreach.**

### 28. 'FCRA amendments crippling our work'

#### Issue:

The amendments to the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) enacted in 2020 that among others **made it compulsory for NGOs to open a bank account in Delhi** has crippled the work of many organisations that are unable to receive foreign funds.

#### Details:

- An NGO has now moved the Delhi High Court seeking exemption from the Union Home Ministry's March 31 deadline to open an FCRA account with the SBI branch in New Delhi.
- The petitioner argued that it applied to open the account before the March 31 deadline but the **administrative delays on the part of the bank and the Ministry severely restricted its activities** including providing COVID-19 relief and paying of urgent salaries of staff and also affected its charitable and educational activities.
- Many NGOs are affected by **the new regulations as they are hampering charitable work** during the pandemic.

#### Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Amendment, 2020:

- Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Amendment Bill, 2020 was passed in the Parliament in September 2020.
- The Home Ministry had directed all NGOs seeking foreign donations to **open a designated FCRA account at the State Bank of India's New Delhi branch by March 31, 2021.**
- The NGOs registered under FCRA shall not receive any foreign donations in any other bank account from April 1, 2021.

#### Note:

- An FCRA registration is mandatory for NGOs to receive foreign funds.

#### Way Forward:

- The pandemic has underscored **the importance of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam** (the whole earth is one family) as a framework for India's global engagement.
- Thousands of NGOs **serve extremely disadvantaged sections**, at times filling in for the state, at others, supplementing it.
- Further **relaxations are necessary in terms of opening an FCRA account with the SBI branch in New Delhi.**
- For a global community to function, there is a **need for a seamless sharing of ideas and resources across national boundaries.**
- It **should not be discouraged unless there is reason to believe the funds are being used to aid illegal activities.**

## 29. Iran confirms that it is in talks with Saudi Arabia

### Context:

Iran's Foreign Ministry for the first time has confirmed that it is holding talks with regional rival Saudi Arabia.

### Background:

- The neighbouring countries **cut ties in 2016** after **Iranian protestors attacked Saudi diplomatic missions** following the **kingdom's execution of a revered Shiite cleric**.
- The regional rivals have **backed opposite sides of several regional conflicts**, from Syria to Yemen, where a Saudi-led coalition is fighting the Houthi rebels.
  - Iran backs the Houthis, who are battling the Saudi-led military that intervened in Yemen's war in 2015.
- They have long competed for influence across the Middle East.
  - Saudi Arabia accuses Iran of using proxies to fight wars and weaken Arab states, destabilizing the region.
  - Iran sees Saudi Arabia as a key player in efforts by the United States and Israel to dominate the region and destabilize Iran.

### Details:

- Iranian and Saudi officials met in Baghdad in **April 2021**, their **first high-level meeting since Riyadh cut diplomatic ties with Tehran in 2016**.
- The purpose of the talks was both bilateral and regional.

## 30. A national health service in India

### Background:

#### Structural issues in the healthcare system of India:

- The health crisis brought out by the pandemic has exposed the problems of the healthcare system in India.

#### Low public spending:

- India has very low public spending on health (barely 1% of GDP).
- Though India's public spending on health is set to double in the 2021-22 financial year, it continues to remain **grossly inadequate when compared to the levels in other similar developing nations.**

High out of pocket expenditure:

- The share of 'out of pocket' (OOP) health expenditure (of total health spending) in India was **over 60% in 2018.**
  - Medical expenses constitute the major reason for personal debt in India and have **pushed many into poverty.**

Regional inequality:

- India's fragmented, **urban-centred, variably functional and grossly underfunded primary health centres and elite-focused healthcare system** cater to only a small section of the population.
  - In certain rural areas, the doctor-population ratio is over 1:40,000.

Lack of regulation of private health sector:

- The private health sector in India is poorly regulated in practice.
  - Some private healthcare providers have objected to public authorities' orders on widened patient access during the ongoing health crisis.

**Details:**

- The article argues for a national health service in India modelled on the **British National Health Service.**

**British National Health Service:**

- The service is **funded entirely from general taxation** and the general public receive treatment solely according to their clinical needs without any exception.
- The system includes payment to general practitioners, most of whom remain private providers but are paid by the state for treating NHS patients.
- **All hospital treatment and medicines are free**, as are outpatient and follow-up appointments. Only a proportion of patients in England have to pay for prescription items.
- The NHS is the largest employer in the U.K. Its **current budget is about 7.6% of GDP**, and it **provides highly localised access to care.**
- It has resulted in the provision of top-class universal healthcare, including **training and research.**

- It integrates preventive and curative medicine at all levels.

#### **Additional information:**

- According to the Lancet Planetary Health journal, air pollution accounted for 1.7 million deaths in India in 2019. The annual business cost of air pollution is currently estimated at \$95 billion, which is about 3% of India's GDP.

### **31. Pakistan government to set new rules to meet FATF requirements**

#### **Context:**

Pakistan is set to introduce **new rules relating to anti-money laundering cases** and **change the prosecution process** to meet its remaining tough conditions to **exit from the FATF grey list**.

#### **Details:**

- **Pakistan was put on the grey list** by the Paris-based Financial Action Task Force (FATF), the global watchdog for money laundering and terror financing **in June 2018** and the country has been struggling to come out of it.
- Based on the measures that Pakistan takes, the FATF would conclude if Pakistan has **complied with three outstanding benchmarks, out of 27, that blocked its exit from the grey list in February 2021**.

### **32. Evaluate the Ladakh crisis, keep China at bay**

#### **Context:**

- Ongoing Ladakh stand-off between India and China.

#### **Background:**

#### **Unresolved issues:**

- After over a year, the stand-off between Indian and Chinese troops in eastern Ladakh shows no signs of resolution. **Disengagement has stalled**, China continues to reinforce its troops, and talks have been fruitless.

#### **Implications on the bilateral relation:**

- **The India-China bilateral relationship has ruptured** and is marked by **increasing hostility and distrust**.
- India has reversed its long-held policy and has stated that it will no longer overlook the problematic border dispute for the sake of a potentially lucrative wider relationship with China.
- Even if disengagement happens it is very likely that the relationship will remain vulnerable to destabilising disruptions along the LAC.

#### **Details:**

- The Ladakh crisis offers India **three key lessons in managing the intensifying strategic competition with China**.

#### **Revamping military strategies:**

- The Indian military's standing doctrine calls for deterring adversaries with the threat of massive punitive retaliation for any aggression, capturing enemy territory as bargaining leverage in post-war talks.
- However, the experience from the Ladakh stand-off seems to indicate that **military strategies based on denial are more useful than strategies based on punishment**.
  - The threat of retaliation did not deter China from launching unprecedented incursions in May 2020.
  - The Indian military's occupation of the heights on the Kailash Range on its side of the LAC in late August, an act of denial, helped deny key terrain to the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA), and gave the Indian Army a stronger defensive position from which it could credibly defend a larger segment of its front line.
- The doctrine of denial will serve the following benefits for India.
  - The focus on denial will give the Indian military greater capacity to **thwart future land grabs across the LAC**.
  - This strategy is also more likely than punishment to **preserve crisis stability**.
  - In the long term, improved denial capabilities may allow India to **reduce the resource drain of the increased militarisation of the LAC**.

#### **Imposing political costs on China:**

- Given the fact that **China's defence budget is three to four times larger than India's**, the material burden of the crisis is unlikely to disrupt China's existing priorities along the LAC, which is aimed at making small tactical gains along the disputed border to ensure a stronger say in the negotiations.
- **China is more likely to be deterred or coerced with the threat of political costs, rather than material costs.**
- India successfully raised the risks of the crisis for China through its threat of a political rupture by **restricting bilateral trade and investment** while also indicating India's inclination towards **greater participation with the Quad**.
- The prospect of a permanently hostile India seems to be a very high price for China given the rising anti-Chinese sentiments.
- Given the limits of individual nations, even large powers such as India, to tackle the increasing assertiveness of China, should **focus on coordinated or collective action with other like-minded countries.**

#### **Focus on Indian Ocean Region:**

- The Ladakh crisis, by prompting an increased militarisation of the LAC, may prompt India to defer long-overdue military modernisation and maritime expansion into the Indian Ocean. This is a cause of concern.
- India should rather consider accepting more risk on the LAC in exchange for long-term leverage and influence in the Indian Ocean Region due to the following reasons.
  - **India has traditionally been the dominant power in the Indian Ocean Region** and stands to cede significant political influence and security if it fails to counter the rapid expansion of Chinese military power in the region.
  - The difficult terrain and more even balance of military force means that China could only eke out minor, strategically modest gains at best.

#### **Conclusion:**

- The measures as recommended on the Line of Actual Control (LAC) and beyond, will help ensure that India is better postured to meet the challenge posed by an increasingly assertive China and manage the strategic competition with it.

### **33. What's happening in Jerusalem?**

#### **Context:**



- The Israeli armed forces stormed **Al-Aqsa Mosque in the Haram esh-Sharif in Jerusalem**, ahead of a march by Zionist nationalists commemorating Israel's capture of the eastern half of the city in 1967, injuring more than 300 Palestinians in the raid.
- **In retaliation, Hamas**, the Islamist militant group that runs Gaza, **fired dozens of rockets**.
- **Israel launched an airstrike on Gaza in response**.

### What led to escalation?

- Tensions have been building up since April 2021 when the **Israeli police set up barricades** at the Damascus Gate outside the occupied Old City, **preventing Palestinians from gathering there**.
- The **threatened eviction of dozens of Palestinian families in the East Jerusalem** neighbourhood of Sheikh Jarrah **escalated the crisis further**.

### Sheikh Jarrah dispute:

- **Hundreds of thousands of Palestinians were forced out of their homes when the State of Israel was created in historic Palestine in 1948** (the Palestinians call the events 'Nakba', or catastrophe).
  - **Twenty-eight of those Palestinian families moved to Sheikh Jarrah in East Jerusalem to settle there**.
- In 1956, when East Jerusalem was ruled by Jordan, the **Jordanian Ministry of Construction and Development and the UN Relief and Works Agency facilitated the construction of houses** for these families in Sheikh Jarrah.
  - **But Israel captured East Jerusalem from Jordan in 1967**.
  - **By the early 1970s, Jewish agencies started demanding the families leave the land**.
  - **Jewish committees claimed that the houses sat on land they purchased in 1885** (when Jews, facing persecution in Europe, were migrating to historic Palestine that was part of the Ottoman Empire).
  - In 2021, the **Central Court in East Jerusalem upheld a decision to evict four Palestinian families** from their homes in Sheikh Jarrah in favour of Jewish settlers. The Israeli Supreme Court is yet to hear the case. **The issue remains unresolved**.

### Why Jerusalem?

- **Jerusalem has been at the centre of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict**.
- According to the original **1947 UN Partition Plan**, **Jerusalem was proposed to be an international city**.

- But in the **first Arab Israel war of 1948**, the **Israelis captured the western half** of the city, and **Jordan took the eastern part**, including the Old City that houses Haram esh-Sharif.
- Al-Aqsa Mosque (**Islam's third holiest site**) and the **Dome of the Rock are situated within Haram esh-Sharif**.
- One side of the compound, called Temple Mount by the Jews, is the Wailing Wall (**Western Wall**), which is **believed to be the remains of the Second Jewish Temple, the holiest site in Judaism**.
- **Israel captured East Jerusalem from Jordan in the 1967 Six-Day War** and annexed it later.
- Since its annexation, Israel has expanded settlements in East Jerusalem. It is now home to some 220,000 Jews.
  - Jews born in East Jerusalem are Israeli citizens.
  - Palestinians in the city are given conditional residency permits.
- Palestinians in East Jerusalem, unlike other parts of the occupied West Bank, can apply for Israeli citizenship. Very few Palestinians have done so.
- **Israel sees the whole city as its "unified, eternal capital"**.
  - This **claim was endorsed by Donald Trump** when he was U.S. President but **not recognised by most other countries**.
  - Palestinian leaders across the political spectrum have maintained that they would **not accept any compromise formula for a future Palestinian state unless East Jerusalem is its capital**.

### What Next?

- In a further sign of rising tensions, Israel signalled it is **widening its military campaign**.
- The military said it is sending **troop reinforcements to the Gaza border** and the Defence Minister ordered the mobilisation of 5,000 reserve soldiers.
- But, in a potentially positive sign, Egyptian and Palestinian officials said **Egypt was working on brokering a cease-fire**.

### 34. 'Child marriages may go unnoticed amid lockdown'

#### Context:

- With the ongoing lockdown in the state of Karnataka and the weddings being restricted to houses because of tough guidelines, there are **fears of child marriages** going unnoticed.

#### Background:

- The 2020 lockdown witnessed a slew of child marriages being reported in Karnataka.
- **A total of 2,180 child marriage cases were reported in Karnataka as per reports of Childline (1098) from April 2020 to January 2021.**
  - The other complaints ranged from illegal adoptions, child trafficking and child labour to the need for medical help or shelter.
- The number of complaints eased when lockdown restrictions were relaxed but were still worrying.

#### Details:

- The Karnataka State Commission for the Protection of Child Rights (KSCPCR) expects the number of child marriages to go up, given that another lockdown is in place and marriages are being allowed in homes.
- Earlier, when child marriages happened at wedding halls, temples, etc., there were people who would alert the relevant authorities or activists who would be able to reach on time to stop the marriage. But now, with marriages happening at homes, **the authorities would be getting fewer alerts.**

#### Factors at play:

- The increasing number of child marriages could be attributed to the factors ranging from **insecurity for the girl**, wherein the parents assume their responsibility is over with her marriage, to the fact that they could get away with a simple marriage without calling too many people, resulting in less expenditure. The increased **financial strain** on the poor has also contributed to some families resorting to child marriage.

#### Recommendations:

- There is a need to **create awareness among the people on the ills of child marriage.**
- People should alert Childline if they come across child marriages.
- The district authorities should constitute a **committee to tackle child marriages** and they should **conduct regular inspections in the most vulnerable areas.**

### 35. A hundred days after the coup

#### Context:

- **ASEAN leaders' summit in Jakarta.**

- The single most important agenda of the summit was to devise a way to defuse the **ongoing crisis in Myanmar**.

### **Background:**

#### **Military coup in Myanmar and associated violence:**

- On February 1, the military overthrew the elected government of Myanmar after the landslide victory of the Aung San Suu Kyi-led National League for Democracy (NLD) in the November 2020 elections.
- Civilians have clashed with police and army units wielding batons, rubber bullets and live ammunition. The military leadership has been brutal in the suppression of the protests. 750 were killed, thousands injured, and over 2,500 detained.
- There has been a stalemate given the differing solutions being offered by the army on the one hand and the opposition on the other.

#### **ASEAN mediation:**

- Given the deep concerns over the coup's adverse regional impact, the ASEAN group, despite its **central concept of non-interference in internal affairs of its member states**, followed its **activist tradition to assist Myanmar in exiting from this complex situation**.
- It was in this direction that it has resisted efforts by other organizations or nations to interfere in the ongoing crisis and organized an **emergency summit at Jakarta and invited the military leadership of Myanmar for the talks**.

#### **Important outcomes of the Jakarta summit:**

- **Five-Point Consensus** including the immediate cessation of violence; supply of humanitarian assistance; constructive dialogue; and ASEAN's mediation through the visit by a special envoy of ASEAN's Chair and the ASEAN Secretary-General has been accepted by the military.
- Though not included in the five-point consensus, **calls for release of all political prisoners including foreigners were also heard by the army**.
- **International reactions to the Jakarta summit outcome have largely been positive**. The UN and other global stakeholders appreciate Southeast Asia's willingness to resolve its problems in its 'family way'.

#### **Challenges for ASEAN in its efforts:**

#### **Bridge internal differences:**

- Members like Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam inclined to be sympathetic to the military and others like Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore are keen to mediate in the Myanmar crisis for the region's larger good.

#### **Chasm within the international community:**

- The U.S., the U.K. and the European Union have advocated a policy of condemnation and strong sanctions against the military regime, while China and Russia have argued against excessive censure and opposition.

#### **India's role:**

- **As a neighbour with vital stakes, India has welcomed the ASEAN initiative.**
  - India and Japan have preferred to support reconciliation.
- India should **unreservedly back ASEAN's endeavours**, helping it further by extending requisite support to the member nations.

#### **Conclusion:**

- ASEAN has created a rare pathway to help Myanmar move forward.
  - Despite its initial opposition to the Jakarta agreement, the opposition in Myanmar would need to internalise the utility of a helping hand extended by the region.
  - Myanmar's leaders should work for a **lasting reconciliation**, deriving inspiration from Lord Buddha's 'Middle Path'.

### **36. Reforming medical education**

#### **Context:**

In the backdrop of Covid-19 pandemic, the numerous challenges being faced by India's health systems have become apparent.

#### **Issues:**

- There is a **serious shortage of health workers**, especially doctors, **particularly in some northern States**.
- The workforce crisis has been **aggravated by the imbalances within the**
  - The doctor-population ratio in northern States is far short of the required norm, while the southern States, barring Telangana, have enough doctors in possession.

- There is also a general **lack of adequate staffing in rural areas**.
- If urgent action is not taken, the shortage will amplify leading to the **weakening of health systems**.
- Health workers are critical also for the **preparedness of health systems in preventing, detecting and responding to threats posed by diseases**.
- Shortage is a major impediment for achieving the health-related Sustainable Development Goals.

#### **Analysing NITI Aayog's proposal:**

- The NITI Aayog's has proposed allowing private entities to take over **district hospitals for converting them into teaching hospitals** with at least 150 MBBS seats.
- There are some **concerns associated with this proposal**.
- This would **encourage private sector in medical education directly aiding the corporatisation processes of healthcare provisioning** while the under-resourced public health system will be a collateral damage.
- The **corporatisation will make the services of district hospitals very costly**.
- Even from the perspective of producing more doctors to meet the shortages in under-served areas, this is unlikely to yield the desired result.
- This proposal is **not aligned with India's national health policy goals** like achieving universal health care and health equity. It could widen health inequalities further.

#### **Way Forward:**

- In order to effectively address these challenges, our **health systems must be strengthened**.
- One of the critical building blocks of the health system is **human resources**.
- Solving the shortage, needs **long-term thinking and commitment from the political leadership**.
  - The government should **learn from previous cases of public-private partnerships (PPPs)**.
  - In the past, many PPPs had to be shelved owing to the non-compliance of the agreement conditions by the private sector under which they were also supposed to cater to the non-paying patients.
- In order to meet the significant shortfall of qualified doctors in northern States, **scaling up of medical education is warranted**.
- By establishing new medical colleges, the government can increase student intake as well as enhance equitable access to medical education.
- The government must **allocate adequate financial resources** to strengthen the overall capacity of existing medical colleges to enrich student learning and improve output.

## Conclusion:

A regulated market with medical colleges that are publicly funded but privately operated cannot be a feasible solution to the health workforce crisis. **Medical education is a public good as its purpose is to improve the population health and decrease disease burden.** The pandemic has provided an opportunity for this. There should be a **substantial step-up in public investment in medical education.**

## 37. Assam NRC authority seeks reverification of citizens' list

### Context:

The Assam National Register of Citizens (NRC) authority has approached the Supreme Court seeking a **comprehensive and time-bound re-verification of the citizens' list**, highlighting major irregularities in the process.

### Background:

- The notification for starting the **Supreme Court-monitored exercise to update the 1951 NRC in Assam** was issued in December 2013.
- **The final draft published in August 2019 had excluded 19.06 lakh** out of 3.3 crore applications for lack of adequate documents establishing them as Indian citizens.
- People left out of the draft NRC are required to **approach the nearest Foreigners' Tribunal** within 120 days of receiving a rejection slip for weighing their citizenship claims.

### Details:

- The interlocutory application by the State NRC Coordinator also prays for **the deletion of illegal voters from Assam's electoral rolls** besides the **revision of the draft NRC** and a **supplementary list under a relevant clause of the Schedule of Citizenship** (Registration of Citizens and Issue of National Identity Cards) Rules, 2003.
- The final NRC is yet to be published by the Registrar General of India.

## 38. Maratha quota: govt. files petition

### Context:

The central government has filed a review petition in the Supreme Court challenging a majority view of its Constitution Bench that **only the Centre has the power under the 102nd Constitution Amendment to identify and list Socially and Educationally Backward Classes (SEBC) and not States.**

#### Details:

- The Bench, led by Justice Ashok Bhushan, found there were **no “exceptional circumstances” or “extraordinary situation” in Maharashtra**, which required the State government **to break the 50% ceiling limit** to bestow quota benefits on the Maratha community.
- All five judges agreed that the **Marathas are a dominant forward class** and are **in the mainstream of national life**. The above situation is not extraordinary.
- The SC **struck down the findings of the Justice M.G. Gaikwad Commission**, which led to the enactment of the **Maratha quota law**, and set aside the Bombay High Court judgment which validated the **Maharashtra State Reservation for Socially and Educationally Backward Classes (SEBC) Act of 2018**.

#### State Government's Argument:

- The state government's argument was that **since the population of the backward class is 85% and the reservation limit is only 50%**, an increase in reservation limit would qualify as an **extraordinary circumstance**.
- **All five judges disagreed with this argument.**

#### Supreme Court Verdict:

- The High Court, in June 2019, reduced the quantum of reservation for Marathas from the 16% recommended by the Gaikwad Commission to 12% in education and 13% in employment.
  - The Supreme Court concluded that even the **reduced percentages were ultra vires**.
- The Supreme Court held that a separate reservation for the Maratha community **violated Articles 14 (right to equality) and 21 (due process of law)**.
- **“The ceiling of 50% with the ‘extraordinary circumstances’ exception, is the just balance – what is termed as the ‘Goldilocks solution’ – i.e. the solution containing the right balance that allows the State sufficient latitude to ensure meaningful affirmative action to those who deserve it and at the same time ensures that the essential content of equality,”** Justice S. Ravindra Bhat on the Bench agreed.



