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GS 2 : Polity, Governance, International Relations

1. Karnataka's Anti-Conversion Legislation

Amid opposition, the Karnataka Protection of Right to Freedom of Religion Bill, 2021, was introduced in the Assembly.

What is the Bill about?

- The Bill envisages stringent provisions for forced or induced conversions.
- The government wants to prohibit conversion by:
 1. Misrepresentation
 2. Force
 3. Allurement
 4. Fraudulent means
 5. Marriage
 6. Coercion and undue influence

Key features of the Bill

(1) Filing of Complaints

- Complaints of conversions can be filed by family members of a person who is getting converted, or any other person who is related to the person who is getting converted, or any person associated with the person getting converted.

(2) Punishment and fines

- The offense of conversion is cognisable and non-bailable and will attract a jail term of three to five years and a fine of ₹25,000 for people found violating the law.
- There is a jail term of three to 10 years, and a fine of ₹50,000 for people converting minors, women and persons from the SC and ST communities.
- The Bill also envisages a compensation of ₹5 lakh to victims of forced conversions.

What about willful conversion?

- **Prior information:** After the law comes into force, any person intending to convert to another religion will have to inform the district magistrate at least thirty days in advance.
- **Due inquiry of purpose:** The person executing the conversion must also give a notice one month in advance, following which an inquiry will be conducted by the district magistrate through the police to establish the real intent of conversion.
- **Defying the conversion:** Not informing the district magistrate will lead to the conversion being declared null and void.

Impact of non-conformance

- Not informing authorities will carry a prison term of six months to three years for persons who are converted and one year to five years for the persons carrying out the conversions.
- After getting converted, the person has to again inform the district magistrate within 30 days after conversion and must appear before the district magistrate to confirm his/her identity.

What happens once the Conversion is held valid?

- Post conversion, the district magistrate has to inform revenue authorities, the social welfare, minority, backward classes and other departments of the conversion.
- These authorities will, in turn, take steps with respect to the entitlements of the person in terms of reservations and other benefits.

How many states have enacted the legislation?

- Arunachal Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand have laws restricting religious conversion.
- Penalties for breaching the laws can range from monetary fines to imprisonment, with punishments ranging from one to three years of imprisonment and fines from ₹5,000 to ₹50,000.
- Some of the laws provide for stiffer penalties if women, children, or members of Scheduled Castes or Scheduled Tribes (SC/ST) are being converted.
- Some other States, including Manipur, are reportedly “considering similar laws.”

How has Parliament handled anti-conversion bills?

After independence, Parliament introduced a number of anti-conversion bills which were not enacted for want of majority approval.

- In post-Independent India, the first **Indian Conversion (Regulation and Registration) Bill, 1954**, which sought to enforce “licensing of missionaries and the registration of conversion.”
- This was followed by the introduction of the **Backward Communities (Religious Protection) Bill, 1960**, “which aimed at checking conversion of Hindus to ‘non-Indian religions’ .
- Non-India religions included Islam, Christianity, Judaism and Zoroastrianism,.
- The **Freedom of Religion Bill in 1979**, which sought “official curbs on inter-religious conversion.”

Religious conversion: A Constitutionality check

- Indian Constitution aspires toward tolerance of all religions and guaranteed that each person was “equally entitled to freedom of conscience and the right to freely profess, practice and propagate religion” (Article 25).
- This formulation did not come without dispute; the word “propagate” was one of the most contested in the whole of Indian Constitution.

Core issue: Prevalence of Inter-faith Marriage

- India has the Special Marriage Act, 1954, which can be used by inter-faith/inter-community couples to get married.
- The Act, however, requires an advance notice of 30 days to the magistrate before a couple is able to register their marriage.
- When the parties are from different faiths, communities or castes, such a public notice can be, and has been, a great source of danger and harm from their family/community members.
- Consequently, the only option exercised by the inter-faith couples is for one of them to convert to the religion of the other and get married.

Issues with such laws

The anti-conversion laws have been challenged on the ground that innocent persons were being booked under these Acts.

