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GS 2 : Polity, Governance, International Relations

1. Need for closer scrutiny of reduced out-of-pocket expenditure on health

The National Health Accounts (NHA) report for 2017-18 is being celebrated widely as it shows that total public spending on health as a percentage of GDP has increased to a historic high of 1.35% of GDP.

India's total public spending on health

- **One of the lowest in the world:** India's total public spending on health as a percentage of GDP or in per capita terms has been **one of the lowest in the world**.
- **Majority spent by the States:** The Union government traditionally spends around a third of the total government spending whereas the majority is borne by the States.
- There has been a policy consensus for more than a decade now that public spending has to increase to **at least 2.5% of GDP**.
- However, there has not been any significant increase so far.
- Despite several pronouncements, it has continued to hover **around 1%-1.2% of GDP**.

Why NHA report is being celebrated?

- The National Health Accounts (NHA) report capture spending on health by various sources, and track the schemes through which these funds are channelised to various providers in a given time period for a given geography.
- The National Health Accounts (NHA) report for 2017-18 is being celebrated widely as it shows that total public spending on health as a percentage of GDP has increased to a historic high of 1.35% of GDP.
- The increase shown in NHA 2017-18 is largely due to **increase in Union government expenditure**.
- **Increase in Centre's share:** For 2017-18, the Centre's share in total public spending on health has jumped to 40.8%.
- However, if we study the spending pattern of the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare and the Ministry of AYUSH, we see that expenditure **increased to 0.32% of GDP from 0.27% in 2016-17** – insufficient to explain the overall jump.

Issues with NHA report

- **Expenditure of DMS included:** Much of this increase has actually happened on account of a tripling of expenditure of the Defence Medical Services (DMS).
- Compared to an expenditure of ₹10,485 in 2016-17, it increased to ₹32,118 crore.
- Though the increasing spending for the health of defence personnel is a good thing, **such spending does not benefit the general population.**
- Within government expenditure, the share of current health expenditure has come down to 71.9% compared to 77.9% a year ago.
- **Capital expenditure included:** This essentially means, **capital expenditure has increased**, and specifically in defence.
- There is a problem in **accounting capital expenditure** within the NHA framework.
- **Why capital expenditure needs to be left out:** Equipment brought or a hospital that is built serves people for many years, so the expenditure incurred is used for the lifetime of the capital created and use does not get limited to that particular year in which expenditure is incurred.
- The World Health Organization proposes to leave out capital expenditure from health accounts estimates, instead focus on current health expenditure.
- **Incomparable to other countries:** In NHA estimates in India, in order to show higher public investment, capital expenditure is included; **thus, Indian estimates become incomparable to other countries.**
- The NHA estimate also shows that out-of-pocket expenditure as a share of GDP has reduced to less than half of the total health expenditure.
- NSSO 2017-18 data suggest that during this time period, utilisation of hospitalisation care has declined compared to 2014 NSSO estimates for almost all States and for various sections of society.
- **Sign of distress:** The decline in out-of-pocket expenditure is essentially due to a **decline in utilisation of care** rather than greater financial protection.
- Actually, the NSSO survey happened just after six months of demonetisation and almost at the same time when the Goods and Services Tax was introduced.
- The disastrous consequences of the dual blow of demonetisation and GST on the purchasing power of people are quite well documented.
- Another plausible explanation is linked to limitations in NSSO estimates. The NSSO fails to capture the spending pattern of the richest 5% of the population (who incur a large part of the health expenditure).
- Thus, out-of-pocket expenditure measured from the NSSO could be an under-estimate as it fails to take into account the expenditure of the richest sections.

Conclusion

The reduction of out-of-pocket expenditure is a sign of distress and a result of methodological limitations of the NSSO, rather than a sign of increased financial protection.

2. Reciprocal Exchange of Logistics (RELOS) Agreement with Russia

India and Russia are set to ink the RELOS logistics exchange pact during the visit of Russian President Vladimir Putin for the Indo-Russia summit.

What are Logistics Agreements, in general?

- Logistical exchange agreements are designed so that partner countries can enjoy ease of access to use each other's military facilities like ports, bases, and military installations.
- Such agreements save enormous time and also frees up the need for constant paperwork when one military obtains assistance on matters like refuelling, berthing, use of aviation infrastructure, etc.

RELOS Agreement with Russia

- RELOS agreement with Russia would grant "access to Russian naval port facilities in the Arctic", thus enhancing "Indian Navy's reach and operational experience in Polar waters".

Need for RELOS

- Despite growing engagement with the US on military hardware and tech, Russia remains a partner with whom India has shared traditionally deep defence ties.
- Russia's growing proximity to China and Pakistan has of late been seen as casting a shadow on the Moscow-New Delhi engagement.
- To that extent, RELOS will be an important step forward in the military sphere as it aims at fostering interoperability and sharing of logistics.
- The "long overdue" agreement was to have come up for signing in 2019 but that was put off pending finalisation of its terms.