### Revisiting 1992 Indra Sawhney judgment:

- The Supreme Court **declined to revisit its 1992 Indra Sawhney judgment**, which fixed the reservation limit at 50%.
- The Indira Sawhney judgment had categorically said “**50% shall be the rule**, only in certain **exceptional and extraordinary situations** for bringing far-flung and remote area population into mainstream, **50% rule can be relaxed.**”
- The court said that the **50% ceiling, although an arbitrary determination by the court in 1992, is now constitutionally recognised.**

### On 102<sup>nd</sup> Constitutional Amendment:

- The Constitution (One Hundred and Second Amendment) Act, 2018 gives **constitutional status to the National Backward Classes Commission**. The Amendment also **gives the President powers to notify backward classes**.
- Several states raised questions on the interpretation of the Amendment and argued that it curtails their powers.
- The **Bench unanimously upheld the constitutional validity** of the 102<sup>nd</sup> Amendment.
  - The Court has ruled that, henceforth, **there will only be a single list of socially and educationally backward classes** with respect to each State and Union Territory notified by the President of India.
- The Supreme Court held that “**the final say in regard to inclusion or exclusion (or modification of lists) of socially and economically backward classes (SEBCs) is firstly with the President under Article 342A (1), and thereafter, in case of modification or exclusion from the lists initially published, with the Parliament**”.
- In the task of **identification of SEBCs**, the President shall be guided by the **Commission set up under Article 338B**; its advice shall also be sought by the state in regard to policies that might be framed by it.
- The **Centre alone is empowered to identify Socially and Educationally Backward Classes (SEBC)** and include them in the Central List for claiming reservation benefits.
- While the **identification of SEBCs will be done centrally, state governments retain the power to determine the extent of reservation** and make specific policy in the spirit of “cooperative federalism”.
- The **President’s prerogative** as regards the identification and inclusion of SEBCs in the List **would not affect the States’ power to make reservations in favour of particular communities or castes, the quantum of reservations, the nature of benefits and the kind of reservations**, and all other matters falling within the ambit of **Articles 15 and 16**.

### 39. Out of line

#### Context:

The West Bengal Governor Jagdeep Dhankhar visited the areas hit by post-poll violence in Cooch Behar.

#### Details:

- It is opined that this act by the Governor constitutes a **grave transgression of the bounds of constitutional propriety and highlights his disregard for the principle** that constitutional heads should not air their differences with the elected regimes in public.
- Some may believe that the gubernatorial office ought not to be an impediment to the incumbent yielding to the moral urge to condemn incidents of rare enormity. Yet, the larger **principle that the Governor should not offer public comment on situations best handled by the representative regime ought to hold good in all circumstances.**

The governor of a state is a very interesting appointee of our political system. Seen as **part of the checks and balances** the Indian democracy is proud of, the post is also seen as the one that is **often able to exercise authority in contravention of an elected government.**

#### Role of Governor:

- The governor acts as the **nominal head** whereas the **real power lies with the Chief Ministers of the states and his/her councils of ministers.**
- The governor also acts as an **agent of the central government.**
- Therefore, the **office of governor has a dual role.**
- The primary function of the governor is to **preserve, protect and defend the Constitution and the law as incorporated in his/her oath of office under Article 159 of the Indian Constitution in the administration of State affairs.**

#### Conclusion:

- Regardless of one's view of a regime's inaction, there should be no departure from the principle that **any advice or warning the Governor wants to give to the elected government ought to be in private and in confidence.**

### 40. Lend a helping hand to children the right way

#### Context:

The second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic has left many children orphaned and vulnerable in India.

### Details:

- Before handing over an orphan child to any agency, family or person it is important to **be aware of the laws that are prevalent and procedures with regard to the care and the protection of orphan children** rather than face legal action for violations later.
- The **non-reporting of such children is also a punishable offence under the JJA** or the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015.
- Only once a **child is declared legally free for adoption by the Child Welfare Committee (CWC)**, adoption can be done either by Indian prospective adoptive parents or non-resident Indians or foreigners, in that order.
- Any voluntary or NGO which is not registered as per the requirement of the JJA cannot house children in need of care and protection.

### Many options to help

1. **Emergency phone outreach service** managed by the Women and Child Development department's nodal agency, the Childline India Foundation should be used.
  - These Childline units are civil society organisations duly approved by the government.
2. **The district protection officer concerned must be informed.**
  - The contact details can be found on the National Tracking System for Missing and Vulnerable Children portal maintained by the Women and Child Development department.
3. **The nearest police station or its child welfare police officer** who is specially trained to exclusively deal with children either as victims or juvenile delinquents **must be informed.**

### Court directives to police:

- Ignorance of the law is not an excuse. If an orphan child is kept by someone without lawful authority, he or she may land themselves in trouble.
- According to the **Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act, 1956, the father, and in his absence the mother, is the natural guardian.** Not even a close relative can look after the child without authorisation.
- **The Supreme Court** in Bachpan Bachao Andolan vs Union of India directed all Directors General of Police, in May 2013, **to register a first information report as a case of trafficking or abduction in every case of a missing child.**

- At least **one police officer not below the rank of assistant sub-inspector** in each police station is mandatorily required to undergo **training to deal with children in conflict with the law and in need of care and protection**.
- **Each district** is supposed to have its **special juvenile police unit**, headed by an officer not below the rank of a Deputy Superintendent of Police.

### Conclusion:

**Article 39 of the Constitution prohibits the tender age of children from being abused.** Therefore, orphaned children who have lost both their parents or abandoned or surrendered due to the COVID-19 pandemic must not be neglected and left to face an uncertain future. They must be taken care of by the authorities entrusted with responsibilities under the JJA.

### 41. Bengal farmers get benefits of PM Kisan scheme

#### Context:

The farmers in West Bengal received the benefits of **PM Samman Kisan Nidhi (PM KISAN)**.

#### Details:

- About 7 lakh farmers in the State got benefits of the Central scheme where ₹2,000 were transferred to their bank accounts.
- During the day, the Prime Minister released the eighth instalment of over ₹20,000 crore to more than 9.5 crore farmer-beneficiaries under the scheme.

#### PM KISAN Scheme:

- The **central sector scheme** under the government of India that provides **income support to the farmers and their families** was launched in 2019.
- The scheme initially provided income support to all Small and Marginal Farmers' families across the country, holding cultivable land up to 2 hectares. Its ambit was later expanded w.e.f. 01.06.2019 to **cover all farmer families in the country irrespective of the size of their landholdings**.
- Under the scheme, an amount of **Rs.6000/- per year is transferred in three quarterly instalments of Rs.2000/- directly into the bank accounts of the farmers**, subject to certain exclusion criteria relating to higher-income status.
- The **responsibility of the identification of beneficiaries rests with the State/UT Governments**.

## Eligibility to avail benefits under PM-KISAN scheme

Any small or marginal farmer should not fall under the following criteria to be eligible under the Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi Yojana. Below are some of the categories of beneficiaries who are not eligible for benefit under this scheme:

1. Any institutional land-holders.
2. The farmer as well as any member of the family belonging to the following categories:
3. Former and present holders of constitutional posts
4. Former and present Ministers/ State Ministers
5. Former or present members of Lok Sabha/ Rajya Sabha/ State Legislative Assemblies/ State Legislative Councils
6. Former and present Mayors of Municipal Corporations
7. Former and present Chairpersons of District Panchayats.
8. Any serving or retired officers as well as employees under the Central/ State Government Ministries /Offices/ Departments.
9. All retired pensioners who get a monthly pension of Rs.10,000/ -or more and belonging to the above category.
10. Any individual who paid their income tax in the last assessment year is not eligible under this scheme.
11. Professionals like Doctors, Engineers, Lawyers, Chartered Accountants, and Architects registered with Professional bodies and carrying out profession by undertaking practices.

The farmers eligible under the scheme are required to produce the below-mentioned documents for their verification:

- Citizenship certificate
- Landholding papers
- Aadhaar card
- Bank account details

## Advantages of PM-KISAN Scheme

Given below are the advantages and the impact of the PM-KISAN schemes:

- The direct transfer of funds is one of the biggest advantages of this scheme. On December 25, 2020, in the presence of PM Narendra Modi, Rs.18,000 crores were directly transferred to the bank accounts of 9 crore farmers
- All the records related to farmers is registered officially on a digital platform which has made the registration and fund transfer easy. The digitalised records have brought about a new start to this welfare scheme
- This scheme eases liquidity constraints of farmers

- PM-KISAN yojana is a big step towards the Government's initiatives of modernisation of agriculture
- There is no discrimination in choosing the PM-KISAN beneficiaries

## 42. Mucormycosis in COVID-19 patients

### Context:

- Hospitals across India have started to report an **increasing number of cases of mucormycosis**.

### Mucormycosis:

- Mucormycosis is an aggressive and invasive **fungal infection** caused by a group of molds called mucormycetes.
- It is also known by the name '**black fungus**'.

### Causative factors:

- According to a study, **Diabetes mellitus is the most common underlying cause**, followed by haematological malignancies and solid-organ transplants for mucormycosis.
  - Diabetes mellitus was reported in 54% to 76% of cases, according to a report.

### Effect:

- It can affect various organs but is currently manifesting as an **invasive rhino-orbito-cerebral disease**, affecting the ear, nose, throat, and mouth and at times the brain, leading to blindness, stroke or death. It can cause a lot of damage internally and can be fatal if not detected early.
  - The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, U.S., calls it a serious but rare disease.

### Treatment:

- The main line of treatment is an **anti-fungal drug called amphotericin B**, which is given over an extended period of time under the strict observation of a physician. Surgery to remove the fungus growth might also be warranted.

### Reasons for sudden spike in cases:

- Mucormycosis has been affecting patients who have recently recovered from COVID-19. The sudden increase in the mucormycosis cases can be attributable to the following reasons:
  - The **indiscriminate use of a high dose of steroids** in COVID-19 patients, sometimes even in minimally symptomatic patients is a major reason. This leads to spikes in the sugar level among diabetics, which, in turn, renders them vulnerable.
  - The **use of monoclonal agents like Tocilizumab** may be a factor, too. Monoclonal antibodies are man-made proteins that act like human antibodies in the immune system. The overuse of such antibodies reduces the inherent immunity of the body in the long run making it vulnerable to future infections.
  - Though the disease is not contagious, the **use of nasal prongs and other devices for oxygen delivery** and possible breach of sterile conditions can possibly lead to cross-infection and **hospital-acquired infection**.

#### Recommendations:

- Following appropriate **treatment protocols as recommended by the World Health Organization for COVID-19**, including **rational use of steroids and monoclonal antibodies** only when they can help a patient, is important.
- In case of usage of steroids, **constant monitoring of sugar levels** and resorting to insulin use to control these levels if required, is essential.
- Recognising the symptoms and **seeking treatment early** would be the key intervention. Like most illnesses, if detected early, mucormycosis can be cured.

### 43. The hurdles in accessing foreign COVID-19 aid

#### Background:

- Nasscom has urged the Prime Minister to temporarily relax **the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act (FCRA) norms**.
  - Given that the amended provisions of the FCRA 2020 are proving to be a deterrent for inflow of foreign aid, Nasscom has requested the government to grant a temporary waiver to the FCRA Act and the 2020 amendments.
- Petitions concerning the restrictive FCRA provisions are being heard in the High Courts.
- A Bench of the Delhi High Court has asked the Finance Ministry to consider dropping GST levies on all oxygen concentrator imports as they can be linked

to the **Right to Life under Article 21 of the Constitution** amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

- State governments are expected to raise the issue of GST levies on COVID-19 supplies, including vaccines, at the upcoming GST Council meeting.

### Steps taken to facilitate imports of relief supplies:

- As India ran out of critical supplies for managing the severe second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Centre unveiled gradual measures over the past month to ease the imports of some items.
  - **Import duties and taxes** were cut in some cases.
  - The government allowed individuals to import oxygen concentrators for personal use through courier from e-commerce portals or global vendors. The customs department was directed to clear them as 'gifts' till July 31.
  - Special protocols have been put in place by the Shipping Ministry to ensure that vessels with COVID-19 relief material are **unloaded on a priority basis and paperwork and cargo clearances are processed expeditiously** by Customs and the Directorate General of Foreign Trade.

### Concerns:

- Despite several facilitative measures introduced by the government to aid inflow of critical materials, serious lacunae's continue to exist.

### GST on critical imports:

- Not all critical COVID-19 imports have been made temporarily tax-free.
- Though customs duties have been slashed, **imports such as oxygen concentrators and related equipment, vaccines still attract the Goods and Services Tax (GST)**, specifically termed the Integrated GST (IGST).
- GST payments are mandatory for the material to be released at the customs. Several shipments sent by foreign donors, including groups of NRIs, or procured online by resident Indians from abroad, were held up due to a lack of awareness of this. This would lead to delay in the release of critical relief material and also would dent the quantities of relief material they send.

### Exemptions for exemption of GST:

- Recently, the Finance Ministry granted a conditional 'ad-hoc' GST exemption for imports of all COVID-19 relief material, including vaccines, medical oxygen and Remdesivir vials, et al, till June 30. However the **regulations in**



place to avail of this IGST exemption have made the relaxation redundant in some cases.

- The regulation that the incoming material has to be “received free of cost for free distribution anywhere in India for COVID relief” has rendered domestic companies or charities importing these items by purchasing them, even if for free distribution in the country, unqualified for availing the GST break.
- Entities that wish to import relief material for free distribution need a prior certification from State governments. So, global donors and their intended recipients for the donations would need to register with individual States where they wish to route relief material.

### FCRA regulations:

- No entity in India is allowed to receive foreign aid or cash donations unless they have an **approval to do so under the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act (FCRA)**.
- Pre-existing rules that require such NGOs to open a bank account for receiving foreign funds at the State Bank of India’s Parliament Street branch has also further curtailed their ability to receive foreign aid.

Also an NGO receiving foreign funds or material can no longer transfer foreign aid to any other person, which would make it difficult to pass on the relief material to patients or smaller NGOs or groups working on the ground.

## 44. Restructuring the tribunals system

### Background:

- The Centre has abolished several appellate tribunals and authorities and transferred their jurisdiction to other existing judicial bodies through **the Tribunals Reforms (Rationalisation and Conditions of Service) Ordinance 2021**.
- The Tribunals Reforms (Rationalisation and Conditions of Service) Ordinance 2021 has been challenged in the Supreme Court.

### Concerns:

- The Ordinance has met with sharp criticism for the following reasons.

### Bypassing the normal legislative process:

- By taking the **ordinance route** the government seems to have bypassed the usual legislative process thus depriving the legislature of its right to discuss and deliberate on the issue.

### Impact of the abolishment of tribunals:

- The abolishing of several tribunals such as the Film Certification Appellate Tribunal **without any stakeholder consultation** will have a profound impact on the stakeholders.
- Despite the Supreme Court's direction in **Roger Mathew v. South Indian Bank (2019)**, **no judicial impact assessment** was conducted prior to abolishing the tribunals through this Ordinance.

### Against the judicial direction:

- While the Ordinance has incorporated the suggestions made in **Madras Bar Association v. Union of India (2020)** on the composition of a search-cum-selection committee and its role in disciplinary proceedings, it has fixed a four-year tenure for Chairpersons and members of tribunals thus blatantly disregarding the court's direction for fixing a five-year term.

### Non commission of NTC:

- The Centre is yet to constitute a **National Tribunals Commission (NTC)**, an independent umbrella body to supervise the functioning of tribunals, the appointment of and disciplinary proceedings against members, and to take care of administrative and infrastructural needs of the tribunals.
  - The idea of an NTC was first mooted in **Chandra Kumar v. Union of India (1997)**.
- The lack of an institutional body like the NTC will fail to deter **executive interference in the functioning of tribunals** in matters of appointment and removal of tribunal members, as well as in the provision of finances, infrastructure, personnel and other resources required for the day-to-day functioning of the tribunals.
- Such a scenario can lead to a situation where the system can be used to serve political or private interests.

### Significance of NTC:

- The NTC would ideally take on some duties relating to administration and oversight. A 'corporatised' structure of NTC with a Board, a CEO and a Secretariat will allow it to scale up its services and **provide requisite administrative support to all tribunals across the country**. The NTC could

pave the way for the separation of the administrative and judicial functions carried out by various tribunals.

- The NTC functioning as an umbrella authority can support uniform administration across all tribunals.
- The NTC could set performance standards for the efficiency of tribunals and their own administrative processes. This can help **increase efficiency as well as ensure better accountability**.
- It could function as an independent recruitment body to develop and operationalize the procedure for disciplinary proceedings and the appointment of tribunal members. Giving the NTC the authority to set members' salaries, allowances, and other service conditions, subject to regulations, would **help maintain tribunals' independence**.

### Recommendations:

- The Finance Ministry which has been vested with the responsibility for tribunals until the NTC is constituted should come up with an appropriate transition plan.
- The way to reform the tribunal system is to look at solutions from a systemic perspective supported by evidence. **Establishing the NTC** will definitely entail a radical restructuring of the present tribunals system.
- Developing an independent oversight body like the NTC requires a **legal framework** that protects its independence and impartiality. The NTC must be established vide a **constitutional amendment or be backed by a statute** that guarantees it functional, operational and financial independence.

## 45. Fighting resumes in southern Afghanistan

### Context:

**Fighting between the Taliban and Afghan government forces** resumed ending a three-day ceasefire agreed to mark Id-ul-Fitr.

### Background:

- President Joe Biden has announced the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan by September 11 in his effort to end America's longest war.
- The deadline for Biden's withdrawal is significant as **September 11, 2021, is 20 years after the 9/11 terror attacks in New York, Washington, DC, and Pennsylvania** that led the US to target Afghanistan.
- Around **7,000 non-U.S. forces from mainly NATO countries**, also from Australia, New Zealand and Georgia, **outnumber the 2,500 U.S. troops in**

**Afghanistan.** They too have announced a **withdrawal from Afghanistan in coordination with a U.S. pull-out.**

#### **Details:**

- Around **7,000 non-U.S. forces from mainly NATO countries**, also from Australia, New Zealand and Georgia, outnumber the **2,500 U.S. troops in Afghanistan.**
- A key **reason for a coordinated withdrawal** is the fact that **NATO relies on U.S. airlift capabilities** and shipping to move valuable equipment in and out of landlocked Afghanistan.
- After withdrawing, the U.S. and NATO aim to rely on Afghan military and police forces, which they have developed with billions of dollars in funding, to maintain security though peace talks are struggling and the insurgency is resilient.

#### **Resolute Support:**

- An integral part of NATO's current mission, **Resolute Support**, is to **train and equip Afghan security forces fighting the Islamist Taliban.**
  - **Taliban was ousted from power** by a U.S. invasion in late **2001** and has since **waged an insurgency.**
- With non-U.S. troop numbers reaching as high as 40,000 in 2008, Europe, Canada and Australia have moved in tandem with the U.S., also providing long-term funding to rebuild Afghanistan despite the resurgence of Taliban-led violence and endemic official corruption in the country.

### **46. It is getting from bad to worse for women workers**

#### **Background:**

#### **Gender inequality in India:**

- India has slipped from 112 to 140 amongst 156 countries in the 2021 **WEF Global Gender Gap Report.** Of the four pillars of the index, **India suffered mainly in economic participation.**
- **Gender inequality subsists in the Indian economy** as in other sectors like health, education and politics.
  - The **labour participation of women is 22 per cent in India, one of the lowest in the world** (comparable countries have 50 per cent).
  - The **wage gap** between men and women across the Indian economy is a marked feature in India.

- Despite the fact that the number of women has increased in jobs, still, they lag behind in the total percentage of jobs. **The gender employment gap is substantial** given that only 18% of working-age women are employed as compared to 75% of men (Pre-pandemic statistics).
  - Reasons include a lack of good jobs, restrictive social norms, and the burden of household work.

### Economic impact of the pandemic:

- The COVID-19 pandemic has brought about a **massive disruption of the labour market** in India, rendering millions unemployed and has led to a sudden and large increase in poverty.

### Details:

- The pandemic seems to have worsened the situation of gender inequality in India.
- The pandemic has affected more women than men. **Women workers, in particular, have borne a disproportionate burden of the pandemic and the associated lockdowns.**

### A widening economic gap:

- Data from the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy Pvt. Ltd. show that 61% of male workers were unaffected during the lockdown while only 19% of women experienced this kind of **work security**.
- Women have lost more jobs irrespective of the industry in which they were employed.
- Unlike men who had the option of moving into fallback employment arrangements like self-employment and daily wage work, women seemed to have far fewer options.
- 47% of employed women who had lost jobs during the lockdown, had not returned to work, while the number stood at only 7% for men.
- Nearly half of the women workers, irrespective of whether they were salaried, casual, or self-employed, withdrew from the workforce, as compared to only 11% of men.
- Even as new entrants to the workforce, women workers had poorer options compared to men. Women were more likely to enter as daily wage workers while men found avenues for self-employment. This leads to **more precarious work and lower earnings** as compared to men.

