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GS 2 : Polity, Governance, International Relations

1. Indian firm to build a bridge in the Maldives

- Maldives lies southwest of Sri Lanka and India, about 700 kilometres (430 mi) from the Asian continent's mainland.
- The maritime boundary between the Maldives and India runs through the Eight Degree Channel. It separates the islands of Minicoy and Maldives.
- The chain of 26 atolls stretches from **Ihavandhippolhu Atoll in the north to Addu Atoll in the south (across the Equator)**.
- Comprising a territory spanning roughly 90,000 square kilometres (35,000 sq mi) including the sea, land area of all the islands comprises 298 square kilometres (115 sq mi), Maldives is one of the world's most geographically dispersed sovereign states as well as the smallest Asian country by land area and, with around 557,426 inhabitants, the 2nd least populous country in Asia.
- The Maldivian Archipelago is located on the **Chagos-Laccadive Ridge**, a vast submarine mountain range in the Indian Ocean; this also forms a terrestrial ecoregion, together with the Chagos Archipelago and Lakshadweep.

History of Maldives

- **Maldives** was a member of the Commonwealth from July 1982 until **withdrawing from the Commonwealth in October 2016** in protest at allegations by the other nations of its human rights abuses and failing democracy. **The Maldives rejoined the Commonwealth on 1 February 2020** after showing evidence of functioning democratic processes and popular support.
- **Maldives became a founding member of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC)**.
- It is also a member of the United Nations, the Commonwealth of Nations, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, and the Non-Aligned Movement.
- The World Bank classifies the Maldives as having an upper-middle income economy.
- **Fishing has historically been the dominant economic activity, and remains the largest sector by far**, followed by the rapidly growing tourism industry.
- Maldives rate "high" on the Human Development Index, with per-capita income significantly higher than other SAARC nations.

Maldives relations with India

- India and Maldives share **ethnic, linguistic, cultural, religious and commercial links** steeped in antiquity and enjoy close, cordial and multi-dimensional relations.
- **India was among the first to recognise Maldives after its independence in 1965** and to establish diplomatic relations with the country.
- India established its mission at the level of CDA in 1972 and resident High Commissioner in 1980.
- Maldives opened a full fledged High Commission in New Delhi in November 2004, at that time one of its only four diplomatic missions worldwide.

1967 Maritime Treaty

- In December 1976, India and the Maldives signed a maritime boundary treaty to agree on maritime boundaries.
- Treaty explicitly places **Minicoy on the Indian side of the boundary**.
- India and Maldives officially and amicably decided their maritime boundary in 1976.

Previous India's Assistance to Maldives

- 1988: Under **Operation Cactus** the Indian Armed Forces have helped the government of Maldives in the **neutralization of the coup attempt**.
- **2004**: India has helped Maldives after the tsunami.
- **2014**: Under 'Operation Neer' India supplied drinking water to Maldives to deal with the drinking water crisis.
- The two **Advanced Light Helicopters (ALH)** given by India to the Maldivian armed forces have been used in saving Maldivian lives. The Advanced Light Helicopter is a multi-role, new generation helicopter in the 5.5-ton weight class, indigenously designed and developed by Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL).
- **Defence:**
 1. India provides the largest number of training opportunities for Maldivian National Defence Force (MNDF), meeting around 70% of their defence training requirements.

Operation Sanjeevani

- **India supplied 6.2 tonnes of essential medicines to Maldives**, under Operation Sanjeevani as assistance in the fight against COVID 19.
- The medicines were delivered by an Hercules C-130J-30 aircraft of Indian Air Force.

- The medicines include influenza vaccines, antiviral drugs such as **lopinavir and ritonavir** among others as well as consumables such as catheters, nebulisers, urine bags and infant feeding tubes.
- Lopinavir and ritonavir have been used to treat patients with COVID-19 in some countries.
- In March India also dispatched a 14-member Army medical team to Maldives to set up a viral testing lab there and gifted 5.5 tonne of essential medicines.

Maldives signs largest-ever infrastructure project with AFCONS

- The contract for the largest-ever infrastructure project in the Maldives was signed in Male.
- The **Greater Male Connectivity Project (GMCP)** will consist of a 6.74-km-long bridge and causeway link between Male and the nearby islands of **Villingli, Gulhifalhu and Thilafushi**. Indian construction giant AFCONS has been tasked with completing the project.
- AFCONS is known for its “extreme engineering” projects that also include the Chenab Railway Bridge.
- The project is funded by a grant of \$100 million and a line of credit of \$400 million from India.
- The GMCP project would be **bigger than the Sinamale Bridge built with Chinese assistance** that connects Male with Hulhumale and Hulhule and was completed in 2018.
- The Greater Malé Connectivity Project supports the vision of Prime Minister Modi and President Solih for strong bilateral relations.
- The seeds of the project were planted during the External Affairs Minister’s visit to Malé in September 2019.

Significance of GMCP

- The GMCP is concrete proof that India is a robust development partner of the Maldives in addition to being the First Responder in times of any emergency in the Maldives.
- The GMCP is not only the biggest project India is doing in the Maldives but also the biggest infrastructure project in the Maldives overall. This iconic project will give a major boost to the Maldivian economy.
- This project is significant because it facilitates inter-island connectivity in the country. Transport is a major challenge for residents who have to take boats or seaplanes to distant islands. Locals take ferries or boats. It becomes even more difficult during the monsoons when the seas are rough. This bridge that would connect Malé with the three neighbouring islands would ease the process.