Strategic significance of RELOS Agreement

- **Naval Cooperation:** It is usually the Indian Navy, the most outgoing force of the three services, that stands to benefit the most from a logistical exchange agreement.
- **Interoperability:** These impart enhanced operational turnaround and strengthened interoperability on the high seas.
- **Military enhancements:** Given the percentage of Russian military hardware in the Indian armed forces, the two sides can take advantage, through RELOS, of increased interoperability “in any hostile situation in the future”.
- **Future defence purchases:** India has acquired advanced defence systems from Russia, including fighter jets, and is looking to again obtain a nuclear-powered attack submarine on a long-term lease from Moscow.

Fulfilling Arctic aspirations of India

- **Navigation:** From a geostrategic point of view, it would give Indian Navy better access to northern sea routes and Russian ports in the Arctic, where India is looking to set up an Arctic station.
- **Energy cooperation:** Russia and India are also exploring enhanced energy cooperation in the Arctic region.
- **Competing China:** India’s presence in Arctic will act as a strategic counterweight to China’s strategic posturing with Beijing and Moscow sharing “synergy” in the Arctic.

Does India have similar arrangements with other Countries?

- India has logistical exchange agreements with six other countries, including Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, or Quad, partners US (**LEMOA**), Japan and Australia.
- Singapore, France and South Korea are the other countries with which similar arrangements have been effected.
- India has become more comfortable in concluding such arrangements with other countries and is currently pursuing one with the UK while exploring arrangement with other partners like Vietnam.

Other defence trade between the two countries

- Russia continues to be among India’s biggest defence suppliers.
- The two sides are now looking to move from licence manufacture to joint research and co-development of defence equipment.
- Both nations have agreed for the manufacture of over six lakh AK-203 assault rifles by a Joint Venture, Indo-Russian Rifles Private Ltd, at Korwa, Amethi, in UP.

- Russia has started deliveries of the S-400 Triumf long-range air defence systems to India. The first division will be delivered by the end of 2021.
- There are several other big such as procurement of 21 Mig-29s and 12 Su-30MKI fighters, Igla-S short-range air defence systems and the manufacture of 200 K-226T utility helicopters.

Future trajectory of the defence cooperation

- Timely supply of spares and support to the large inventory of Russian hardware in service with Indian military has been a major issue from India.
- To address this, Russia has made legislative changes allowing its companies to set up joint ventures in India to address it following an Inter-Governmental Agreement signed in 2019.
- This is in the process of being implemented.
- With increased competition from the U.S., France, Israel and others who have bagged major deals in recent years, Russia is also focusing on timely deliveries and lifetime support.

Conclusion

- Russia will remain a key defence partner for India for decades to come.
- In line with India's quest for self-sufficiency, such partnerships help curb the reliance of India over other countries.
- This will thereby curb India's dependency in near future.

3. 'Judicial inaction favors those in power'

Congress leader Shashi Tharoor recently criticized the Judiciary's "inaction". He also said the judiciary had failed to stem the tide of "militant majoritarianism".

What does the Judiciary's Inaction mean?

- In India, the problem of judicial activism has been confounded and exacerbated by the Executive's and sometimes even the Legislature's inactivity, leaving the people with little choice but to turn to the courts.
- There is nothing wrong with courts intervening to protect citizens from the Executive's excesses or inactivity, or to enforce citizens' rights.
- The line between judicial activism and excess is narrow. When judicial activism touches on policy areas that the Executive perceives to be solely its domain, a problem occurs.
- In many circumstances, rather than granting mandamus to the Executive, the Supreme Court and numerous high courts have taken on Executive tasks by establishing their own systems to regularly review cases.

Militant Majoritarianism

- India's incapacity to respond to radical majoritarianism is becoming a catastrophe. There is no effective opposition in politics, and there is no effective opposition in society.
- Academics and the media are frequently the focal points of such pushback in liberal democracies across the world.
- In India, whereas the media intellectual is admired but not taken seriously, academics have never had an impact.

Concerns with Judiciary's Inaction:

- Inaction on the part of the Judiciary nearly always benefits those in power.
- The Supreme Court's continuous passivity has not only allowed the government's violations against people to go unpunished, but it has also caused some opponents to question if the court can be deemed an accomplice to the violation of constitutional rights.
- However, many of these issues are the result of inadequate governance.
- The independence of the Supreme Court (SC) has been questioned in recent years, with the primary issue being the government's significant influence on judicial appointments and transfers.

Conclusion:

The Indian judiciary has been characterized as an overly ambitious organization that really seeks to address people's issues. The courts will have to make a calculated retreat as the government improves. It's past time for judges to accept that there isn't a legal remedy to every issue. But before complaining about judicial overreach, the Executive must first offer excellent governance.

4. Mediation Bill: Not getting the Act together

The Draft Mediation Bill 2021, slated for presentation to Parliament, bears no resemblance to the original in some crucial places.

What are Alternative Dispute Resolution Mechanisms?

- Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) is a technique to resolve disputes and disagreements between parties by arriving at an amenable settlement through negotiations and discussions. It is an attempt to establish an alternative mechanism other than the traditional methods of dispute resolution.

- The ADR mechanism offers to facilitate the resolution of matters of business issues and others where it has not been possible to initiate any process of negotiation or arrive at a mutually agreeable solution.
- In India, ADR is established on the basis of Article 14 (Equality before law) and Article 21 (Right to life and personal liberty) under the Constitution of India.
- The Directive Principles of State Policy (DPSP) of equal justice and free legal aid as engraved in Article 39-A of the Indian Constitution can also be achieved by the ADR.