### Growing domestic work:

- With the lockdowns in place and almost everyone limited to the confines of their homes, household responsibilities have increased for women. **There has been a massive increase in the burden of household work for women.**
  - The India Working Survey 2020 found that among employed men, the number of hours spent on paid work remained more or less unchanged after the pandemic. But for women, the number of hours spent in domestic work has increased manifold. This increase in household work came without any accompanying relief in the hours spent on paid work.
- This could lead to a situation where married women and women from larger households are less likely to return to work, suggesting that the burden of care may be a reason for **poor employment recovery**.

### Recommendations:

#### Short term measures:

- Expansion of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA).
- Introduction of an **urban employment guarantee** targeted at women.
- There should be coordinated efforts by states to **facilitate the employment of women** while also addressing immediate needs through the setting up of community kitchens, prioritising the opening of schools and anganwadi centres.
- The governments should consider a **COVID-19 hardship allowance** of at least Rs. 5,000 per month for six months for 2.5 million accredited social health activists and Anganwadi workers, most of whom are women.

#### Long term measures:

- **The National Employment Policy**, currently in the works, should systematically **address the constraints around the participation of women's workforce**, both with respect to the availability of work and household responsibilities.
- The government should come up with **policies for sectors where women participation can be significant**, both in current (healthcare, IT, education, agriculture) and emerging (artificial intelligence, blockchain) areas.
- The government should focus on **increasing public investment in social infrastructure** like health, education, child and elderly care. This can help bring women into the workforce not only by directly creating employment for them but also by alleviating some of their domestic work burdens.
- Given the close link between educational attainment and economic participation and the big drop in enrolment of girls in primary (93 per cent),

secondary (62 per cent) and tertiary (29 per cent) education, relevant interventions like Skill India should develop programmes for girls/women and address the systemic issues.

- There is the need to embrace **policies for inclusion** that help women progress in career, with up-skilling and “return-to-career” schemes, flexi-work, special leave, wage parity, hybrid working models, and so on. **A concerted effort across key sectors with a cultural focus on gender sensitivity** instead of gender neutrality can help.

### Conclusion:

- In the pandemic, women have borne a disproportionate burden of the severe disruptions to life and the economy.
- **The govt and businesses must join hands to empower women economically.** This apart from the obvious **social benefit of gender equality** will also give a **big boost to the GDP** of the nation.
  - The global GDP could rise by as much as \$28 trillion by 2025 if, for instance, women play an equal role to men in labour markets. If small, medium and large businesses – both domestic and MNCs – join hands with the government to close the gender gap in economic empowerment, **India could add at least a trillion annually to its GDP by 2029.**
  - Companies with more women representation have achieved 22 per cent higher productivity, 40 per cent better customer retention and 27 per cent more profitability.

### 47. Is India's Palestine policy evolving?

#### Context:

At the United Nations Security Council, **India reaffirmed its support for Palestine.**

#### Details:

- However, India stopped short of making any direct reference to the status of Jerusalem or the future Israel-Palestine borders.
- India's Permanent Representative to the UN said: “**India reiterates its strong support for the just Palestinian cause and its unwavering commitment to the two-state solution.**”
- **India has expressed deep concern over the violence in Jerusalem**, especially on Haram esh-Sharif/Temple Mount during the holy month of Ramzan and

about the possible eviction process in Sheikh Jarrah and Silwan neighbourhood in East Jerusalem.

- India has also **urged both sides to refrain from attempts to unilaterally change the existing status quo**, including in East Jerusalem and its neighbourhood.
  - Here, it is **Israel that is trying to unilaterally change the status quo** by moving to **evict the Palestinian families**, and deploying troops to the Al-Aqsa compound.

### **Evolving position:**

- India's recent comments point to its evolving position on the larger Israel-Palestine issue.
  - India called for the status quo relating to East Jerusalem.
  - However, the crucial point that was missed is that **East Jerusalem should be the capital [of a future Palestinian state]**.
  - Earlier, this was India's stand regarding the two-state solution. This portion is now taken out.
- **Until 2017, India's position** was that it **supported "the Palestinian cause** and called for a negotiated solution resulting in a sovereign, independent, viable and united State of Palestine, **with East Jerusalem as its capital**, living within secure and recognised borders, side by side at peace with Israel".
- **India dropped the references to East Jerusalem and the borders in 2017** when Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas visited Delhi.
- At present, while **India is firmly putting the two-state solution on the table**, it made **no reference to East-Jerusalem as Palestine's capital**, it opines that the contours of the boundaries must be discussed, settled and recognised by the parties.

## **48. Independent Collegium for Election Commission**

### **Why in News**

Recently, a petition was filed in the **Supreme Court (SC)** seeking the **constitution of an independent collegium to appoint members of the Election Commission**.

### **Election Commission of India**

- **About:**
  - It is an **autonomous constitutional authority** responsible for administering **Union and State election** processes in India.



- The body administers elections to the **Lok Sabha, Rajya Sabha, State Legislative Assemblies, and the offices of the President and Vice President in the country.**
- **Article 324 of the Constitution:** It provides for appointment of a Election commission to superintend, direct and control the elections.
- **Structure :**
  - Originally the commission had only one election commissioner but after the **Election Commissioner Amendment Act 1989**, it has been made a multi-member body.
  - The commission **presently consists of one Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) and two Election Commissioners (ECs).**
  - The secretariat of the **commission is located in New Delhi.**

## Key Points

- **Present System of Appointment:**
  - There is **no prescribed procedure for appointment** of the CEC and EC **as per the Constitution.**
  - Under the Transaction of Business rules 1961, **the President shall appoint the CEC and EC based on the recommendations made by the Prime Minister.**
    - Therefore, it is the **executive power of the President** to appoint CEC and ECs.
  - However, according to **Article 324(5)**, **the Parliament has the power to regulate the terms of conditions of service and tenure of ECs.**
    - **Election Commission (Conditions of Service of Election Commissioners and Transaction of Business) Act, 1991** was passed to determine the conditions of service of the CEC and other ECs and to provide for the procedure for transaction of business by the ECI.
  - It is under **Article 324(5)** that the Parliament has made laws till date, and not under **Article 324(2)** in which the Parliament can establish a selection committee for regulating the appointments made by the President.
    - **Article 324(2)** states that the President shall, with aid and advice of the Council of Ministers, appoint CEC and ECs, till Parliament enacts a law fixing the criteria for selection, conditions of service and tenure.
- **Need for an Independent Collegium:**
  - **Recommendation of Committees:**
    - The recommendation to have a neutral collegium to fill up vacancies in the Election Commission have been given by **several expert committees, commissions from 1975.**

- The recommendation was also part of the **Law Commission's 255<sup>th</sup> report in March 2015**.
- In **2009**, the **Second Administrative Reforms Commission** in its fourth report suggested a collegium system for CEC and ECs.
- In **1990**, the **Dinesh Goswami Committee** recommended effective consultation with neutral authorities like the Chief Justice of India and the Leader of the Opposition for the appointment in the Election Commission.
- In **1975**, the **Justice Tarkunde Committee** recommended that the members of the Election Commission should be appointed by the President on the advice of a Committee consisting of the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha and the Chief Justice of India.
- **Insulation from Political and Executive Interference:**
  - The appointment of members of the Election Commission on the whims and fancies of the Executive **violates the very foundation on which it was created**, thus, making the Commission a branch of the Executive.
- **Unfair Election Process:**
  - The Election Commission is **not only responsible for conducting free and fair elections, but it also renders a quasi judicial function** between the various political parties including the ruling government and other parties.
  - In such circumstances, the Executive cannot be the sole participant in the appointment of members of the Election Commission as it gives **unfettered discretion to the ruling party** to choose someone whose loyalty to it is ensured and thereby renders the selection process vulnerable to manipulation.
- **Challenges:**
  - **Similar Demand for Others:**
    - For other constitutional positions, similar demands can be raised where it is the imperative of the executive to make such appointments like for **Attorney General** or **Comptroller & Auditor-General**.
    - For the appointment of **Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) director** and the **Central Vigilance Commissioner**, committees are constituted. But these are statutory positions. As of now, there is no committee for constitutional appointments.
  - **Distinction between CEC & EC:**
    - There is a difference between the position of a CEC & EC. The **appointments to both the positions may differ** according to the task they perform.

- Therefore, to differentiate the process of appointment which is still done on an ad-hoc basis (because of absence of any constitutional law) becomes a **challenging task** that needs to be addressed properly to ensure the independent working of the commission.
- **Judicial Overreach:**
  - The SC interprets any law on the basis of provisions of the constitution, and constitutionally the **decision for appointment procedure of EC comes under executive domain.**
  - Thereby, **decisions by the SC in this regard can possibly shake the harmonious balance of power.**

### Way Forward

- Deficiencies in the present system of appointment process needs to be removed. And **adequate safeguards must be put into place to ensure that ethical and capable people head the concerned positions.**
- There is a **need for debate and discussions in the Parliament on the issue of independence of ECI** and consequently passing of required legislation.

### 49. Sri Lanka's China-backed tax haven clears final hurdle

#### Context:

The Supreme Court in Colombo ruled that the Chinese-funded **tax-free enclave** – the Colombo Port City project could go ahead with only minor tweaks.

- The largest single foreign investment in Sri Lanka is one of several **massive Asian infrastructure projects funded by China** as Beijing increases its regional footprint.
- Under the proposed legislation, the Port City will be **administered by a commission with unprecedented powers to fast track investment approvals.**
- Transactions within the Port City will be **denominated in foreign currency** and all **salaries earned by any worker will be tax-exempt.**

#### Background:

Opposition parties, civil society groups, and labour unions had **challenged the “Colombo Port City Economic Commission” Bill** in Sri Lanka's Supreme Court.

#### Issue:

- The ruling Rajapaksa administration tabled a Bill, titled ‘**Colombo Port City Economic Commission**’, in Parliament, **outlining proposed laws for the \$1.4 billion-Port City** being built on reclaimed land at Colombo’s seafront.
- It is **touted** by the government as an **investment hub for foreign capital**.
- However, opposition argues that it directly **affects Sri Lanka’s sovereignty**.
  - They have **challenged the constitutional validity** of the proposed legislation for the Port City.
  - The clauses **prohibit investment in the Port City in Sri Lankan rupees**, which will keep out Sri Lankans.
- In addition to the legal challenge, the government also faces sharp criticism from some of its backers, including sections of Sri Lanka’s influential Buddhist clergy.
- They fiercely opposed Indian involvement at the East Container Terminal at the Colombo Port.
  - Sri Lanka then **backed out of an agreement with India and Japan** to develop the **East Container Terminal (ECT) at the Colombo Port**.

## 50. Planning for future waves of the pandemic

### Context:

- The **second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in India** and the probability of more such waves in the coming times.
  - The COVID-19 trajectory in other countries shows the possibility of multiple waves of the pandemic. **Japan is experiencing the fourth wave**.

### Details:

- The article discusses some of the measures that could be necessary to mitigate the impact of future waves in India.

### Surveillance:

- There is a lack of clear data relating to the pandemic. There has been some degree of unreliable testing and under-reporting and manipulation of data relating to cases and deaths. This will impair the modellers and result in faulty projections.
- **Identifying impending waves** is very important in mitigating the impact of the pandemic given that it serves as an early warning for the governments, which could then take appropriate measures such as localized lockdowns and other mitigative measures.

- **A strong surveillance system reporting will provide reliable early markers of an impending wave.** The detection of an outbreak in the initial stages can help contain it before the pandemic spreads to other areas.
- The Central and State government should use real-time data by encouraging reliable reporting.
- Also, **concurrent genomic sequencing in real-time in the fixed proportion of samples** will help identify any new variants causing several outbreaks. In case of such a scenario, the administration could impose local lockdowns in high-burden areas to stop the wide spread of the variant.

### **Vaccination:**

- Vaccination continues to remain the major intervention that could help in the fight against the pandemic. The administration should take all measures to **ensure vaccine production at pace and scale to vaccinate the entire population at the earliest.**
- The Central government should proactively reach out to all the vaccine manufacturing firms in the west and invite them to collaborate with Indian firms under the 'Make in India' programme. This will not only increase its domestic production but also help India emerge as the world's biggest exporter of vaccines and furthermore provide an impetus to the soft power image of India in the global community.
- With newer variants of concern emerging, it is also important to **update the vaccines depending on how the virus changes.**

### **Public health infrastructure and workforce:**

- The pandemic has brought to light the importance of timely and efficient public health responses. The lack of sufficient public health infrastructure to cater to the population and the depleted public health workforce has weakened India's fight against the pandemic. The front-line public health workforce is particularly absent in urban areas, while critical care capacity (oxygenated beds, ICUs) is limited in rural areas.
- The need for robust **public health infrastructure and a trained public health workforce** is a bare minimum necessity in this regard.
- The administration needs to reconfigure the health systems to ensure that adequate public health workers and public health infrastructure are available as per global norms.
- The administration will have to hire front-line workers in public health who can engage in surveillance and contact-tracing, and mobilise people for primary healthcare services, including vaccination.

### **Robust pandemic preparedness plan:**

- India has to have a system that can respond to newer pandemics in the making. Rather than building reactive systems for each wave and each pandemic, India should develop robust pandemic preparedness plans. Such a **proactive approach** will help reduce the impact of such an outbreak.

#### One Health approach:

- **India needs to adopt the 'One Health' agenda and ensure that environmental health and animal health are given similar priority as human health.**
  - Nearly 60% of known infectious diseases and up to 75% of new or emerging infectious diseases are zoonotic in origin.
- Hence, **preserving the ecosystem in its natural form** is important in order to prevent future pandemics.

#### 51. Crime and Criminal Tracking Network and Systems (CCTNS)

- Crime and Criminal Tracking Network and Systems (CCTNS) is a **secure application that links over 97% of police stations in the country.**
- The project was initiated in June 2009.
- CCTNS has been developed by the **National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) under the Union Home Ministry.**
- It aims to create a **comprehensive and integrated system for enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of policing at the Police Station level.** This will be done through:
  - Adoption of principles of e-Governance.
  - Creation of a **nationwide networked infrastructure for the evolution of IT-enabled state-of-the-art tracking system** around the investigation of crime and detection of criminals.
- It not only automates police functions at Police station and higher levels but also creates facilities and mechanism to provide public services like registration of online complaints, ascertaining the status of a case registered at the police station, verification of persons, etc.

#### Note:

- CCTNS is being used for antecedent **verification for Global Entry.**
- The Global Entry is a **facility run by the U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP)**, an agency that works under the Department of Homeland Security

that fast tracks movement of pre-approved, low-risk travellers upon arrival after a rigorous background check through designated kiosks.

- Though the **Global Entry pilot project started in 2008, India became a member** in 2017 only.

## 52. High Court seeks govt.'s stand on GNCTD Act plea

### Context:

The Delhi High Court has asked the Centre to respond to a **plea seeking to strike down** the Government of National Capital Territory of Delhi (GNCTD) **Amendment Act that increases powers of the Lieutenant-Governor.**

### Details:

- The petition has argued that the Act would lead to **confusion among the residents** as to who would be taking decisions for the Capital.
- It argued that vesting of powers in the L-G **would not be in harmony with the republican system of government.**
- It is argued that the **L-G already had overriding powers in the matters of land, police and services** and by the latest amendment to the GNCTD Act, he would **have authority over all legislations passed by the Delhi Assembly.**

### Background to the issue

- It was in 1991 that Delhi was given a fully elected legislative assembly and a responsible government through a constitutional amendment.
- The 69th Constitutional Amendment Act of 1991 conferred the Union Territory of Delhi with a special status, and redesignated it as the 'National Capital Territory of Delhi' and designated its administrator as the Lieutenant Governor (LG).
- Though a UT, Delhi was considered as a special case and given a special constitutional status by the Parliament.
- The 1991 act provided for a fully elected assembly and a council of ministers responsible to the assembly.
- It conferred on the assembly the power to legislate on all matters in the state list as well as the concurrent list except land, police and public order. However, the laws of Parliament prevail over those made by the Delhi Assembly.
- It also brought in a provision from the Government of Union Territories Act, 1963, namely, that in case of a difference between the LG and the council of ministers on any matter, it shall be referred to the President by the LG for

his/her decision and pending such decision, the LG can take any action on the matter as he/she deems appropriate.

- Although the constitution bench of the Supreme Court has held that the government does not have to seek the concurrence of the LG on its decisions and that any differences between them should be resolved keeping in view the constitutional primacy of representative government and cooperative federalism, the state government is under constant threat from the LG's power to differ with the government on important issues.
  - The verdict said that the LG was bound by the aid and advice of the council of ministers.
  - It also added that the decisions of the council should be communicated to the LG.
  - However, the SC has said that the LG cannot refer a matter mechanically or mindlessly and has to make all attempts to resolve the differences within the framework of the law and the Transaction of Business Rules.
- Encouraged by this verdict, the state government had stopped sending files on executive matters to the LG before implementation. It had been keeping the LG informed of all administrative developments, but not necessarily before implementing or executing any decision.
- This is the backdrop in which the new amendments have been brought about.

### 53. A thaw in India-Pakistan trade relations?

#### Context:

- The rejection by the Pakistan government of the recent proposal made to it by the Pakistani Economic Coordination Committee (ECC) to import sugar, cotton and cotton yarn from India.

#### Background:

#### Restriction in bilateral trade:

- In 2019, India and Pakistan undertook trade-restrictive measures against each other.
  - After the Pulwama terror attack, **India withdrew the Most Favoured Nation (MFN) status of Pakistan and imposed a customs duty hike of 200% on imports.**
  - When India revoked the autonomy of Jammu and Kashmir, **Pakistan suspended bilateral trade with India.**



### Details:

- Despite the disappointment with the Pakistan decision, the article expresses a **possibility of resumption of trade relations** between the two countries in the coming times based on the following reasons.

### History of ups and downs:

- Even though trade curbs have been applied several times in the past, such measures have been reversed to create a trade enhancing environment when the relations stabilized.
- There have been growing indications of back channel talks between the two neighbours and the recent developments like the extension of the ceasefire agreement between the two nations are indicative of a **thaw in their otherwise troubled and strained relationship**.

### Pressure of the pandemic:

- The Pakistan government had lifted the trade ban on the **import of medicines** and raw material from India to avert a health crisis.
- Now there is a demand for the inclusion of more items like sugar, cotton and yarn. These are critical not just for domestic consumption but also for the **domestic industries which have had to face the wrath of the pandemic**.

### Continued trade despite restrictions:

- The available data indicate that there has been substantial **trade between the two countries in the recent past**.
  - During 2020-21 (April-February), the recorded bilateral trade was \$280 million, of which India's exports to Pakistan were \$278 million and imports were \$2 million with even banned items like sugar being exported to Pakistan.
  - A sizeable number of items have been traded between the two countries. This is despite the complete ban on trade by Pakistan on both exports and imports.
- Thus, even under restrictive trade conditions, there has been unimpeded trade between the two countries.
  - **Informal channels for trade** have functioned for decades and are a ready option for traders from both countries.

### Significance of bilateral trade:

- The trade in essential agricultural commodities could **help stabilise domestic prices and take care of seasonal shortages and food security in the home country**.
- A robust bilateral trade augurs well for several important **domestic and export industries** in both countries.
- There are **significant costs of non-cooperation** on the economic front. Given the interdependencies between India and Pakistan, restrictions on trade only shift trade to informal channels. The informal channels cost more and are not dependable.
- The **increased trade relation and economic interdependence could also play a critical role in easing the strained bilateral relation**.

### Conclusion:

- Given the potential benefits of a robust trade relation, India and Pakistan must initiate a **process for a gradual deepening of the bilateral trade**. This could begin with a positive list for trade, which has to be expanded over the years to move towards complete normalisation.
- **Business organisations and chambers of commerce should play an important role** in creating a strong lobby that could help revive the trade dialogue between the two nations.

## 54. Scrap new privacy policy, Centre tells WhatsApp

### Context:

The government of India sent a **notice to WhatsApp** asking it to **withdraw the controversial update to its privacy policy**.

### Details:

- The MeitY notice **directs WhatsApp to withdraw its Privacy Policy 2021** as the changes and the manner of introducing these changes **undermine the sacrosanct values of informational privacy, data security and user choice for Indian users and harms the rights and interests of Indian citizens**.
- The Ministry highlighted how the new policy violated several provisions of Indian laws.
- The notice warned the firm that the **failure to give a satisfactory response** may result in **steps in consonance with law**.

### Issues raised:

- The Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY), in an affidavit, said the policy was not in tune with the IT (Intermediary Guidelines) Rules, 2011.
  - Notably, the rules require a body corporate who collects, stores or otherwise deals with data to issue a privacy policy providing for certain safeguards, in addition to imposing various other obligations.
- According to MeitY, the impugned privacy policy violates the 2011 Rules.
- The Ministry also pointed out that WhatsApp's policy fails to specify types of sensitive personal data being collected, highlighting that there was no distinction between personal data or sensitive personal data which would be collected.
- It added that WhatsApp also failed to notify users of details of the collection of sensitive personal information.
- Further, the new privacy policy fails to provide an option to withdraw consent retrospectively.

## 55. Interpretations which impede a just social order

### Context:

- A Constitution Bench of the Supreme Court has declared the **Maharashtra State Reservation for Socially and Educationally Backward Classes (SEBC) Act of 2018** as being unconstitutional.

