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GS 2 : Polity, Governance, International Relations

1. Election Laws (Amendment) Bill, 2021

The Election Laws (Amendment) Bill, 2021 that seeks to link electoral rolls to the Aadhaar number has been listed for introduction in the Lok Sabha.

Key Provisions of the Election Laws (Amendment) Bill 2021

(1) Aadhaar authentication:

- The Bill seeks to empower electoral officers to seek Aadhaar number of people, who want to register as voters, for establishing their identity.
- It also seeks to allow the electoral registration officers to ask for Aadhaar numbers from persons already included in the electoral roll for the purposes of authentication of entries in the electoral roll.
- This would also aim to identify registration of the name of the same person in the electoral roll of more than one constituency or more than once in the same constituency.

(2) Aadhaar linking with Voter ID

- Linking Aadhaar with voter ID will be voluntary.
- The amendment makes it clear that no application shall be denied and no entries in the electoral roll shall be deleted for the inability to produce Aadhaar number.
- Such people will be allowed to furnish other documents as may be prescribed.

(3) Amendments to the RP Act for new voter registration

- Section 23 of the RP Act, 1950 will be amended to allow linking of electoral roll data with the Aadhaar ecosystem to curb the menace of multiple enrolments.
- Amendment to section 14 of the RP Act, 1950 will allow having four qualifying dates for eligible people to register as voters, instead of one that is January 1 at present.
- As of now, people who turn 18 on or before January 1 can register as voters but those turning 18 after January 1 wait for the whole year to get registered.

- The Bill proposes to make the 1st day of January, 1st day of April, 1st day of July, and 1st day of October as the qualifying dates.

(4) Imbibing gender neutrality

- An amendment to section 20 of the RP Act, 1950 and section 60 of the RP Act, 1951 seeks to make the elections gender-neutral for service voters.
- The amendment will also replace the word 'wife' with 'spouse' to make the statutes gender-neutral.

2. India- Sri Lanka Fisherman Issue

The Sri Lankan Navy has seized eight Indian fishing vessels and arrested 55 fishermen on the charge of poaching.

What is the issue?

- As in the past, fishermen from Rameswaram and nearby coasts continue to sail towards Talaimannar and Katchatheevu coasts, a region famous for rich maritime resources in Sri Lanka.
- Indian boats have been fishing in the troubled waters for centuries and had a free run of the Bay of Bengal, the Palk Bay and the Gulf of Mannar until 1974 and 1976.
- Treaties were later signed between the two countries to demarcate the maritime boundary – the 'International Maritime Boundary Line'(IMBL).

Issues for Sri Lanka

- **Proliferation of Trawlers:** The overuse of mechanized trawlers in Palk Bay is damaging the marine ecosystem in SL waters.
- **Breach of sovereignty:** There were many favorable reasons too for Indian fishermen as their access to Sri Lankan waters was easier at the time of Sri Lankan civil war.
- **Porous borders:** Maritime boundaries were never tightly guarded as a result, Indian trawlers continue to routinely enter Lankan waters for fishing.
- **End of Civil War:** Everything changed in 2009 with the end of civil war. Arrests and attacks increased on Indian fishermen as they continued entering Lankan waters because of depletion of marine resources on the Indian side.

Fishermen's concern:

(1) Depletion of fisheries

- There is a depletion of fisheries on the Indian side, so Indian fishermen cross into Sri Lankan waters thus denying the livelihood of their counterparts.
- They deliberately cross the territorial waters even at the risk of getting arrested or shot dead by the Sri Lankan Navy.
- Sri Lankan fishermen across Palk Bay are concerned over similar depletion on their side (where there is a ban for trawlers) because of poaching by Indian fishermen.

(2) Rights over Katchatheevu Island

- Tamil fishermen have been entering Sri Lankan waters nearby Katchatheevu island, where they had been fishing for centuries.
- In 1974, the island was ceded to Sri Lanka after an agreement was signed by Indira Gandhi between the two countries without consulting the Tamil Nadu government.
- The agreement allows Indian fishermen "access to Katchatheevu for rest, for drying of nests and for the annual St Anthony's festival" but it did not ensure the traditional fishing rights.

(3) Hefty fines

- After some respite in the last couple of years, Sri Lanka introduced tougher laws banning bottom-trawling and put heavy fines for trespassing foreign vessels.
- SL has increased the fine on Indian vessels found fishing in Sri Lankan waters to a minimum of LKR 6 million (about ₹25 lakh) and a maximum of LKR 175 million (about ₹17.5 Crore).
- Quiet often, the fishermen are shot dead by SL marines.

