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# **CURRENT AFFAIRS**

A MAGAZINE FOR CIVIL SERVICES PREPARATION

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## **GS 2 : Polity, Governance, International Relations**

### **1. The direction that the National Curriculum Framework needs to take**

NCERT has tasked the State Councils of Educational Research and Training (SCERTs) to develop four State Curriculum Frameworks (SCFs). They pertain to

- School Education
- Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE)
- Teacher Education (TE)
- Adult Education (AE)

The draft SCFs will feed into formulating the **National Curriculum Frameworks**, or NCFs, and the final version of the NCFs will be used as guiding documents to finalise the SCFs.

- NCERT will provide support to the SCERTs in terms of guidance, training of personnel, and technology platforms to develop these documents.
- NCERTs will also provide e-templates & survey questionnaires to conduct surveys among various stakeholders. This ensures that board views from all sections of the population are taken in consideration while drafting SCFs & NCFs

NCERT has to be cautious of the following while deliberating & drafting on NCF

- The purpose of surveys on public opinion is to create a **consensus on basic values**, and the vision and the direction our education system should take.
- The data collected by NCERT should be **analysed in a rigorous manner** to make proper sense of gathered public opinion.
- Data needs to be analysed and organised in the light of the vision of the individual, society, and education inherent in the democratic ideal
- There has to be **logical derivation** of educational aims from the vision of society, curricular objectives from the aims, and content from the objectives are starkly clear.
- Final NCF should be aligned with overall framework of values and future direction, current issues and problems of the education system, and public opinion.

## 2. UNESCO Delists Liverpool of Its World Heritage Status

### Why in News

Recently, the city of Liverpool, England has been removed from UNESCO's (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) list of world heritage sites.

- Earlier six Indian places were added to the **tentative list of UNESCO's** world heritage sites.

### Key Points

- **Liverpool:**
  - - The port city was **included in the prestigious list for its architectural beauty** and in recognition of its role as **one of the world's most important ports during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.**
    - It was **named a World Heritage Site in 2004**, joining cultural landmarks such as the Great Wall of China, the **Taj Mahal**, and the Leaning Tower of Pisa.
      - The city is only the **third place to be removed from the prestigious list.**
  - **Reasons for Delisting:**
    - The **new buildings including a football stadium** undermine the attractiveness of its Victorian docks and were destroying the **heritage value of its waterfront.**
    - The over development would **irreversibly damage the heritage of the historic port.**
  - **Other Delisted Sites:**
    - **Wildlife sanctuary in Oman in 2007.**
      - **Reason:** poaching and habitat loss.
    - **Dresden Elbe valley in Germany in 2009.**
      - **Reason:** A four-lane motorway bridge was built over the river.

### World Heritage Site

- **About:**
  - A World Heritage Site is a place that is **listed by UNESCO for its special cultural or physical significance.** The list of World Heritage Sites is maintained by the international '**World Heritage Programme**', administered by the **UNESCO World Heritage Committee.**

- It seeks to encourage the identification, protection and preservation of cultural and natural heritage around the world considered to be of outstanding value to humanity.
- This is embodied in an international treaty called the Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, adopted by UNESCO in 1972.
  - It provides a framework for international cooperation in preserving and protecting cultural treasures and natural areas throughout the world.
- **Types:**
  - **Cultural heritage sites** include historic buildings and town sites, important archaeological sites, and works of monumental sculpture or painting.
  - **Natural heritage sites** are restricted to natural areas.
  - **Mixed heritage sites** contain elements of both natural and cultural significance
- **Sites in India:**
  - India has **38 world heritage sites**, including **30 cultural properties**, **7 natural properties** and **1 mixed site**. The latest one included is **Jaipur city, Rajasthan**.

### 3. Govt. Portal for Children Orphaned by COVID-19

**In news** The government has introduced a portal to all the States and Union Territories for children orphaned by COVID-19

- Any citizen can inform the administration regarding a child eligible for support under this scheme through the portal

#### About PM-CARES for Children

- The Central government has announced the “**PM-CARES for Children**” scheme for all those children orphaned due to Covid-19.

#### What are the features of the Scheme?

- **Corpus of Rs. 10 Lakh:**
  - A corpus of Rs. 10 lakh will be allocated to each of these children from the **PM CARES fund**.
  - It will provide a monthly stipend from 18 years of age.
  - On attaining 23 years, he/she will get the corpus amount.
- **Education to the Children (under 10 years):**

- Ensure admission to Kendriya Vidyalayas/ private schools.
- PM CARES will pay for the uniform textbooks and notebooks
- If the child is admitted in a private school the fees as per the RTE norms will be provided
- **Education to the Children (11-18 years):**
  - The child will be given admission in any Central Government Residential School
  - In case the child is to be continued under the care of **guardian**, he/she will be given admission in the nearest Kendriya Vidyalaya/private school
- **Higher education:**
  - Provision of either a scholarship equivalent to the tuition fees/ educational loans.
  - Interest on the loan will be paid by the PM-CARES fund.
- **Health Insurance:**
  - All children will be enrolled as a beneficiary under **Ayushman Bharat Scheme**
  - The premium amount will be paid by PM-CARES till a child turns 18.

#### 4. Judicial Appointments to High Courts

##### Why in News

Recently, the **Union Minister of Law and Justice** informed the **Rajya Sabha** regarding the appointment of judges in various high courts.