- **Patriarchal dominance:** It is widely presumed that such conversions involve ‘coercion’ or ‘deceit’, and hence, Hindu women ought to be ‘protected’ from the danger of conversion.

- **Targeting minorities:** These laws target Muslims and quoted instances of such inter-faith couples having been harassed by militant activists and state government authorities.
- **Freedom of Conscience:** Women, it is clear, are being treated in a paternalistic way which assumes that they need protection at the cost of their right to make reasoned decisions about changing faith or choosing a friend or life partner.

What about Incentivised Conversions?

- There are many cases of incentivized conversions for the poor sections of society in exchange for a dignified social life.

For them, the solution lies in addressing the root issues:

1. Ending discrimination
2. Providing high quality and free education to the poor and disenfranchised
3. Improving access and quality of free health facilities and medicines
4. Improving nourishment and
5. Providing adequate employment opportunities to all

Conclusion

- Clearly, anti-conversion laws amount to discrimination and a violation of the right to equality.
- However, inter-faith marriages should not be pre-conditioned with religious conversion. This certainly raises concerns for the majority of society.
- Instead of pursuing this disastrous course, the government could work towards removing impediments to inter-faith marriages and eradicating the social stigma attached to such marriages.
- The couples who wish to enter into an inter-faith alliance are enabled an

2. Troubled waters: On Indian fishermen in Sri Lankan custody

Indian fishermen from Tamil Nadu are often arrested by Sri Lanka for fishing in its territorial waters. Sri Lankan authorities have seized more than 75 fishing boats already. Also, there have been cases of death like in January 2021, four fishermen from Ramanathapuram lost their lives in collision with Sri Lankan Naval craft.

Issues

- It is a livelihood issue for fishermen on both sides.
- Also, there is an environmental concern as Tamil Nadu fishermen use bottom trawlers.
- Moreover, frequent loss of lives has made it a humanitarian issue.
- Even many rounds of discussions involving both countries have not made tangible improvement in the situation.
- The fishing issue has been an ever-present sore in India – Sri Lanka relations.

Solution

- Need for improvement in the form of an Indian government scheme for replacing bottom trawlers with deep-sea fishing boats equipped with long lines and gill nets. The scheme has not taken off due to the limited planned unit cost and fishermen's share accounting for 30% of this cost which they are unable to afford.
- Government should push for the adoption of sea cage farming and sea/ocean ranching by Indian fishermen as there is limited marine wealth on the Indian side of Palk Bay.

What are bottom Trawlers?

Bottom trawling is a fishing method that is indiscriminate in what it catches as it involves dragging a large fishing net with a wide mouth and enclosed end along the ocean floor. It harms the marine ecosystem and is banned in many countries including Sri Lanka.

3. As a regional leader, not a victim of circumstance

Recent changes in the Indian Ocean region:

In the past few years, the Indian Ocean region has been influenced by two trends – prudence in power projection by the USA in the region and China's increasing assertiveness leading to territorial tensions. These trends have been exemplified by the American pull-out from Afghanistan and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Indian response

There is a view that India has not been able to respond well to the changing dynamics in the region.

On Afghanistan

- India had not been able to predict U.S withdrawal especially after it signed the Doha Agreement of February 2020. India has not been able to affect outcomes in Afghanistan to its advantage either.
- Moreover, India has cancelled all visas to Afghans granted before August this year, thus, abandoning its friends and minorities (other than Sikh or Hindu).
- India is also trying to establish furtive links with the Taliban. Such stand shows that India is toeing the line of “western powers” and is not holding out for a better future for Afghanistan with a strong Indian presence.

On China

- China has been amassing its military along the Line of Actual Control for months now while the Indian government has been reluctant in admitting it. The Chinese actions could be because of the following reasons.
 - to limit India’s efforts at building border infrastructure, bridges, and roads right up to the LAC;
 - to limit any possible threat to Xinjiang and Tibet;
 - to limit India’s ability to threaten China’s key Belt and Road project, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), and
 - to blunt any plans as outlined by the Home Minister in 2019 to reclaim Aksai Chin and Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK) militarily by India.
- India’s attempts to get China to the negotiating table have met with little success.