### Details:

- The judgement is based on the following three primary findings of the bench.
  - The Court held that the Maratha community did not constitute a socially and educationally backward class.
  - The law concerned was in breach of the rule set by the Supreme Court in **the Indra Sawhney vs Union of India (1992) judgement** which disallows reservations made in excess of 50% of the total available positions.
  - The Court noted that **State governments had no independent power to declare a group as a backward class** based on its interpretation of the **102<sup>nd</sup> constitutional amendment**.

### Concerns:

- The article expresses deep concerns over the judgement, especially with regard to the observations regarding the limit on reservations and the states' power to determine backward classes.

### With regard to limit on reservation:

No constitutional backing:

- The text of **Articles 16(4) and 15(4)** which confer power on the government to make reservations for the deserving classes contains no limitation on reservation.
- Hence, the idea that **reservations ought to be restricted to 50%** does not stem from the Constitution but from the Supreme Court Judgement in the Indra Sawhney vs Union of India (1992) case. Hence the limit does not have constitutional backing.

Against the objective of attaining substantive equality:

- **Reservation is an important tool to obtain the objective of substantive equality as envisioned in the Indian Constitution.** It could impede the ability of States to secure a **just social order.**

### With regard to states' power in determining backward classes:

Impede the right of certain communities:

- Until now, the central government and each of the State governments produced separate lists declaring communities as socially and educationally backward. As a result, backward communities that were kept out of the central list were entitled to reservation at least for those posts and seats under the control of the State government.
- The recent judgement stating that the state governments cannot exercise the right of classifying communities as backward may lead to a scenario where **deserving communities might lose the benefits offered by reservation.**

Interpretational errors:

- The bench seems to have overlooked, at least, two essential factors in its observation on the 102<sup>nd</sup> Amendment and its impact on the states' right to determine backward classes.
  - Article 342A clearly mentions the term "Central List" differentiating itself from the existent state lists. Thus the provision in question was intended towards the categorisation of groups as backward for the purposes of reservation to posts and seats under the Union government's control only. The SC's observation thus seems like impinging on the **plain meaning of the term "central list"**.
  - The Union Minister of Social Justice and Empowerment during the **parliamentary debate on the constitutional amendment bill** had

reiterated that the changes envisaged via the 102<sup>nd</sup> Amendment did not intend to limit the powers of states in any way.

Against the principle of federalism:

- The Constitutional Bench's interpretation of the 102<sup>nd</sup> Amendment dispossessing the states from exercising the power to determine backward classes goes against the very essence of federalism, which again is a **basic structure of the Indian Constitution**.

**Conclusion:**

- **The interpretation of the 102<sup>nd</sup> Amendment seems to be against values of equality and federalism**, considered integral aspects of India's democracy.
- The Union Government has rightly filed a petition to review the judgment with respect to the limits it places on the power of State governments to determine backward classes. If the Supreme Court refuses the plea, the Parliament can amend the Constitution and grant to States the power to determine backwardness.

## **56. The outdated nature of bureaucracy**

**Background:**

- The COVID-19 pandemic has been a major challenge to public administration and has tested the resilience of all public institutions.
- **The bureaucracy is being blamed for its ineffective response to the COVID-19 crisis.**
- Academicians and public administration experts have pointed out the **outdated nature of public bureaucracy** for its ineffectiveness.

**Concerns:**

**Continued reliance on traditional bureaucratic structures:**

- The article laments the fact that even in this 21<sup>st</sup> century, democratic countries are still relying on **traditional bureaucracies (Weberian bureaucracy model)** to perform public policy formulation and implementation roles despite such structures having outlived their relevance.
- Some of the major lacunae with respect to the Weberian bureaucratic approach are as follows:
  - Continued **preference for generalists over specialists**

- In such a system, specialists in every government department have to remain subordinate to the generalist officers despite their superior domain knowledge.
- The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the weakness of such an approach. The lack of authority to healthcare professionals who are specialists to carry out policy formulation can be counted as one of the major lacunae in our policy response to the pandemic.
- Weberian bureaucracy prefers **leadership of position over leadership of function**.
  - Leadership of function is when a person has expert knowledge of a particular responsibility in a particular situation and is capable of and authorized to respond to evolving situations rather than relying on dictation from someone occupying a particular position.
  - This acts as a major **limitation for decentralized governance which is more effective**. This has resulted in a situation where the bureaucracy has become an end in itself rather than a means to an end, which is, improved governance and socio-economic development of the society.
- The **rigid adherence to rules** in the traditional bureaucratic structure has been an area of major concern.
  - The strict adherence to process and rules has resulted in COVID-19 aid getting stuck in cumbersome clearance processes even during the pandemic.
  - The **rigid emphasis on the following of rules and regulations and the fear of official sanctions** have resulted in the **rejection of innovation from public officials**.

#### Limitations of outright privatization:

- In the light of the lacunae in the existent bureaucratic structure, there have been growing calls for a new public management in India, which promotes privatisation and managerial techniques of the private sector as an effective tool to seek improvements in public service delivery and governance.
- However, it should be noted that **outright privatization may not be a viable solution in India where there is social inequality and regional variations in development**.
- The private sector is driven by the motive of profits and hence would cater only to people and areas where their operations are financially viable. They would not be able to serve the poor due to his/her inability to pay for the private sector's work.
- Such an approach renders the state as a mere bystander among the multiple market players with accountability being constantly shifted, especially during

a crisis. The COVID-19 crisis has shown that the private sector has failed in public service delivery.

### Recommendations:

#### Collaborative governance:

- The most appropriate administrative reform to ensure more effective public governance is aiming for collaborative governance in which the **public sector, private players and civil society, especially public service organisations (NGOs), work together for effective public service delivery.**
- Benefits of such a system:
  - Such a system would ensure that there is **no domination of public bureaucracy in policy formulation and implementation.** This can help change the behaviour of bureaucracy towards governance and also help initiate public service reforms – relook at the generalist versus specialist debate, **openness to reforms such as lateral entry and collaboration with a network of social actors.**
  - In such a system the existing network of social actors and private players would take responsibility in various aspects of governance with public bureaucracy coordinating the efforts. Such a structure would allow **the institutionalization of the critical role being played by civil society.** This will help in scaling the impact of effective civil societies.
    - Civil society has been playing a major role during the pandemic.
  - The collaboration of public bureaucracy with the private and social society has had a profound impact on public service delivery as seen in the following cases.
    - Green Revolution (M.S. Swaminathan), the White Revolution (Vergheese Kurien), Aadhaar-enabled services (Nandan Nilekani) and the IT revolution (Sam Pitroda).

### Conclusion:

- The public sector, private players and civil society should all work together for public service delivery.
- Such **new public governance which can help address the various lacunae and make public administration more effective is the future of governance, especially public service delivery in India.**

## 57. China completes Tibet highway

### Context:

China has completed the construction of a strategic highway through the Brahmaputra Canyon.

### **China's Border Infrastructure push – Strategic significance:**

- The strategically significant highway **through the world's deepest canyon** is in Tibet along the Brahmaputra river.
  - It passes **through the Grand Canyon of the Yarlung Zangbo river**, as the Brahmaputra is called in Tibet.
  - It **enables greater access to remote areas** along the **disputed border with Arunachal Pradesh** in India.
  - The construction began in 2014 and is **part of a wider infrastructure push in border areas in Tibet.**
- In **November 2020**, China began work on a **strategically important railway line** – its **second major rail link to Tibet** that will link Sichuan province with Nyingchi.
  - The first one was the **Qinghai-Tibet railway that opened in 2006.**
  - The Chinese President called it a **major step in safeguarding national unity** and a significant move in **promoting the economic and social development of the western region.**
  - The railway would act as a 'fast track' for the **delivery of strategic materials in the time of crisis.**
- Another part of the border infrastructure push is the **construction of new civilian settlements**, along with the **expansion of existing smaller hamlets, along border areas**, some of which lie in **disputed territories claimed by India and Bhutan**, to strengthen China's control over the land.
- In 2017, the **Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) government** launched a plan to build moderately well-off villages **along China's borders with India, Bhutan and Nepal.**

### **Concerns:**

- In 2020, satellite images emerged showing a **new village called Pangda built 2-3 km into what Bhutan sees as its land.**
- In 2021, a **village built 4-5 km into what India sees as its territory in Arunachal** was seen via satellite images.
  - Indian officials said this land has been under China's effective control since 1959 and there were military barracks there earlier.

### **Conclusion:**

- The civilian settlements, **along with the new infrastructure connectivity**, are seen as **aimed at bolstering China's control over the areas.**



## 58. Still grappling with online classes

### Background:

- The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in a **decisive shift from traditional modes of classroom education to online education.**

### Concerns:

- Though the online education mode has allowed maintaining a semblance of continuity in education, yet online education in India suffers from the following lacunae.

### Lack of requisite infrastructure:

- The **low public expenditure in the education sector** has resulted in poor infrastructure in state run universities.
  - The **government spent only 3.2% of its GDP on education in 2020-21.**
- Even this low expenditure is marked by **stark differences within government institutions.** While centrally funded elite institutes such as the IITs, IIMs, NITs and Central universities receive a large proportion of government funds, the financial health of state universities in the country continues to be worrisome.
- This allowed centrally funded elite institutes to adapt to the new requirement quickly. They were able to launch video channels and upload e-content on institutional websites and digital platforms.
- However, a **majority of the state universities still struggle without proper Internet connectivity and bandwidth in their campuses.** Also the severe crunch of human resources in universities of India is an added challenge to the already overburdened teachers.

### Digital divide:

- Many of the **students lack the facilities to attend online classes.**
- Despite impressive growth in digital connectivity, **internet penetration is still low** in India.
- The difference in students' access to digital education, will lead to the exclusion of the less privileged student community and deepen the existing inequalities in the society.

### Lack of appropriate study material:

- The lack of appropriate study material is a major concern too for online education. Merely using scanned lecture notes or powerpoint presentations does not serve any meaningful purpose.
- There has been the **absence of application-based learning avenues for students** in the online education mode. Without this the practical field and laboratory-based learning would suffer.

### Recommendations:

- Given that there is talk of more COVID-19 waves, it is imperative for the government to embrace a pragmatic approach to online education.
- The higher education institutions were directed by the government to shift from classroom education to online education, without taking cognisance of changes needed in infrastructure, training, etc. Neither the institutions nor the students were prepared for this sudden change. The **transition from conventional classroom teaching and learning to online education needs to be done in a phased manner.**

### Ensure funding:

- The government should provide sufficient financial support to the state universities to build the requisite infrastructure for online education. The government must provide suitable **financial aids to state universities to obtain appropriate IT tools, platforms, devices etc.**
  - The Fifteenth Finance Commission in its report has also recommended investing in online education.

### Bridging digital divide:

- Development of **massive open online courses (MOOCs), direct-to-home (DTH) content development**, digital classrooms and provision of devices (laptop/tablets) for 25 lakh students belonging to the socially and economically weaker sections of society could help close the digital gap to some extent.

### Additional information:

- There are 993 universities, 39,931 colleges, 3.73 crore students and 14.16 lakh teachers in India, according to All India Survey on Higher Education (2018-19).

## 59. CJI made 'statement of law' at CBI panel

### Context:

- The high level committee consisting of the Prime Minister, Chief Justice of India and the leader of the opposition in Lok sabha had recently convened to appoint a director to the Central Bureau of Investigation.
  - **Subodh Kumar Jaiswal**, currently Director General of the Central Industrial Security Force, has been appointed as CBI Director.

### Details:

- The Chief Justice of India N.V. Ramana during the meeting had asked to **avoid officers with less than six months left to retire for appointment as CBI Director.**
- This opinion of the CJI should be viewed as just a “**statement of law**” flowing from the judiciary’s observations in many landmark cases.

### Cases which guide appointment of director to CBI:

#### Vineet Narain judgment:

- As per the Vineet Narain judgment of 1998, the Director of CBI is to hold the post for not less than two years.
- He/she may not be transferred except with the previous consent of the high-level appointment committee.

#### 2019 Supreme Court order:

- **The six-month minimum residual tenure rule was introduced by the Supreme Court in a 2019 order.**
- It had noted that recommendation for appointment to the post of Director General of Police by the Union Public Service Commission and preparation of panel should be purely on the basis of merit from officers who have a minimum residual tenure of six months, that is, officers who have at **least six months of service prior to retirement.**
- The apex court had reasoned that officers with only a few days of service may be in an insecure state of mind and this would not augur well for the functioning of the CBI which has jurisdiction to investigate offences pertaining to 69 Central laws, 18 State Acts and 231 offences in the IPC.

### Laws which guide appointment of director of CBI:

#### Central Vigilance Commission Act, 2003:

- CBI works under the overall supervision of CVC in matters related to the Prevention of Corruption Act, 1988. **The CVC act provides for a security of two year tenure in office for CBI Director.**
- The CVC is also involved in the appointment of officers to the post about the level of SP and above except Director and also recommend the extension or curtailment of tenure of such officers in the DSPE (CBI) -An investigation wing of CBI.

### 60. Subodh Kumar Jaiswal takes charge as CBI chief

#### Context:

Subodh Kumar Jaiswal, a 1985-batch Indian Police Service (IPS) officer, has been appointed the **Director of Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI)**.

#### Appointment of CBI Director:

- At present, the **appointment of the CBI director** is governed by the **Lokpal Act**.
- **Before** the Lokpal Act was legislated, the CBI director was appointed by the **Delhi Special Police Establishment (DSPE) Act**.
- The CBI director is appointed by the Centre on the basis of the recommendation of a search committee.
- The search committee is made up of the **Prime Minister as the chairperson, the Chief Justice of India and the Leader of Opposition**.
- Firstly, the **Home Ministry prepares a list** of IPS officers, who are eligible for appointment.
- This **list is sent to the Department of Personnel for preparation of the final list** on the basis of “seniority, integrity and experience in the investigation of anti-corruption cases”.
- The **search committee examines the final list and recommends a name** to the government for the appointment.

### 61. SC had cautioned govt. on privacy

#### Context:

Recently, **WhatsApp** has approached the Delhi High Court **challenging the Central government's new Information Technology Rules, 2021.**

### **Background:**

- In September 2019, hearing a petition filed by Facebook, the top court showed **deep concern at the utilisation of social media for committing crimes.**
- It said the medium had become a **source for pornography, criminals** to run weapons, drugs and contraband. The court had even felt that some messages on social media may even **threaten national sovereignty.**
- It was in this context the court had called for a **properly framed regime to allow the government to get information about the first originators of messages from significant social media intermediaries with end-to-end encryption technology.**
  - However, the court had exercised restraint, too. It warned that **de-encryption, if easily available, could defeat the fundamental right to privacy.**
- The court had clarified that the **government should ensure that the privacy of the individual is not invaded.** The order had also underlined that **traceability should be restricted to specific circumstances.**
- **In the Puttuswamy Case, the SC had said** “The essential role of the test of proportionality is to enable the court to determine whether a legislative measure is disproportionate in its interference with the fundamental right... In determining this, the court will have regard to whether a less intrusive measure could have been adopted consistent with the object of the law and whether the impact of the encroachment on a fundamental right is disproportionate to the benefit which is likely to ensue.

### **Issue:**

- The new rules compel the **social media platforms to compulsorily enable “the identification of the first originator of the information”** in India upon **government or court order.**
- But **WhatsApp finds traceability under the new rules “disproportionate”.** The privacy of each one of its users would be compromised as there was no way to predict which message would be subject to a tracing order from the government.
- In its petition before the Delhi High Court, it said that it would have to **build an ability to identify the first originator of every message, to be served up to the government forever.** This means even **legal users and their messages would be under watch.** It would have a **chilling effect on free speech.**

## 62. U.S.-China engagement era has come to an end: top U.S. official

Context:

Changing U.S. - China relationship.

Details:

- A top official (**Coordinator for Indo-Pacific Affairs**) of the **Biden administration** has said “More than three-decade long era of engagement between the United States and China that saw the world’s two largest economies develop closely interdependent relations has come to an end”.
- He said **competition would henceforth be the dominant paradigm** and **U.S. policy would work under a new set of strategic parameters**.
- The comments **underline the shift in U.S. views on China from the time of the Obama administration** as well as the broadly bipartisan consensus on the current direction of relations, following four turbulent years for the relationship under the previous Trump administration.
- He said that the U.S. believed that the **best way to engage a more assertive China is to work with allies, partners and friends**.
- He said that the **Chinese policies** under President Xi **are in large part responsible for the shift in U.S. policy**, citing **clashes on China’s border with India**, an **economic campaign against Australia** and the **rise of China’s ‘wolf warrior’ diplomacy**.

### Wolf warrior diplomacy

- It is a new approach inside China and **reinforces a presumed transition of Chinese diplomacy from conservative, passive, and low-key to assertive, proactive, and high-profile**.
- Wolf Warrior and Wolf Warrior II are Chinese action blockbusters that highlight agents of Chinese special operation forces. They have boosted national pride and patriotism among Chinese viewers.
- **“Wolf-warrior diplomacy,”** named after these movies, **describes offensives by Chinese diplomats to defend China’s national interests, often in confrontational ways**.
- Many Chinese believe the Western media portrayal of China is highly biased, often with ideological and racist tinges. Wolf-warrior diplomacy is part of the Chinese government’s endeavour to “tell the China story.”

### 63. Democracy at stake in Nepal

#### Context:

- Nepal is facing its severest political crisis in decades. The country has seen repeated dissolution of Parliament in 2020 and 2021.

#### India's role:

- Even when India's political and diplomatic culture saw a departure from best past practices, it was expected that its official regime would always support multiparty democracy, progressive political action and changing fundamentals.
- In helping an unpopular and illegitimate regime in Kathmandu, India might not be benefitted nor will Nepal.
- India is being seen as backing an autocratic and unconstitutional regime, surviving in caretaker mode.
- In this backdrop, India should correct its course and not support an autocratic regime. It must facilitate reposing faith in Nepal's democracy and due processes.
- There should be a trade-off between the developmental aspirations of Nepal and the strategic concerns of India, in the light of changing geopolitical dynamics in the Himalayan region.
- The Kalapani-Limpiyadhura map issue, boundary issues can be resolved through serious political dialogue.

#### Issue:

- While dissolution is not new to Nepal, dissolutions after the new Constitution of 2015 coming into force, that places safeguards against dissolution, raises concerns.
- The repeated dissolution of Parliament is a dangerous game plan by national and international forces to dismantle the federal republican democratic Constitution and restore the old Hindu monarchical state.
- With Parliament dissolved and with a President seen as favourable to him, Prime Minister (now caretaker Prime Minister) K.P. Sharma Oli will have the power to rule without being accountable.

#### Way Forward for Nepal:

- Nepal should work towards regaining its lost glory and avail its true development potential.
- It should decline harmful assistance of neighbours involved in geostrategic rivalries.

- On the domestic front, an increased focus should be on the country itself, instead of leveraging on vulnerabilities and the making of disruptive partnerships.
- In a functional democracy, statecraft is not supposed to be selfless until it relies on progressive policy and governance with an aim to further the mission of the greater common good.
- Despite all the flaws, Nepal should protect its democracy that is now at stake because of actions by political opportunists.

#### **64. Children under mid-day meal scheme to get aid**

##### Context:

The Centre has decided to give about **100 each to children** studying in **Class 1 to Class 8 in government schools**, who are **beneficiaries of the Mid-Day Meal scheme**.

##### Details:

- It is aimed at **safeguarding the nutritional levels of children and ensuring their immunity is protected**.
- **₹1200 crore in total** would be given to 11.8 crore children through **direct benefit transfer as a one-time payment**.

##### Fund Allocation:

- The Central Government will provide additional funds of about **₹1200 crore to States and Union Territories**.
- The money comes from the **cooking cost component of the scheme**.
- The **Central allocation** for the Mid-Day Meal scheme in 2021-22 is **₹11,500 crore**.
  - Its **largest component is cooking costs**, which cover the prices of ingredients such as pulses, vegetables, cooking oil, salt, and condiments.
  - In 2020, the **minimum allocation for cooking cost per child per day** was set at ₹4.97 for Classes 1 to 5, and ₹7.45 for Classes 6 to 8, with the Centre paying **60% of the cost**.

##### Issue:



- Children are being given **cash in lieu of the mid-day meal** in some places and **dry rations** in others. However, the quantities/amounts are too low to be even adequate for one nutritious meal a day.
- Noting that ₹100 per child amounts to less than ₹4 a day, even if it was a monthly payment, Right to Food activists also say this is **insufficient to provide the nutrition security** that is envisaged.
- With approximately 200 school days, each child should be getting something like 900-1300 annually [as cooking cost component].
- Also, while the **schools can purchase ingredients at wholesale prices**, with the same amount, parents will be able to purchase much less.

### Way Forward:

- In 2020, **hardly any State provided free grain or transferred these cooking costs**. The children must be transferred the arrears from the previous year as well.
- **Enhanced take-home rations**, including eggs, vegetables, fruits, dal/chana, oil must be given in order to **ensure nutrition security**.

## 65. Probing the origins of the SARS-CoV-2 virus

### Context:

Calls to **investigate into the origin of the COVID-19 pandemic** have resurfaced.

### Details:

- The novel coronavirus was first reported from Wuhan.
  - The Chinese city hosts a laboratory conducting virus research.
- The Program for Monitoring Emerging Diseases (ProMED) notified pneumonia of unknown cause in the city in December 2019.
  - The city's Huanan wet market was associated with many of the earliest cases.