What is Mediation?

- It is a kind of alternative dispute resolution mechanism.
- A mediator is involved in assisting the parties in dispute to reach an agreement.
- The parties in dispute themselves set the conditions of the settlement to be reached.
- The third party does not impose any decisions on the parties but merely acts as a facilitator involved in improving the dialogue between the parties.

The Draft Mediation Bill 2021:

- It recognises mediation as a profession, which is a huge improvement over the part-time honorarium basis it has in the court-annexed mediation schemes.
- The Bill acknowledges the importance of institutes to train mediators, and service providers to provide structured mediation under their rules.
- It provides for pre-litigation mediation.
- The Bill does away with the confusion emanating from using both expressions 'Mediation' and 'Conciliation' in different statutes by opting for the former in accordance with international practice, and defining it widely to include the latter.
- It also recognises online dispute resolution.
- It provides for enforcement of commercial settlements reached in international mediation viz between parties from different countries as per the Singapore Convention on Mediation to which India was a notable signatory.
- The Convention assures disputants that their mediation settlements will be enforced without much difficulty across the world, unlike the fresh headaches that the litigative decree or arbitration award presents at the time of enforcement.

- It is expected that this Bill would make India a hub for international mediation in the commercial disputes field, and indeed institutions are being opened for this purpose.

Problems with the draft bill:

- Despite dispute resolution being the judiciary's domain, there is **no role for CJI in the appointment process**.
- **It distinguishes between Indian and International settlements:** It unwisely treats international mediation when conducted in India as a domestic mediation.
- **This distinction is disastrous for foreign parties:** Now, that is excellent for cases between Indian parties, but disastrous when one party is foreign. The reason is that the Singapore Convention does not apply to settlements that already have the status of a judgment or decree. Ergo, if you conduct your cross-border mediation in India, you lose out on the tremendous benefits of worldwide enforceability. In sum, go to Singapore or Sri Lanka or anywhere else other than India to conduct your mediation.
- **None of the members will be active practitioners.** Certainly, this Bill will be unique where a profession is being regulated without a single professional on the regulator.
- **Negative list for mediation:** There is an unnecessary long list of disputes which should not be mediated, which is not understandable. For example:
 - Patents and copyright cases settle on commercial terms leaving untouched the validity of the grant, so why deny this possibility and consign the parties to litigative longevity.
 - In the case of telecom, why can't manufacturers and service providers and consumers be allowed to talk and resolve issues?
 - In **cases involving minors or persons of unsound mind**, the law provides for the court to pass orders to protect them.

Conclusion:

- Eventually, this draft bill, needs a wider level of discussion and consideration amongst all stakeholders that will enable a faster resolution of disputes resulting in the restoration of faith of the litigants in the judicial and lawmaking arms of the government.

GS 3 : Economy, Science and Technology, Environment

5. A monumental mistake fomented by impunity

Context: The death of 13 civilians by Armed Forces in Nagaland has brought back the debate on AFSPA and controversies surrounding it.

Issue:

- 14 civilians in Mon district of Nagaland, home of the Konyak Nagas, have lost their lives in firing by para commandos of the Indian Army based in Jorhat.
- In the wake of public outrage against the killings, the Nagaland govt has urged the Centre to repeal AFSPA from Nagaland.

What is AFSPA (Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA))?

- It gives powers to the army, state and central police forces to shoot to kill, search houses and destroy any property that is “likely” to be used by insurgents in areas declared as “disturbed” by the home ministry.
- AFSPA is invoked when a case of militancy or insurgency takes place and the territorial integrity of India is at risk.
- Security forces can “arrest a person without a warrant”, who has committed or is even “about to commit a cognizable offence” even based on “reasonable suspicion”.
- It also provides security forces with legal immunity for their actions in disturbed areas.

Where is AFSPA in effect now?

- Currently, AFSPA is in effect in Jammu and Kashmir, Nagaland, Assam, Manipur (excluding seven assembly constituencies of Imphal) and parts of Arunachal Pradesh.
- The Union Ministry of Home Affairs has recently declared the entire Nagaland as a “disturbed area” for six more months till December 31 this year, under the AFSPA.

Controversies surrounding AFSPA

- AFSPA has often been criticised as a “draconian Act” for the unbridled power it gives to the armed forces and the impunity that security personnel enjoy for their actions taken under the law.

- Under AFSPA, the “armed forces” may shoot to kill or destroy a building on mere suspicion. While the armed forces and the government justify its need in order to combat militancy and insurgency, critics have pointed out cases of possible human rights violations linked to the act.
- Once AFSPA is implemented, “no prosecution shall be instituted except with the previous sanction of the central government, in respect of anything done or purported to be done” under this Act.
- The Jeevan Reddy Committee formed in 2004 had recommended a complete repeal of the law.

How has AFSPA been received by the people?

- In Manipur, AFSPA had been withdrawn from the Imphal Municipal area after public agitation and civil society campaigns following the atrocious rapes and fake encounter killings.