Suggestions for India

- India should adhere to the democratic principles of the Indian Republic’s founders as a pluralistic, representative, inclusive power that respects the rights of each citizen, the media, and civil society as these are admired by its neighbours.
- India should not falter on its commitment to smaller neighbours like Bangladesh, Maldives.
- India should take utmost care in nurturing and strengthening its ties with these small but crucial nations in the Indian Ocean region.
- India should take measures to counter the growing Chinese influence in the region by adopting the principles of the Gujral doctrine vis-a-vis its smaller neighbours.
- New Delhi should overcome all attempts to cast it as a “middle power” that needs the support of other powers to decide its course rather than emerge as a maker of its own destiny. India should start taking independent foreign policy stands based on its own self-interests.

4. Looking beyond the Forest Rights Act

The Forest Rights Act completed 15 years. This has been marred by myriad implementational issues between the Forest Department and various Tribal Rights Groups.

Forest Rights Act, 2006:

- In the colonial era, the British diverted the abundant forest wealth of the nation to meet their economic needs. While the procedure for settlement of rights was provided under statutes such as the Indian Forest Act, 1927, these were hardly followed.
- As a result, tribal and forest-dwelling communities, who had been living within the forests in harmony with the environment and the ecosystem, continued to live inside the forests in tenurial insecurity, a situation which continued even after independence as they were marginalised.
- The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, also known as the Forest Rights Act was enacted to protect the marginalised socio-economic class of citizens and balance the right to the environment with their right to life and livelihood.

Challenges Observed:

- **Absence of Procedural Safeguards:** Despite the confirmation of forming a Forest Rights Committee from the grassroots level, there has not been any such activity in many places, it was observed.
- **Lack of Verifiable Data:** The studies conducted in Chhattisgarh revealed that during various instances, the plots claimed and the awards given do not match.
- **Information Asymmetry:** The Tribals majorly received lesser rights than claimed due to the fact that they believed if they claimed their right, they may lose the smaller claim as well. This information asymmetry had led to the further alienation of the tribal persons from the mainstream.
- **Failure of Last Mile Connectivity of Schemes:** Various developmental schemes for rural development such as Deendayal Upadhyaya Gram Jyoti Yojana, Janani Shishu Suraksha Karyakram, etc. have not been able to empower the vulnerable sections and failed to allow for the assertion of political space.
- **Lack of Quality Land:** The land allotted to the Tribal persons is mostly small, of poor quality and not very fertile. The lack of irrigation facilities and labour-wage economy further destroy their productivity and profitability. The declining industry of local cigars in Chhattisgarh is a prime example of the same.

Chances Available:

- **Innovative Techniques:** The techniques of horticulture must be provided to the tribals so that they may increase their productivity and afford a better quality of life.
- **Involvement of Civil Society:** Various organizations such as in Dang, Gujarat allowed for the hand-holding of the beneficiaries at every step.
- **Kerala Model:** The promotion of eco-tourism and medico-tourism to safeguard the interests of the tribals is another positive step. Also providing skill-based education with assured jobs on a large scale in proportion to the demand would do wonders in these areas.

Way Forward:

The intent of the Forest Rights Act, 2006 was to spread empowerment of forest dwellers, and the same can be achieved with multi-level coordination among the tribal communities, civil society and the local administration. The support from Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 should be mobilized to provide further support to the tribal communities in-situ.

- The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) has passed a resolution permitting a **carve-out in sanctions against the Taliban** to facilitate the delivery of humanitarian aid to Afghanistan.

Background:

- The U.S. and other countries had frozen more than \$10 billion and imposed several sanctions against the Taliban after it ousted the elected government in Afghanistan in August.
- Reports from international institutions like the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) had noted the sorry state of affairs of Afghanistan's banking and financial system and an **impending economic collapse**. UNICEF had warned of **disruptions in health and nutrition services in Afghanistan** and a possible **drought and food crisis** in its report.
- The sanctions and freeze on Afghan assets were found to be impeding humanitarian work in the country.