Fishermen issue in TN politics

- It has been often a sensitive political issue in Tamil Nadu in the past one decade.
- In a defiant speech in 1991, late CM Jayalalitha had called on the people of Tamil Nadu to retrieve the Katchatheevu Island.

Way forward

- **Leasing:** Two courses of action exist: (1) get back the island of Katchatheevu on “lease in perpetuity” or (2) permit licensed Indian fishermen to fish within a designated area of Sri Lankan waters and vice versa.
- **Licensing:** The second course of action would persuade Colombo to permit licensed Indian fishermen to fish in Sri Lankan waters for five nautical miles from the IMBL.
- **Reconsidering old agreements:** The 2003 proposal for licensed fishing can be revisited.
- **Looping in fishermen themselves:** Arranging frequent meetings between fishing communities of both countries could be systematized so as to develop a friendlier atmosphere mid-seas during fishing.

Conclusion

- The underlying issues of the fisheries dispute need to be addressed so that bilateral relations do not reach a crisis point.
- Immediate actions should be taken to begin the phase-out of trawling and identify other fishing practices.

3. Questioning the impartiality of the Election Commission

The opposition has questioned **the impartiality of the upcoming elections** in five states after **Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) Sushil Chandra** and **Election Commissioners Rajiv Kumar** and **Anup Chandra Pandey** attended an online interaction called by the Prime Minister’s Office (PMO).

- Critics have said that **the PMO cannot call the EC for such interactions as the poll panel is an independent body.**

What has the Centre said?

An official communication from the Law Ministry, which is the administrative ministry of the Commission, said the meeting had been called to discuss electoral reforms. Also, the Ministry claimed that the session was an “informal interaction”.

What's the issue now?

- The “directive” from the PMO has raised concerns about **the independent functioning of the Commission**, whose autonomy successive CECs have sought to protect zealously.
- The “informal interaction” has also raised questions about **the neutrality of the Commission**, especially when elections to crucial States are around the corner.

How independence of the EC is ensured by the Constitution?

The Election Commission is a **constitutional authority** whose responsibilities and powers are prescribed in the Constitution of India under **Article 324**.

1. The Election Commission is insulated from executive interference.
2. It is the Commission which decides the election schedules for the conduct of elections, whether general elections or by-elections.
3. It is the Commission which decides on the location of polling stations, assignment of voters to the polling stations, location of counting centres, arrangements to be made in and around polling stations and counting centres and all allied matters.
4. The decisions of the Commission can be challenged in the High Court and the Supreme Court of India by appropriate petitions.
5. By long-standing convention and several judicial pronouncements, once the actual process of elections has started, the judiciary does not intervene in the actual conduct of the polls.

Communication between EC and the Government:

- The EC's communication with the Government on election matters is **through the bureaucracy** – either with its administrative ministry – the Law Ministry or the Home Ministry for the deployment of security forces during elections.
- In such cases, **the Home Secretary is often invited in front of a full commission** where the three commissioners are also present.
- The Law Ministry spells out the fine print on law for the country and is expected not to breach the constitutional safeguard provided to the commission to ensure its autonomy.

Recent such incidents:

- During the 2019 Lok Sabha Elections, the EC under Chief Election Commissioner Sunil Arora gave a clean chit to Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who in an election rally in Latur, had referenced his campaign with an appeal on behalf of the armed forces.
- There have also been various violations of the model code of conduct during the 2019 Lok Sabha Elections.
- This year, the Commission's belated decision in banning election campaigns in the midst of a rampaging pandemic, raised eyebrows.

4. Jammu and Kashmir Delimitation Commission:

The **Jammu and Kashmir Delimitation Commission** (headed by retired Supreme Court Judge **Justice Ranjana Prakash Desai**), has made the following recommendations:

1. Increase six seats for the Jammu division and one for the Kashmir division.
2. Reserve 16 seats for the Scheduled Caste (SC) and Schedule Tribe (ST) communities.

Implications:

J&K will have a 90-member Legislative Assembly now, up from 87 prior to the Centre's decision to end J&K's special constitutional position.

Basis of these recommendations:

The **Jammu and Kashmir Delimitation Commission** has said that it will base its final report on **the 2011 Census** and will also take into account the topography, difficult terrain, means of communication and convenience available for the ongoing delimitation exercise.

Delimitation exercise in J&K- a timeline:

1. The **first delimitation exercise**, carving out 25 assembly constituencies in the then state, was carried out by a Delimitation Committee in 1951.