- The minister pointed out that filling up vacancies in the higher judiciary is a **continuous, integrated and collaborative process** between the **Executive** and the **Judiciary**.
- It requires **consultation and approval** from **Constitutional authorities** at the **State** as well as **Central level**.

##### Key Points

- **Appointment of HC Judges:**
  - **Article 217 of the Constitution:** It states that the **Judge of a High Court** shall be **appointed by the President** in consultation with the **Chief Justice of India (CJI), the Governor of the State**.
    - In the case of appointment of a Judge other than the Chief Justice, the **Chief Justice of the High Court is consulted**.
  - **Consultation Process:** High Court judges are recommended by a **Collegium** comprising the **CJI and two senior-most judges**.

- The proposal, however, is **initiated** by the **Chief Justice of the High Court** concerned in consultation with two senior-most colleagues.
- The recommendation is sent to the Chief Minister, who advises the Governor to send the proposal to the Union Law Minister.
- The **Chief Justice of the High Court** is appointed as per the policy of having Chief Justices from outside the respective States.
  - The Collegium takes the call on the elevation.
- **Ad-hoc Judges:** The appointment of retired judges was provided for in the Constitution under **Article 224A**.
  - Under the Article, the **Chief Justice of a High Court** for any State may at any time, with the **previous consent of the President**, request any person who has held the office of judge of that court or of any other High Court to sit and act as a judge of the High Court for that State.
  - Recently, the Supreme Court pushed for the **appointment of retired judges** to battle the pendency of cases in High Courts.
    - It orally outlined prospective **guidelines** for the appointment and functioning of an ad-hoc judge.
- **Collegium System:**
  - It is the system of appointment and transfer of judges that has evolved through judgments of the SC, and **not by an Act of Parliament** or by a **provision of the Constitution**.
  - **Evolution of the System:**
    - **First Judges Case (1981):** It declared that the “primacy” of the Chief Justice of India (CJI) recommendation on judicial appointments and transfers can be refused for “cogent reasons.”
      - The ruling gave the **Executive primacy over the Judiciary** in judicial appointments for the next 12 years.
    - **Second Judges Case (1993):** SC introduced the **Collegium system**, holding that “**consultation**” really meant “**concurrence**”.
      - It added that it was **not the CJI’s individual opinion**, but an institutional opinion formed in consultation with the two senior-most judges in the SC.
  - **Third Judges Case (1998):** SC on President’s reference expanded the Collegium to a five-member body, comprising the CJI and four of his senior-most colleagues (for example for the transfer of HC judges).
- **Issues Involved:**
  - **Cumbersome Process:** There are inordinate delays in the appointment of High Court judges and depleting numbers in the higher judiciary threaten to affect the justice delivery mechanism.
  - **Lack of transparency:** The absence of formal criteria has multiple worrying implications.

- Presently, there is no structured process to investigate if a judge who is recommended by the collegium has any conflict of interests.
- **Improper Representation:** The collegium system structurally tends to favour particular sections of society and is far from being representative of the population for whom it seeks to deliver justice.
- **Vacancy in High Courts:** The total sanctioned strength of judges across the 25 high courts is 1,098 but the working strength is only 645, a shortfall of 453 judges.
- **High Pendency of Cases:** The total pendency of cases in the several courts of India at different levels, sums up to a total of about 3.7 crores thus increasing the demand of a better and improved judicial system.
- **Attempts of Reform:**
  - The attempt was made to replace the Collegium by a '**National Judicial Appointments Commission (NJAC)**' in 2014 through the **99<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendment Act, 2014**.
    - The NJAC proposed to make the appointment of High Court and Supreme Court judges and chief justices more **transparent**.
    - They will be selected by the commission, whose members will be drawn from the judiciary, legislature and civil society.
  - The **Constitutional Bench** of the Supreme Court declared NJAC **unconstitutional in 2015**, citing that it violates the **Basic Structure** of the **Constitution of India** on the ground that it posed a threat to the independence of the judiciary.

## Way Forward

- It is time to think of a permanent, independent body to institutionalize the process with adequate safeguards to preserve the judiciary's independence guaranteeing judicial primacy but not judicial exclusivity.
  - It should ensure independence, reflect diversity, demonstrate professional competence and integrity.
- Instead of selecting the number of judges required against a certain number of vacancies, the collegium must provide a panel of possible names to the President to appoint in order of preference and other valid criteria.

## 5. Adarsh Smarak Scheme

**In news** Monuments at Nagarjunakonda, Buddhist remains at Salihundam and Veerabhadra Temple at Lepakshi are identified as 'Adarsh Smarak' in Andhra Pradesh for providing additional facilities.

### About the Adarsh Smarak scheme

- Launched in 2014 for providing improved visitor amenities, especially for the physically challenged.
- Implemented by the **Ministry of Culture**.
- The civic amenities are being augmented at the protected sites under the scheme.
- Archaeological Survey of India had identified 100 monuments as “Adarsh Smarak” for upgradation

### What are the Objectives of the Scheme?

- To make the monument visitor friendly.
- To provide interpretation and audio-video centers.
- To make the monument accessible to differently-abled people.
- To implement Swachh Bharat Abhiyan.

### 6. China-led South Asian Initiative

**In news** Recently, Bangladesh has invited India to join the China-led South Asian initiative for Covid-19 vaccines and poverty alleviation.

- It includes the creation of the China-South Asian Countries Emergency Supplies Reserve, and a Poverty Alleviation and Cooperative Development Centre set up in China.