### What is the need for investigation into the origin?

According to a group of scientists, this is necessary because the two theories on the origins remain invalid. They are:

1. The virus could have been accidentally released from a laboratory.
2. It was the result of a spillover from some animal species to humans.

### What have U.S. intelligence agencies been asked to do?

- Subsequent to the call issued by scientists, U.S. President Joe Biden, ordered an investigation by intelligence agencies into the origins of the virus.
- The Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO) has also acknowledged that more work needs to be done on the lab leak theory.
  - Earlier, a WHO team that visited Wuhan thought a leak to be the least likely hypothesis.

### Why has the demand for a fresh inquiry arisen?

- Understanding the origin of the virus is important to both increase safety in laboratories undertaking biological research, and to prevent pandemics of animal origin.

### What is the basis for the natural origin hypothesis?

- The natural origin hypothesis is explained in a **Joint WHO-China study report**.
- It identifies a SARS-related coronavirus in a (horseshoe) bat (SARSr-CoV; RaTG13).
  - SARS-CoV-2 virus has 96.2% genomic similarity to this.
- The novel coronavirus is less similar to the genome of viruses that have caused other epidemics such as SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome) and MERS (Middle East respiratory syndrome).
- The higher infectivity of SARS-CoV-2 is attributed to the unique insertion of four amino acids in its spike protein that makes it more efficient.
- Their arguments are based on genetic differences between the viruses:
  - While the RaTG13 in bats is similar to SARS-CoV-2, the receptor binding domain (RBD) of the spike (the RBD protein binds to the ACE2 receptor) is divergent for the two.
    - RaTG13's RBD appears less efficient.
  - It is on the basis of this natural origin hypothesis, it was concluded that natural selection on a human or human-like host appeared to facilitate optimal binding of the spike protein of the novel coronavirus with ACE2 receptors. This ruled out the lab-leak hypothesis.
  - It is also believed that a virus was acquired by humans, and it became more efficient as it spread among humans during a certain phase that remains undetected.

## **GS 3 : Economy, Science and Technology, Environment**

## 1. Positron: The Antimatter Counterpart of the Electrons

### Why in News

Researchers from the **Raman Research Institute (RRI)**, Bengaluru, have resolved the mystery of the antimatter counterpart of the electrons called **Positron and Positron Excess Phenomenon**.

- RRI is an autonomous institution of the **Department of Science and Technology**.

### Anti-Matter

- Antimatter is the **opposite of normal matter**. More specifically, the sub-atomic particles of antimatter have properties opposite those of normal matter.
  - **Matter** is made up of atoms, which are the basic units of chemical elements such as hydrogen, helium or oxygen.
  - **Atoms** are the basic units of matter and the defining structure of elements. atoms are made up of three particles:
    - Protons, Neutrons and Electrons.

### Positron

- Positron is a **subatomic particle whose mass is the same as that of an electron and numerically equal but positively charged particle**. The positron was discovered in 1932.

### Key Points

- **Positron Excess:**
  - The excess number of high energy particles of the antimatter counterpart of the electrons, called **positrons have intrigued scientists for long**.
  - Over the years astronomers have **observed positrons having an energy of more than 10 giga-electron volts, or 10 GeV**.
    - For an estimate, this is the energy of a **positively charged electron accelerated across a 10,000,000,000 volt battery**. Positrons with energy more than 300 GeV, however, are lower in comparison to what astronomers expect.
  - This behaviour of positrons between 10 and 300 GeV is what astronomers call the '**positron excess**'.
- **RRI's Study:**

- The **Milky Way** consists of **giant clouds of molecular hydrogen**. They are the seats of the formation of **new stars** and can be as massive as **10 million times the Sun's mass**.
  - They can extend up to **600 light-years**.
- Cosmic rays, produced in **supernovae** explosions propagate through these clouds before they reach the Earth. **Cosmic rays interact with molecular hydrogen and can give rise to other cosmic rays**.
- As they propagate through these clouds, they **decay from their original forms and intermix, lose their energy by energising the clouds, and may also get re-energised**.
- RRI studied all these astrophysical processes via a **code it set up on the computer, using a publicly available code**.
- **RRIs Code:**
  - The code **considers 1638 molecular hydrogen clouds in the Milky Way** that other astronomers have observed across different wavelengths of the electromagnetic spectrum.
  - RRI followed a comprehensive catalogue which **consists of ten molecular clouds in the immediate neighbourhood of our Sun**.
  - These galactic clouds **provide the astronomers a crucial input** that is the number of giga-electron volt cosmic rays.
    - These help them **determine the excess number of positrons that reach the Earth**.
  - The computer code was successfully able to **reproduce the observed number of positrons at giga-electron volt energies**.
  - Not only the positron excess, the computer code accurately **reproduces the spectra of protons, antiprotons, boron, carbon, and all other components of cosmic rays**.
- **RRIs Proposal:**
  - Cosmic rays **while propagating through the Milky Way galaxy interact with matter producing other cosmic rays**, primarily electrons and positrons.
  - All mechanisms via which cosmic rays interact with the molecular clouds to show that **nearby molecular clouds can be a viable contributor to the positron excess phenomenon**.

## Cosmic Rays

- Cosmic rays are **atom fragments that rain down on the Earth from outside of the solar system**. They blaze at the speed of light and have been blamed for electronics problems in satellites and other machinery. They were Discovered in 1912.

## Light-Year

- The light-year is a unit of length used to express astronomical distances and is equivalent to about **9.46 trillion kilometres**.
- As defined by the International Astronomical Union, a light-year is **the distance that light travels in vacuum in one Julian year**.

## 2. State Disaster Response Fund

### Why in News

Recently, the Centre has released the **first instalment of the State Disaster Response Fund (SDRF) to States**, in the wake of the **second wave of Covid-19** that has claimed thousands of lives since April 2021.

- Normally, the first instalment is released in June as per the recommendations of the **Finance Commission**.

### Key Points

- **About:**
  - SDRF has been constituted under Section 48 (1) (a) of the **Disaster Management Act, 2005**.
    - It was constituted based on the recommendations of the **13<sup>th</sup> Finance Commission**.
  - It is the **primary fund available with the State governments** for responses to notified disasters to meet expenditure for providing immediate relief.
  - It is audited by the **Comptroller and Auditor General of India (CAG)** every year.
- **Contribution:**
  - The **Centre contributes 75% of the SDRF allocation for general category States and Union Territories and 90% for special category States and Union Territories** (northeastern States, Sikkim, Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir).
  - The annual Central contribution is **released in two equal installments as per the recommendation of the Finance Commission**.
- **Disaster (s) Covered under SDRF:**

- Cyclone, drought, earthquake, fire, flood, tsunami, hailstorm, landslide, avalanche, cloudburst, pest attack, frost and cold waves.
- **Local Disasters:**
- A State Government may use up to 10% of the funds available under the SDRF for providing immediate relief to the victims of natural disasters that they consider to be 'disasters' within the local context in the State and which are not included in the notified list of disasters of the Ministry of Home Affairs.

### 3. RBI to strengthen risk-based supervision (RBS) of banks, NBFCs

#### About RBS model

- The RBI uses the **Risk-Based Supervision (RBS)** model, including both **qualitative and quantitative elements**, to supervise banks, urban cooperatives banks, non-banking financial companies and all India financial institutions.

#### Decision to review the model

- The Reserve Bank has decided to **review and strengthen** the Risk-Based Supervision (RBS) of the banking sector with a view to enable financial sector players to **address the emerging challenges**.
- The review process will help make the extant **RBS model more robust and capable of addressing emerging challenges**, while removing inconsistencies if any.
- Annual financial inspection of UCBs and NBFCs is largely based on **CAMELS model** (Capital Adequacy, Asset Quality, Management, Earnings, Liquidity, and Systems & Control).
- It is intended to review the existing supervisory rating models under CAMELS approach for improved risk capture in a forward-looking manner and for harmonising the supervisory approach across all Supervised Entities.

### 4. Small Savings Instruments

#### Why in News

Recently, the central government withdrew its orders of reducing the rates on all **small savings instruments/schemes**.

## Key Points

- **About:**
  - Small savings instruments **help individuals achieve their financial goals over a particular period.**
  - They are the **major source of household savings** in India.
  - The small savings instrument basket **comprises 12 instruments.**
  - Collections from all small savings instruments are credited to the **National Small Savings Fund (NSSF).**
- **Classification:** Small savings instruments can be classified under three heads:
  - **Postal Deposits:** (comprising savings account, recurring deposits, time deposits of varying maturities and monthly income scheme).
  - **Savings Certificates:** National Small Savings Certificate (NSC) and Kisan Vikas Patra (KVP).
  - **Social Security Schemes:** **Sukanya Samridhhi Scheme**, Public Provident Fund (PPF) and Senior Citizens' Savings Scheme (SCSS).
- **Rates of Small Saving Instruments:**
  - The rates for small saving instruments are **announced quarterly.**
  - Theoretically, the **rate changes is based on yields of government securities of corresponding maturity.** However, political factors also influence the rate change.
  - The **Shyamala Gopinath panel (2010)** constituted on the Small Saving Scheme had suggested a **market-linked interest rate system** for small savings schemes.

## National Small Savings Fund

- **Establishment:**
  - National Small Savings Fund (NSSF) in the Public Account of India was **established in 1999.**
- **Administration:**
  - The Fund is administered by the Government of India, **Ministry of Finance** (Department of Economic Affairs) under National Small Savings Fund (Custody and Investment) Rules, 2001, framed by the President under Article 283 (1) of the Constitution.
- **Objective:**
  - To **de-link small savings transactions from the Consolidated Fund of India** and ensure their operation in a transparent and self-sustaining manner.
  - Since NSSF operates in the public account, its transactions do not impact the fiscal deficit of the Centre directly.

## 5. 'OPEC share slid as India's oil imports shrank 11.8%'

### What's in News?

OPEC's share of India's oil imports fell to the lowest in at least two decades in the year to the end of March 2021.

- **Overall purchases by India fell to a six-year low.**
- Total crude imports by the **world's third-biggest oil importer (India)** fell by 11.8% from a year earlier.
- **India bought more U.S. and Canadian oil** at the expense of that from Africa and West Asia, reducing purchases from members of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) squeezing the group's share of imports to 72% from about 80% previously.
  - That is the lowest share since at least FY02, before which crude import data is not available.
- The **U.S. emerged as the fifth-biggest supplier**, up to two places from FY20.

## 6. Govt. gives nod for 5G trials

### Trials for 5G technology

- The Department of Telecommunications (DoT) on Tuesday gave permission to **Telecom Service Providers (TSPs)** to conduct trials for the use and application of 5G technology.
- The applicant TSPs include Bharti Airtel Ltd., Reliance JioInfocomm Ltd., Vodafone Idea Ltd. and MTNL.
- **These TSPs have tied up with original equipment manufacturers** and technology providers which are Ericsson, Nokia, Samsung and C-DOT.
- Each TSP will have to conduct trials in rural and semi-urban settings also in addition to urban settings so that the **benefit of 5G technology proliferates across the country.**
- This formally **leaves out Chinese companies** like Huawei and ZTE from the 5G race in India.

### About 5Gi technology

- TSPs are encouraged to conduct trials using **5Gi technology** in addition to the already known 5G technology.
- 5Gi technology was advocated by India, as it facilitates **much larger reach of the 5G towers** and radio networks.



- The 5G technology has been **developed by** the Indian Institute of Technology, Madras (IIT-M), Centre of Excellence in Wireless Technology (CEWiT) and IIT Hyderabad.

## 7. Scientists see flaws in SUTRA's approach to modelling pandemic

### What's in News?

With close to 4,00,000 cases being added every day, questions are being raised on whether **SUTRA - a government-backed model, to forecast the rise and ebb of the COVID-19 pandemic**, may have had a role in creating the perception that a catastrophic second wave of the pandemic was unlikely in India.

- SUTRA stands for **Susceptible, Undetected, Tested (positive), and Removed Approach**.
- The Covid 'supermodel' was commissioned by the Government of India.

### Issues:

- Unlike many epidemiological models that extrapolated cases based on the existing number of cases, the behaviour of the virus and manner of spread, the **SUTRA model chose a data-centric approach**.
- **Too many parameters, a constant that was inaccurate and calibration errors** may have led to predictions that did not signal the catastrophic second wave.
- A rapid acceleration of cases couldn't be predicted in advance.

## 8. Purchasing Managers' Index

### Why in News

The seasonally adjusted **IHS Markit India Manufacturing Purchasing Managers' Index (PMI)** was at 55.5 in April 2021, little changed from March's reading of 55.4.

## Key Points

- It is a **survey-based measure** that asks the respondents about changes in their perception about key business variables as compared with the previous month.
- The **purpose** of the PMI is to provide information about current and future business conditions to company decision makers, analysts, and investors.
- It is **calculated separately** for the manufacturing and services sectors and then a **composite index** is also constructed.
- The PMI is a number **from 0 to 100**.
  - A print **above 50 means expansion**, while a score below that denotes contraction.
  - **A reading at 50** indicates no change.
- If **PMI of the previous month is higher** than the PMI of the current month, it represents that the economy is contracting.
- It is **usually released at the start of every month**. It is, therefore, considered a good leading indicator of economic activity.
- PMI is **compiled by IHS Markit for more than 40 economies** worldwide.
  - **IHS Markit is a global leader** in information, analytics and solutions for the major industries and markets that drive economies worldwide.
- As the official data on industrial output, manufacturing and Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth comes much later, PMI helps to make informed decisions at an earlier stage.
- It is **different from the Index of Industrial Production (IIP)**, which also gauges the level of activity in the economy.
  - IIP covers the broader industrial sector compared to PMI.
  - However, PMI is more dynamic compared to a standard industrial production index.

## 9. RBI steps in to ease COVID-19 burden

### Context:

The Reserve Bank of India has stepped in with **measures aimed at alleviating any financing constraints** for healthcare infrastructure and services, as well as small borrowers who may be facing distress due to a sudden spike in health expenditure amidst the surge in COVID-19 cases.

### Details:

- RBI Governor announced a **Term Liquidity Facility of ₹50,000 crore** with a tenor of **up to three years**, at the **repo rate**, to ease access to credit for providers of emergency health services.
- Under the scheme, **banks will provide fresh lending support to a wide range of entities**, including vaccine manufacturers, importers/suppliers of vaccines and priority medical devices, hospitals/dispensaries, pathology labs, manufacturers and suppliers of oxygen and ventilators, and logistics firms.
- These loans will continue to be **classified under the priority sector till repayment or maturity**, whichever is earlier.
- Under the scheme, banks are expected to **create a COVID loan book**.
- As part of a “**comprehensive targeted policy response**”, the RBI has also unveiled **schemes to provide credit relief to individual and MSME borrowers** impacted by the pandemic.
  - To provide further support to small business units, micro and small industries, and other unorganised sector entities, the RBI decided to conduct **special three-year long-term repo operations (SLTRO) of 10,000 crore at the repo rate for Small Finance Banks**.
  - The SFBs would be able to deploy these funds for fresh lending of up to 10 lakh per borrower.

## 10. India's Sovereign Rating

### Why in News

According to the **S&P Global Ratings**, **India's sovereign rating will remain unchanged at the current level of BBB-** for the next two years despite the potential adverse impact of surging **pandemic** on its economy.

- S&P is one of the **largest credit rating agencies**, assigning letter grades to companies and countries and the debt they issue on a scale of AAA to D, indicating their degree of investment risk.

### Key Points

- **Sovereign Credit Rating:**
  - A sovereign credit rating is **an independent assessment of the creditworthiness of a country or sovereign entity**.
  - It **can give investors insights into the level of risk** associated with investing in the debt of a particular country, including any political risk.

- In addition to **issuing bonds** in external debt markets, another common motivation for countries to obtain a sovereign credit rating is **to attract foreign direct investment (FDI)**.
- At the request of the country, a credit rating agency will evaluate its economic and political environment to assign it a rating.
  - S&P gives a BBB- or higher rating to countries it considers investment grade, and grades of BB+ or lower are deemed to be speculative or "junk" grade.
  - Moody's considers a Baa3 or higher rating to be of investment grade, and a rating of Ba1 and below is speculative.
- **Sovereign Credit Ratings and India:**
  - **The Economic Survey 2020-21** has called for sovereign credit ratings methodology to be made more **transparent, less subjective and better attuned to reflect an economy's fundamentals**.
  - Within its sovereign credit ratings cohort – countries rated between A+/A1 and BBB-/Baa3 – India is a clear outlier on several parameters i.e. a sovereign whose rating is significantly lower than mandated by the effect on the sovereign rating of the parameter.
    - These include GDP growth rate, inflation, general government debt (as % of GDP), cyclically adjusted primary balance (as % of potential GDP), current account balance (as % of GDP), political stability, rule of law, control of corruption, investor protection, ease of doing business, short-term external debt (as % of reserves), reserve adequacy ratio and sovereign default history.
    - The outlier status remains true not only now but also during the last two decades.
  - The Survey observes that India's willingness to pay is unquestionably demonstrated through its **zero sovereign default history**.
  - India's ability to pay can be gauged not only by the extremely low foreign currency-denominated debt of the sovereign but also by the comfortable size of its foreign exchange reserves that can pay for the short term debt of the private sector as well as the entire stock of India's sovereign and non-sovereign external debt.

## Credit Rating

- A credit rating is a quantified assessment of the **creditworthiness of a borrower** in general terms or with respect to a particular debt or financial obligation.
- A credit rating can be assigned to any entity that seeks to borrow money – an individual, corporation, state or provincial authority, or sovereign government.

- A **rating agency** is a company that assesses the financial strength of companies and government entities, especially their ability to meet principal and interest payments on their debts.
- **Fitch Ratings, Moody's Investors Service and Standard & Poor's (S&P)** are the big three international credit rating agencies controlling approximately 95% of global ratings business.
- In **India**, there are six credit rating agencies registered under **Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI)** namely, **CRISIL, ICRA, CARE, SMERA, Fitch India and Brickwork Ratings**.

## 11. Anti-COVID-19 drug developed by DRDO gets emergency use nod

### Context:

- **Drugs Controller General of India (DCGI) has granted permission for emergency use of an anti-COVID-19 therapeutic application of the 2-deoxy-D-glucose (2-DG)**

### Details:

- The order allows for emergency use of the drug as adjunct therapy in moderate to severe COVID-19 patients.
- The drug comes in powder form in sachets and is taken orally by dissolving it in water.
- **It selectively accumulates in virally infected cells and prevents their growth by stopping viral synthesis and energy production.**
- The drug has been developed by the **Institute of Nuclear Medicine and Allied Sciences (INMAS)** in collaboration with Dr. Reddy's Laboratories, Hyderabad.
  - INMAS is a lab of the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO).

### Significance:

- Clinical trial results have shown that this drug helps in **faster recovery of hospitalised patients and reduces supplemental oxygen dependence**. This will help ease the acute bed shortage and also help reduce medical oxygen demand to a great extent.
- The drug being a **generic molecule and analogue of glucose**, it can be easily produced and made available in plenty in the country.

## 12. China rocket debris falls in Indian Ocean near Maldives

### Context:

Debris from the last stage of China's Long March rocket fell into the waters of the Indian Ocean west of the Maldives.

### Details:

- China Manned Space Agency (CSMA) said that the vast majority of the device burned up during the re-entry, and the rest of the debris fell into the sea.

### Concerns:

- The re-entry of the rocket was described by astrophysicists as the **fourth-largest uncontrolled re-entry in history**.
- It was on a par with the **first Long March rocket that in 2020 fell in the Ivory Coast** where there were reports of debris damaging homes in villages.
- This has evoked **concerns about possible damage should it have fallen on land**.
- It has been criticised by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) in the U.S. for failing to meet responsible standards.

### Note:

- The **Long March-5B Y2 rocket** was carrying the **Tianhe**, or Heavenly Harmony, the **first of three key components for the construction of China's space station**.
- The space station, which will be only the second after the International Space Station (ISS), has been designed with a lifespan of 10 years but could last 15 years, or until 2037.

## 13. NITI Aayog's Project for Great Nicobar Island

### Why in News

Recently, the Environment Appraisal Committee which flagged concerns over the project has now 'recommended' it **'for grant of terms of reference'** for **Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA)** studies.

- In August, 2020 the Prime Minister had declared that the Andaman and Nicobar islands will be developed as a **"maritime and startup hub"**.

## Key Points

- **About the Project:**
  - The proposal includes an **international container trans-shipment terminal, a greenfield international airport, a power plant and a township complex spread over 166 sq. km. (mainly pristine coastal systems and tropical forests).**
  - It is estimated to cost Rs. 75,000 crore.
- **Issues with Project:**
  - Lack of details on **seismic and tsunami hazards, freshwater requirement details, and details of the impact on the Giant Leatherback turtle.**
  - **No details of the trees to be felled** – a number that could run into millions since 130 sq. km. of the project area has some of the finest tropical forests in India.
  - A number of additional issues include about **Galathea Bay**, the site of the port and the centrepiece of the NITI Aayog proposal.
    - **Galathea Bay** is an iconic nesting site in India of the **enigmatic Giant Leatherback, the world's largest marine turtle** – borne out by surveys done over three decades.
    - Ecological surveys in the last few years have reported **a number of new species**, many restricted to just the Galathea region.
    - **These include** the critically endangered Nicobar shrew, the Great Nicobar crane, the Nicobar frog, the Nicobar cat snake, a new skink (*Lipinia* sp), a new lizard (*Dibamus* sp,) and a snake of the *Lycodon* sp that is yet to be described.
  - The site selection for the port had been done **mainly on technical and financial criteria, ignoring the environmental aspects.**
- **Action Points listed out by the Committee:**
  - There is a need for **an independent assessment of terrestrial and marine biodiversity**, a study on the impact of dredging, reclamation and port operations, including oil spills.
  - The **need for studies of alternative sites for the port** with a focus on environmental and ecological impact, especially on turtles, analysis of risk-handling capabilities.
  - A **seismic and tsunami hazard map, a disaster management plan, details of labour**, labour camps and their requirements, an assessment of the cumulative impact, and a **hydro-geological study** to assess impact on ground and surface water regimes.