Conclusion:

- The tragic development may have a lasting impact on the ongoing Naga peace process that is now presumed to be in its final stage. It also has the ability to rekindle the narrative of India versus the Naga people. Insurgent organisations might utilise the tragedy to recruit and even enhance their positions.
- Therefore, peace in the region now depends greatly on the Indian state’s ability to say sorry from the heart and not just bargain for just another quid pro quo truce in the present tragedy. The saying sorry could also be accompanied by a gesture such as declaring AFSPA, which has come to be seen as a symbol of oppression across the region, abrogated.

6. China’s export growth slows, imports quicken on demand

- As an indication of greater domestic demand, China’s exports increased while imports also surged.
- Foreign demand has increased China’s exports at a time when other worldwide rivals are being restricted by anti-coronavirus measures.
- Stronger imports indicate that consumer and other demand is recovering following a downturn caused by the government’s drive on real estate debt.

7. Kasturirangan Committee on Western Ghats:

Recently, Karnataka Chief Minister Basavaraj Bommai informed the Centre that the state is opposed to the **Kasturirangan Committee** report on Western Ghats.

- He said that declaring Western Ghats as ecologically sensitive zone would adversely affect the livelihood of people in the region.
- However, the experts called the state's opposition disastrous for the ecologically fragile Western Ghats.

What did the Gadgil Committee say?

- It defined the boundaries of the Western Ghats for the purposes of ecological management.
- It proposed that this entire area be designated as ecologically sensitive area (ESA).
- Within this area, smaller regions were to be identified as ecologically sensitive zones (ESZ) I, II or III based on their existing condition and nature of threat.
- It proposed to divide the area into about 2,200 grids, of which 75 per cent would fall under ESZ I or II or under already existing protected areas such as wildlife sanctuaries or natural parks.
- The committee proposed a Western Ghats Ecology Authority to regulate these activities in the area.

Why was Kasturirangan Committee setup?

None of the six concerned states agreed with the recommendations of the Gadgil Committee, which submitted its report in August 2011.

- In August 2012, then Environment Minister constituted a High-Level Working Group on Western Ghats under Kasturirangan to “examine” the Gadgil Committee report in a “holistic and multidisciplinary fashion in the light of responses received” from states, central ministries and others.
- The Kasturirangan report seeks to bring just 37% of the Western Ghats under the Ecologically Sensitive Area (ESA) zones – down from the 64% suggested by the Gadgil report.

Recommendations of Kasturirangan Committee:

- A ban on mining, quarrying and sand mining.
- No new thermal power projects, but hydro power projects allowed with restrictions.
- A ban on new polluting industries.
- Building and construction projects up to 20,000 sq m was to be allowed but townships were to be banned.
- Forest diversion could be allowed with extra safeguards.

Importance of western ghats:

- The Western Ghats is an extensive region spanning over six States. It is the home of many endangered plants and animals. It is a **UNESCO World Heritage site**.
- It is one of **the eight “hottest hot-spots” of biological diversity in the world**.
- According to UNESCO, the Western Ghats are older than the Himalayas. They influence Indian monsoon weather patterns by intercepting the rain-laden monsoon winds that sweep in from the south-west during late summer.

THE INDIAN EXPRESS

GS 2 : Polity, Governance, International Relations

1. What's behind the Russia-Ukraine Conflict?

Thousands of Russian troops have been deployed to stations along Ukraine's border, sparking fears among Western leaders and Ukraine itself that Moscow is planning an invasion

Roots of the Russia-Ukraine Conflict

Ans. USSR disintegration

- Ukraine was a part of the Russian empire for centuries before becoming a Soviet republic.
- It won independence as the USSR broke up in 1991.

- Since then, it has moved to shed its Russian imperial legacy and is in increasingly close ties with the West.
- After the Crimean annexation, both nations have signed ceasefire agreements at Minsk in 2014 and 2015.

The beginning

Ans. Separatist insurgency in Ukraine's East (by Russian speaking population)

- In 2014, then Russian-leaning Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich rejected an association agreement with the European Union in favor of closer ties with Moscow.
- This sparked mass protests that led to his ouster in 2014.
- Russia responded by annexing Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula and throwing its weight behind a separatist insurgency that broke out in Ukraine's east.

Beginning of armed conflict

- More than 14,000 people have died in the fighting that devastated Ukraine's eastern industrial heartland known as Donbas.
- Ukraine and the West accused Russia of sending its troops and weapons to back the rebels.
- Moscow denied that, charging that Russians who joined the separatists were volunteers.
- Earlier this year, a spike in cease-fire violations in the east and a Russian troop concentration near Ukraine fueled war fears.

Why is Russia resented over Ukraine?

- **Cultural ties defying the conflict:** The Russian president has repeatedly described Russians and Ukrainians as "one people" and claims that Ukraine has unfairly received historic Russian lands during Soviet times.
- **Influence of the 'West':** The Kremlin has accused Ukraine of failing to honor the 2015 peace deal and criticized the West for failing to encourage Ukrainian compliance.
- **Asylum to rebels:** The agreement was a diplomatic coup for Moscow, requiring Ukraine to grant broad autonomy to the rebel regions and offer a sweeping amnesty to the rebels.
- **Affinity with the US and NATO:** Ukraine's aspirations to join NATO represent a red line for Moscow.