### About China-South Asian Initiative

- **Members:** China, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.
  - India, Bhutan and the Maldives are the other SAARC countries that are not part of this initiative.
- **China’s game plan:** China has different kinds of strategic, maritime, political and ideological interests with different South Asian nations so it is increasing its engagements with each country on equal footing to counterbalance India. China is also building ports, roads and power stations as part of its Belt and Road Initiative.
- **India’s Stand:** Given continuing tensions over Chinese PLA aggression at the Line of Actual Control in Ladakh, India’s stand is that other bilateral relations cannot move ahead without a resolution of the boundary stand-off.

### Some of the India’s Initiatives for South Asia



- In early 2021, India – driven by its ‘Neighbourhood First’ policy and in its understanding of its role as the ‘net security provider’ of the region began providing Covid-19 vaccines on a priority basis to its immediate neighbours (Vaccine Diplomacy).
- India is also helping with the training of health workers in some of these countries and the setting up of the infrastructure to administer the shots.
- Recently, India, Japan and Australia have formally launched the Supply Chain Resilience Initiative (SCRI)

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

### 7. RBI working towards ‘phased introduction’ of Digital Rupee

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) is working toward a “phased implementation strategy” of a Central Bank Digital Currency (CBDC).

#### Central Bank Digital Currency (CBDC)

- The phrase CBDC has been used to refer to various proposals involving digital currency issued by a central bank.
- They are also called digital fiat currencies or digital base money.
- The present concept of CBDCs was directly inspired by Bitcoin, but a CBDC is different from virtual currency and cryptocurrency.
- Cryptocurrencies are not issued by a state and lack the legal tender status declared by the government.
- CBDC implementations will likely not use any sort of distributed ledger such as a blockchain.

#### Why India needs a digital rupee?

- **Online transactions:** India is a leader in digital payments, but cash remains dominant for small-value transactions.
- **High currency in circulation:** India has a fairly high currency-to-GDP ratio.
- **Cost of currency management:** An official digital currency would reduce the cost of currency management while enabling real-time payments without any inter-bank settlement.

## Features of CBDS

- **High-security instrument:** CBDC is a high-security digital instrument; like paper banknotes, it is a means of payment, a unit of account, and a store of value.
- **Uniquely identifiable:** And like paper currency, each unit is uniquely identifiable to prevent counterfeit.
- **Liability of central bank:** It is a liability of the central bank just as physical currency is.
- **Transferability:** It's a digital bearer instrument that can be stored, transferred, and transmitted by all kinds of digital payment systems and services.

## Various benefits offered

- It is efficient than printing notes (cost of printing, transporting, and storing paper currency)
- It reduces the risk of transactions
- It makes tax collection transparent
- Prevents money laundering

## 8. Species in news: Great Indian Bustards

The Environment Ministry has informed the Parliament that there were no Great Indian Bustards (GIB) left in Kutch Bustard Sanctuary (KBS) in Gujarat's Kutch district.

### Great Indian Bustards

- GIBs are the largest among the four bustard species found in India, the other three being MacQueen's bustard, lesser florican and the Bengal florican.
- GIBs' historic range included much of the Indian sub-continent but it has now shrunk to just 10 per cent of it. Among the heaviest birds with flight, GIBs prefer grasslands as their habitats.
- Being terrestrial birds, they spend most of their time on the ground with occasional flights to go from one part of their habitat to the other.
- They feed on insects, lizards, grass seeds etc.
- GIBs are considered the flagship bird species of grassland and hence barometers of the health of grassland ecosystems.

### On the brink of extinction

- The GIB population in India had fallen to just 150.

- Pakistan is also believed to host a few GIBs and yet openly supports their hunting.

### Protection accorded

- **Birdlife International:** uplisted from Endangered to Critically Endangered (2011)
- **Protection under CITES:** Appendix I
- **IUCN status:** Critically Endangered
- **Protection under Wildlife (Protection) Act:** Schedule I

### Threats

- **Overhead power transmission:** lines are the biggest threat to the GIBs.
- **Poor vision:** Due to their poor frontal vision, can't detect powerlines in time and their weight makes in-flight quick manoeuvres difficult.
- **Windmills:** Coincidentally, Kutch and Thar desert are the places that have witnessed the creation of huge renewable energy infrastructure.
- **Noise pollution:** Noise affects the mating and courtship practices of the GIB.
- **Changes in landscape:** Change in the landscape by way of farmers cultivating their land, which otherwise used to remain fallow due to frequent droughts in Kutch.
- **Cultivation changes:** Cultivation of cotton and wheat instead of pulses and fodder are also cited as reasons for falling GIB numbers.

### Supreme Court's intervention

- The Supreme Court has ordered that all overhead power transmission lines in core and potential GIB habitats in Rajasthan and Gujarat should be undergrounded.
- The SC also formed a three-member committee to help power companies comply with the order.
- However, nothing has happened on the ground.

### Conservation measures

- In 2015, the Central government launched the GIB species recovery programme.
- Under the programme, the WII and Rajasthan Forest departments have jointly set up conservation breeding centres where GIB eggs are harvested from the wild.
- They have been incubated artificially and hatchlings raised in a controlled environment.

## 9. Subsidy Scheme to Boost Merchant Ships

### Why in News

Recently, the Union Cabinet has approved a scheme for providing subsidy support to Indian Shipping companies in global tenders floated by Ministries and Central Public Sector Enterprises (CPSEs) for import of government cargo.