## Great Nicobar

- **About:**

- Great Nicobar is the **southernmost island** of the Nicobar Islands Archipelago.
- **It covers 1,03,870 hectares of unique and threatened tropical evergreen forest ecosystems.**
- It is home to a very rich ecosystem, including 650 species of angiosperms, ferns, gymnosperms, bryophytes, among others.
- In terms of fauna, there are over 1800 species, some of which are endemic to this area.
- **Ecological Characteristics:**
  - The **Great Nicobar Biosphere Reserve** harbours a wide spectrum of ecosystems comprising **tropical wet evergreen forests**, mountain ranges reaching a height of 642 m (**Mt. Thullier**) above sea level, and coastal plains.
- **Tribe:**
  - The **Mongoloid Shompen Tribe**, about 200 in number, live in the forests of the biosphere reserve particularly along the rivers and streams.
    - They are hunters and food gatherers, dependent on forest and marine resources for sustenance.
  - Another Mongoloid Tribe, **Nicobarese**, about 300 in number, used to live in settlements along the west coast.
    - After the tsunami in 2004, which devastated their settlement on the western coast, they were **relocated to Afra Bay in the North Coast and Campbell Bay.**

#### **14. A TRIPS waiver is useful but not a magic pill**

##### **Context:**

- The **United States' declaration of support for a temporary waiver of the Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) agreement** for COVID-19 vaccines at the World Trade Organisation (WTO).
  - Article IX of the WTO Agreement allows for **waiving obligations in 'exceptional circumstances'**.

##### **Challenges:**

- While the U.S.'s decision is to be welcomed, the article argues that there continue to be many challenges in ensuring that this move would be truly effective in meeting its stated **objective of ensuring faster, equitable and quality vaccine access to everyone.**

##### **Time-consuming text-based negotiations approach:**



- Given the **consensus-based approach of the WTO**, the complexity of the issues involved and given the **lack of political will** of the developed countries that house the giant pharmaceutical corporations producing COVID-19 vaccines and medicines, the negotiations are bound to be time-consuming.

#### **Possibility of high degree of regulation:**

- Previous experience of negotiating such waivers, especially on TRIPS, point to **gross ineffectiveness**.
- In the aftermath of the **HIV/AIDS crisis in Africa in the 1990s**, the WTO adopted a decision in **2003 waiving certain TRIPS obligations** to increase the accessibility of medicines in countries that lacked manufacturing capability. Article 31(f) of TRIPS was waived.
  - Article 31(f) of TRIPS mandates that medicines produced under a **compulsory licence** are predominantly for the domestic market of that country.
- However, this waiver was subject to **several stringent requirements** such as the drugs so manufactured are to be exported to that nation only; the medicines should be easily identifiable through different colour, or shape; only the amount necessary to meet the requirements of the importing country are to be manufactured; the importing country has to notify to the WTO's TRIPS Council, etc. Given these **cumbersome requirements**, hardly any country, in the last 17 years, was able to make effective use of this waiver.

#### **Limited scope of the waiver:**

- As against the original proposal made by India and South Africa at WTO calling for a waiver for vaccines, medicines and other therapeutics and technologies related to the treatment of COVID-19, it appears that the U.S. supports waiving intellectual property (IP) protections only on COVID-19 vaccines.
- This amounts to **narrowing down the scope of the waiver considerably by restricting it to vaccines**. Medicines useful in treating COVID-19 and other therapeutics must be also included in the waiver.

#### **Non IP challenges:**

##### Technology transfer:

- While the TRIPS waiver would lift the legal restrictions on manufacturing COVID-19 vaccines, it would not solve the problem of the **lack of access to technological 'know-how' related to manufacturing COVID-19 vaccines**.

- Waiving IP protection does not impose a legal requirement on pharmaceutical companies to transfer or share technology.
- This might lead to individual countries adopting coercive legal measures for a forced transfer of technology, which could turn out to be draconian and also counterproductive in the long run.

Production constraints:

- A considerable amount of time, even several years could be needed for production plants to become operational at optimal capacity.

Logistical challenges:

- Logistical challenges such as **inadequacy of supply chains and unavailability of raw materials** to manufacture vaccines and medicines could derail the production process.

Recommendations:

- The governments would have to be proactive in **negotiating with pharmaceutical companies** to transfer technology using various legal and policy tools including **financial incentives**.
- Countries should start working towards making suitable **changes in their domestic legal framework to operationalize and enforce the TRIPS waiver**.

Conclusion:

- Though the U.S.'s support of the TRIPS waiver is a significant step forward in the global fight against the pandemic, the waiver will have an effect only if countries simultaneously address non-IP bottlenecks among other things.

## 15. SEBI's sustainability reporting norms mandate ESG overview

Context:

The Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) has issued a circular notifying the **new disclosure norm on sustainability-related reporting** for the top 1,000 listed companies by market capitalization by FY23.

Market capitalization:

- Market capitalization, generally referred to as “market cap” is the market value of a publicly-traded company’s outstanding shares.
- Market cap is equal to the share price multiplied by the number of shares outstanding.

#### Details:

- Such reporting will be under a new **Business Responsibility And Sustainability Report (BRSR) format**.
- It is a significant step towards **bringing sustainability reporting at par with financial reporting**.
- The companies will need to provide an overview of their material environmental, social, governance risks and opportunities and approach to mitigate or adapt to the risks along with financial implications.
  - The **social-related disclosures** will cover the workforce, value chain, communities and consumers.
- Companies will have to disclose the gender and social diversity of employees, including measures for differently-abled employees and workers, occupational health and safety and trainings.
- On the community front, **companies need to make disclosures on social impact assessments (SIA), rehabilitation and resettlement and corporate social responsibility**.
- For consumers, they have to make disclosures on product labelling, product recall and complaints in respect of data privacy and cybersecurity.

## 16. A bullet train to hunger

### Background:

#### Socio-economic impact of the pandemic:

- The pandemic and associated lockdowns have brought miseries upon millions of poor and vulnerable in India.
- Apart from the healthcare crisis, the poor are having to deal with **hunger and nutritional insecurity and also a sense of uncertainty about their livelihoods**.
  - As per the State of Working India report 2021 of Azim Premji University, nearly half of formal salaried workers moved into informal work between late 2019 and late 2020 and the poorest 20% of the households lost their entire incomes in April and May 2020. This indicates **massive job and income losses**.

- Considering even the low national minimum wage threshold of Rs. 375 per day (Anoop Satpathy Committee), 23 crore individuals have been pushed below these minimal earnings. Consecutively, **poverty rates have increased.**
- The 'Hunger Watch' (HW) has noted the **impact on nutritional security** due to the pandemic. The access to nutritional food has decreased owing to reduced incomes.
  - The survey focussed on understanding the hunger and livelihood situation among marginalised communities such as daily wage workers, single women households, people with disability, etc.
  - As per conservative estimates, there are at least 33 crore poor households in India. The lack of access to food can plunge this section of the population into irredeemable levels of **starvation and malnutrition.**
- The impact has been even worse on sections of the society considered most vulnerable like the minorities, scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, old age people, women. The pandemic has had a **disproportionate impact on some of these more vulnerable communities.**

#### The rural-urban divide:

- Several surveys and reports have indicated a **higher impact on the urban population as compared to the rural population due to the pandemic.**
  - **Incomes reduced** by half/quarter for more than half the urban respondents while it was a little over one-third for rural respondents. In October, in rural areas, 26% had no income while 30% had no income in urban areas.
  - **Poverty rates** in rural areas have increased by 15 percentage points and by 20 percentage points in urban areas.
  - For one in five rural respondents, the **nutritional quality of food** remained "more or less the same" in October compared to pre-pandemic levels. This was doubly worse for urban respondents.

#### Social security schemes:

#### Food security schemes:

- Under the **National Food Security Act (NFSA)**, 75% of the rural population and 50% of the urban population are entitled to 5 kg of foodgrains each month at subsidised prices.

- Under the **Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana**, an additional entitlement of 5 kg of foodgrains per individual and 1 kg of pulses per household for free was given to those who hold Antyodaya Anna Yojana (AAY) cards under the NFSA. AAY cardholders fall under the extremely poor category.
- Supplementary rations were also made available under various State schemes.

#### Concerns:

- The NFSA suffers from exclusion issues due to identification errors as well as using old population estimates.
- PDS entitlements fall far short of minimal nutritional requirements for a healthy society.

#### MGNREGA:

- There has been a 47% increase in person-days of work under the **Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA)** in 2020-21 compared to 2019-20 and a record 72 lakh households completed 100 days of work in one year.
- The avenue for **guaranteed employment in rural areas** has perhaps cushioned the impact of income loss in rural areas as compared to urban areas.

#### Recommendations:

- The pandemic has highlighted the importance of expanding social security nets. NFSA and MGNREGA have demonstrated the role they can play in addressing social and economic distress.
- **The government must bear the responsibility of social protection** and must consider implementing the following measures.
  - The Central government **must expand the coverage and quantity under the NFSA** for at least one year. Given that there are over 100 million tonnes of food grain stocks in the Food Corporation of India warehouses (as of May 1), the government can even consider universalizing the scheme.
  - **Increase MGNREGA entitlements** to 200 days per household.
  - Initiate consultations for an **urban employment programme**.
  - Offer a **wage compensation** of Rs. 7,000 per poor household for the next few months.

## 17. Sovereign Gold Bond Scheme 2021-22

### In news

- The Central Government in consultation with the RBI, has decided to issue Sovereign Gold Bonds.

### Key takeaways

- The Sovereign Gold Bonds will be issued in six tranches from 17th May to September 2021.
- The Bonds will be sold through Scheduled Commercial banks (except Small Finance Banks and Payment Banks), Stock Holding Corporation of India Limited (SHCIL), designated post offices, and National Stock Exchange of India Limited and Bombay Stock Exchange Limited.
- The minimum permissible investment will be one gram of gold.
- Investors will be compensated at a fixed rate of 2.50% per annum payable semi-annually on the nominal value.
- The Bonds will be restricted for sale to resident individuals, Hindu Undivided Families, Trusts, Universities and Charitable Institutions.
- The tenor of the Bond will be for a period of 8 years with exit option after 5th year to be exercised on the next interest payment dates.

## 18. SWAMIH Fund

### Why in News

Recently, the Government of India's **Special Window for Affordable & Mid-Income Housing (SWAMIH)** completed its **first residential project**.

- **The residential project - Rivali Park**, located in **suburban Mumbai**, was the **first housing project in India** to have received funding under the **SWAMIH Fund**.

### Key Points

- **About the SWAMIH Fund:**
  - This is a government backed fund that was set up as a **Category-II AIF (Alternate Investment Fund)** debt fund **registered with SEBI**, launched in 2019.

- **SWAMIH Investment Fund** was formed to complete construction of stalled, **RERA**-registered affordable and mid-income category housing projects which are stuck due to paucity of funds.
- The **Investment Manager** of the Fund is **SBICAP Ventures**, a wholly-owned subsidiary of SBI Capital Markets, which in turn is a wholly-owned subsidiary of the **State Bank of India**.
- The **Sponsor of the Fund** is the **Secretary, Department of Economic Affairs, Ministry of Finance**, on behalf of the Government of India.

## RERA

- **Inception:**
  - **Real Estate (Regulation and Development) Act (RERA)** is an act passed by the Parliament in 2016 that came into effect fully **from 1<sup>st</sup> May, 2017**.
    - The Act establishes Real Estate Regulatory Authority (RERA) in each state for regulation of the real estate sector and also acts as an adjudicating body for speedy dispute resolution.
- **Aim:**
  - It seeks to protect **home-buyers** as well as help **boost investments in the real estate sector** by bringing efficiency and transparency in the sale/purchase of real estate.
- **Alternative Investment Fund (AIF):**
  - AIF means any fund established or incorporated in India which is a **privately pooled investment vehicle which collects funds from sophisticated investors**, whether Indian or foreign, for investing it in accordance with a defined investment policy for the benefit of its investors.
  - **Regulation 2(1)(b) of Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) Regulations (AIFs), 2012** lays down the definition of AIFs.
    - Through a company, or a Limited Liability Partnership (LLP), an Alternative Investment Fund can be established.
  - AIF **does not include** funds covered under the SEBI (**Mutual Funds**) Regulations, 1996, SEBI (Collective Investment Schemes) Regulations, 1999 or any other regulations of the Board to regulate fund management activities.
    - Other **exemptions** include family trusts, employee welfare trusts or gratuity trusts.
  - **Categories of AIFs:**
    - **Category-I AIFs:**

- These funds are **invested in** businesses that have the potential to grow financially such as **StartUps, Small and Medium Enterprises**.
- The government encourages investments in these ventures as they have a positive impact on the economy with regards to high output and job creation.
- **Examples** include Infrastructure Funds, Angel Funds, Venture Capital Funds and Social Venture Funds.
- **Category-II AIFs:**
  - Under this category, funds that are **invested in equity securities and debt securities** are included. Those funds not already under Category I and III respectively are also included. No concession is given by the government for any investment made for Category II AIFS.
  - **Examples** include Real Estate Funds, Debt Fund, Private Equity Funds.
- **Category-III AIFs:**
  - Category-III AIFs are those funds which **give returns under a short period of time**. These funds use complex and diverse trading strategies to achieve their goals. There is no known concession or incentive given towards these funds specifically by the government.
  - **Examples** include Hedge Funds, Private Investment in Public Equity Funds, etc.

## 19.Cyclone Tauktae

### Why in News

Recently, **Cyclone Tauktae** made landfall in **Gujarat**.

- The cyclone has left a trail of destruction as it swept through the coastal states of **Kerala, Karnataka, Goa and Maharashtra**.

### Key Points

- **About:**
  - **Named by:**
    - It is a **tropical cyclone, named by Myanmar**. It means 'gecko', a highly vocal lizard, in the Burmese language.
    - Typically, **tropical cyclones** in the North Indian Ocean region (**Bay of Bengal and Arabian Sea**) develop during the **pre-monsoon** (April to June) and **post-monsoon** (October to December) periods.



- **May-June and October-November** are known to produce cyclones of severe intensity that affect the Indian coasts.
- **Classification:**
  - It has **weakened into a "very severe cyclonic storm"** from the "extremely severe cyclonic storm".
  - The **India Meteorological Department (IMD)** classifies cyclones on the basis of the **maximum sustained surface wind speed (MSW)** they generate.
  - The cyclones are classified as **severe (MSW of 48-63 knots), very severe (MSW of 64-89 knots), extremely severe (MSW of 90-119 knots)** and **super cyclonic storm (MSW of 120 knots or more)**. **One knot is equal to 1.8 kmph (kilometers per hour)**.
- **Developed in Arabian Sea:**
  - **Tauktae** is the **fourth cyclone in consecutive years** to have developed in the **Arabian Sea**, that too in the **pre-monsoon period (April to June)**.
  - After **Cyclone Mekanu** in 2018, which struck Oman, **Cyclone Vayu** in 2019 struck Gujarat, followed by **Cyclone Nisarga** in 2020 that struck Maharashtra.
  - All these cyclones **since 2018** have been categorised either '**Severe Cyclone**' or above.
- **Arabian Sea becoming Hotbed of Cyclones:**
  - **Annually, five cyclones on average** form in the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea combined. Of these, **four develop in the Bay of Bengal, which is warmer than the Arabian Sea**.
  - In **2018**, while the Bay of Bengal maintained its average of four cyclones a year, the **Arabian Sea produced three cyclonic storms**. In **2019**, the **Arabian Sea overtook the Bay of Bengal with five cyclones to three**.
  - In **2020**, the **Bay of Bengal produced three cyclonic storms** while the **Arabian Sea generated two**.
  - In recent years, meteorologists have observed that the **Arabian Sea, too, has been warming**. This is a phenomenon associated with **global warming**.
  - It has been observed that the **sea surface temperature in the Arabian Sea has been rising** for about 40 years. The **increase in temperature** is in the zone of **1.2-1.4 degree Celsius**.
- **Tropical Cyclone:**
  - A tropical cyclone is **an intense circular storm that originates over warm tropical oceans** and is characterized by low atmospheric pressure, high winds, and heavy rain.
  - A **characteristic feature** of tropical cyclones is the **eye**, a central region of clear skies, warm temperatures, and low atmospheric pressure.

- Storms of this type are called **hurricanes** in the **North Atlantic and eastern Pacific** and **typhoons** in **SouthEast Asia and China**. They are called **tropical cyclones** in the **southwest Pacific and Indian Ocean** region and **Willy-willies** in north-western **Australia**.
- Storms **rotate counterclockwise** in the **northern hemisphere** and **clockwise** in the **southern** hemisphere.
- The **conditions favourable** for the **formation and intensification** of tropical storms are:
  - **Large sea surface** with **temperature higher than 27° C**.
  - Presence of the **Coriolis force**.
  - Small variations in the **vertical wind speed**.
  - A pre-existing weak low- **pressure area or low-level-cyclonic circulation**.
  - **Upper divergence** above the sea level system.
- **Naming of Tropical Cyclones:**
  - According to **WMO (World Meteorological Organization) guidelines**, countries in every region are supposed to give names for cyclones.
  - The **North Indian Ocean Region** covers tropical cyclones formed over Bay of Bengal and Arabian Sea.
  - The **13 members**, which come under the region, are **Bangladesh, India, Maldives, Myanmar, Oman, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Iran, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Yemen**.
  - **India Meteorological Department (IMD)**, one of the six **Regional Specialised Meteorological Centres (RSMC)** in the world, is mandated to issue advisories and name tropical cyclones in the **north Indian Ocean Region**.
    - It is an agency of the **Ministry of Earth Sciences**.

## 20. Tianwen-1: China's Mars Mission

### Why in News

Recently, China's spacecraft **Tianwen-1** landed on Mars carrying its **first Mars rover** named **Zhurong**.

- It became the **third country** to land on Mars **after the US and Soviet Union**.
- **China's previous 'Yinghuo-1' Mars mission**, which was supported by a Russian spacecraft, **had failed** after it did not leave the earth's orbit and disintegrated over the Pacific Ocean **in 2012**.

## Key Points

- **About the Tianwen-1 Mission:**
  - **Launch:**
    - The **Tianwen-1 Spacecraft** was **lifted off on a Long March 5 rocket**, from the Wenchang launch center in **July 2020**.
  - **Three Parts:**
    - The Spacecraft consists of three parts - the **orbiter, the lander and the rover** - which separated in Mars orbit.
    - The **orbiter will remain in the orbit for scientific operations** and to relay signals while the **lander-rover combination has made an autonomous descent and landing**.
      - The **lander from Tianwen-1 has touched down on Utopia Planitia**, a large plain in the northern hemisphere of Mars.
  - **Objectives:**
    - To conduct scientific investigations into the planet's soil, geological structure, environment, atmosphere and water.
      - The mission **will be the first to place a ground-penetrating radar** on the Martian surface, which will be able to study local geology, as well as rock, ice, and dirt distribution.
- **China's Other Space Programmes:**
  - **Chang'e-5** (Moon)
  - **Tianhe** (Permanent Space Station)
- **Other Mars Missions:**
  - **NASA's Perseverance Rover**
  - **UAE's Hope Mars Mission** (UAE's first-ever interplanetary mission)
  - **India's Mars Orbiter Mission (MOM) or Mangalyaan:**
    - It was launched from the Satish Dhawan Space Centre in Andhra Pradesh by **Indian Space Research Organisation** in November 2013.
    - It was launched on board a PSLV C25 rocket with the aim of studying Martian surface and mineral composition as well as scan its atmosphere for methane (an indicator of life on Mars).

## Mars

- **Size and Distance:**
  - It is the **fourth planet from the Sun** and the **second-smallest** planet in the Solar System.
  - Mars is about **half the size of Earth**.
- **Similarity to the Earth (Orbit and Rotation):**

- As Mars orbits the Sun, it completes **one rotation every 24.6 hours**, which is very similar to one day on **Earth (23.9 hours)**.
- Mars' axis of rotation is **tilted 25 degrees** with respect to the plane of its orbit around the Sun. This is similar to **Earth**, which has **an axial tilt of 23.4 degrees**.
- Mars has distinct seasons like Earth, but **they last longer than seasons on Earth**.
  - **Martian days are called sols** – short for 'solar day'.
- **Other Features:**
- The **reason Mars looks reddish** is due to oxidation or rusting of iron in the rocks, and dust of Mars. Hence it is also called the **Red Planet**.
- It has the **largest volcano** in the solar system i.e. **Olympus Mons**.
- It has **two small moons, Phobos and Deimos**.

## 21. Can the economy survive the second COVID-19 wave?

### Context:

- The article analyzes the potential **economic impact of the second COVID-19 wave** and State-level lockdowns, while comparing it with the first wave.