2. India must leverage its unique strengths in remaining engaged with Kabul

In the chaos that has followed the Taliban takeover of Kabul on August 15, India has been relatively silent.

Role of India in Afghanistan's development

- India's role spanned **three areas in Afghanistan**:
- In terms of **infrastructure building** and development assistance, encompassing all 34 provinces of the country.
- In terms of **building democracy**, helping script the Constitution and hold elections.
- **In terms of educational investment**, allowing thousands of young Afghans to study, be trained as professionals and soldiers, and become skilled in India.
- India was the first country that Afghanistan signed a strategic partnership with.
- India was the only country that undertook perilous but ambitious projects such Parliament, the Zaranj-Delaram Highway, and the Chabahar port project in Iran for transit trade.
- India was by far the one country that polled consistently highly **among countries that Afghan people trusted**.
- **What should India do now?** India should not choose to simply walk away from such capital, regardless of the developments in Afghanistan, domestic political considerations in India and geopolitical sensitivities.

India's role in negotiations over Afghanistan

- No other power from the west to the east has considered India's interests while charting its course on Afghanistan.
- India has found itself cut out of several quadrilateral arrangements: the main negotiations held by the "Troika plus" of the United States-Russia-China-Pakistan that pushed for a more "inclusive government" including the Taliban.
- The alternative grouping of Russia-Iran-China-Pakistan that formed a "**regional arc**" that has today seen them retain their embassies in Kabul.
- Neither India's traditional strategic and defence partner, Russia, nor its fastest growing global strategic partner, the United States, thought it important to include India.
- It is time to accept that India is in need of a new diplomatic strategy.

Way forward for India

1) Leveraging its position at the UN

- India needs to begin by **rallying the United Nations**, to exert its considerable influence in its own interest, and that of the Afghan “republic”, which is an idea that cannot be just abandoned.
- Next, India must take a leading role in the debate over who will be nominated to the Afghan seat at the UN depending on the new regime in Afghanistan **committing to international norms on human rights, women’s rights, minority rights and others.**
- As **Chairman of the Taliban Sanctions Committee** (or the 1988 Sanctions Committee), India must use its muscle to ensure terrorists such as Sirajuddin Haqqani must not be given any exemptions: on travel, recourse to funds or arms.

2) India’s engagement with Afghanistan

- The question of whether India should convert its back-channel talks with the Taliban and with Pakistan in the past few months into something more substantive remains to be debated.
- This becomes more important as India now faces a “**threat umbrella**” to its north, including Pakistan’s cross-border terrorism, Afghanistan’s new regime and China’s aggression at the Line of Actual Control.
- A more broad-based and consultative process of engaging all political parties would be required.
- While not directly dealing with the Taliban, India must ensure stronger communication with those who are dealing directly, including leaders such as former Afghanistan President Hamid Karzai, to ensure its interests.
- As a part of its engagement, India must consider whether to revive its assistance to the resistance, which at present includes Ahmad Shah Massoud Jr., Amrullah Saleh, Abdul Rashid Dostum and Atta Mohammad Noor.

3) Engagement with the Afghan people

- The Government must embrace its greatest strength in Afghanistan – its relations with the Afghan people – and open its doors to those who wish to come here.
- In particular, India must **continue to facilitate medical visas for Afghan patients** and extend the education visas for students who are already admitted to Indian colleges.

Conclusion

It is India's soft power, strategic autonomy or non-alignment principles and selfless assistance to those in need, particularly in its neighbourhood, that has been the strongest chords to its unique voice in the world. The moment to make that voice heard on Afghanistan is now.

3. Inaccessible UIDAI system leaves Aadhaar users in lurch

- The Unique Identification Authority of India (UIDAI) is a **statutory authority** established on 12 July 2016 by the Government of India under the jurisdiction of the **Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology**, following the provisions of the **Aadhaar Act 2016**.
- The UIDAI is mandated to **assign a 12-digit unique identification (UID) number** (Aadhaar) to all the residents of India.
- The UIDAI was initially set up by the Government of India in January **2009**, as an **attached office under the aegis of the Planning Commission**.
- It is mandated to **collect demographic and biometric information** of the country's residents, store the data in a central database, and issue to each resident of the country a 12-digit unique identity number called Aadhaar.
- UIDAI is **accountable for the authentication and enrolment of Aadhaar**, and also to safeguard the data protection of identity information of individuals.

4. Hybrid SC hearings likely from Sept.

Context :

The Supreme Court may try a mixed mode of physical and virtual court hearings from the first week of September 2021.

- However, no final decision has yet been taken. The court is keeping in mind reports about the third wave of the pandemic. It does not want to launch the "mixed mode" and then abort it midway in case of a prospective rise in COVID-19 cases.

Background

- The Supreme Court had passed directions for all courts across the country to extensively use video-conferencing for judicial proceedings saying

congregations of lawyers and litigants must be suspended to maintain social distancing amid the coronavirus pandemic.

- SC restricted its functioning and has been conducting hearings through video conferencing since March 25, 2020.
- It also exercised its plenary power to direct all high courts to frame a mechanism for use of technology during the pandemic.

Pros of virtual hearings

- Saves significant court costs in terms of building, staff, infrastructure, security, transportation costs for all parties to the court proceedings, especially transfer of prisoners from jails.