2. **The first full-fledged Delimitation Commission** was formed in 1981 and it submitted its recommendations in 1995 on the basis of 1981 Census. Since then, there has been no delimitation.
3. In 2020, the Delimitation Commission was constituted to carry out the exercise on the basis of 2011 Census, with a mandate to add seven more seats to the Union Territory' and grant reservations to SC and ST communities.
4. Now, the total number of seats in Jammu and Kashmir will be raised to 90 from the previous 83. This is apart from 24 seats which have been reserved for areas of PoK and have to be kept vacant in the Assembly.

What is delimitation and why is it needed?

The **Delimitation Commission for Jammu and Kashmir** was constituted by the **Centre** on March 6 last year to redraw Lok Sabha and assembly constituencies of the union territory in accordance with the provisions of the **Jammu and Kashmir Reorganisation Act, 2019** and Delimitation Act, 2002, passed by the Centre in August 2019 along with other J&K-specific Bills.

- Delimitation literally means the process of fixing limits or boundaries of territorial constituencies in a state that has a legislative body.

Who carries out the exercise?

- Delimitation is undertaken by a highly powerful commission. They are formally known as **Delimitation Commission or Boundary Commission**.
- These bodies are so powerful that **its orders have the force of law and they cannot be challenged before any court**.

Composition of the Commission:

According to the Delimitation Commission Act, 2002, **the Delimitation Commission will have three members:** a serving or retired judge of the Supreme Court as the chairperson, and the Chief Election Commissioner or Election Commissioner nominated by the CEC and the State Election Commissioner as ex-officio members.

Constitutional Provisions:

1. Under **Article 82**, the Parliament enacts a Delimitation Act after every Census.
2. Under **Article 170**, States also get divided into territorial constituencies as per Delimitation Act after every Census.

GS 3 : Economy, Science and Technology, Environment

5. SEBI suspends Futures Trading in key farm crops

Market regulator Securities & Exchange Board of India (SEBI) has issued an order suspending futures trading in paddy (non-basmati), wheat, Bengal gram (chana dal), mustard seeds and its derivatives, soyabean and its derivatives, crude palm oil and green gram (moong dal) for a year.

What are Derivatives?

- A derivative is a contract between two parties which derives its value/price from an underlying asset.
- The value of the underlying asset is bound to change as the value of the underlying assets keep changing continuously.
- Generally stocks, bonds, currency, commodities and interest rates form the underlying asset.

Types of Derivatives

The most common types of derivatives are futures, options, forwards and swaps:

(1) Futures

- Futures are standardized contracts that allow the holder to buy/sell the asset at an agreed price at the specified date.
- The parties to the futures contract are under an obligation to perform the contract. These contracts are traded on the stock exchange.
- The value of future contracts is marked to market every day.
- It means that the contract value is adjusted according to market movements till the expiration date.

(2) Options

- Options are derivative contracts that give the buyer a right to buy/sell the underlying asset at the specified price during a certain period of time.

- The buyer is not under any obligation to exercise the option.
- The option seller is known as the option writer. The specified price is known as the strike price.

(3) Forwards

- Forwards are like futures contracts wherein the holder is under an obligation to perform the contract.
- But forwards are unstandardized and not traded on stock exchanges.
- These are available over-the-counter and are not marked-to-market.
- These can be customized to suit the requirements of the parties to the contract.

(4) Swaps

- Swaps are derivative contracts wherein two parties exchange their financial obligations.
- The cash flows are based on a notional principal amount agreed between both parties without the exchange of principal.
- The amount of cash flows is based on a rate of interest.
- One cash flow is generally fixed and the other changes on the basis of a benchmark interest rate.
- Swaps are not traded on stock exchanges and are over-the-counter contracts between businesses or financial institutions.

What is the recent SEBI move?

- SEBI asked stock exchanges in the commodity derivatives segment to not to undertake any trading in derivative contracts in these key farm commodities.
- Prices of these kitchen staples have been spiraling in recent months.
- India is the world's biggest importer of vegetable oils.
- The governments as well as the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) are struggling to hold prices of food items to curb inflation.

6. Changes to Biological Diversity Act, 2002

Government has recently introduced **the Biological Diversity (Amendment) Bill, 2021** in Lok Sabha.