- The scheme provides a subsidy of Rs. 1,624 crore over five years.

### Key Points

- **Highlights of the Scheme:**
  - The scheme envisages an **increase in flagging** and would link access to Indian cargo to investment in Indian ships.
    - Flagging in is the **process of adding a vessel to the national registry** and "flagging out" is the process of removing a vessel from a national registry.
  - The subsidy support varies **from 5% to 15%** of the lowest quote offered by the foreign shipping company, depending on whether the ship was flagged after or before 1<sup>st</sup> February, 2021.
  - However, **ships older than 20 years will not be eligible under the scheme**, according to the Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways.
- **Rationale of the Scheme:**
  - **Small Size of Indian Shipping Industry:** Despite having a 7,500 km long coastline, a significant **national EXIM (Export-Import) trade, a policy of 100% FDI in shipping since 1997**, the Indian shipping industry and India's national fleet is proportionately small when compared with its global counterparts.
    - Currently the Indian fleet comprises a meagre **1.2% of the world fleet in terms of capacity**.
    - The share of Indian ships in the carriage of India's EXIM trade has drastically declined from 40.7% in 1987-88 to about 7.8% in 2018-19.
  - **Offsetting Higher Operational Costs:** Currently, Indian shipping industry bears relatively higher operating costs, owing to factors like higher costs of debt funds, taxation on wages of Indian seafarers, IGST on import of ships, blocked GST tax credits, etc.
    - In this context, these higher operational costs would be offset to a large extent through the subsidy support and it would be more attractive to flag merchant ships in India.

- **Increasing Foreign Exchange Outgo:** Owing to high operational costs, importing a shipping service by an Indian charterer is cheaper than contracting the services of a local shipping company.
  - This has led to an increase in foreign exchange outgo on account of freight bill payments to foreign shipping companies.
- **Significance of the Scheme:**
  - **Generating Employment:** Increase in Indian fleet will provide direct employment to Indian seafarers since Indian ships are required to employ only Indian seafarers.
    - Further, cadets wishing to become seafarers are required to obtain on-board training on ships. Indian ships will therefore provide training slots for young Indian cadet boys and girls.
  - **Strategic Advantages:** A policy to promote the growth of the Indian shipping industry is also necessary because having a bigger national fleet would provide economic, commercial, and strategic advantages to India.
  - **Economic Advantages:** A strong and diverse indigenous shipping fleet will not only lead to foreign exchange savings but would also reduce excessive dependence on foreign ships for transporting India's critical cargoes.
    - Thus, it would help in achieving the objective of Atmanirbhar Bharat and contribute to the Indian GDP.

## THE INDIAN EXPRESS

## GS 2 : Polity, Governance, International Relations

### 1. Pegasus scandal and implications for privacy

#### Context

The Pegasus spyware, created by NSO Group in Israel has created a political storm in India over its alleged use by the government.

#### About the Pegasus spyware controversy

- It uses a “**zero-click**” attack which allows the device to be taken over remotely by exploiting software and hardware vulnerabilities.

- The Israeli Defence Ministry's stated that Pegasus and other cyber products are exported "exclusively to government entities" and are only for the purpose of **preventing and investigating crime and counter terrorism**.
- Pegasus has been used to **illegally hack into people's lives** and to obtain private information outside the boundaries of the law.
- Those who were supposedly targeted range from the uppermost echelons of the judiciary, Opposition party leaders, activists and journalists.

### How it harms freedoms and rights guaranteed by the Constitution

- A person has the basic fundamental rights of liberty, privacy, speech and expression amongst others.
- These rights go hand in hand with each other.
- The alleged use of Pegasus to illegally hack into persons' lives, listen in on private conversations, to thereafter use this private information against said persons in hope of gaining undue advantage, **are all outside the boundaries of the law**.
- Surveillance on this level would have the effect of instilling fear and directly hampering a **person's ability to freely make their own decisions**.
- The effect is that a person does not have the freedom to think, to speak or even be in the privacy of their own homes.

### Legal provisions for surveillance

- In December 2018, the government authorised **10 security and intelligence agencies** to **intercept, monitor and decrypt** any information generated, transmitted, received or stored in any **computer resource**.
- The **authorisation is required** before any of the 10 notified agencies can intercept, monitor or decrypt any information.
- This and other grounds are being taken by the government before the Supreme Court to defend its stance.
- The Data Protection Bill (yet to be passed by Parliament) **offers no protection in respect of surveillance**.
- Sections 43 and 66 of the **Information Technology Act, 2000** criminalise hacking.

### Conclusion

The majority is not always right. A democracy has the indelible right to question, to demand answers and explanations. The government has many questions to answer and steps to take to protect the rights and freedoms of its citizens.

## 2. Surveillance Laws in India and Individual Privacy

After alleged WhatsApp snooping cases the government has claimed that all interception in India takes place lawfully.

### What are the laws covering surveillance in India?

Communication surveillance in India takes place primarily under two laws:

1. **Telegraph Act, 1885:** It deals with interception of calls.
2. **Information Technology Act, 2000:** It was enacted to deal with surveillance of all electronic communication, following the Supreme Court's intervention in 1996.

#### [I] Telegraph Act, 1885

- **Call interception:** Under Section 5(2) of this law, the government can intercept calls only in certain situations.
- **For sovereignty:** They include the interests of the sovereignty and integrity of India, the security of the state, friendly relations with foreign states or public order, or for preventing incitement to the commission of an offense.
- **Free speech restrictions:** These are the same restrictions imposed on free speech under Article 19(2) of the Constitution.
- **Exceptions for journalists:** A provision in Section 5(2) states that even this lawful interception cannot take place against journalists.