Challenges of virtual hearing

- The use of video and audio enabled hearings have also faced significant legal and practical problems including admissibility and authenticity of the evidence received through the video and/or audio transmissions, the identity of the witness and/or individuals subject of the hearings, the confidentiality of the hearings.
- Poor quality of internet connection or inability to establish connection at the agreed time,
- Poor and outdated the audio and video equipment
- Power cuts
- Face-to-face contact is essential to build trust and develop relationships.
- Defences such as duress or reasonable excuse may require the defendant to reveal delicate or personal information – they may not feel comfortable doing so to a stranger over a video link, while sitting in a cramped room in a police station.

5. Finding India's voice on Afghanistan

Context:

- India has been relatively silent in the chaos that has followed the Taliban takeover of Kabul,
- At the UN Security Council and UN Human Rights Council, India has expressed its worries about terrorism, human rights and refugees, but has not mentioned the Taliban itself even once.
- In India, the Government appears to be silent, as thousands of Afghans are fighting for visas.
- The focus is on the task of bringing a few hundred Indian nationals back from Afghanistan.

India's Role in Afghanistan in the Recent Past:

- No other power from the west to the east has considered India's interests while charting its course on Afghanistan.
- India was cut out of several quadrilateral arrangements:
 - the main negotiations held by the "Troika plus" of the United States-Russia-China-Pakistan that pushed for an inclusive government including the Taliban.
 - the alternative grouping of Russia-Iran-China-Pakistan that formed a "regional arc" (countries that have retained their embassies in Kabul).
 - the connectivity quadrilaterals formed by the U.S. and China, respectively, with Uzbekistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan, that depend heavily on Taliban protection and Pakistani port access.
- Neither India's traditional strategic and defence partner Russia, nor its fastest-growing global strategic partner, the United States, thought it important to include India in the details of their negotiations with the Taliban leadership.

Way Forward:

- It is time to accept that India is in need of a new diplomatic strategy.
- It is necessary for the Indian government to publicly decry an outcome that has clearly worked against India's interests now.
- India needs to begin by rallying the United Nations, to exert considerable influence in its own interest, and that of the Afghan republic.
- At the UNSC, India must assert its distaste of a Taliban-run Afghanistan that seeks to reverse the gains of the past two decades.
- India must take a leading role in the debate over who will be nominated to the Afghan seat at the UN.
- As Chairman of the Taliban Sanctions Committee (or the 1988 Sanctions Committee), India must use its muscle to ensure terrorists such as Sirajuddin Haqqani and other members of the Haqqani group responsible for brutal suicide bombings on Indian embassies and consulates must not be given any exemptions: on travel, recourse to funds or arms.
- The government must determine the nature of its engagement with the new regime in Afghanistan.
 - The question would be whether India should convert its secretive back-channel talks with the Taliban and with Pakistan in the past few months into something more substantive.
 - A more broad-based and consultative process of engaging all political parties would be required.
 - While not directly dealing with the Taliban, India must ensure stronger communication with those who are dealing directly, including leaders,

such as former Afghanistan President and former High Council for National Reconciliation chief Abdullah Abdullah, who have lived in India and retain close links, to ensure its interests.

Conclusion:

India now faces a threat umbrella to its north, including Pakistan's cross-border terrorism, Afghanistan's new regime and China's aggression at the Line of Actual Control. Regardless of the horrific developments in Afghanistan, domestic political considerations in India and geopolitical sensitivities, the government must consider all its options in remaining engaged with Afghanistan for its future.

GS 3 : Economy, Science and Technology, Environment

6. Drone rules aim to help start-ups, SMEs

- The Civil Aviation Ministry has notified the Drone Rules, 2021, under which the weight of a fully loaded unmanned aircraft system has been increased from 300 kg to 500 kg to include heavy payload-carrying craft for use in the logistics and transportation sectors. The rules will also cover drone taxis.
- In aviation and in space, a drone refers to an unpiloted aircraft or spacecraft.
- The key features of these rules include the **development of drone corridors for cargo deliveries**.
- An **unmanned aircraft systems promotion council** will be set up to facilitate a business-friendly regulatory regime.
- Under the new rules, **no security clearance will be required before any registration or licence issuance** for drones.
- The **number of forms** or permissions has been **reduced from 25 to just five**.
- **No pilot licence** will be required for operating nano drones and micro drones for non-commercial use.
- The **Director General** or an entity authorised by it, **on the recommendation of the Quality Council of India** or an authorised testing entity, **will issue a type certificate for drones**.
- **No type certificate, unique identification number, prior permission and remote pilot licence will be needed for research and development entities**.
- The **import of drones will be regulated by the Directorate General of Foreign Trade**.
- There will be **no restriction on foreign ownership in Indian drone companies**.

- **Importing and manufacturing drones purely for exports are now exempt** from type certification and unique identification number.
- Manufacturers and importers will be able to generate their drones' unique identification number on the **Digital Sky Platform** through the self-certification route. The **online registration of all drones** will happen through the Digital Sky Platform.
- An interactive airspace map with green, yellow, and red zones will be displayed on the Digital Sky Platform. The yellow zone has been reduced from 45 km to 12 km from the airport perimeter. No permission will be required for operating a drone in the green zones and up to 200 feet in the area between eight and 12 km from the airport perimeter.
- Safety features like 'no permission-no take-off', real-time tracking beacon, geo-fencing, etc., will have to be notified soon. A minimum six-month lead time will be given for compliance.
- A remote pilot licence holder enlisted on the Digital Sky Platform will only be allowed to operate a drone covered under the Rules. The training and examination will be conducted by an authorised drone school. The Directorate General of Civil Aviation will prescribe the training requirements, oversee the schools and provide pilot licences online.
- **Carriage of arms, ammunition, explosives and military stores and so on on drones has been prohibited.**
- "No person shall carry dangerous goods on unmanned aircraft unless such operation is in compliance with the Aircraft (Carriage of Dangerous Goods) Rules, 2003," said the notification.
- **Any accident involving drones should be reported within 48 hours.** The maximum penalty for violations had been reduced to ₹1 lakh.