Highlights of the Bill:

1. The Bill seeks to **reduce the pressure on wild medicinal plants** by encouraging the cultivation of medicinal plants.
2. The Bill proposes to **exempt AYUSH practitioners from intimating biodiversity boards** for accessing biological resources or knowledge.
3. The Bill also facilitates **fast-tracking of research, simplify the patent application process, decriminalises certain offences.**
4. The Bill brings more **foreign investments** in biological resources, research, patent and commercial utilisation, without compromising the national interest.
5. The bill focuses on **regulating who can access biological resources and knowledge and how access will be monitored.**
6. The Bill has also clarified and strengthened the role of **state biodiversity boards.**

Why is the Biodiversity Act 2002 being amended?

- People from AYUSH medicine urged the government to simplify, streamline and reduce the compliance burden to provide for a conducive environment for collaborative research and investments.
- They also sought to simplify the patent application process, widen the scope of access and **benefit-sharing** with local communities.

Concerns:

- The main focus of the bill is to facilitate trade in biodiversity as opposed to conservation, protection of biodiversity and knowledge of the local communities.
- The bill has been introduced **without seeking public comments** as required under **the pre-legislative consultative policy.**
- There are **ambiguous provisions in the proposed amendment** to protect, conserve or increase the stake of local communities in the sustainable use and conservation of biodiversity.
- Activists say that the amendments were done to “solely benefit” the AYUSH Ministry.
- The bill has **excluded the term Bio-utilization** which is an important element in the Act. Leaving out bio utilization would leave out an array of activities like characterization, incentivisation and bioassay which are undertaken with commercial motive.

- The bill also **exempts cultivated medicinal plants from the purview of the Act** but it is practically impossible to detect which plants are cultivated and which are from the wild.

Biological Diversity Act, 2002:

- Enacted for the conservation of biological diversity and **fair, equitable sharing of the monetary benefits** from the commercial use of biological resources and **traditional knowledge**.
- The main intent of this legislation is to protect India's rich biodiversity and associated knowledge against their use by foreign individuals.
- It seeks to check **biopiracy**, protect biological diversity and local growers through a three-tier structure of central and state boards and local committees.
- The Act provides for setting up of a **National Biodiversity Authority (NBA), State Biodiversity Boards (SBBs) and Biodiversity Management Committees (BMCs) in local bodies**.
- The NBA will enjoy the power of a civil court.

THE INDIAN EXPRESS

GS 2 : Polity, Governance, International Relations

1. Raising marriage age won't lead to women's empowerment

The announcement of a cabinet decision to raise the age at marriage for women from 18 to 21 years marks the fruition of a plan that was first revealed almost two years ago when a Task Force was set up for the purpose.

Why the age of marriage of women matters

- Age of marriage has bearing on maternal mortality rates, fertility levels, nutrition of mother and child, sex ratios, and, on a different register, education and employment opportunities for women.

- It is also argued that other factors – such as **poverty and health services** – were far more effective as levers for improving women’s and children’s health and nutritional status.

Issues with the decision

[1] Role of poverty neglected

- If women who marry at higher ages seem to have better health and nutrition indicators, this is not caused by their marrying later than others – it is because **women from better-off groups tend to marry at higher ages**.
- Conversely, the health indicators of poorer women do not change just because they marry at a higher age.
- An illustration of this truth is found in the National Family Health Survey (IV) data, which show that levels of anaemia – which is the highest cause of maternal mortality in India and one of our worst statistics – **show no change even at ages of marriage up to 25 years**, once we control for other factors.
- **World Bank study finds no impact on women:** Population control was at the heart of the 1978 amendment to the Sarda Act of 1929.
- Moreover, **reducing fertility rates** globally by banning marriage before the age of 18 years is very much on the agenda of international agencies to this very day.
- A major multi-country **study undertaken by the World Bank in 2017** estimated that “savings” of no less than \$5 trillion would accrue if marriage before the age of 18 was eliminated.
- But such savings would be mostly due to reductions in fertility and consequent reductions in public health investments due to fewer births.
- The same study saw no significant gains from raised age of marriage for women’s decision making, for lowering the levels of violence they face, or helping them find employment.
- **Restriction on the right of an adult woman:** Globally, the age of 18 is widely regarded as the age of adulthood.
- It is also viewed as an upper limit in terms of the physical and reproductive maturity of women, as well as the **age of majority by child rights conventions** to which India is a signatory.
- Thus, the proposed move will restrict the rights of already adult women, an issue for legal experts to debate.
- **Law is meant to set minimum age not the right age:** Equally important is the crucial slippage in the arguments made on behalf of the government from the minimum age at marriage to the right age at marriage.
- The minimum age is obviously a floor, not a standard or desirable norm.
- Laws are meant to set minimum levels, a threshold for triggering legal or penal action, because of the harm that may be done.