#### Supreme Court intervention

- In *Public Union for Civil Liberties v Union of India* (1996), the Supreme Court pointed out the lack of procedural safeguards in the provisions of the Telegraph Act.
- The court noted that authorities engaging in interception were not even maintaining adequate records and logs on an interception.
- It noted that- tapping is a serious invasion of an individual's privacy.
- The Supreme Court's guidelines formed the basis of introducing Rule 419A in the Telegraph Rules in 2007 and later in the rules prescribed under the IT Act in 2009.
- Rule 419A states that a Secretary in the MHA can pass orders of interception in the case of the Centre, and a secretary-level officer who is in charge of the Home Department can issue such directives in States.

## [II] IT Act, 2000

- **Electronic surveillance:** Section 69 of the IT Act and the IT (Procedure for Safeguards for Interception, Monitoring, and Decryption of Information) Rules, 2009 were enacted to further the legal framework for electronic surveillance.
- **Data interception:** Under the IT Act, all electronic transmission of data can be intercepted.
- Section 69 of the IT Act adds another aspect that makes it broader – interception, monitoring, and decryption of digital information “for the investigation of an offense”.

### Identifying the gaps

- In 2012, the Planning Commission was tasked with identifying the gaps in laws affecting privacy.
- It pointed out divergence in-laws on permitted grounds, “type of interception”, “granularity of information that can be intercepted”, the degree of assistance from service providers, and the “destruction and retention” of intercepted material.
- Although the grounds of selecting a person for surveillance and the extent of information gathering have to be recorded in writing, the wide reach of these laws has not been tested in court against the cornerstone of fundamental rights.

### Only inference: Right to Privacy is not absolute

- Only in such exceptional circumstances, however, can an individual’s right to privacy be superseded to protect the national interest.
- In today’s times, when fake news and illegal activities such as cyber terrorism on the dark web are on the rise, the importance of reserving such powers to conduct surveillance cannot be undermined.

### What is our concern?

- For Pegasus-like spyware to be used lawfully, the government would have to invoke both the IT Act and the Telegraph Act.
- There is no comprehensive data protection law leaving ambiguities over several laws.
- A comprehensive data protection law to address the gaps in existing frameworks for surveillance is yet to enact.



### What should be the basis for surveillance?

- There should be some reasonable basis or some tangible evidence to initiate or seek approval for interception by State authorities.
- Any action without such evidence or basis would be struck down by courts as arbitrary, or invasive of one's right to privacy.
- Any digression from the ethical and legal parameters set by law would be tantamount to a deliberate invasion of citizens' privacy and make India a surveillance state.

### Way forward

- The security of a device becomes one of the fundamental bedrock of maintaining user trust as society becomes more and more digitized.
- There is an urgent need to take up this issue seriously by constituting an independent high-level inquiry with credible members and experts that can restore confidence and conduct its proceedings transparently.

### Conclusion

- We must recognize that national security starts with securing the smartphones of every single Indian by embracing technologies such as encryption rather than deploying spyware.
- This is a core part of our fundamental right to privacy.
- This intrusion by spyware is not merely an infringement of the rights of the citizens of the country but also a worrying development for India's national security apparatus.

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

### **3. Nord Stream 2 Pipeline Project**

The US, which had previously imposed sanctions to prevent the completion of a major new gas pipeline between Russia and Germany, has now signaled its approval for the project.

#### **Nord Stream 2 Pipeline**

- It is a system of offshore natural gas pipelines running under the Baltic Sea from Russia to Germany.

- It includes two active pipelines running from Vyborg to Lubmin near Greifswald forming the original Nord Stream, and two further pipelines under construction running from Ust-Luga to Lubmin termed Nord Stream 2.
- In Lubmin the lines connect to the OPAL line to Olbernhau on the Czech border and to the NEL line to Rehden near Bremen.
- The first line Nord Stream-1 was laid and inaugurated in 2011 and the second line in 2012.
- At 1,222 km in length, Nord Stream is the longest sub-sea pipeline in the world, surpassing the Langede pipeline.

### Why is the pipeline controversial?

- Since it was first planned, Nord Stream 2 has drawn criticism from the US which believed that the project would increase Europe's dependence on Russia for natural gas.
- Currently, EU countries already rely on Russia for 40 percent of their gas needs.
- The project also has opponents in eastern Europe, especially Ukraine, whose ties with Russia have seriously deteriorated in the aftermath of the Crimean conflict in 2014.
- There is an existing land pipeline between Russia and Europe that runs through Ukraine.
- The country feels that once Nord Stream 2 is completed, Russia could bypass the Ukrainian pipeline, and deprive it of lucrative transit fees of around \$3 billion per year.
- Ukraine also fears another invasion by Russia once the new pipeline is operational.

## 4. Challenges in withdrawing stimulus measures

### Context

Economic-policy discussions increasingly revolve around the question of when and how quickly central banks should pull back the uber-stimulus measures implemented last year in response to the pandemic.

### Why withdrawal is challenging?

- **Uncertainties:** Both parts of the question (when and how) call for finely balanced judgment to account for uncertainties that are in play.