Significance of Drone Rules

- The new Drone Rules will tremendously help start-ups and our youth working in this sector.
- It will open up new possibilities for innovation & business.
- It will help leverage India's strengths in innovation, technology & engineering to make India a drone hub.
- The rules are aimed at simplifying the procedures and reducing compliance burden for drone operation.
- It would enable start-ups and small and medium enterprises to create innovative-use cases and applications in various sectors such as e-commerce, agriculture, mining, healthcare, emergency response and logistics.
- The new rules were a major breakthrough for the Indian drone industry, and would make India an over \$5 billion drone market in the next three years.

7. JeM planning attacks

Context:

- Security threat to India in the light of the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan.

About:

Anti-India terror organizations:

- As per the intelligence gathered by Indian security agencies, **nearly 100 members of the Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) have rejoined the banned terror outfit** after being released from Afghan prisons by the Taliban.
 - JeM was proscribed by the United Nations Security Council on October 17, 2001, for its deep links with Al-Qaeda and the Taliban, in terms of financing, supplying weapons, planning and facilitating terror attacks by them.
- The recent developments in Afghanistan seem to have emboldened the outfit and it is **planning to carry out fresh attacks in India, particularly in Jammu and Kashmir.**

Destabilization of Pakistan:

- There is the threat of the rise of the Taliban leading to destabilisation in Pakistan and this could possibly lead to the **acquisition of nuclear weapons by terror organizations.**

China-Taliban ties:

- **China is seeking to fill the power vacuum left** by the withdrawal of the U.S. from Afghanistan by increasing its ties to the Taliban. The **evolving axis between China, Pakistan and Taliban controlled Afghanistan carries geopolitical and strategic consequences** that will reverberate for decades and this does not augur well for India's security interests.

THE INDIAN EXPRESS

GS 2 : Polity, Governance, International Relations

1. New drone rules make flying them easier and cheaper

The central government has notified the Drone Rules 2021, a much more liberalised regime for unmanned aircraft systems than what existed previously.

Features of Drone Rules 2021

These rules are built on a premise of trust, self-certification and non-intrusive monitoring. The policy is designed to usher in an era of super-normal growth while balancing safety and security considerations.

- **Several approvals abolished:** Unique authorisation number, unique prototype identification number, certificate of manufacturing and airworthiness, certificate of conformance, certificate of maintenance, import clearance, acceptance of existing drones, operator permit, authorisation of R&D organisation, student remote pilot licence, remote pilot instructor authorisation, drone port authorisation etc.
- **Number of forms reduced:** from 25 to 5.
- **Types of fees:** reduced from 72 to 4.
- **Quantum of fee:** reduced to nominal levels and delinked with size of drone. For instance, the fee for a remote pilot license fee has been reduced from INR 3000 (for large drone) to INR 100 for all categories of drones; and is valid for 10 years.
- **Digital sky platform:** It shall be developed as a user-friendly single-window system. There will be minimal human interface and most permissions will be self-generated.
- **Interactive airspace map:** with green, yellow and red zones shall be displayed on the digital sky platform within 30 days of publication of these rules.
- **No permission required in green zones:** Green zone means the airspace upto a vertical distance of 400 feet or 120 metre that has not been designated as a red zone or yellow zone in the airspace map; and the airspace upto a vertical distance of 200 feet or 60 metre above the area located between a lateral distance of 8 and 12 kilometre from the perimeter of an operational airport.
- **De-licensing:** No remote pilot licence required for micro drones (for non-commercial use) and nano drones. No requirement for security clearance before issuance of any registration or licence. Nano and model drones (made for research or recreation purposes) are exempt from type certification.
- **Foreign ownership:** No restriction on foreign ownership in Indian drone companies.
- **Import:** Import of drones to be regulated by DGFT. Requirement of import clearance from DGCA abolished.

- **Size of drones:** Coverage of drones under Drone Rules, 2021 increased from 300 kg to 500 kg. This will cover drone taxis also.
- **Testing of drones:** for issuance of Type Certificate to be carried out by Quality Council of India or authorised testing entities.
- **UID:** Manufacturers and importers may generate their drones' unique identification number on the digital sky platform through the self-certification route. Drones present in India on or before 30 Nov 2021 will be issued a unique identification number through the digital sky platform provided, they have a DAN, a GST-paid invoice and are part of the list of DGCA-approved drones.
- **Penalties:** Maximum penalty for violations reduced to INR 1 lakh.
- **Permission:** Safety and security features like 'No permission - no takeoff' (NPNT), real-time tracking beacon, geo-fencing etc. to be notified in future. A six-month lead time will be provided to the industry for compliance.
- **Drone corridors:** will be developed for cargo deliveries.
- **Drone promotion council:** to be set up by Government with participation from academia, startups and other stakeholders to facilitate a growth-oriented regulatory regime.