Way forward: Address issues that drive empowerment

- Going by the NFHS 4 data (2015-16), more than half – 56 per cent – of women in the age group 20-24 years marry before the age of 21 years.
- The problem is that the **real reasons that drive empowerment** are not being addressed, at least not adequately.
- **Educational attainments have improved** enormously in recent years.
- But the shocking fact (evident in all major data sets) is that **decline in early marriages has been accompanied by a fall in women's employment rates**, that persisted even during the 1990s boom.
- **Paradoxical outcomes: The proportion of women not in paid work increases at higher ages of marriage!**
- Complex paradoxes like these are the hallmark of our society.
- **They cannot be addressed by a legal fix**, particularly one that will be very hard to implement.

Conclusion

Instead of criminalising our youth, the government must take concrete steps to really empower women. If they are truly in charge of their own lives – through affordable education, meaningful and decent employment opportunities – they will be able to make better decisions about whether, when and whom to marry.

2. Why the Russia-West equation matters to India

Thirty years ago this week, the Soviet Union collapsed – after seven decades of an expansive global role. Few countries have been as significant as Russia for modern India's evolution.

Impact of Russian geopolitics on India's worldviews

- The twists and turns in Russia's relations with the West have always had consequences for India's international relations.
- **India's fear of a unipolar world dominated by the US:** After the collapse of the USSR in December 1991, the loss of the long-standing Soviet ally left Delhi in a deep strategic funk amidst fears of **a unipolar world dominated by the US**.
- These anxieties were accentuated by post-Soviet Russia's quick embrace of the US and the West.
- However, by the turn of the millennium, relations between Russia and the West had begun to sour.

- That drew India once again closer to Russia.
- **Russia's growing closeness to China:** Moscow also roped in Beijing to build a new coalition – the RIC – to promote a multipolar world that would limit the dangers of American hyperpower.
- **Improvement in India-US relations:** India's fears of the unipolar moment turned out to be overblown and Delhi's ties with Washington began to see rapid improvement since 2000.
- The upswing in India's ties with America, however, coincided with a steady downturn in the relations between Russia and the US.

Tension between Russia and the West

- The continuous escalation of tensions between Russia and the West culminated in the last few weeks in Ukraine – at the heart of Europe.
- Moscow's military mobilisation on the frontier with Ukraine – that was part of the Soviet Union until 1991 – raised alarm bells of a new war between the forces of Russia and the US-led European military alliance, North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO).
- Last week, Russia presented several proposals for a new European security architecture.
- Moscow is calling for an end to NATO's further eastward expansion.
- Moscow also wants NATO to rescind its earlier promise to make **Ukraine and Georgia** – two former Soviet Republics – members of the military alliance.

Major compromises between US and Russia

- The resolution of US-Russian differences, however, involves some **major compromises**.
- **Russia aware of the over reliance on China:** While Russia has demonstrated that its interests can't be simply ignored by the West, it also recognises the **costs of a prolonged confrontation with the US and Europe** and the dangers of relying solely on China to secure its geopolitical interests.
- **Russia seeking accommodation with US and Europe:** While Moscow is unlikely to abandon the partnership with China, there is no doubt that **an accommodation with America and Europe** is a high priority for Russia.
- **US to focus on China challenge:** The US, which is now focused on the China challenge, appears interested in **easing the conflict with Russia**.
- Despite its extraordinary military resources, Washington can't afford to fight in both Asia (with China) and Europe (with Russia).

Implications for India

- **Role of ideological sentiment:** While coping with the complex dynamic of Russia's relations with the West has been an enduring element of independent India's foreign policy, Delhi's thinking on Russia has too often been coloured by ideological sentiment.
- In Delhi, the tendency is to **over-determine Russia's contradictions with the West.**
- It is not Russia's national destiny to forever confront the West.
- Russia's current problems with the West are not about ideological principles.
- It is about the terms of an **honourable accommodation.**
- Prior to the 1917 revolution, Russia was a leading part of the European great power system.
- Delhi can't influence the new effort to build a mutually acceptable security order in Europe, but it **can welcome and support it.**
- **Role of Asian geopolitics:** That the pressure for this attempted reset in Russia's relations with the West is coming from **Asian geopolitics** is of some significance.
- A reconciliation between Russia and the West will make it a lot easier for India to manage its own security challenges.

Conclusion

Delhi knows that stabilising the Asian balance of power will be difficult without a measure of US-Russian cooperation in Europe. If Moscow – at odds with the West in the last two decades – deepens its current close alignment with Beijing, it will be a lot harder to prevent Chinese dominance over Asia.