- Policy changes by major central banks can have far-reaching implications for economic and financial well-being, affecting not just those directly involved but also the many nations.
- To answer the question, an assessment of **three current issues** is required:
- **The labour market.**
- The surge in **inflation.**
- The risk of not being able to recover quickly in the event of a policy mistake.

## Let's look into these three issues

### 1) Labour market puzzle

- Despite massive demand, the labour market is unable to match unemployed workers to jobs.
- The situation is particularly stark in the US.
- Job data for April show that there are a record number of job openings in the US—more than nine million—**labour-force participation remains stubbornly low**, and **unemployment high**, compared to pre-pandemic levels.
- The labor market's **persistent malfunctioning**—particularly employers' struggle to find employees—is likely to lead to higher wage growth, a possibility that fuels concern about the second issue-inflation.

### 2) Inflation: Is it transitory or long lasting?

- There is a view that the current **uptick in inflation will sharply reverse itself.**
- As the year progresses, it is expected that the base effect will wash out together with the **supply and demand mismatches.**
- However, there is a possibility of **supply bottlenecks, changes in supply chains**, and lasting **inventory management** challenges.

### 3) Policy challenges: To act or not to act

- Policymakers must be mindful of the **risks associated with any given course of action—including inaction.**
- In the face of such uncertainty, it is wise to ask not just what could go wrong but also what the consequences of a policy mistake would be.
- Under the current conditions, a wrong move could have far-reaching, lasting effects.
- Those favouring a continuation of loose monetary policies argue that central bankers still have tools to overcome inflation should it persist.
- But as the opponents are quick to point out, those tools have become **increasingly ineffective and difficult to calibrate.**

- The risk of inaction (or inertia) in this case may be larger than that of acting early.

### Options with systemically important central banks

- In case of the US, economic growth is buoyant, fiscal policy is also extremely expansionary, and businesses and households alike have significant accumulated savings that they will now be spending down.
- The conditions are now ripe for the Fed to start **reducing – gradually and carefully – its bond-buying programme** from its current rate of \$120 billion per month.
- The European Central Bank, however, is in a different position.
- While eurozone growth is picking up, the level of **fiscal support** is not as strong as in the US, and the **private-sector recovery is not as advanced**.
- The hardest case to call is the UK.
- With growth, fiscal support, and the private sector's prospects more finely balanced.
- Other central bankers around the world also have an important role to play.
- Central bankers elsewhere should be **running their own scenario analyses** and formulating appropriate response plans.

### Conclusion

There is nothing wrong with hoping that three systemically important central banks will get to their destination smoothly. But the journey is far from over, and the risk of someone slipping is not negligible.

## 5. Microplastics Pollution in Ganga

The Ganga is heavily polluted with microplastics at Varanasi, Haridwar, and Kanpur, Delhi-based non-profit Toxics Link claimed.

- Microplastics are plastics that are less than 5 mm in size but are a major source of marine pollution.
- They are recognized as a major source of marine pollution.
- Untreated sewage from many cities along the river's course, industrial waste, and religious offerings wrapped in non-degradable plastics pile pollutants into the river as it flows through several densely populated cities.

- The plastic products and waste materials released or dumped in the river break down and are eventually broken down into microparticles.
- The rivers finally transport significantly large quantities downstream into the ocean, which is the ultimate sink of all plastics being used by humans.

### Microplastics in Ganga

- They are non-degradable plastics that often entered the Ganga through industrial waste or packaging of religious offerings, its research found.
- The density of population in the three cities also added to the problem because a large chunk of pollutants got directly discharged into the river by people living on the banks.
- Among the three cities, the Toxics Link's study found that sites at Varanasi showed the maximum load of microplastics in the water of the Ganga, as compared to the other two cities.
- This might be due to cumulative downstream pollution as well as industrial and human activities.

### On a global high

- The researchers tried to compare the microplastics concentration in Ganga water with similar studies on other rivers across the globe.
- It included the Rhine in Europe, the Patapsco, Magothy, Rhode in North America and the Elqui, Maipo, Biobio, and Maule in South America.
- They found the Ganga microplastics pollution was much higher.
- This was in spite of a higher per capita consumption of plastic in the European countries, North and South America, as compared to India.

### How does it impact people?

- The Ganga is a source of water for not just drinking and bathing purposes but also for irrigation to a large extent.
- Microplastics in river water, if ingested in humans or other organisms, can cause toxicity through various means.
- Not only are these microplastics toxic themselves, they also have a tendency to absorb various toxins present in water, including harmful chemicals.
- Although some of the effects of microplastics on public health are understood, a lot still needs to be done.

## 6. India improves score in Ease of Cross-Border Trade

As per the latest UN Global Survey on Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation, India's rank moved up from 78.49% in 2019 to 90.32% in 2021.

## About the Survey

- The Global Survey on Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation is conducted every two years by UNESCAP.
- The 2021 Survey includes an assessment of 58 trade facilitation measures covered by the WTO's Trade Facilitation Agreement.
- The Survey is keenly awaited globally as it evidences whether or not the trade facilitation measures being taken have the desired impact and helps draw comparison amongst countries.
- A higher score for a country also helps businesses in their investment decisions.

## Global performance

- Among developed countries, Australia, New Zealand, Netherlands, Japan, and Belgium have scored more than 93%.
- In South Asia, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka were behind India with a score of 64.5% and 60.2%, the survey showed.

## India's improvement

- India has scored 90.32% in United Nation's Economic and Social Commission for Asia Pacific's (UNESCAP) latest Global Survey on Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation.
- The Survey hails this as a remarkable jump from 78.49% in 2019.