2. India, Maldives to sign pact on Greater Male Connectivity Project

Greater Male Connectivity Project

Maldives has announced the signing of a \$500-million infrastructure project for the construction of the Greater Malé Connectivity Project (GMCP) with India.

Greater Malé Connectivity Project

- This infrastructure project, the largest-ever by India in the Maldives, involves the construction of a 6.74-km-long bridge and causeway link.
- It will connect the Maldives capital Malé with the neighbouring islands of Villingli, Gulhifalhu and Thilafushi.
- The seeds of the project were planted during the External Affairs Minister's visit to Malé in September 2019.
- The GMCP is not only the biggest project India is doing in the Maldives but also the biggest infrastructure project in the Maldives overall.

Significance of the Project

- This project is significant because it facilitates inter-island connectivity in the country
- Transport is a major challenge for residents who have to take boats or seaplanes to distant islands.
- It becomes even more difficult during the monsoons when the seas are rough.
- This bridge that would connect Malé with the three neighboring islands would ease the process.

Why it is needed?

- Male is one of the most densely populated cities in the world.
- Close to 40% of the entire population of the Maldives lives in Malé, which has an area of approximately 8.30 square kilometres.
- It is very congested and land is a major issue.

Why these islands?

- On the island of Gulhifalhu, a port, is at present being built under the Indian line of credit.
- Located some 6 kilometers from Malé, since 2016, the island has been promoted as a strategic location for manufacturing, warehousing and distribution facilities due to its proximity to the capital city.
- Located 7 km from the capital, the artificial island of Thilafushi was created and designated as a landfill in the early 1990s, to receive garbage created mostly in Malé.
- The Maldives has plans of expanding industrial work on Thilafushi, making this bridge's connectivity to the capital indispensable for the transport of employees and other services.

Why did Male opt for India's offer?

- After a five-year grace period, the interest rate is 1.75% and the Maldives has to repay it over a 20-year period.
- India's loans are less expensive and more transparent, unlike China's.
- The Maldives hasn't really been clear about how much debt it owes to China.

Importance of Maldives for India

- **Geo-strategic importance:** Maldives, a Toll Gate in Indian Ocean. Located at the southern and northern parts of this island chain lies the two important sea lanes of communication (SLOCs).

- **Trade:** These SLOCs are critical for maritime trade flow between the Gulf of Aden and Gulf of Hormuz in West Asia and the Strait of Malacca in Southeast Asia. Nearly 50% of India's external trade and 80% of its energy imports transit these SLOCs in the Arabian Sea.
- **Important SAARC member:** Besides, Maldives is a member of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the South Asia Subregional Economic Cooperation (SASEC).
- **People To People Contact:** There is a significant population of Maldivian students in India. They are aided by a liberal visa-free regime extended by India. There is also medical tourism.
- **Economic Cooperation:** Tourism is the mainstay of Maldivian economy. The country is now a major tourist destination for some Indians and a job destination for others.

What hinders India in Male?

- **Unstable governments:** India's major concern has been the impact of political instability in the neighbourhood on its security and development.
- **Religious extremism:** In the past decade or so, the number of Maldivians drawn towards terrorist groups like the Islamic State (IS) and Pakistan-based madrassas and jihadist groups has been increasing.
- **Affinity with China:** China's strategic footprint in India's neighbourhood has increased. The Maldives has emerged as an important 'pearl' in China's "String of Pearls" construct in South Asia. It has also started using the China card to bargain with India.

GS 3 : Economy, Science and Technology, Environment

3. Sugar Pricing Policy and Fair and Remunerative Price (FRP)

The Central government has hiked the minimum price setting the Fair and Remunerative Price (FRP) that sugar mills must pay to cane farmers.

- The hike is of ₹5 a quintal set FRP at **₹290 a quintal for the 2021-22 sugar season**, which runs from October to September.
- The ₹290 a quintal national FRP will **apply for a recovery rate of 10%**.
- The Centre had **hiked FRPs by 38%** since the ₹210 a quintal rate of 2013-14.

Sugar Pricing Policy:

- With the amendment of the **Sugarcane (Control) Order, 1966**, the concept of Statutory Minimum Price (SMP) of sugarcane was replaced with the '**Fair and Remunerative Price (FRP)**' of sugarcane for 2009-10 and subsequent sugar seasons.
- The **cane price announced** by the Central Government is **decided on the basis of the recommendations of the Commission for Agricultural Costs and Prices (CACP)** in consultation with the State Governments and after taking feedback from **associations of sugar industry**.
- Price of sugar are market driven & depends on demand and supply of sugar.
- Under the **FRP system**, the farmers are **not required to wait till the end of the season or for any announcement** of the profits by sugar mills or the Government.
- The new system also **assures margins on account of profit and risk to farmers**, irrespective of the fact whether sugar mills generate profit or not and is not dependent on the performance of any individual sugar mill.

Fair and Remunerative Price (FRP)

- FRP is **approved by Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs** based on recommendations of **Commission for Agricultural Costs and Prices (CACP)**.
- It is the minimum price at which rate sugarcane is to be purchased by sugar mills from farmers.
- Determined under **Sugarcane (Control) Order, 1966**.
- It is uniformly applicable all over the country.
- States also announce a price called the **State Advisory Price (SAP)**, which is usually higher than the FRP.