American concern over Russian build-up

- **Buffer state with Russia:** Ukraine is a crucial buffer between Russia and the West.
- **Heavy troop deployment:** Russia hasn't provided any details about its troop numbers and locations, saying that their deployment on its own territory shouldn't concern anyone.
- **Invasion:** Russia is planning to deploy an estimated 175,000 troops and almost half of them are already stationed along various points near Ukraine's border in preparation for a possible invasion.
- **Protection of its ally:** Ukraine has been a close ally of the US. Hence, NATO has placed its military infrastructure closer to Russia.

Recent developments

- As it moves a large number of troops towards the border, Russia seeks assurances from the US that Ukraine will not be inducted into NATO.
- However, US President Joe Biden has made it clear that he is not prepared to give any such assurance.
- This has left the countries in a stand-off, with tens of thousands of Russian troops ready to invade Ukraine at short notice, and the West not budging on Russia's demands.
- Experts believe that Russia is keeping the tensions high at the Ukraine border in order to get sanctions relief and other concessions from the West.

2. Significance of Raigad Fort in Maratha History

President Ram Nath Kovind is commencing his visit to Maharashtra by visiting the Raigad Fort where he will pay tribute to Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj.

Where is Raigad fort located?

- Raigad is a hill fort situated about 25 km from Mahad in the Raigad district and stands 2,851 feet above sea level.
- The British Gazette states the fort was known to early Europeans as the Gibraltar of the East.
- Its decisive feature is a mile and a half flat top which has adequate room for buildings.
- In its prime, the fort had 300 stone houses and a garrison of 2,000 men.

When was it built?

- The fort, which was earlier called Rairi, was the seat of the Maratha clan Shirke in the 12th century.
- The fort changed hands a number of times from the dynasty of Bahaminis to the Nizamshahis and then the Adilshahis.
- In 1656, Chhatrapati Shivaji captured it from the More's of Javli who were under the suzerainty of the Adilshahi Sultanate.
- The fort not only helped Shivaji challenge the supremacy of the Adilshahi dynasty but also opened up the routes towards Konkan for the extension of his power.

Significance of the fort in Shivaji's life

- In 1662, Shivaji formally changed the fort's name to Raigad and added a number of structures to it.
- By 1664, the fort had emerged as the seat of Shivaji's government.
- As the Marathas under the leadership of Shivaji gained strength in their struggle against the Mughals, the announcement of a sovereign, independent state was made.
- On June 6, 1674, Shivaji was coronated at Raigad by Gagabhatt where he took on the title of Chhatrapati.
- Six years later, Shivaji passed away in Raigad in 1680 and has been cremated at the fort.

Importance of Raigad Fort in Maharashtra's polity

- Chhatrapati Shivaji is the tallest and the most revered icon in Maharashtra and there is a constant attempt by political parties of all hues to appropriate his legacy.
- Due to the significance of Raigad in his life, many political leaders make it a point to visit the fort.
- Maharashtra has already announced a mid-sea memorial in the Arabian Sea for the Maratha warrior king.

3. Ukraine Issue

The United States, NATO and Ukrainian officials have been making statements for nearly two weeks, referring to what they say are unusual Russian troop movements in the proximity of Ukraine.

What is the conflict all about?

- Tensions between Ukraine and Russia, both former Soviet states, escalated in late 2013 over **a landmark political and trade deal with the European Union**. After the pro-Russian then-President, Viktor Yanukovich, suspended the talks, weeks of protests in Kiev erupted into violence.
- Then, **in March 2014, Russia annexed Crimea**, an autonomous peninsula in southern Ukraine with strong Russian loyalties, on the pretext that it was defending its interests and those of Russian-speaking citizens.
- Shortly afterwards, pro-Russian separatists in Ukraine's Donetsk and Luhansk regions declared their independence from Kiev, prompting months of heavy fighting. Despite Kiev and Moscow signing **a peace deal in Minsk in 2015**, brokered by France and Germany, there have been repeated ceasefire violations.

Need for international attention:

Fourteen thousand people have died in the battle between Kiev and pro-Russia rebels in the east of the country. Out of these, 3,393 deaths were of civilians, according to the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights's October 2021 report.

International response:

The European Union and US have imposed a series of measures in response to Russia's actions in Crimea and eastern Ukraine, including economic sanctions targeting individuals, entities and specific sectors of the Russian economy.

Russia's response:

Moscow sees the growing support for Ukraine from NATO – in terms of weaponry, training and personnel – as a threat to its own security.

- It has also accused Ukraine of boosting its own troop numbers in preparation for an attempt to retake the Donbas region, an allegation Ukraine has denied.

- Russian President Vladimir Putin has called for specific legal agreements that would rule out any further NATO expansion eastwards towards Russia's borders, saying the West has not lived up to its previous verbal assurances.

Minsk Agreements:

Minsk I: Ukraine and the Russian-backed separatists agreed a 12-point ceasefire deal in the capital of Belarus in September 2014.

- Its provisions included prisoner exchanges, deliveries of humanitarian aid and the withdrawal of heavy weapons.
- The agreement quickly broke down, with violations by both sides.

Minsk II: In 2015, an open conflict was averted after the 'Minsk II' peace agreement was signed, under the mediation of France and Germany.

- It was designed to end the fighting in the rebel regions and hand over the border to Ukraine's national troops.