India's significant improvement in the scores on all 5 key indicators, as follows:

1. **Transparency:** 100% in 2021 (from 93.33% in 2019)
2. **Formalities:** 95.83% in 2021 (from 87.5% in 2019)
3. **Institutional Arrangement and Cooperation:** 88.89% in 2021 (from 66.67% in 2019)
4. **Paperless Trade:** 96.3% in 2021 (from 81.48% in 2019)
5. **Cross-Border Paperless Trade:** 66.67% in 2021 (from 55.56% in 2019)

- The Survey notes that India is the best-performing country when compared to the South and southwest Asia region (63.12%) and the Asia Pacific region (65.85%).
- The overall score of India has also been found to be greater than many OECD countries including France, UK, Canada, Norway, Finland etc. and the overall score is greater than the average score of EU.
- India has achieved a 100% score for the Transparency index and 66% in the "Women in trade" component.

## 7. Open Network for Digital Commerce could disrupt India's e-commerce space

### Context

The Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade (DPIIT) recently issued orders appointing an advisory committee for its Open Network for Digital Commerce (ONDC) project.

### About ONDC project

- The Open Network for Digital Commerce (ONDC) project aims to **make e-commerce processes open-source**.
- In simple terms, it aims at creating **a platform that can be utilised by all online retailers**.
- This is another effort by the government to facilitate **the creation of shared digital infrastructure**, as it has previously done for identity (Aadhaar) and payments (**Unified Payments Interface**).
- It will digitise e-commerce value chains, standardise operations, promote inclusion of suppliers, and derive efficiencies in logistics.

### What are its advantages?

- **Level playing field:** When done well, this approach can **level the playing field and create value for users**.
- **Curb monopoly:** The market is **dominated by a few players** who are facing investigations for unfair trade practices in many countries.
- **Prevent market failure:** The sector is characterised by many small players who individually do not have the muscle to have an equitable bargain with e-commerce companies.
- Economists call this a “market failure”, and it presents a **legitimate case for intervention**.

### The three layers of an open digital ecosystem and their conceptual framework for adoption and safeguards

#### 1) Tech layer

- The “tech layer” should be designed for **minimalism and decentralisation**.
- The government should restrict its role to **facilitating standards and protocols** that provide open access, and in getting them adopted organically.
- Building an entire tech platform should happen only if a standards-based approach doesn't suffice.

- If built, the platform should be built on “**privacy by design**” principles.
- It should collect minimal amounts of data (especially personal data) and store it in a **decentralised manner**.
- Tools like **blockchain could be used to build technical safeguards** that cannot be overridden without active consent.

## 2) Governance layer

- **Avoid excessive government intervention:** The “governance layer” around this should allay business fears of **excessive state intervention in e-commerce**.
- **Legal provision:** Any deployment of standards or tech should be **accompanied by law or regulation** that lays out the scope of the project.
- **Independent regulator for personal data:** If collection of any personal data is required, **passing the data protection bill** and creating an **independent regulator** should be a precondition.
- **Handling by independent society:** To assure the industry of fairness, the government could hand over the stewardship of the standards or platform to **an independent society or non-profit**.

## 3) Community layer

- A community layer can foster a truly inclusive and participatory process.
- This may be achieved by **making civil society and the public active contributors** and seeking wide feedback on drafts of the proposal.
- Once the framework is implemented, ensuring **quick and time-bound redressal of grievances** will help build trust in the system.

## Concerns with government creating shared digital infrastructure

- This approach also comes with risks and we should tread with caution.
- In general, governments should intervene in markets only when there is a clearly **identifiable market failure** or massive **societal benefits** from creating shared infrastructure.

## Way forward

- The government’s championing of open-source technology for digital commerce is commendable.
- It should also push the envelope on the other principles of the open-source movement – **transparency, collaboration, release early and often, inclusive meritocracy, and community**.
- Even if we do all things right, **an infrastructure-led approach** may not be sufficient.



- Therefore, we need to supplement infrastructure with **tightly-tailored regulation**.
- We need to explore the concept of **interoperability**, that is, mandating that private digital platforms like e-commerce firms enable their users and suppliers **to solicit business on other platforms**.
- To drive the adoption of an **open e-commerce platform** in a sector with entrenched incumbents we need to create “reference applications”, and financial or non-financial incentives.
- Useful learnings can be drawn from the adoption of UPI: The government **supported the rollout of BHIM as a reference app**, and offered incentives.

## Conclusion

It is timely that India is exploring innovative ways to bridge the gaps in e-commerce markets. But the boldness of this vision must be matched by the thoughtfulness of the approach.

## Prelims Practice Questions

**1. Consider the following statements with respect to Man Portable Antitank Guided Missile (MPATGM)**

1. It is a low weight man portable missile which follows fire and forgets principle.
2. It has been developed indigenously by the Defence Research & Development Organisation (DRDO).

Which of the statement(s) given above is/are correct?

- a. 1 only
- b. 2 only
- c. Both 1 and 2
- d. Neither 1 nor 2

Answer : c

- In a major boost towards AatmaNirbhar Bharat and strengthening of Indian Army, Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) successfully flight-tested indigenously developed Man Portable Antitank Guided Missile (MPATGM).
- It is a low weight, fire & forgets Man Portable Antitank Guided Missile (MPATGM).
- The missile was launched from a man portable launcher integrated with thermal site and the target was mimicking a tank.
- The test has validated the minimum range successfully.
- The missile has already been successfully flight tested for the maximum range.
- The missile is incorporated with state-of-the-art Miniaturized Infrared Imaging Seeker along with advanced avionics.
- The test brings the development of indigenous third generation man portable Anti-Tank Guided Missile close to completion.