Factors for determining FRP:

- Cost of production of sugarcane.
- Return to the grower from alternative crops and the general trend of prices of agricultural commodities.
- Availability of sugar to the **consumers at a fair price**.
- Price of sugar.
- Recovery rate of sugar from sugarcane.
- Realization made from the **sale of by-products viz. molasses, bagasse and press mud or their imputed value**.
- Reasonable margins for growers of sugarcane on account of **risk and profits**.

State Advised Prices (SAP)

- Citing differences in cost of production, productivity levels and also as a result of pressure from farmers' groups, some states declare state specific sugarcane prices called **State Advised Prices (SAP)**.
- SAP is usually higher than the SMP/FRP.
- Since early 1970s, SAP came into existence in States like UP, Tamil Nadu, Punjab, Haryana etc.
- High SAPs without any linkage with the output price is unviable.
- Higher SAP than FRP led to year-on-year rise in cane price arrears.
 - Industry association recommends **to remove the system of SAP**; in case states announce SAP, such price differential should be borne by the state governments.

Recommendations of Various Committees on Sugarcane Price Policy:

Tuteja Committee (2004)

- Payment of SMP along with price sharing benefits as per Clause 5A to continue

Thorat Committee (2009)

- Government should withdraw from fixing price of sugarcane
- Mills and farmers should settle prices and terms of raw material supply

Nanda kumar Committee (2010)

- Recommends for a fixed % of sugar, bagasse & Molasses realisation
- Guarantees share to farmers of hike in sugar prices in off-season
- Ensures a fair return/ savings to sugar mills too

Dr. C. Rangarajan Committee (2012)

- Linkage of sugarcane price with realisation of sugar and its first level of by-products
- A minimum price fixed for sugarcane (FRP)
- The actual payment for cane dues would happen in two steps. The first would be payment of FRP at floor price as per extant mechanism
- Balance payment of cane dues will be done subsequent to publication of half-yearly ex-mill prices and values of the by-products

4. North Eastern Region District SDG Index

About the SDG Index:

- **Developed by:** NITI Aayog
 - Collaboration with Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region (DoNER)
 - Technical inputs from United Nations Development Programme
 - Consultations with all North-Eastern States.
- **Measures:** Performance of districts of the eight states- Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura on SDG and their corresponding targets, and ranks the districts based on the same.
- **Based on:** NITI Aayog's SDG India Index – the principal and official tool for monitoring progress on SDGs at the National, State, and Union Territory level.
- **Offers insights:** Social, economic, and environmental status of the region and its districts & their march towards achieving SDGs.

Ranking:

- **103 districts** considered for ranking:
 - **64 districts** belonged to the Front Runner category
 - **39 districts** were in the Performer category
 - **No districts** in Aspirant or Achiever categories
- All districts in Sikkim and Tripura fell in Front Runner category.
 - **East Sikkim** district was ranked first in the region
 - Districts Gomati & North Tripura (**Tripura**) in second position.

Significance:

- The **Index** will help in evidence-based planning, resource allocation (both financial as well as others) and effective supervision and monitoring of developmental efforts for focused and balanced regional development.

5. Forum for Decarbonizing Transport

NITI Aayog and World Resources Institute (WRI), India, jointly launched the 'Forum for Decarbonizing Transport' in India as part of the NDC-Transport Initiative for Asia (NDC-TIA) project.

- The project aims at bringing **down the peak level of GHG (greenhouse gas) emissions** by the transport sector in Asia.

NDC-Transport Initiative for Asia (NDC-TIA):

- The NDC Transport Initiative for Asia (**TIA 2020-2023**) is a joint programme of seven organisations that will engage **China, India and Vietnam** in promoting a comprehensive approach to decarbonising transport in their respective countries.
- The project is part of **the International Climate Initiative (IKI)**.
- **NITI Aayog is the implementing partner** for the India component of the project.

Forum for Decarbonizing Transport:

- Forum on Transport Decarbonisation is a defining milestone for the electric mobility ecosystem in the country.
- It will bring together all stake holders as well as the Central and state government on a common platform.
- The forum is **to formulate strategies and develop appropriate business models** to accelerate electric mobility in India.
- This will help in the **development of innovative business models** resulting in targeted results and the holistic growth of the electric mobility space in India.
 - India has a massive and diverse transport sector, which is also the **third most CO2 emitting sector**.

World Resources Institute

- WRI is a global non-profit organization that works with leaders in government, business and civil society to research, design, and **carry out practical solutions** that simultaneously improve people's lives and protect nature.
- It organizes work around **seven global challenges**: Food, Forests, Water, Energy, Climate, the Ocean and Cities.
- WRI was founded in 1982.
- **Aim:** To move human society to live in ways that **protect Earth's environment** and its capacity to provide for the needs and aspirations of current and future generations.

Key Facts:

- WRI India is an independent charity legally registered as the India Resources Trust, provides objective information and practical proposals to foster environmentally sound and socially equitable development.

6. How to read the state of the economy

In News :

GDP growth estimates range from a high of 11 per cent, as per the government, to 9.5 per cent as per RBI. The variation is stark. So, what should one look at to evaluate the state of the economy?

Things to consider

- First, since the economy contracted by 7.3 per cent in 2020-21, all numbers will be **exaggerated in the upward direction**.
- Second, beware of interpretations based on single-month data.
- Cumulative numbers are better at times, but can be misleading too.
- Third, what is more important is how things will play out during **September-December as this is the festival-cum-harvest season** which engenders spending normally.
- Several indicators are used as leading signals of the economy, but here, too, we need to be careful.
- PMIs for manufacturing and services tell us if we are better off than the previous month.