Details:

- The carve-out covers urgently needed **humanitarian assistance and other activities** that support basic human needs in Afghanistan. It would include activities related to shelter and settlement assistance, food security, education, livelihoods support, energy, water, sanitation, health, nutrition, and hygiene, among others.

Condition-based relief

- The resolution mandates a **review of the carve-out every six months**. It also mandates a brief on the implementation of the carve-out every six months to the UNSC by an Emergency Relief Coordinator.
- It calls for the **impartial distribution of the assistance** especially to the most vulnerable, including women, children and minorities.
- It also seeks an assurance that the **benefits of the assistance do not accrue to entities designated on the 1988 Sanctions List**.

GS 3 : Economy, Science and Technology, Environment

5. Indian Army inducts Armoured Engineer Reconnaissance Vehicle (AERV)

The first batch of next-generation indigenously designed Armoured Engineer Reconnaissance Vehicles (AERV) was inducted by the Indian Army.

About AERV

- AERV is indigenously designed and developed by DRDO and manufactured by the Pune unit of Bharat Electronics Limited.
- It has more than 90% indigenous content.
- It is a versatile BMP-IIK amphibious Infantry Combat Vehicle (ICV) fitted with instruments for water reconnaissance, land reconnaissance, navigation, and data backup.

Unique capabilities of AERV

- AERV is capable of measuring soil bearing capacity on riverbanks.
- It works to determine if they are motorable for military vehicles on Go-No Go basis (critical parameters for bridge laying), dry and wet gaps in day and night conditions, slopes and height of river banks or canals.”
- AERVs can navigate terrain using Military Grid Coordinate System, measure and plot underwater beds and water currents of rivers or canals.
- They can store data from various instruments on Control Console for further analysis and decision-making.

6. The suspension of futures trading in agri products

The **Securities & Exchange Board of India (SEBI)** has issued directions to stock exchanges in commodity derivatives segment for immediately suspending **trading in derivative contracts in key farm commodities** namely paddy (non-basmati), wheat, chana, mustard seeds and its derivatives, soya bean and its derivatives, crude palm oil & moong for a year.

- It is being suspended to reign in the rising prices of these essential commodities which is fuelling inflation.

What are derivative contracts?

- Derivative contracts are contracts between two or more parties where **the derivative value is based upon an underlying asset**, in this case agri commodities.
- The price of the derivatives are established by the price fluctuations of the underlying assets.
- Derivatives can be **traded on an exchange or over the counter (OTC)**.

How does the system work and what are derivatives trading?

Derivatives trading takes place when **traders speculate on the future price of an asset through buying or selling of derivative contracts** to maximise profit as compared to buying the underlying asset outright.

- Traders also use derivatives for hedging to minimise risk against an existing position.
- With derivatives, traders can go short and make profit from falling asset prices.
- They also use derivatives to hedge against any existing long positions.
- The ultimate objective is to profit. This is viewed as a deterrent to bring in price discipline in the market.

Why suspension?

- To reign in on the rising prices of these essential commodities which is fuelling inflation. India is the world's biggest importer of vegetable oils and

this measure will make it difficult for edible oil importers and traders to transact business since they use Indian exchanges to hedge their risk.

- It is believed that speculators have a role in jacking up of prices and this needs to be discouraged to curb inflation and support growth as the economy is recovering from the COVID-19 impact.

THE INDIAN EXPRESS

GS 2 : Polity, Governance, International Relations

1. Electoral reform is welcome, but shouldn't be selective

The Election Laws (Amendment) Bill that seeks to link the electoral rolls with the Aadhaar database has been passed by both the Houses of the parliament.

Three electoral reforms

- A wide range of electoral reform proposals has been pending with the government, several of them for over two decades.
- The three reforms – **common electoral rolls for Vidhan Sabha and panchayat elections, extending the qualifying date for registration of young new voters, and linking of Aadhaar with electoral rolls** – taken up by the Union Cabinet on December 15 are, therefore, significant.