3. 4 labour codes

India is likely to implement **four labour codes (on wages, social security, occupational safety and industrial relations)** by the next fiscal year beginning 2022.

- Under these new codes, a number of aspects related to employment and work culture, in general, might change – including the take-home salary of employees, working hours, and the number of weekdays.

Opposition:

- Trade unions, however, have planned to intensify their agitation this week against the codes in the wake of the government's decision to repeal the three farm laws.

What are the demands by trade unions?

The two codes we accepted – on wages and social security – be implemented immediately and the two to which we had objections – industrial relations and occupational safety – be reviewed.

About the labour codes:

The new set of regulations consolidates 44 labour laws under 4 categories of Codes namely, Wage Code; Social Security Code; Occupational Safety, Health & Working Conditions Code; and the Industrial Relations Code.

- The Parliament has already passed all the four Codes and it has also received the President's assent.

The 4 codes are:

1. **The Code on Wages, 2019**, applying to all the employees in organized as well as unorganized sector, aims to regulate wage and bonus payments in all employments and aims at providing equal remuneration to employees performing work of a similar nature in every industry, trade, business, or manufacture.
2. **The Code on Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions, 2020** seeks to regulate the health and safety conditions of workers in establishments with 10 or more workers, and in all mines and docks.
3. **The Code on Social Security, 2020** consolidates nine laws related to social security and maternity benefits.
4. **The Code on Industrial Relations, 2020** seeks to consolidate three labour laws namely, The Industrial Disputes Act, 1947: The Trade Unions Act, 1926 and The Industrial Employment (Standing Orders) Act, 1946. The Code aims to improve the business environment in the country largely by reducing the labour compliance burden of industries.

Issues with these codes:

- The work hours provisions for regular workers do not provide flexibility to fix work hours beyond eight hours a day.
- The codes have also missed laying down uniform provisions for part-time employees.
- There are also provisions that impact employee wages.
- The labour codes also chalk out fines on businesses for non-compliance of provisions, second offences and officer-in-default. In the current pandemic situation, a majority of small businesses are in no position to adopt and implement the **labour code** changes

4. India-Taiwan relations

India and Taiwan have started negotiations for a free-trade agreement and the setting up of a semiconductor manufacturing facility by a Taiwanese firm in India, in a significant step signalling their resolve to broad-base the overall bilateral economic engagement.

- If the move to set up the semiconductor manufacturing plant succeeds, then it will be **the second such facility to be set up by a Taiwanese company in a foreign country after a similar hub in the United States.**

India's position on Taiwan:

- India's policy on Taiwan is clear and consistent and it is focused on promoting interactions in areas of trade, investment and tourism among others.
- Government facilitates and promotes interactions in areas of trade, investment, tourism, culture, education and other such people-to-people exchanges.
- However, India doesn't have formal diplomatic relations with Taiwan, but both sides have trade and people-to-people ties.

Indo- Taiwan relations:

- Although they do not have formal diplomatic ties, Taiwan and India have been cooperating in various fields.
- India has refused to endorse **the "one-China" policy** since 2010.

Significance of India for Taiwan:

Taiwan is keen to deepen relations with various countries.

- Also, China has ramped up military pressure, including repeated missions by Chinese warplanes near democratic Taiwan, which Beijing claims as its own and has not ruled out taking by force.

Way ahead:

India and Taiwan are celebrating 25 years of their partnership.

Mutual efforts between Delhi and Taipei have enabled a range of bilateral agreements covering agriculture, investment, customs cooperation, civil aviation, industrial cooperation and other areas. This growing relationship indicates that the time has come to recalibrate India-Taiwan relations.

What needs to be done?

- Both sides can create a group of empowered persons or a task force to chart out a road map in a given time frame.
- The time is ripe to expand cooperation in the field of healthcare.
- Taiwan could be a valuable partner in dealing with this challenge through its bio-friendly technologies.

China- Taiwan relations- Background:

China has claimed Taiwan through its **“one China” policy** since the Chinese civil war forced the defeated Kuomintang, or Nationalist, to flee to the island in 1949 and has vowed to bring it under Beijing’s rule, by force if necessary.

- While **Taiwan is self-governed** and de facto independent, it has never formally declared independence from the mainland.
- Under the **“one country, two systems” formula**, Taiwan would have the right to run its own affairs; a similar arrangement is used in Hong Kong.

Presently, Taiwan is claimed by China, which refuses diplomatic relations with countries that recognise the region.