## 2. Consider the following statements:

1. The Bureau of Energy Efficiency (BEE) was established through the Energy Conservation Act, 2001.
2. Its primary objective is to reduce the energy intensity of the Indian economy.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

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

Answer :C

Explanation

- The **Bureau of Energy Efficiency (BEE)** is a statutory body established through the **Energy Conservation Act, 2001** under the Union Ministry of Power. **Hence, statement 1 is correct.**
- It assists in developing policies and strategies with the **primary objective of reducing the energy intensity of the Indian economy. Hence, statement 2 is correct.**
  - BEE coordinates with designated consumers, designated agencies, and other organizations to identify and utilize the existing resources and infrastructure, in performing its functions.

3. Harela Festival is celebrated in which of the following Himalayan States?

- a. Himachal Pradesh
- b. Uttarakhand
- c. Arunachal Pradesh
- d. Sikkim

Answer : b

**Harela Festival**

- Villagers across Uttarakhand celebrate Harela, a festival of greenery, peace, prosperity and environmental conservation.
- Harela means 'day of green' and is celebrated in the month of Shravan (the fifth month of the Hindu lunar calendar) to worship Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati.
- Harela is also linked to the Barahnaza system (12 types of crops), a crop diversification technique followed in the Kumon region.

**4. Which of the following countries are members of the 'China-South Asian Initiative'?**

1. Afghanistan
2. Pakistan
3. Maldives
4. Srilanka

Select the correct answer using the code given below:

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

Answer : D

Explanation

- **China-South Asian Initiative: Members:** China, **Afghanistan**, Bangladesh, Nepal, **Pakistan** and **Sri Lanka**.
- India, Bhutan and the **Maldives** are the other SAARC countries that are **not part of this initiative. Hence option D is correct.**
- Intended Vision: China has different kinds of strategic, maritime, political and ideological interests with different South Asian nations so it is increasing its engagements with each country on equal footing to counterbalance India.

5. Consider the following statements:

1. Akash missile is India's first indigenously produced medium range Surface to Air missile.
2. The Akash missile is supported by the indigenously developed radar called 'INDRA'.
3. Akash Missile (Akash-NG) is a new variant having air-to-air missile capabilities.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

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

Answer : A

Explanation

- **Akash Missile is India's first indigenously produced medium range Surface to Air missile** that can engage multiple targets from multiple directions. **Hence, statement 1 is correct.**
  - The missile is unique in the way that it can be launched from mobile platforms like battle tanks or wheeled trucks. It has nearly 90% kill probability.
  - The missile is **supported by the indigenously developed radar** called '**Rajendra**'. **Hence, statement 2 is not correct.**
  - The missile is reportedly cheaper and more accurate than US' Patriot missiles due to its solid-fuel technology and high-tech radars.
  - It can engage targets at a speed 2.5 times more than the speed of sound and can detect and destroy targets flying at low, medium and high altitudes.
  - The Akash missile system has been designed and developed as part of India's 30-year-old Integrated Guided-Missile Development Programme (IGMDP).
- **Akash Missile (Akash-NG) is a surface-to-air Missile. Hence, statement 3 is not correct.**
  - It is a new variant of the Akash missile that can strike targets at a distance of around 60 km and fly at a speed of up to Mach 2.5.
  - Once deployed, the Akash-NG weapon system will prove to be a force multiplier for the air defence capability of the Indian Air Force.
  - It is developed by Defence Research & Development Laboratory (DRDL), Hyderabad in collaboration with other DRDO laboratories.
  - It is being produced by Bharat Electronics Limited (BEL) and Bharat Dynamics Limited (BDL).

**6. Etikoppaka Toys, sometimes seen in the news recently, belongs to which of the following regions?**

- a. Karnataka
- b. Tamil Nadu
- c. Uttar Pradesh
- d. Andhra Pradesh

Answer : d

## Etikoppaka Toys

- It is a small village located on the banks of the river Varaha in Vishakhapatnam district of Andhra Pradesh.
- Made in the Etikoppaka region of Andhra Pradesh, these toys are made with lacquer color and are traditionally known as Etikoppaka toys or Etikoppaka Bommalu.
- The village is very famous for its toys made of wood.
- The toys are also called as lacquer toys because of application of lacquer coating.



### Mains Practice Questions

**1. Discuss the features of feudalism in India during the post-Mauryan period. How was it different from feudalism in Europe? (250 words)**

### Approach

- Introduce by defining feudalism.
- Explain the rise origin of feudalism in the post-Mauryan period.
- Discuss the features of feudalism in India during the post-Mauryan period.
- Differentiate between feudalism in India and post Mauryan feudalism.
- Conclude by summarizing your answer.

**2. Creation of a vibrant knowledge society can be ensured by higher quality education to all thereby making India a 'Global knowledge Super Power'. Explain. (250 words)**

### Approach

- Start your answer by showing a contrast between India's status of knowledge superpower in ancient times and status of education today.
- Briefly mention the key advantages, which could work in its favour in India becoming Global knowledge Super Power.
- Mention various challenges that are ailing India's education system.
- Conclude your answer by enumerating the steps to be taken to make India a knowledge superpower.