[1] Common electoral rolls

- For years, the ECI has been advocating a common electoral roll for all elections.
- Currently, separate electoral rolls are maintained for elections to the Lok Sabha, Vidhan Sabha and local government bodies (panchayats or municipal).
- **Role of ECI and SECs:** There are two types of election management bodies in the country – the ECI that conducts the Lok Sabha and Vidhan Sabha elections and SECs that conduct panchayat and municipal elections.
- The process for making electoral rolls is laid down in the **Registration of Electors Rules, 1960**.
- The SECs have the **option of either adopting the electoral rolls created by the ECI** or preparing such rolls on their own.
- Most prefer to use the rolls prepared by the ECI.

- Some states, however, **develop their rolls independently.**
- These are Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Madhya Pradesh, Kerala, Odisha, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland and the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir.
- Considering that a voter for all three tiers of elected bodies is the same, why is it that she finds her name missing from one of the rolls, **mostly the panchayat rolls?**
- This is particularly surprising when the officials responsible for making **both these rolls are the same.**
- **A common electoral roll is thus a logical solution.**

Benefits of common electoral rolls

- **Tackling stuffing voters:** A common experience has been the stuffing of bogus voters in the panchayat/municipal rolls.
- Corrupt practices are proportionately higher in PRI polls.
- **Avoid the involvement of teachers in the non-teaching work:** The process of making electoral rolls is usually done by the schoolteachers.
- Their involvement in non-teaching work takes its toll.
- **Cost-saving:** A common electoral roll will obviate the need for deploying them repeatedly, besides saving enormous costs.

Suggestions for preparation of common electoral rolls

- **Issue joint instructions:** The ECI and SECs can issue joint instructions for preparing the common rolls. The roll-making machinery stays the same.
- **Pilot studies** may be conducted in random constituencies to identify the discrepancies between two sets of rolls and their reasons.

What are the constitutional and legal changes required?

- **Amendment in Article 243K and 243ZA:** The SECs derive their powers to supervise local body elections from Articles 243K and 243ZA of the Constitution.
- **Changes in State laws:** All state governments would have to change their electoral laws to adopt ECI electoral rolls for local elections.

[2] Eligibility date of new voters

- According to **Section 14(b) of the Representation of People Act of 1950**, only those who have turned 18 on or before January 1 of the year are to be registered.
- This implies that all those who turn 18 between January 2 and December 31 of a year must wait till the next year.

- This technicality results in the **exclusion of a large section of 18-year-olds.**

Suggestion by ECI on eligibility date

- The ECI had sent a letter to the Law Ministry on November 4, 2013, which recommended the **issuing of a voter card to an individual ideally on their 18th birthday**, or updating voter rolls **every month or quarter.**
- A committee of the Ministry of Law and Justice under Sushil Kumar Modi has proposed quarterly cut-off dates for voter registration – January 1, April 1, July 1 and October 1.

[3] Aadhar linking

- The proposal to link electoral rolls with Aadhaar was first mooted by the ECI in 2015 but work on it had to be stopped when the Supreme Court ruled that Aadhaar cannot be used except **voluntarily for beneficiary-oriented schemes.**
- **Benefits of linking:** The linking will help in **identifying duplicate voters**, something that ECI has been desperately attempting for years using various **“de-duplication” software** with limited success.

Conclusion

Any progress in addressing the vexed issue of electoral reform – even in a piecemeal manner – is welcome. The time has, however, come for the government to consider the 40-plus pending proposals, instead of selectively going for some reforms.

2. In electoral reform bill's passing, a missed opportunity

The Election Laws (Amendment) Bill, 2021 was passed in the Lok Sabha recently. It seeks to link electoral rolls with the Aadhaar ecosystem.

What are the concerns with linking of Aadhar with electoral roll?

[1] Aadhar is not proof of citizenship

- Aadhaar is not meant to be a citizenship proof but only a digital identity for all residents.
- Residence of 182 days can make even a non-citizen eligible for an Aadhaar ID.