Indicators to look at as signs of recovery

- **Credit growth:** Bank credit is a good indicator of whether companies are producing more as all activity requires working capital.
- Here, the picture is not good as growth is (-) 0.4 per cent as of July end, indicating that activity has not picked up yet.
- Therefore, credit growth is in the negative territory.
- **Investment:** Debt issuances are lower in the first four months at around Rs 1.25 lakh crore, which is half of the Rs 2.57 lakh crore mobilised last year.
- Therefore, the investment scenario is still one where companies are watchful.
- There is surplus capacity in industry with utilisation rate being at 69.4 per cent in March 2021.

- **Rural demand:** Rural demand is an integral part of the story and presently progress on the kharif crop is satisfactory.
- A good crop is also necessary to **generate spending power** besides augmenting supplies in the market as well as food processing industry.
- The second wave has pushed back rural households with more expenditure on health care.
- **Employment generation:** Employment generation is a trigger for higher income and spending and while the battle between CMIE and EPFO data remains unresolved, the market will finally reveal if people have more money.

Inflation concern

- Inflation is high and though there is a view that **it is transient**.
- Several households, who are living on a fixed income have witnessed a double whammy in the form of **lower returns on deposits** and cumulative inflation of 6 per cent last year, and a similar number this year.

Conclusion

Investment will trail consumption and while the Centre has a good capex plan, it is only one piece in the overall puzzle. The private sector must get involved and with the banks being hesitant, the road can get longer.

7. Merging of three Supermassive Black Holes

Indian researchers have discovered three supermassive black holes from three galaxies merging together to form a triple active galactic nucleus, a compact region at the centre of a newly discovered galaxy that has a much-higher-than-normal luminosity.

About Supermassive black holes

- A supermassive black hole is the largest type of black hole, with mass on the order of millions to billions of times the mass of the Sun.
- Black holes are a class of astronomical objects that have undergone gravitational collapse, leaving behind spheroidal regions of space from which nothing can escape, not even light.
- They are difficult to detect because they do not emit any light. But they can reveal their presence by interacting with their surroundings.

Active galactic nuclei (AGN) from such black holes

- When the dust and gas from the surroundings fall onto a supermassive black hole, some of the mass is swallowed by the black hole, but some of it is converted into energy.
- This is emitted back as electromagnetic radiation that makes the black hole appear very luminous.
- They are called active galactic nuclei (AGN) and release huge amounts of ionized particles and energy into the galaxy and its environment.
- Both of these ultimately contribute to the growth of the medium around the galaxy and ultimately the evolution of the galaxy itself.

How does merger of black holes occur?

- A major factor impacting galaxy evolution is galaxy interactions, which happen when galaxies move close by each other and exert tremendous gravitational forces on each other.
- During such galaxy interactions, the respective supermassive black holes can get near each other.
- The dual black holes start consuming gas from their surroundings and become dual AGN.

What happens when galaxies collide?

- If two galaxies collide, their black hole will also come closer by transferring the kinetic energy to the surrounding gas.
- The distance between the blackholes decreases with time until the separation is around a parsec (3.26 light-years).
- The two black holes are then unable to lose any further kinetic energy in order to get even closer and merge.
- This is known as the final parsec problem.

Here comes the third black hole

- Many AGN pairs have been detected in the past, but triple AGN are extremely rare, and only a handful has been detected before using X-ray observations.
- The presence of a third black hole can solve this problem.
- The dual merging blackholes can transfer their energy to the third blackhole and merge with each other.

Prelims Practice Questions

1. Which of the following is/are applications of nanotechnology in the health sector?

1. Eye surgery
2. Detection of heart attack
3. Drug delivery
4. Removing toxins from the bloodstream

Select the correct answer using the code given below:

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

Answer :D

Explanation

- Nanorobotics describes the technology of producing machines or robots at the nanoscale.
 - 'Nanobot' is an informal term to refer to engineered nano machines that carry out a very specific function and are ~50–100 nm wide.
- They **can be used very effectively for drug delivery.**
 - Using nanotechnology, the drug can be targeted to a precise location which would make the drug much more effective and reduce the chances of possible side effects.
- Uses of Nanotechnology in Health Care:
 - **Nanotech detectors for heart attack.**
 - **Nanocarriers for eye surgery**, chemotherapy etc.
 - Diabetic pads for regulating blood sugar levels.
 - **Nanosponges** are polymer nanoparticles coated with a red blood cell membrane, and can be used for **absorbing toxins and removing them from the bloodstream.**
 - NanoFlares are used for detection of cancer cells in the bloodstream.
 - Nanopores are used in making DNA sequencing more efficient.
- **Hence, option D is correct.**

2. Which of the following is/are correct regarding e-Shram?

1. It is a database of unorganised sector workers.
2. e-Shram card contains a 12 digit unique number which will help the card holders access social security schemes.
3. It was launched in 2020.

Select the correct option from below:

- a. 1 & 2
- b. 1 & 3
- c. 2 & 3
- d. All of the Above

Answer: a

Explanation:

- The Union Ministry of Labour has launched the National Database of Unorganised workers (E-Shram) portal.
- The E-Shram portal will maintain a database of workers in the country's unorganised sector.
- Unorganised workers, BOCW Workers, SHG members, domestic workers, ASHA workers, Anganwadi workers, street vendors, rickshaw-pullers, brick-kiln workers, agricultural labourers, MGNREGA workers, fishermen, shopkeepers and small retailers can register on the website.
- The new E-Shram portal will help in accessing social security schemes available for the unorganised workers.
- The workers who register on the portal will get an e-SHRAM card which will have a 12 digit unique number. This card is aimed at the integration of the Centre's social security schemes. The Universal Account Number on the e-Shram card will be acceptable across the country.