GS 3 : Economy, Science and Technology, Environment

5. Amendment to the Multi-State Cooperatives Act, 2002

The Union Home and Cooperation Minister has announced the decision to amend the Multi-State Cooperative Societies (MSCS) Act, 2002 to plug the loopholes in the Act.

What is MSCS Act?

- Cooperatives are a state subject, but there are many societies such as those for sugar and milk, banks, milk unions etc whose members and areas of operation are spread across more than one state.
- The MSCS Act was passed to govern such cooperatives.
- For example, most sugar mills along the districts on the Karnataka-Maharashtra border procure cane from both states.

What are Multi-State Cooperatives?

- They draw their membership from two or more states, and they are thus registered under the MSCS Act.
- Their board of directors has representation from all states they operate in.
- Administrative and financial control of these societies is with the central registrar, with the law making it clear that no state government official can wield any control on them.

Why does the government plan to amend the Act?

(1) Issues with Central Registrar

- The exclusive control of the central registrar, who is also the Central Cooperative Commissioner, was meant to allow smooth functioning of these societies.
- The central Act cushions them from the interference of state authorities so that these societies are able to function in multiple states.
- What was supposed to facilitate smooth functioning, however, has created obstacles.
- For state-registered societies, financial and administrative control rests with state registrars who exercise it through district- and tehsil-level officers.

(2) Multiple checks and balances

- Thus if a sugar mill wishes to buy new machinery or go for expansion, they would first have to take permission from the sugar commissioner for both.
- Post this, the proposal would go to the state-level committee that would float tenders and carry out the process.
- While the system for state-registered societies includes checks and balances at multiple layers to ensure transparency in the process, these layers do not exist in the case of multistate societies.
- Instead, the board of directors has control of all finances and administration.

(3) Lack of govt control

- There is an apparent lack of day-to-day government control on such societies.
- Unlike state cooperatives, which have to submit multiple reports to the state registrar, multistate cooperatives need not.
- The central registrar can only allow inspection of the societies under special conditions – a written request by one-third of the members of the board.
- Inspections can happen only after prior intimation to societies.

(4) Lack of infrastructure

- The on-ground infrastructure for central registrar is thin – there are no officers or offices at state level, with most work being carried out either online or through correspondence.
- For members of the societies, the only office where they can seek justice is in Delhi, with state authorities expressing their inability to do anything.

(5) Ponzi schemes functioning as MCS

- There have been instances across the country when credit societies have launched ponzi schemes taking advantage of these loopholes.
- Such schemes mostly target small and medium holders with the lure of high returns.
- Fly-by-night operators get people to invest and, after a few instalments, wind up their operations.

What kind of amendments can be expected?

- The Centre is holding extensive consultations with experts from various fields: bankers, sugar commissioners, cooperative commissioners, housing societies federations etc.
- The centre might increase their manpower, first in Delhi and then in the states, to ensure better governance of the societies.
- Also, technology will be used to bring in transparency.

6. Green Hydrogen

The Centre is planning to use the green hydrogen fuel from wastewater by using solar energy. It is possible by using electrolyzers.

How this can be achieved?

By segregation of solid waste management using the rooftop solar, we can make green hydrogen with the help of electrolyzers. The power and water cost of producing it would be negligible. We can use this fuel even in railway engines along with cement and chemical companies instead of coal.

Challenges:

The path for green hydrogen in the country is not clear and at the moment, production of green hydrogen is slightly more expensive than grey hydrogen.

What is green hydrogen?

Hydrogen when produced by electrolysis using renewable energy is known as Green Hydrogen which has no carbon footprint.

Significance of Green Hydrogen:

- Green hydrogen energy is vital for India to meet its Nationally Determined Contribution (INDC) Targets and ensure regional and national energy security, access and availability.
- Green Hydrogen can act as an energy storage option, which would be essential to meet intermittencies (of renewable energy) in the future.
- In terms of mobility, for long distance mobilisations for either urban freight movement within cities and states or for passengers, Green Hydrogen can be used in railways, large ships, buses or trucks, etc.

Applications of green hydrogen:

- Green Chemicals like ammonia and methanol can directly be utilized in existing applications like fertilizers, mobility, power, chemicals, shipping etc.
- Green Hydrogen blending up to 10% may be adopted in CGD networks to gain widespread acceptance.

Benefits:

- It is a clean-burning molecule, which can decarbonize a range of sectors including iron and steel, chemicals, and transportation.
- Renewable energy that cannot be stored or used by the grid can be channelled to produce hydrogen.