[2] Aadhaar is not address proof

- According to public statements by several government functionaries, Aadhaar was only meant to be identity proof but not address proof.
- **Electoral roll is based on Aadhaar:** In contrast, the RER clearly stipulates address to be a key index for electoral rolls.
- **Different enrolment process:** Moreover, the enrolment processes for voters' lists and Aadhaar are completely different.
- Whereas Aadhaar enrolment is based on production of existing documents and the "introducer system", voter enrolments involve physical verification and "house visits" by a registration officer or representative.

[3] No audit report on the efficacy of Aadhaar deduplication or on the authenticity of the Aadhaar database

- Even the Supreme Court accepted the Unique Identification Authority of India's (UIDAI) claims on the integrity of the Aadhaar database at face value without any scrutiny.
- **Risk of exclusion error:** Using Aadhaar to clean the electoral rolls involved the risk of **disenfranchisement, especially of the marginalised communities.**
- It is to be noted that there is ample publicly documented evidence of large-scale exclusion in PDS and welfare disbursement due to Aadhaar.

[4] Conflict of interest

- **UIDAI is under government control:** Maintenance of the voters' lists is a primary responsibility of the ECI, which is an independent constitutional body, whereas Aadhaar is a government instrument and UIDAI is under government control.
- Since the ECI has no control on either enrolment or deduplication in Aadhaar, it appears inappropriate – and a **potential conflict of interest** – to use Aadhaar for electoral rolls.
- In particular, since **Aadhaar is directly used for disbursement of welfare** and direct benefit transfers, linking it with voter ID may provide a direct method for the government to influence and manipulate voters.

[5] Risk of profiling and targeting of voters

- Aadhaar is a ubiquitous ID that is used in a variety of applications.
- Linking it with the voter ID will open up avenues for **profiling and targeting of voters.**
- **No audit for purpose limitation:** This is of particular concern because neither the UIDAI nor the ECI have publicly audited architectures for **purpose limitation** and protection against insider attacks.

- While **profiling using public data is not illegal** according to current laws, both the electorate and Parliament need to clearly understand the risks of such profiling.
- It is far easier to win elections through digital analysis of electoral rolls than through attacking the electronic voting process, especially when election results are available at booth-level granularity
- Both **privacy and integrity of the electoral rolls** are of paramount importance in the digital age, and the clear tension between the two makes the problem challenging.

Way forward

- **Use of cryptography:** The RER of 1960 clearly opted for transparency as a means to the integrity of the electoral rolls, thereby ensuring that all **additions and deletions can be publicly audited.**
- However, with the possibility of digital processing of electoral data, the risks associated with such complete transparency have increased manifold.
- Yet, there are several modern techniques from **cryptography and computer science** that may help mitigate the risks by enabling both privacy and public auditability.

Conclusion

An electoral reforms bill at the onset of 2022 needed to explore and address these issues head-on.

3. Centre disagrees with India's rank on World Press Freedom Index

The Centre has disagreed with India's low rank on **the World Press Freedom Index** prepared by media watchdog **Reporters Without Borders**.

What's the issue?

The government claimed that the report was based on a small sample size and gave little or no importance to the "fundamentals of democracy".

India's ranking in the index and the cause for concern:

In March, Reporters Without Borders had said that **India ranked 142 out of 180 countries** when it comes to press freedom.

- It had added that the nation was classified as “bad” for journalism.
- It had said that **India was among the five most dangerous nations** in terms of journalists killed across the world this year.
- Also, the report had a “questionable methodology” for the survey. It lacked a clear definition of press freedom.

World Press Freedom Index 2021- Highlights:

- **Norway topped the index for the fifth year in a row.**
- The report labelled 132 countries as “very bad”, “bad” or “problematic”.
- It stated that the pandemic was used as means to deny journalists this access and promote government sponsored propaganda regarding the Covid-19 outbreak.