3. The 'EASE 4.0 reforms agenda' has been recently in the news. It is related to reforms in which of the following areas?

- A Manufacturing sector reforms
- B Global taxation reforms
- C Higher judiciary reforms
- D Banking reforms

Answer : D

Explanation

- **EASE Reforms Agenda** was launched in January 2018 jointly by the **government and PSBs**.
- It was commissioned through **Indian Banks' Association and authored by Boston Consulting Group**.
- **Various Stages under EASE Reforms Agenda:**
 - **EASE 1.0:** The EASE 1.0 report showed significant improvement in PSB performance in resolution of **Non Performing Assets (NPAs)** transparently.
 - **EASE 2.0:** EASE 2.0 was built on the foundation of EASE 1.0 and introduced new reform Action Points across six themes to make reforms journey irreversible, strengthen processes and systems, and drive outcomes. The six themes of EASE 2.0 are:
 - Responsible Banking;
 - Customer Responsiveness;
 - Credit Off-take,
 - PSBs as UdyamiMitra (SIDBI portal for credit management of MSMEs);
 - Financial Inclusion & Digitalisation;
 - Governance and Human Resource (HR).
 - **Ease 3.0:** It seeks to enhance ease of banking in all customer experiences, using technology.
 - **EASE 4.0** commits PSBs to tech-enabled, simplified and collaborative banking to further the agenda of customer-centric digital transformation.
- **Hence, option D is correct.**

4. Which of the following statements regarding the Start-up Accelerators of MeitY for product Innovation, Development and growth (SAMRIDH) is correct?

- a. It aims at allowing direct overseas listing of Indian start-ups.
- b. The programme aims to boost the start-up ecosystem in the country where 300 startups will be provided funding support of 40 Lakhs.
- c. Both (a) and (b)
- d. Neither (a) nor (b)

Answer: b

Explanation:

- The Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) has announced the Startup Accelerator for Product Innovation, Development & Growth (SAMRIDH) programme, which aims to help growing startups in India.
- The SAMRIDH programme will focus on accelerating 300 start-ups by providing customer connect, investor connect, and international immersion in the next three years. Also, an investment of up to ₹ 40 lakh to the start-up based on the current valuation and growth stage of the Start-Up will be provided through selected startup accelerators. It will also facilitate equal matching investment by the accelerator/investor. The programme aims to further the Indian start-up growth which has seen the emergence of 63 Unicorns and is now the third-largest Unicorn hub globally with a total valuation of 168 Bn USD.

5. Consider the following statements:

1. The pneumococcal disease affects the children under 2 years of age only.
2. The pneumococcal disease is covered under the Universal Immunization Program (UIP).

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 : B

Explanation

- **Pneumococcal disease** is a name for any infection caused by bacteria called **Streptococcus pneumoniae or pneumococcus**. Most people carry pneumococcus in their nose and throat, where the bacteria do not cause any symptoms.
 - However, sometimes the bacteria grow and spread to other parts of the body and that's when people become sick.
 - These bacteria can cause many types of illnesses, including pneumonia, which is an infection of the lungs. Pneumococcal bacteria are one of the most common causes of pneumonia.

- **Anyone can get pneumococcal disease, but children under 2 years of age, people with certain medical conditions, adults 65 years or older, and cigarette smokers are at the highest risk. Hence, statement 1 is not correct.**
 - Pneumonia had been a major cause of infant and child mortality. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), pneumonia accounts for 15% of all deaths of children under 5 years.
 - It was estimated that the disease affected around 16 lakh children and caused the death of nearly 68,700 children across the country in the year 2015.
- **The government of India is ensuring equitable access to those to the underprivileged and underserved by making it available under the Universal Immunization Program (UIP). Hence, statement 2 is correct.**

6. With reference to the Forum for Decarbonizing Transport, consider the following statements:

1. The forum was jointly launched by NITI Aayog and World Resources Institute (WRI), India.
2. The forum is a part of the Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC)-Transport Initiative for Asia (NDC-TIA) project.

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

- Recently, **Forum for Decarbonizing Transport** was jointly launched by NITI Aayog and World Resources Institute (WRI), India. **Hence, statement 1 is correct.**
- The forum is a part of the **Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC)-Transport Initiative for Asia (NDC-TIA) project**, which focuses on developing a coherent strategy of effective policies and the formation of a multi-stakeholder platform for decarbonising transport in the region. **Hence, statement 2 is correct.**

MAINS PRACTICE QUESTIONS

1. Law has its own limitation in bringing social change. In this context, critically evaluate the efficacy of steps taken to empower women and weaken the grip of patriarchy around them.

Approach

- Describe social change by law through illustrations.
- Provide examples where law has been successful in bringing social change by attacking patriarchal practices.
- Give illustrations where law has failed to deal with patriarchy effectively.

2. Some people feel that values keep changing with time and situation, while others strongly believe that there are certain universal and eternal human values. Discuss with examples. (250 words)

Approach

- Define human values with examples.
- Explain the type of values, whether they keep changing with time or are permanent.