Prelims Practice Questions

1. Consider the following statements:

1. The District Mineral Foundation is a statutory body.
2. The funds accrued under DMF is used under Pradhan Mantri Khanij Kshetra Kalyan Yojana.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

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

Answer : D

Explanation

- As per the **Mine and Minerals Development Regulation (Amendment) Act, 2015**, in every district affected by mining-related operations, the state government shall, by notification, establish a trust as a **non-profit body to be called the District Mineral Foundation. Hence, statement 1 is correct.**
- Mining companies contribute 10-30% of the royalty amount that they pay to the government to DMF Trust in the district they are operating in.

- The idea behind the contribution is that local mining-affected communities, mostly tribal and among the poorest in the country, also have the right to benefit from natural resources extracted from where they live.
- DMFs have been set-up in 572 districts of the country, with a cumulative accrual of more than Rs. 40,000 crore so far as per Ministry of Mines (MoM) data.
- The functioning of the DMF trusts and the fund use governed by states' DMF Rules incorporate the mandates of a central guideline, **Pradhan Mantri Khanij Kshetra Kalyan Yojana (PMKKKY)** that specifies high priority areas of investments. **Hence, statement 2 is correct.**

2. Which among the following was the first military exercise between Indian and Vietnamese armies?

- a. INVITEX
- b. LAMITIYE
- c. VINBAX
- d. Ekuverin

Answer: c

Explanation:

- VINBAX is the military exercise between armies of India and Vietnam. It stands for India-Vietnam Bilateral Army Exercise.

3. Consider the following statements:

1. Panna Tiger Reserve is situated in the Vindhya mountain ranges.
2. The Panna region is famous for diamond mining.

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 **Panna Tiger Reserve** was established in 1981 and is **situated in the Vindhya mountain range** in the northern part of Madhya Pradesh. **Hence, statement 1 is correct.**
 - Ken river (a tributary of the Yamuna River) flows through the reserve.
 - The region is also famous for **Panna diamond mining. Hence, statement 2 is correct.**
- Ken-Betwa river interlinking project will be located within the tiger reserve.

4. Delft Island often seen in news is a part of:

- a. Vietnam
- b. Sri Lanka
- c. Maldives
- d. Australia

Answer: b

Explanation:

- Delft island is in Sri Lanka. It was in news recently because some Indian fishermen were arrested close to the island by Sri Lankan navy for trespassing.

5. There has been a persistent deficit budget year after year. Which action/actions of the following can be taken by the Government to reduce the deficit?

1. Reducing revenue expenditure
2. Introducing new welfare schemes
3. Rationalizing subsidies
4. Reducing import duty

Select the correct answer using the code given below.

- a. 1 only

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

Answer: c

Explanation:

- Reducing revenue expenditure and Rationalizing subsidies will help reduce expenditure from the government. This will help reduce the budget deficit of the government.
- The introduction of new welfare schemes will entail new expenditure on the government. Also reducing import duty will reduce government revenue. Hence these two measures will actually contribute to increasing the budget deficit of the government rather than decrease it.

6. The Prime Minister of India has been recently conferred the “Ngadag Pel gi Khorlo” award. It is the highest civilian award of which of the following countries?

- A South Korea
- B Bhutan
- C Indonesia
- D Mongolia

Answer : B

Explanation

- Recently, the **Prime Minister of India** has been conferred by **Bhutan’s highest civilian award, 'Order of the Druk Gyalpo'** also known as “Ngadag Pel gi Khorlo”.
 - The announcement of the award coincided with the occasion of the 114th National Day of Bhutan.
- This is the highest decoration of Bhutan and is **awarded in recognition of a lifetime of service to the people and the Kingdom of Bhutan.**
 - Order of the Dragon King was founded on 7th November 2008, to reward those who devoted a lifetime of service to the nation and people of Bhutan.
 - The honours exist in two categories. Order of the Dragon King is the pinnacle of the honour system in Bhutan and also takes precedence over all other orders, medals and decorations.

- Hence, option B is correct.

Mains Practice Questions

1Q. Including more women in science and applied technologies is critical for the advancement of society. Discuss.

Approach

- Start the answer by mentioning the status of gender equality in India.
- Discuss the status of women in Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics (STEM) fields.
- Suggest some measures to improve women's participation in STEM fields.
- Conclude Suitably.

2Q. What do you understand by DeepFake? Discuss the challenges posed by DeepFake. (150 words)

Approach

- Explain how the deepfake works.
- Highlight some challenges posed by deepfake technology.
- In conclusion highlight some measures to overcome these challenges