### Comparison of the economic impact of the two waves of the pandemic:

- A key difference between the first and second waves has been that while the nationwide lockdown last year in response to the first wave of the pandemic resulted in a severe supply shock, the **second wave has resulted more in a demand shock than supply shock**.

### Magnitude of economic slowdown:

- **The impact of the second wave is likely to be less severe than the first one.**
- Businesses and people have started to adapt to lockdowns and the contraction in demand would be much lower this time.
- Though most forecasts are predicting that there won't be an economic contraction this year and are expecting positive growth for India, the **growth rate is going to be very low**.
- As against the predictions before the second wave, that FY 2021-22 GDP should cross the pre-pandemic 2019-20 GDP in such a scenario is highly unlikely.

### Challenges of the second wave:

### **Prolonged slowdown:**

- The slow pace of vaccination and the **uncertainty and fear of a third wave** would result in the **government being hesitant in opening the economy up** very quickly.
- A significant section of the population has spent a large amount of their savings to fight COVID-19. Some have also been pushed into debt and poverty hampering their financial situation. Such sections will find it difficult to spend even on essentials. This is likely to have an **adverse impact on consumption expenditure based growth revival**.
- The second wave has created a lot of **uncertainty, pessimism and loss of confidence among households and businesses**. It will take time for people to start recovering because it has created a lot of uncertainty. The uncertainty would also disincentivize people with financial resources to spend.
- Hence a **V-shaped recovery is highly unlikely and the economic recovery is most likely to take a lot of time**.

### **Doubtful effectiveness of monetary responses:**

- As against the previous year, where the RBI announced a large number of monetary measures to mitigate the economic impact of the first wave of the pandemic, there have been very few measures this time around.
- This can be attributed to the fact that there is **very little space for an expansionary monetary policy** given that India is experiencing bouts of inflation as well as growth slowdown, raising **fears of stagflation**.
- The fact that the **Indian economy is not currently in sync with the global business cycle** has resulted in a situation where inflation in the domestic economy has been rising despite a domestic demand slowdown.
  - In advanced economies, growth is picking up and as a result, inflation is picking up as demand recovers. As a result, global commodity prices on items such as crude oil have been surging and this has had an impact on India's domestic inflation.
- The RBI's attempts to incentivise banks to lend to sectors that have been hit hard have not been very successful because of the **risk-averse behaviour of the banks** and their lack of willingness to lend.
- Also despite several incentives for businesses to borrow like the ease of approvals, lower interest rates, etc., there has been **negligible credit off take growth**.
- The risk-averse nature of banks and the lack of interest in businesses to borrow limit the effectiveness of the monetary measures in reviving economic growth.

### **Limited ability to execute fiscal responses:**

- Given that India's **debt-to-GDP ratio has risen to around 90%** and there has been a collapse in revenues, the ability of the government to employ fiscal responses to revive growth is limited.

#### **Impact on rural areas:**

- Compared to the first wave, this time the **rural areas have witnessed a larger number of infections and mortalities**.
- The **reverse migration** to rural areas has caused an increase in unemployment and MGNREGA is not able to absorb workers, which has resulted in a huge mismatch between demand and supply.
- There has been a larger number of job losses in the rural sector. Last time, rural employment was in a much better position as compared to urban unemployment. The **fear of infections has also led to the deceleration of economic activity in rural areas** this time around.
- During the first wave, the robust growth in the agricultural sector had helped limit the national economic contraction to some extent.
- Unlike the last year when the government was able to spend their way out of trouble by spending to create economic activity, this time around it would be difficult to implement such a policy.

## **22. Infrastructure status for Convention Centres**

The **Ministry of Finance** has granted '**Infrastructure**' status for Exhibition-cum-Convention Centres.

#### **Major Highlights:**

- Exhibition-cum-Convention Centre has been included in the **Harmonised Master List of Infrastructure sub-sectors**.
  - It has been placed in the category of **Social and Commercial Infrastructure**.
- The benefits available as 'infrastructure' projects would only be available for projects with a minimum built-up floor area of **1,00,000 square metres** of exclusive exhibition space or convention space or both combined.
- This **includes primary facilities** such as exhibition centres, convention halls, auditoriums, plenary halls, business centres, meeting halls etc.

#### **Significance:**

- The infrastructure tag would help such projects get **easier financing** from banks.

- India **doesn't have large convention centres or single halls** with capacities to hold 7,000 to 10,000 people.
  - This move can give boost to India to become a global **MICE destination**.
  - Becoming a **MICE** (Meetings, Incentives, Conferences and Exhibitions) destination can **generate significant revenue** with several global companies active in India.
- This move will **enable more such projects** to come up across India's tourist destinations.

#### **Harmonized Master list of infrastructure sub-sectors:**

- Harmonized Master list of infrastructure sub-sectors aims for a **uniform definition of infrastructure**.
- The **Cabinet Committee of Infrastructure** (CCI) came up with a harmonized master list of 5 main infrastructure sectors (Transport, Energy, Water and sanitation, Communication and Social and commercial infrastructure) and 29 infrastructure sub sectors.
- The list **acts as a guide** to all agencies involved in the field of infrastructural development or financing in India.
- The following are the **six characteristics** that make any new sub sector eligible to be included in the master list:
  - Natural monopoly
  - High sunk costs and asset specificity
  - Non-tradability of output
  - Non-rivalrous in consumption
  - Possibility of price exclusion
  - Presence of externalities

### **23. A jobs crisis in the second wave of COVID-19**

#### **Background:**

- The **second wave of COVID-19 pandemic** and the localised lockdowns across several States, have resulted in restrictions on movement of people and goods and thus has led to **restrained economic activity in India**.

#### **Details:**

- The restrained economic activity has resulted in **large scale job losses** in India.

- According to the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE), the **unemployment rate has shot up** to 8% in April 2021 as several States started imposing lockdowns. The month of May has seen the rates rise further.
- There have been a mammoth 73.5 lakh job losses in April alone.
- As of May 21, the 30-day moving average for overall unemployment was 10.3%, with the relevant figures for urban and rural areas at 12.2% and 9.4%, respectively.
- The salaried class has also witnessed significant loss of jobs since the pandemic began.
- Even states with traditionally low unemployment rates like Gujarat have also witnessed increases in unemployment rates.
- There has been a **steady fall in the number of employees (both salaried and non-salaried) for the third straight month.**
- This is a clear indication that the **jobs scenario is weakening**

#### Economic consequences of rising unemployment:

- Job losses have a **depressing impact on incomes.**
  - Almost 90% of Indian families have seen their incomes shrink over the course of the past 13 months.
- The job losses **dampen consumer sentiment and lowers discretionary spending, economic demand** and subsequently consumption expenditure which is so very vital for a developing economy like India.
  - The RBI's monthly bulletin also acknowledges this demand shock which has been a character of the economic impact of the second wave of the pandemic.
  - The contraction in e-way bills of GST might be indicative of such a contraction in demand for goods.
- The reduction in demand for goods would invariably lead to **lower GST collections** in the coming months. This would severely impede public expenditure by the government which is so very important for economic revival.
- The reduced income levels would have a detrimental **impact on the food security of the poor and vulnerable.** This could have a debilitating impact on the health and productivity of the workforce.
  - Several reports have highlighted the problem of the low-income population cutting back on food intake due to income losses.
- **The high levels of unemployment will push the economy into a vicious cycle of low economic growth.**

#### Economic concerns associated with second wave:



### Long term impact of the pandemic:

- The poor have been forced to cope with this economic shock by borrowing, largely from informal sources or by selling their assets.
  - Surveys have shown that the poorest households having taken the largest loans relative to their earnings.
- Experts have noted that the affected people will indulge in building back the depleted savings or will try and pay back the incurred debt by curtailing future consumption and investment.
- This means that **even after a lockdown is lifted the consumer spending may remain muted**. Hence the **economic revival would take longer**, thus belying hopes of an economic revival in the aftermath of the first wave of the pandemic.

### Impact on agricultural sector:

- Unlike during the first wave when the agricultural sector witnessed positive growth rates and also increased employment opportunities, it is not so during the second one.
  - The rural hinterland has been far more affected by the pandemic in the second wave as compared with the first wave.
- **The agricultural sector has also been witnessing job losses in the second wave**. In April 2021, agriculture shed 6 million jobs just in a month's time.

### Disproportionate impact on the most vulnerable:

- **Women** face a double challenge in the form of lower labour participation and a higher unemployment rate for females compared with males (for ages above 15).
- The vulnerable population like the **daily wage labourers and small traders** have witnessed a loss of employment

### High degree of uncertainty:

- Also notably, **the labour participation rate (LPR) for April 2021, at 40%, remained lower than the levels seen before last year's lockdown**. This is indicative of the high uncertainty associated with the second wave.
  - The labour force participation rate is a measure of the proportion of a country's working-age population that engages actively in the labour market, either by working or looking for work; it provides an indication of the size of the supply of labour available to engage in the production of goods and services, relative to the population at working age

### Governmental measures taken:

- The **Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee scheme** has been broadened to cater to the increased demand for work in rural areas as reverse migration of labour picked up. The
- The Central government's decision to distribute 5 kg of rice and wheat for free to ration card holders across the country will help limit the impact of job losses on nutritional security of the poor and vulnerable.
- The state governments have also taken several measures to mitigate the impact of job losses on the general populace.
  - Bihar has announced that it would issue an equal measure to the Centre's distribution from the State's resources for free distribution via the Public Distribution System.
  - Tamil Nadu has announced Rs 4,000 handout per ration card.
  - Kerala has undertaken distribution of free food kits for vulnerable families
  - Karnataka has announced a Rs. 1,250-crore relief package, for vulnerable sections like farmers, auto and taxi drivers, construction workers and other informal sector workers.

## **24. Weather fluctuations may trigger pest attack on sugarcane crops in U.P.**

### Context:

- Concerns of **pest attack on sugarcane crop** in Uttar Pradesh.

### Background:

- **Uttar Pradesh has the maximum area under sugarcane cultivation.** However, the **highest sugar recovery can be obtained in Maharashtra.**
- Uttar Pradesh is India's largest producer of sugarcane, accounting for 51 per cent of the total cultivated area, 50 per cent of the crop and 38 percent of sugar production

### Details:

- The frequent fluctuations in weather conditions in recent times have raised the risk of pest attacks for the sugarcane crop in Uttar Pradesh.
  - The **excess moisture in the atmosphere and day-to-day fluctuations in the weather** has aided the spurt in the population of various pests such as **pyrilla, grasshopper, fall armyworm and black bug.** These pests mainly infest the sugarcane crop.

- These insects by feeding on the leaves of sugarcane plants **impacts sugarcane growth and decreases yield and sugar content.**
- The state government has issued an advisory to make relevant arrangements for prevention of insects and pests attacks and has also advised field inspections to gauge the extent of the threat.
- The department officials have been asked to destroy the affected plants and not to use them as cane seeds for sowing.
  - Black bug is mostly found in the **ratoon plant.**
    - Ratoon is a new shoot or sprout springing from the base of a crop plant, especially sugar cane, after cropping.

## 25. Guarantor beware

- This article evaluates the recent Supreme Court judgement allowing financial creditors to initiate insolvency proceedings against personal guarantors of stressed corporate entities under the Indian Bankruptcy and Insolvency Code (IBC).

### Background:

- The central government had released a notification in November 2019 allowing **lenders to initiate insolvency proceedings against personal guarantors along with the stressed corporate entities** for whom they gave guarantee.
- This was challenged before several High Courts by a group of petitioners, mostly personal guarantors to stressed companies.
- Given the multiple appeals in different High Courts, the Supreme Court had transferred the petitions from the High Courts to itself on a request from the government.

### Salient aspects of the judgement:

- The bench noted an **“intrinsic connection” between personal guarantors and their corporate debtors** and hence the need to **hold the personal guarantors accountable too.**
  - The personal guarantors are usually promoters of big business houses.

- The Court also noted that the intimate connection between the personal guarantors and their corporate debtors necessitates **a common forum for adjudication under the IBC**.
  - Section 60(2) of the Code requires the bankruptcy proceedings of corporate debtors and their personal guarantors to be held before a common forum – the **National Company Law Tribunal (NCLT)**.
- The Court has clarified that the discharge of a principal borrower from the debt by operation of law, or due to liquidation or insolvency proceeding, does not absolve the guarantor of his or her liability thus implying that the **liability of the guarantor is not co-extensive with that of the corporate debtor**.

### Significance of the judgement:

#### More effective outcomes:

- Involving the personal guarantors in the liquidation process will also facilitate the Committee of Creditors to **frame realistic resolution or liquidation plans**, keeping in mind the prospect of realising some part of the creditors' dues from personal guarantors.
- A common forum for adjudication will help the NCLT have a better overview of the case and hence will aid in **more effective verdicts at the appellate stage**.
- The judgement is expected to **boost banks' recovery efforts involving bad loans**. The inclusion of the guarantors in insolvency proceedings would push the guarantors to arrange for the payment of the debt to the creditor bank in order to obtain a quick discharge from insolvency proceedings.

#### Rectifying a loophole in the IBC framework:

- The personal guarantors and related parties in some insolvency cases had been able to escape insolvency proceedings against them despite indications of **collusion between the borrowers and the guarantors**. This judgement will now help rectify such a loophole in the IBC.

## 26. Recalibrate growth, reprioritise expenditures

### Context:

- The article co-authored by C. Rangarajan, former Chairman, Economic Advisory Council to the Prime Minister and a former Governor, Reserve

Bank of India analyzes the **fiscal impact of the second wave of the pandemic** and suggests measures needed in this direction.

### **Fiscal impact of the pandemic:**

- The second wave of COVID-19 and the lockdowns in several states have been eroding economic activities in India. This would have the following implications.

### **Lower economic growth:**

- The **GDP growth rate for both nominal as well as real GDP is going to be substantially lower** than that projected earlier.

### **Lowering of tax and non-tax revenue:**

- The slow economic growth will lead to a lowering of tax and non-tax revenues.
  - The author estimates a shortfall of about Rs. 0.6 lakh crore in the Centre's net tax revenues.
- Given the uncertainty and reluctance on the part of the private players to invest, the budgeted magnitudes for non-tax revenues and non-debt capital receipts premised on implementing the **monetisation and disinvestment programme** are most likely to be unmet.
  - The author estimates a shortfall of Rs. 1.5-lakh crore in non-tax revenues and non-debt capital receipts. Hence the total shortfall on the receipts side for the government may be about Rs. 2.1-lakh crore.

### **Increase in fiscal deficit:**

- The most likely **change in the budgeted nominal GDP growth (lower)** and the **shortfall in the receipts** from tax, non-tax and non-debt sources will invariably push the fiscal deficit beyond the projected budget estimate of 6.76% of GDP.
  - The author estimates a significant slippage in fiscal deficit which may be close to 7.7% of GDP in 2021-22 if the total expenditures are kept at the budgeted levels.

### **Recommendations:**

- The fiscal projections of the Centre's 2021-22 Budget require recalibration given the inevitable economic impact of the pandemic. Such a revised estimate should project more realistic values to stimulate requisite measures.

- Despite the inevitable chances of fiscal slippage, the **government needs to ensure that the total expenditures remain at the budgeted level**, given the inevitability of public expenditure in supporting the economy in these challenging times.
- There is a need for **reprioritising government expenditure**.
  - The allocation for the health sector should be increased substantially.
  - Strong support is needed for the vulnerable groups of the society including migrant labour and the rural and urban unemployed population.
  - Given the fact that universal vaccination at pace is key to minimising economic damage, the central government should invest accordingly in vaccine purchase and distribution among the states.

### **Additional information:**

#### **Economic terminology:**

##### *Real GDP:*

- The real GDP is the total value of all of the final goods and services that an economy produces during a given year, accounting for inflation. It is calculated using the prices of a selected base year.

##### *Nominal GDP:*

- The nominal GDP is the value of all the final goods and services that an economy produced during a given year. It is calculated by using the prices that are current in the year in which the output is produced.

##### *Tax buoyancy:*

- Tax buoyancy refers to the responsiveness of tax revenue growth to changes in GDP.
- Tax buoyancy is an indicator to measure the efficiency and responsiveness of revenue mobilization in response to growth in the gross domestic product or national income. A tax is said to be buoyant if the tax revenues increase more than proportionately in response to a rise in national income or output.
- When a tax is buoyant, its revenue increases without increasing the tax rate.

## **27. The many benefits of an eco tax**

### **Background:**

### Financial impact of the pandemic:

- The second wave of the pandemic has induced lockdowns in several states and brought **economic activity to a standstill**. This will lead to a lower than estimated economic growth and a subsequent **decline in tax revenue**. This will lead to a **larger than projected fiscal deficit in the current year**.
- The fiscal deficit for FY 2020-21 (revised estimates) is projected to be 9.5% of the GDP; for 2021-22, it is pegged at 6.8%.
- The continued focus on fiscal discipline is bound to impact public expenditure which is vital for economic revival and also impact expenditure into the ailing health sector which is crucial in the fight against the pandemic.

### Consequences of low public expenditure in the health sector:

- Sustained health financing in India has always been a challenge.
- The low public expenditure into the health sector results in the **lack of adequate and quality public health care facilities**, thus leading to the rise of private health care centres. Such a scenario invariably leads to a **high out of pocket expenditure** for health needs.
  - The World Health Organization (WHO) data notes that 17.33% of the population in India made out-of-pocket payments on health exceeding 10% of the total household expenditure or income in 2011.
    - This is higher than the global average of 12.67% and also the average for the Southeast Asian region which stands at 16%.
  - Similarly, 3.9% of the population in India made more than 25% of out-of-pocket payments on health.
  - The Economic Survey of India 2019-20 notes that an increase in public spending from the current level of 1% to **5-3% of GDP, as envisaged in the National Health Policy of 2017**, can decrease out-of-pocket expenditure from 65% to 30%.
- The high out of pocket expenditure for health pushes many into **poverty**. Also since a lower proportion of disposable income is available for other essentials like food and education, this would also have a long term impact on the nutritional security and development of children of such families.

### Details:

- Given the critical need for higher public expenditure in the health sector and the fiscal strain imposed by the pandemic, it becomes important to look for **alternate sources of health financing in India**.
- The COVID-19 pandemic has also forced a **rethink on climate change and the need for environmental preservation**.

- In this direction, the article evaluates possible fiscal reforms which will not only help manage the environment in a sustainable manner but also help generate enough revenues to fund its public expenditure programmes in critical areas like health.
- The article evaluates the potential of environmental tax in this direction.

### Environmental regulation:

- Environment regulation may take one of the following forms:
  - **Command and control approach** wherein the government places strict regulations on pollutant emissions and there are fines on non-compliance.
  - **Economic planning/urban planning approach** involves inculcating sustainable management practices in policymaking.
  - **Environmental tax (eco tax)/subsidies approach** involves either taxing the polluters to disincentivize the use of high carbon footprint processes or products and also providing subsidies to encourage the adoption of green technology.
  - **Cap and trade approach** involves the government setting limits for emissions and the establishment of carbon trade markets.
- India currently focuses majorly on the command-and-control approach in tackling pollution.

### Eco tax:

- Environmental tax reforms would mainly involve the following three activities:
  - Eliminating existing subsidies and taxes that have a harmful impact on the environment.
  - **Restructuring existing taxes in an environmentally supportive manner.**
  - Initiating new environmental taxes.
- For example, in the energy sector, the following reforms may qualify as environmental fiscal reforms.
  - Correcting the price differential between diesel and petrol.
  - Differential taxation on vehicles in the transport sector based on fuel efficiency and GPS-based congestion charges.
  - Taxes on thermal-based powers and tax rebates for renewable energy producers.
  - Tax on high carbon footprint industries.

### Significance:



- The implementation of an environmental tax in India will have the following three broad benefits.

*Environmental:*

- Environmental taxes help internalise the negative environmental externalities in the overall framework and thus incentivize greener products and processes and disincentivize polluting processes and products. This will **reduce environmental pollution, encourage environmental preservation** and adoption of an environmentally sustainable approach.

*Fiscal:*

- Tax revenues can be generated through eco taxes by designing them as revenue augmenting.
- The additional revenue so generated can be used for the provision of environmental public goods or directed towards the overall revenue pool to be used in critical social sectors like health. This will **help developing countries like India, constrained by limited fiscal space** to address critical environmental health issues.

*Poverty reduction:*

- The augmented revenue from eco tax can **finance research and the development** of new technologies thus encouraging the rise of new sunrise sectors and new jobs.
- The augmented revenue will also help **finance social sectors** which will aid in the development process and help reduce poverty.

**Concerns:**

- Environmental regulations may have significant costs on the private sector in the form of the high cost of compliance. This could lead to a **possible increase in the prices of goods and services**. This may disincentivize demand and thus hamper the economic growth of the nation.
  - Notably, there is no evidence of green taxes leading to a deceleration of the economy. Most countries' experiences suggest a negligible impact on the GDP.

**Recommendations:**

- It is the right time for India to **adopt environmental fiscal reforms** as it will not only help reduce environmental pollution but also generate resources for financing the health sector.