GS 3 : Economy, Science and Technology, Environment

5. To check stubble burning, monitor policy implementation

Every October and November, parts of north India are engulfed by a dense fog. Farmers resort to the practice due to the limited time they have between the harvesting of kharif paddy and sowing of the rabi wheat.

Government initiatives to stop the stubble burning

- **Policy measures:** In 2014, the Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare developed a **National Policy for the Management of Crop Residue**.
- **Ban by NGT:** In 2015, the National Green Tribunal banned stubble burning in Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Delhi, Haryana and Punjab.
- **Weak enforcement:** The **enforcement** of the ban has, however, been weak, largely due to inadequate political will.
- **Legal measures:** Stubble burning was considered an offence under Section 188 of the Indian Penal Code and in the Air and Pollution Control Act, 1981.

- However, it has now been decriminalised as per a recent government announcement.
- The **Central Scheme on Promotion of Agricultural Mechanisation for In-Situ Management of Crop Residue** was introduced in 2018-19.
- Over 1.5 lakh **crop residue management machineries** have been supplied to farmers and custom hiring centres between 2018-19 to 2020-21.

How successful were the measures?

- As a result of these efforts, the number of crop residue burning events declined from 2016 to 2019.
- This year **satellite data** did show an almost 50 per cent decline in the number of stubble burning events in Punjab, Haryana and UP in October.
- However, after including burning events till November 21, the decline reduced to about 8 per cent.
- Experts suggest that the respite in October was temporary as the initial decline can be attributed to the delayed withdrawal of monsoon.
- It is thus evident that despite various government initiatives, substantial stubble burning continues in several states.

Suggestions

- **Subsidise operational cost for crop residue management:** To ease farmers' financial burden, the government could consider subsidising operational costs along with providing farmers capital subsidy on crop residue management equipment.
- **Ex-situ management of crop residue:** Ex-situ management of crop residue can also be explored under the schemes covering products such as bales and pellets for biomass power generation and supplementary feedstock in coal-fired power plants.
- **Awareness generation:** Awareness generation and trust building exercises should be undertaken with the support of local civil society organisations.
- **Adopt targeted and cluster-based approach:** Stubble burning is fairly concentrated in regions within states.
- A targeted and cluster-based approach can be undertaken by **identifying districts** with a higher number of stubble burning incidents.
- Central and state government interventions can then be concentrated in these districts.
- **Monitoring system:** To make these interventions effective, there is a requirement for formulating a robust monitoring system at the local level to track the progress of different activities.

Conclusion

Dealing with the practice of stubble burning requires efforts on multiple levels. A combination of these measures can complement the existing initiatives to encourage farmers to adopt zero stubble burning practices.

6. Kasturirangan Committee Recommendations for Western Ghats Conservation

Recently, the Karnataka CM has informed the Centre that the state is opposed to the Kasturirangan Committee report on the Western Ghats.

What is the issue?

- The Kasturirangan committee report proposes 37 per cent of the total area of Western Ghats, which is roughly 60,000 square kilometers, to be declared as eco-sensitive area (ESA).
- Declaring this would adversely affect the livelihood of people in the region, asserted the Karnataka CM.

Kasturirangan Committee Report

- The Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel (WGEEP), also known as the Gadgil Commission after its chairman Madhav Gadgil, was an environmental research commission.
- It was appointed by the Ministry of Environment and Forests of India. The commission submitted the report in 2011.
- The WGEEP was succeeded by an eminent scientist K. Kasturirangan.

Key recommendations

(1) Declaration of Eco-Sensitive Area (ESA)

- The committee report proposes 37 per cent of the total area of Western Ghats, which is roughly 60,000 square km, to be declared as eco-sensitive area (ESA).
- Out of this, 20,668 sq km of the area falls in Karnataka (46.50%) covering 1,576 villages.

(2) Ban on various activities

- The report recommended a blanket ban on mining, quarrying, setting up of red category industries and thermal power projects.

- It also stated that the impact of infrastructural projects on the forest and wildlife should be studied before permission is given for these activities.

(3) Urging of UNESCO World Heritage tag

- It has sought for UNESCO Heritage tag as an opportunity to build global and domestic recognition of the enormous natural wealth that exists in the Western Ghats.
- The 39 sites are located across the Western Ghats and distributed across the states (Kerala 19), Karnataka (10), Tamil Nadu (6) and Maharashtra (4).

Reasons behind rejection by Karnataka

- **Hitherto conservation measures:** Karnataka has the distinction of being one of the states with extensive forest cover and the government has taken care to protect the biodiversity of Western Ghats.
- **Curb over development activities:** The state believes that implementation of the report will halt the developmental activities in the region.
- **Issues over satellite observations:** The Kasturirangan report has been prepared based on the satellite images, but the ground reality is different.
- **Adaptation by People:** People of the region have adopted agriculture and horticultural activities in an eco-friendly manner.

Significance of the recommendations

- There have been massive encroachments across the state forest areas and these have been done at the behest of political leaders.
- We are in the throes of extreme climate events, which are impacting nature and people.
- Hence it is prudent to conserve the fragile ecosystems as it costs less compared to the situation prone to calamities (with changes in the climate).

7. World Inequality Report, 2022

As per the 'World Inequality Report 2022', India is among the most unequal countries in the world, with rising poverty and an 'affluent elite.'

World Inequality Report

- This report is published by Mr Lucas Chancel, the co-director of World Inequality Lab of the Paris School of Economics.
- It was coordinated by famed French economist Thomas Piketty.

Key highlights of the report

(1) Income divide

- The report highlights that the top 10% and top 1% in India hold 57% and 22% of the total national income respectively while the bottom 50% share has gone down to 13%.
- The average national income of the Indian adult population is Rs 2,04,200.
- The bottom 50% earns 20 times more than the top 10%.

(2) Decline in public wealth

- The report notes that the share of public wealth across countries has been on a decline for decades now.
- Public assets typically include public buildings housing administrations, schools, universities, hospitals and other public services.

(3) Inequality during Colonial India

- Going back in time, the report shows that the income inequality in India under the British colonial rule (1858-1947) was very high, with a top 10% income share around 50%.
- After independence, due to socialist-inspired five-year plans, this share was reduced to 35-40%.
- Owing to poor post-Independence economic conditions, India embarked upon deregulation and loosening controls in the form of liberalization policies.

(4) Wealth inequality

- The average household wealth in India is around Rs 9,83,010.
- The bottom 50% of the nation can be seen to own almost nothing, with an average wealth of Rs 66,280 or 6% of the total pie.
- The middle class is relatively poor with an average wealth of Rs 7,23,930 or 29.5% of the total.
- The top 10% owns 65% of the total wealth, averaging Rs 63,54,070 and the top 1% owns 33%, averaging Rs 3,24,49,360.

(5) Gender Inequality

- Gender inequality in India is also considered on the higher end of the spectrum.
- The share of female labor income share in India is equal to 18% which is significantly lower than the average in Asia (21%, excluding China) & is among the lowest in the world.
- Although, the number is slightly higher than the average share in Middle East (15%).
- However, a significant increase has been observed since 1990 (+8 p.p.) but it has been insufficient to lift women's labor income share to the regional average.

(6) Poor States, wealthy population

- Countries across the world have become richer over the past 40 years, but their governments have become significantly poorer.
- The report shows that the share of wealth held by public actors is close to zero or negative in rich countries, meaning that the totality of wealth is in private hands.
- Following the pandemic, governments borrowed the equivalent of 10-20% of GDP, essentially from the private sector.

(7) Issue over data availability

- The report goes on to say that over the past three years, the quality of inequality data released by the government has seriously deteriorated.
- This has made it particularly difficult to assess recent inequality changes.

Conclusions from the report

(1) Wealth is mostly inherited and has a snowball effect

- People accumulate wealth across generations through inheritance.
- It has a snowball effect, wherein successive generations will gain more, but in their concentrated section.
- More capital incentivizes banks to lend. This is why the rich section's wealth grows faster.

(2) Wealth management is necessary

- Public wealth has been declining for two reasons:

1. First, governments have been privatizing assets and natural resources at low costs.
 2. Second, governments contract debt to the private sector, making it richer.
- Without assets, governments have low resources to invest and to mitigate climate change impacts, particularly in the energy sector.
 - Currently, governments have more debts than assets. This calls for strategic management of the economy.

8. Laser Communications Relay Demonstration (LCRD)

NASA has launched its new Laser Communications Relay Demonstration (LCRD) – the agency's first-ever laser communications system.

What is LCRD?

- LCRD involves laser communications - also called optical communications which uses infrared light to send information.
- LCRD is launched in a geosynchronous orbit, over 35,000km above Earth.
- LCRD has two optical terminals - one to receive data from a user spacecraft, and the other to transmit data to ground stations.
- The modems will translate the digital data into laser signals. This will then be transmitted via encoded beams of light.

Benefits offered by LCRD

- Currently, most NASA spacecraft use radio frequency communications to send data.
- Optical communications will help increase the bandwidth 10 to 100 times more than radio frequency systems.
- The LCRD will help the agency test optical communication in space.

Laser vs Radio

- Laser communications and radio waves use different wavelengths of light. It uses infrared light and has a shorter wavelength than radio waves.
- This will help the transmission of more data in a short time.
- Using infrared lasers, LCRD will send data to Earth at 1.2 gigabits-per-second (Gbps).

- It would take roughly nine weeks to transmit a completed map of Mars back to Earth with current radio frequency systems. With lasers, we can accelerate that to about nine days, says NASA.

Other advantages

Optical communications systems are smaller in size, weight, and require less power compared with radio instruments.

- A smaller size means more room for science instruments.
- Less weight means a less expensive launch.
- Less power means less drain on the spacecraft's batteries.

Prelims Practice Questions

1. Which of the following Constitutional Provisions grants protection to persons who are arrested or detained?

- A Article 19
- B Article 20
- C Article 21
- D Article 22

Answer : D

Explanation

Constitutional Provisions Related To Arrest

- **Article 22** grants protection to persons who are arrested or detained. Detention is of two types, namely, punitive and preventive.
 - Punitive detention is to punish a person for an offence committed by him after trial and conviction in a court.
 - Preventive detention, on the other hand, means detention of a person without trial and conviction by a court.