- The architecture of the **eco tax framework should be credible, transparent and predictable.**
  - The eco tax rate should be commensurate to the marginal social cost arising from the negative externalities associated with the production, consumption or disposal of goods and services. This should consider both short and long term impacts both on humans and other living beings.
- The environmental taxes must be **integrated with the Goods and Services Tax framework.**

## 28. Cairn Energy verdict 'highly flawed': Ministry

### Context:

The Union Government is defending its case against an **international arbitration** order asking it to refund \$1.2 billion to Cairn Energy over a **retrospective tax dispute.**

### Details:

- Cairn Energy filed a lawsuit in a U.S. court against Air India, seeking to make the national carrier **liable to pay the damages awarded to it**, but which are **not yet honoured by the Indian government.**
- Earlier, the **Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) at The Hague ruled in favour of Cairn Energy PLC** of the U.K and **awarded \$1.2 billion in damages against India** in the **retrospective taxation case.**

### India's stand:

- The Indian government has termed the tribunal's December 2020 decision highly flawed.
- The government has raised several arguments that call for **setting aside the award including** but not limited to **the arbitral tribunal improperly exercising jurisdiction over a national tax dispute that India never offered and/or agreed to arbitrate.**
- It argues that the **award improperly ratifies Cairn's scheme to achieve Double Non-Taxation**, which was **designed to avoid paying taxes anywhere in the world**, a significant **public policy concern for governments worldwide.**

## 29. FDI flows crossed \$81 bn in FY21

### Context:

- Data released by the Commerce and Industry Ministry relating to foreign investment into India.

### Details:

#### Impressive growth in foreign investment:

- **Foreign direct investment (FDI)** flows into India grew 10% in 2020-21 to touch a record \$81.72 billion. The FDI equity inflows have risen 19% to total almost \$60 billion.

#### Top investors:

- **Singapore** has emerged as the top investor followed by the U.S. and Mauritius.
- FDI equity flows from the U.S., the U.K. and Saudi Arabia have witnessed sharp increases.

#### Top destination states:

- **Gujarat** was the top FDI destination followed by Maharashtra and Karnataka.
- The other regions have accounted for a disproportionately lower amount of 23% of the remaining foreign equity capital. This is indicative of the **skewed pattern of FDI inflows and concerns of unbalanced growth.**

#### Top sectors:

- **Computer software and hardware** has emerged as the top sector during 2020-21 with about 44% share of the total FDI equity inflow followed by construction (infrastructure) activities and services sector.
- Construction (infrastructure) activities, computer software and hardware, rubber goods, retail trading, drugs and pharmaceuticals and electrical equipment have recorded more than a 100% jump in equity during 2020-21.

## 30. 'GST Council should prioritise COVID relief, States' cash woes'

### Context:

- Ahead of the **scheduled Goods and Services Tax (GST) Council meeting**, the article discusses some of the major topics that would find detailed discussions during the meeting.

#### **Details:**

#### **Tax relief:**

- The council should consider **reducing the tax rates or zero-rating the GST on essential materials** to combat COVID like vaccines, medicines, hand sanitizers, oximeters and oxygen concentrators.
- The council should also consider providing **input tax credits to companies that have been importing critical medical items.**

#### **Rationalizing GST rates:**

- The council should **rationalise GST rates to provide relief to sectors like entertainment, hotels and tourism** that are worst hit by the second wave.
- The council should consider **reducing the GST rate for composition dealers.**
- COVID-related expenditures incurred by employers for the welfare of employees and their families like vaccination drives and distribution of oxygen concentrators may also be considered as an input tax credit.

#### **Ensuring faster refunds:**

- The industries must be enabled to **get their due refunds quicker to free up their working capital needs.** This will infuse the necessary liquidity into their finances.
- GST refunds for several exporters including gems and jewellery and IT sectors are stuck. The gems and jewellery industry has over ₹1,000 crore stuck in past accumulated input tax credits and due to backlog in refunds.

#### **GST compensation to states:**

- Given that the last GST meeting had ended without a consensus on the **Centre's GST compensation formula**, a new mechanism for paying States their compensation dues must be designed.
- States are still owed Rs. 63,000 crore from last year's dues and GST cess collections are unlikely to meet this year's compensation dues as well, following the spate of lockdowns across several States.

### 31. Recycling Carbon Technology

A Bangalore-based startup has received the National Award 2021 for developing efficient catalysts and methodologies for the conversion of CO<sub>2</sub> to methanol and other chemicals.

#### Carbon Recycling

- It has led to the improvisation of process engineering to enhance the production of chemicals and fuels from anthropogenic CO<sub>2</sub>.
- It has integrated multiple components involved in the CCUS (Carbon capture, utilization, and sequestration) to develop a complete solution for the environmental issues due to global warming.
- The current capacity of CO<sub>2</sub> conversion is 300 kg per day, which can be scaled up to several 100 tons on an industrial scale.

#### What is CCUS?

- Carbon Capture, Utilization, and Storage (CCUS) encompass methods and technologies to remove CO<sub>2</sub> from the flue gas and from the atmosphere.
- CCUS involves multiple aspects that need to be in sync for the successful removal or capture of CO<sub>2</sub> from the flue gas or the atmosphere, followed by utilization and storage.
- Carbon capture involves the development of sorbents that can effectively bind to the CO<sub>2</sub> present in flue gas or the atmosphere, which is expensive.
- In addition, there has been a considerable debate about the fate of captured and compressed CO<sub>2</sub>.

### 32. NGT upholds rights of pastoralists in Banni Grasslands

The National Green Tribunal (NGT) ordered all encroachments to be removed from Gujarat's Banni grasslands.

#### Banni Grasslands

- Banni Grasslands form a belt of arid grassland ecosystem on the outer southern edge of the desert of the marshy salt flats of Rann of Kutch.
- They are known for rich wildlife and biodiversity and are spread across an area of 3,847 square kilometers. Two ecosystems, wetlands and grasslands, are juxtaposed in Banni.
- They are currently legally protected under the status as a protected or reserve forest in India.

- Wildlife Institute of India (WII) has identified this grassland reserve as one of the last remaining habitats of the cheetah in India and a possible reintroduction site for the species.
- The region hosts a nomadic pastoralist community, the Maldharis, whose livelihoods depend on this protected shrub-savanna.

### What is the recent NGT verdict?

- The court also said the Maldharis will continue to hold the right to conserve the community forests in the area, granted to them as per the provisions in Section 3 of Forest Rights Act, 2006.
- NGT highlighted that the lack of coordination between the forest department and the revenue department lead to the problem of encroachment.
- The grassland was first declared a “protected forest” in May 1955, using the nomenclature of the Indian Forest Act, 1927.
- Since then, the actual transfer of the land from the Revenue department to the Forest department has not been completed.

### 33. Rights of Van Gujjars

#### Why in News

The **Uttarakhand High Court** has **reprimanded the State government for stopping some Van Gujjar families on the way to Govind Pashu Vihar National Park** and said their **right to life is being violated** by the authorities.

#### Key Points

- **Background:**
  - The **Van Gujjars pursue seasonal migration from the Terai-Bhabar and Siwalik region of Uttarakhand to the higher bugyals in the Western Himalayas in summer** and vice versa in winter.
    - This **phenomenon of transhumance** pursued by the community is among the few climate-adaptive and resilience strategies that ensures their pastoral livelihood remains viable and sustainable.
  - The Van Gujjars **possess legitimate permits** across their summer (Govind Pashu Vihar National Park) and winter homesteads. However, they are **not permitted by authorities** to enter the Park.
- **Rights of Pastoralists under Forests Rights Act 2006:**
  - It has ensured that **even pastoralists possess rights to access grazing pastures in lieu of the Community Forest Resource right** they are eligible for.

- Section 2 (a) prescribes for the rights of pastoral communities on customary common forest land within the traditional or customary boundaries of a village.
  - It also prescribes the seasonal use of a landscape in case of pastoral communities, including in unclassified forests, reserve forests, undemarcated forests, deemed forests, protected forests, sanctuaries and national parks.
- **High Court's Order:**
  - Upholds the right of Van Gujjars to migrate to their summer homesteads in the bugyals (Himalayan alpine meadows) located within the Govind Pashu Vihar National Park.
  - The court relied on Article 21 (Protection of Life and Personal Liberty) of the constitution.

### Article 21 of the Constitution

- It declares that no person shall be deprived of his life or personal liberty except according to procedure established by law.
- This right is available to both citizens and non-citizens.
- The right to life is not merely confined to animal existence or survival but also includes the right to live with human dignity and all those aspects of life which go to make a man's life meaningful, complete and worth living.
- **About Van Gujjars:**
  - Van Gujjars are the forest-dwelling nomadic community inhabiting the foothills of Himalayan States such as Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh and Jammu and Kashmir.
  - Usually, they migrate to the bugyals (grasslands) located in the upper Himalayas with their buffaloes and return only at the end of monsoons to their makeshift huts, deras, in the foothills.
  - They traditionally practice buffalo husbandry; a family owns up to 25 heads of buffaloes. They rely on buffaloes for milk, which gets them a good price in Uttarakhand and Uttar Pradesh markets.

### Govind Pashu Vihar National Park

- **Location:**
  - It is located in the Uttarkashi district of the state of Uttarakhand. The park lies in the higher reaches of the Garhwal Himalayas.
- **Establishment:**
  - The park was established as a Wildlife Sanctuary in the year of 1955. It was declared as a National Park in the year of 1990.
- **Flora and Fauna:**

- Fauna include the **Snow Leopard**, Brown Bear, Musk Deer, Western Tragopan etc.
- Some of the noteworthy trees present in the sanctuary include deodar cedar, chir pine, silver fir, blue pine and several **deciduous species**.
- **Other Features:**
  - Within the park is the **Har-ki-dun valley** which is a known **spot for trekking**, while the **Ruinsara high altitude lake** is also popular as a tourist destination.
  - The park creates an upper water catchment of **River Tons**.
    - **Tons river** is a significant tributary of **Yamuna River** and reaches the upper stretches of **Garhwal**.

### Other Protected Areas in Uttarakhand

- Jim Corbett National Park (first National Park of India).
- Valley of Flowers National Park and Nanda Devi National Park which together are a **UNESCO World Heritage Site**.
- **Rajaji National Park**.
- **Gangotri National Park**.
- Nandhaur Wildlife Sanctuary.

## 34. National Mission on use of Biomass in Coal Based Thermal Power Plants

### Why in News

Recently, the Ministry of Power has decided to set up a **National Mission on use of Biomass in coal based thermal power plants**.

### Key Points

- **About:**
  - The proposed National Mission on biomass will also contribute to the **National Clean Air Programme (NCAP)**.
  - It would further **support the energy transition in the country** and our targets to move towards **cleaner energy sources**.
- **Aim:**
  - To **address the issue of air pollution** due to farm **stubble burning** and to **reduce carbon footprints of thermal power generation**.
- **Objective:**



- Increase the **level of biomass co-firing** from present 5% to **higher levels** to have a larger share of carbon neutral power generation from the thermal power plants.
  - **Biomass co-firing** stands for adding biomass as a partial substitute fuel in high efficiency coal boilers.
- **Take up R&D (Research & Development)** activity in boiler design to handle the higher amount of silica, alkalis in the biomass pellets.
- **Facilitate overcoming the constraints in supply chain of biomass** pellets and agro- residue and its transport upto to the power plants.
- Consider **regulatory issues in biomass co-firing**.
- **Proposed Structure:**
  - The Mission would have a **Steering Committee headed by the Secretary (Ministry of Power)** comprising all stakeholders including representatives from the **Ministry of Petroleum & Natural Gas , Ministry of New & Renewable Energy etc.**
  - **National Thermal Power Corporation Limited** will play a larger role in providing logistics and infrastructure support.
- **Duration:**
  - The duration of the proposed National Mission would be a **minimum 5 years**.
- **Initiatives to Reduce Pollution from Coal Power Plants:**
  - **Stringent emission standards** for coal based thermal power plants have been notified.
    - Compulsory adoption of emissions standards for installing **Flue Gas Desulphurization (FGD)** units that cut emissions of toxic sulphur dioxide.
  - **Approved automatic transfer of coal linkage from inefficient power plants to new supercritical plants** subject to certain conditions to promote setting up of supercritical units in place of old ones.
  - Thermal power plants within 50 km of sewage treatment facilities will **mandatorily use treated sewage water**.
- **Other Initiatives to Reduce Air Pollution:**
  - **Bharat Stage-VI (BS-VI) emission norms**.
  - **UJALA scheme**.
  - **International Solar Alliance**.
  - **National Action Plan on Climate Change (NAPCC)**.

## Biomass

- **About:**
  - **Biomass** is plant or animal material used as fuel to produce electricity or heat. Examples are wood, energy crops and waste from forests, yards, or farms.

- Biomass has always been an **important energy source for the country considering the benefits it offers.**
- **Benefits:**
  - It is **renewable, widely available, carbon-neutral** and has the potential to provide **significant employment in the rural areas.**
  - It is also capable of providing firm energy. About **32% of the total primary energy use in the country is still derived from biomass** and more than **70% of the country's population depends upon it** for its energy needs.
- **Biomass power & cogeneration programme:**
  - **About:**
    - Initiated by the **Ministry of New and Renewable Energy.**
    - For efficient utilization of biomass, **bagasse based cogeneration in sugar mills and biomass power generation** have been taken up under the programme.
    - **Biomass materials used for power generation include** Rice husk, straw, cotton stalk, coconut shells, soya husk, de-oiled cakes, coffee waste, jute wastes, groundnut shells, saw dust etc.
  - **Objective:**
    - **Promoting technologies for optimum use** of the country's biomass resources for grid power generation.

### **35. Data is an essential weapon against Covid**

#### **Importance of data in decision making**

- The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted globally how important data is to governments in decision-making.
- **Epidemiological data** is of paramount significance for targeting and implementing control measures for public health in a timely manner
- Such data was used effectively in the **evidence-based response** and decision-making in countries like South Korea.
- Modern response to pandemics has focused on exploiting all the available data to **inform policy action in real time.**

#### **How data analysis helped during pandemic**

- Data analysis has revealed the need for continuous and repeated tracking of case numbers, fatalities and recoveries.
- The epidemiological concept of **flattening the curve** and its predictions are results of **data analysis and modelling.**

- Understanding testing adequacy or lack thereof allows us to measure our preparedness, **prognostic versus diagnostic ability**, and shape our responses to identify, manage, and care for new cases.
- Epidemic outbreak data like case data, medical and treatment data can be used to understand disease pathogenesis and severity.
- **Genome sequencing surveillance** helps identify and track viral genome sequence variants in real time and the evolution of the virus.
- The concept of **open access to various data** enables models to improve forecast and study the spread of the disease.'

### Integration and analysis of multiple datatypes

- The integration and analysis of **multiple heterogeneous datatypes eventually would yield a holistic picture**.
- This helps guide policy decisions for control and management of public health.
- When **genome surveillance data is correlated with the magnitude of cases and their outcomes**, then we can understand the **transmissibility or infectivity of the virus**.
- **Geographical mapping of prevalence of mutants** allows us to understand viral spread and **explain recoveries or deaths in a specific area**.
- The roll out of vaccinations can shape viral evolution and drug-treatment strategies.
- Surveillance through studying genome sequencing of the virus, coupled to other epidemiological data allows us to identify these connections.

### Challenges

- Part of the challenge lies in the **standardisation of data collection**, curation, annotation and the **integration of data analytics pipelines for outbreak analytics**.

### Way forward

- Ensuring **data availability** and quality under operational constraints is critical.
- The use of **data standards** instils consistency, reduces errors and enables transparency.
- Embedded in the idea of data sharing lies the concept of **data security and confidentiality**.
- Concerns of privacy and security calls for a **systemic infrastructure with built-in safeguards** to ensure **data encryption** while preserving anonymity and ensuring privacy.

- As our dependence on **data-based decisions** becomes more and more critical, an urgent charter for **standardised digital health data** in India is required.

## Conclusion

Rational and scientific methods necessitate data without which neither can we have information, nor knowledge or wisdom. Data sharing, and transparency and timely dissemination of data are critical to overcome the pandemic.

## 36. DBT for Mid Day Meal Scheme

### Why in News

The Ministry of Education has approved the proposal to provide monetary assistance to students through **Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT)** of the cooking cost component of the **Mid-Day-Meal (MDM) Scheme**, to all eligible children.

### Key Points

- **Implications of DBT for MDM Scheme:**
  - With schools closed for months due to Covid-19, this move will **give a fillip to the Midday Meal programme.**
  - This is **in addition** to the Government of India's announcement of distribution of free-of-cost food grains at Rs. 5/kg per person per month to nearly 80 crore beneficiaries under the **Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana (PM-GKAY).**
  - It will help safeguard the nutritional levels of children and aid in **protecting their immunity** during the challenging pandemic times.
  - This one time special welfare measure will **benefit about 11.8 crore children** studying in class I to VIII in the 11.20 lakh Government and Government aided schools across the country.
  - The central government will provide **additional funds of about Rs. 1200 crore** to state governments and UT administrations for this purpose.
- **About Mid-Day-Meal Scheme:**
  - **Launch:** It is a centrally sponsored scheme which was **launched in 1995.**
    - It is considered as the **world's largest school feeding programme** aimed to attain the goal of **universalization of primary education.**
  - **Nodal Ministry:** Ministry of Education.

- **Aim:** To address hunger and malnutrition, increase enrolment and attendance in school, improve socialisation among castes, provide employment at grassroot level especially to women.
- **Provisions:**
  - Provides **cooked meals to every child within the age group of six to fourteen years studying in classes I to VIII** who enrolls and attends the school.
  - Cooked meal having **nutritional standards** of 450 calories and 12 gm of protein for primary (I-V class) and 700 calories and 20 gm protein for upper primary (VI-VIII class).
  - If the **Mid-Day Meal is not provided in school on any school day** due to non-availability of food grains or any other reason, **the State Government shall pay food security allowance** by 15<sup>th</sup> of the succeeding month.
- **Beneficiaries:** All children in government and aided schools and madrasas supported under **Samagra Shiksha**.

### Direct Benefit Transfer Scheme

- **Aim:** It has been visioned as an aid for simpler/faster flow of information and funds to the beneficiaries and to reduce the fraud in the delivery system.
- **Implementation:** It is a mission or an initiative by the government of India started on 1<sup>st</sup> January 2013 as a way to reform the government delivery system.
  - Central Plan Scheme Monitoring System (CPSMS), the earlier version of the **Public Financial Management System (PFMS)**, of the Office of Controller General of Accounts, was chosen to act as the common platform for routing of the Direct Benefit Transfer.
- **Components of DBT:** Primary components in the implementation of DBT schemes include Beneficiary Account Validation System, a robust payment and reconciliation platform integrated with RBI, NPCI, Public & Private Sector Banks, Regional Rural Banks and Cooperative Banks (core banking solutions of banks, settlement systems of RBI, Aadhaar Payment Bridge of NPCI) etc.
- **Other Schemes involving DBT:**
  - **Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana, National Food Security Mission, Pradhan Mantri Krishi Sinchai Yojana, PM KISAN, Swachh Bharat Mission Gramin, Atal Pension Yojana, National AYUSH Mission.**

### 37. Declining forest bird species in Western Himalaya

## What's in News?

A study that analysed natural oak-dominated forests and modified forests in the State of Uttarakhand has noted that there was a **drastic loss of bird species in all modified landscapes**.

- The State of Uttarakhand is home to the Western Himalayan temperate forests which harbour a large number of endemic bird species.

## Key Findings:

- The results of the study showed that there was a **low diversity of species in monoculture areas and urban sites**.
- They also noted a **drastic loss of pollinator birds and insectivores** in the degraded forests, monocultures and urbanised sites.
- It saw a **strong decline in some of the habitat guilds** in the areas that experienced land-use change.
  - Habitat guilds are **groups of bird species that have common habitat preferences**.
- Recognised oak forest specialists such as rufous-bellied woodpecker, greater yellownape, rufous sibia, white-throated laughingthrush and black-faced warbler dropped out of the modified land areas .
- It was noted that **two species (rufous-bellied woodpecker and greater yellownape)** showed great potential as **indicators of forest quality** as they were most likely to be found in dense canopied forests with larger and taller trees.

## 38. Ripples from Yaas and surging tides devastate the Sunderbans

### Context:

Every cyclone poses **new challenges to the Sunderbans and its inhabitants**.

### Details:

- Over just the past three years, the Sunderbans has been **damaged by four tropical cyclones** – **Fani** (May 2019), **Bulbul** (November 2019), **Amphan** (May 2020) and **Yaas** (May 2021).
- With every cyclone, the region has suffered damage because of gale winds and breached embankments, leading to ingress of sea water.
  - The intensity of the gale winds has ranged from 100 kmph to 150 kmph during each of the cyclones.

### Effects of Cyclone Yaas:

- Cyclone Yaas made landfall about 200 km south of the Sunderbans in Odisha. But it **inundated large areas of the estuary**.
- There is a **scarcity of drinking water** because of inundation.
- The **combined effect of the full moon tide and the cyclone** led to the overflowing and breach of embankments in large areas of the Sunderbans.
- Not only the **western part of Sunderbans that faces Bay of Bengal** but large parts in the **eastern part of the delta** remain under water days after the cyclone and the high tide.
- Once the sea water enters the islands, the **crops are inundated and land cannot be cultivated because of the salinity**, even the **fish in the ponds die**.

**Note:**

- **Ghoramara** is one of the islands that has been sinking due to rising sea levels, where a few dozen houses and acres of land go under water every year.
- **Sagar Island**, the **biggest island of the Sundarbans chain** and site of the famous **Gangasagar Mela during Makar Sankranti**, has also suffered damage.

**Way Forward:**

- Solution to this perennial problem lies in **long-term planning**.
- Strategies that will **minimise the impact of climate change must be adopted**.
- Policy makers must prepare **disaster management plans suited to the region**.