- **Article 22** has two parts – the first part deals with the cases of ordinary law and the second part deals with the cases of preventive detention law.
- **Hence, option D is correct.**

2. India observes 'Maitri Divas' with reference to which of the following nations?

- a. Bhutan
- b. Bangladesh
- c. Sri Lanka
- d. Nepal

Answer: b

Explanation:

- To celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971, India and Bangladesh are celebrating 'Maitri Diwas.'
- Bangladesh was formally recognised as a new country by India on December 6 1971.
- Every year, the two countries observe this day as 'Maitri Diwas,' or 'Friendship Day.'
- Hence **Option B is correct.**

3. India conducts the EKVVERIN exercise with which of the following?

- A South Africa
- B Seychelles
- C Maldives
- D Sri Lanka

Answer : C

Explanation

- **India and Maldives** have been conducting **Exercise Ekuverin** meaning 'Friends' in the Maldivian language since 2009.

- Recently, the 11th Edition of Joint Military Exercise EKUVERIN between India & Maldives has been started at Kadhdhoo Island, Maldives.
- It is a 14 days Joint Exercise held alternatively in India and Maldives.
- It **focuses on enhancing interoperability between the two forces** for carrying out counter insurgency and counter-terrorism operations in a semi-urban environment under the United Nations mandate.
- **Hence, option C is correct.**

4. Which amongst the following correctly describes an 'invasive species'?

- a. It is an introduced organism that becomes overpopulated and negatively alters its new environment.
- b. It is an organism that helps define an entire ecosystem.
- c. These are species selected for making conservation-related decisions, typically because protecting these species indirectly protects many other species.
- d. None of the above

Answer: a

Explanation:

- An invasive species is an organism that has been brought into a new ecosystem and has grown overpopulated, adversely altering its surroundings.
- Invasive species have a negative impact on the habitats and bioregions they invade, inflicting ecological, environmental, and/or economic harm.
- **Hence Option A is correct.**

5. With reference to Chhatrapati Shivaji, which of the following statements is correct?

- A The Battle of Sinhagad fought between the Mughal and Maratha Empires was the last battle fought by Shivaji.
- B The Treaty of Purandar was signed between Shivaji and Adil Shah of Bijapur.
- C Shivaji captured the Torna fort and Kondana fort from the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb.
- D Shakakarta and Haindava Dharmodhhaara are the titles given to Chhatrapati Shivaji.

Answer : D

Explanation

- **Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj** was born on 19th February, 1630 at Shivneri Fort in District Pune in the present-day state of Maharashtra.
- **Early Life:**
 - He displayed his military zeal for the first time in 1645 when as a teenager, he successfully **got control of the Torna Fort** which was under Bijapur.
 - He also **acquired the Kondana Fort. Both these forts were under Adil Shah of Bijapur. Hence, option C is not correct.**
- **Important Battles:**
 - **The Battle of Sangamner, 1679 fought between the Mughals and Marathas was the last battle in which the Maratha King Shivaji fought. Hence, option A is not correct.**
 - Battle of Sinhagad, 1670 was fought between Tanaji Malusare, a commander of Maratha ruler Shivaji Maharaj and Udaybhan Rathod, fortkeeper under Jai Singh I who was a Mughal Army Chief.
- **Important Treaty:**
 - In June 1665, the **Treaty of Purandar** was signed between **Shivaji and Raja Jai Singh I** (representing Aurangzeb). **Hence, option B is not correct.**
 - As per this treaty, many forts were relinquished to the Mughals and it was agreed that Shivaji would meet Aurangzeb at Agra. Shivaji also agreed to send his son Sambhaji as well.
- **Granted Title:**
 - He took on the titles of Chhatrapati, **Shakakarta**, Kshatriya Kulavantas and **Haindava Dharmodhhaarak. Hence, option D is correct.**

6. Consider the following statements

1. The Black Sea is also connected to the Sea of Azov by the Strait of Kerch.
2. The Dardanelles, Bosphorus and Marmara Sea forms a transitional zone between the Mediterranean and the Black Sea.

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 Black Sea is located between Eastern Europe and Western Asia.
- It is surrounded by the Pontic, Caucasus, and Crimean Mountains in the south, east and north respectively.
- The Black Sea is also connected to the **Sea of Azov** by the **Strait of Kerch**. **Hence, statement 1 is correct.**
- The **Turkish straits system** - the Dardanelles, Bosphorus and Marmara Sea - forms a transitional zone between the Mediterranean and the Black Sea. **Hence, statement 2 is correct.**
- **Bordering countries of Black Sea are:** Russia, Ukraine, Georgia, Turkey, Bulgaria and Romania.
- There is a significant **absence of oxygen** in the water (anoxic waters).

Mains Practice Questions

1. Explain the value-added, income and expenditure methods of estimating national income.

Approach:

- Briefly explain the concept of national income.
- Explain the value added, income and expenditure methods of estimating national income.
- Conclude with a brief note on the methods employed in India.

2. Agricultural marketing in India suffers from various shortcomings. Explain. Highlight the measures taken by the government to improve the agricultural marketing system in India.

Approach:

- Start with a brief note on agricultural marketing.
- Explain the various shortcomings of agricultural marketing in India.
- Highlight the measures taken by the government to improve the agricultural marketing system in India.
- Conclude briefly by mentioning the further measures needed.