Performance of India and neighbours:

- India remained at **the 142nd position among 180 countries.**
- India was ranked in the “bad” category, along with Brazil, Mexico and Russia.
- The report says India is one of the world’s most dangerous countries for journalists trying to do their job properly.
- In 2016, India’s rank was 133, which has steadily climbed down to 142 in 2020.
- India drew flak for “extremely violent social media hate campaigns” against journalists who “dare to criticise” the government.
- In south Asia, Nepal was placed 106, Sri Lanka 127, Myanmar 140, Pakistan 145 and Bangladesh at the 152nd spot. China was ranked 177, and the US 44.

About World Press Freedom Index:

- Published annually by **Reporters Without Borders since 2002**, the World Press Freedom Index measures the level of media freedom in 180 countries.
- It is based on an evaluation of media freedom that measures pluralism, media independence, the quality of the legal framework and the safety of journalists.
- It also includes indicators of the level of media freedom violations in each region.
- It is compiled by means of a questionnaire in 20 languages that is completed by experts all over the world. This qualitative analysis is combined with

quantitative data on abuses and acts of violence against journalists during the period evaluated.

4. UNSC adopts resolution to ease Afghan assistance

Context The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) unanimously passed a resolution permitting a carve-out in sanctions against the Taliban to facilitate the delivery of humanitarian aid to Afghanistan.

Key takeaways

- This carve-out covers urgently needed humanitarian assistance and other activities that support basic human needs in Afghanistan.
- The resolution (2615) mandates a review of the carve-out every six months.
- It also requests that an Emergency Relief Coordinator brief the UNSC every six months on the delivery of assistance and any obstacles to implementation.
- It also “calls on all parties” to respect human rights and observe international humanitarian law.

About United Nations Security Council

- The UNSC is one of the six principal organs of the United Nations
- It is charged with the maintenance of international peace and security.
- Permanent members (P5): Russia, UK, France, China, and USA
- The Security Council also has 10 non-permanent members, elected on a regional basis to serve two-year terms.
- The body’s presidency rotates monthly among its 15 members.

GS 3 : Economy, Science and Technology, Environment

5. RBI proposes new norms for Capital Requirement for Banks

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has proposed to replace existing approaches for measuring minimum operational risk capital requirements of banks with a new Basel-III standardized approach.

What are Capital Requirements of a Bank?

- Capital requirements are standardized regulations in place for banks and other depository institutions that determine how much liquid capital must be held of a certain level of their assets.
- They are set to ensure that banks and depository institutions' holdings are not dominated by investments that increase the risk of default.
- They also ensure that banks and depository institutions have enough capital to sustain operating losses (OL) while still honoring withdrawals.

Why need such a requirement?

- An angry public and uneasy investment climate usually prove to be the catalysts for capital requirements provisions.
- This is essential when irresponsible financial behavior by large institutions is seen as the culprit behind a financial crisis, market crash, or recession.

What are the risks for a Bank?

There are many types of risks that banks face.

- Credit risk
- Market risk
- Operational risk
- Liquidity risk
- Business risk
- Reputational risk
- Systemic risk
- Moral hazard

What is Operational Risk?

- 'Operational risk' refers to the risk of loss resulting from inadequate or failed internal processes, people and systems or from external events.
- This has been defined by the Basel Committee on Banking Supervision I as the risk of loss resulting from inadequate or failed internal processes, people and systems or from external events.
- This definition includes legal risk, but excludes strategic and reputational risk.

Pros of Capital Requirements

- Ensure banks stay solvent, avoid default
- Ensure depositors have access to funds

- Set industry standards
- Provide way to compare, evaluate institutions

Unwanted consequences of such move

- Raise costs for banks and eventually consumers
- Inhibit banks' ability to invest
- Reduce availability of credit, loans

6. Kerala's SilverLine Project

Protests are taking place across Kerala against SilverLine, a semi high-speed railway project that envisages trains running at 200 km/h between the state's northern and southern ends.

What is the SilverLine project?

- The proposed 529.45-km line will link Thiruvananthapuram in the south to Kasaragod in the north, covering 11 districts through 11 stations.
- KRDC, or K-Rail, is a joint venture between the Kerala government and the Union Ministry of Railways created to execute this project.
- The deadline for the project, being executed by the Kerala Rail Development Corporation Limited (KRDC), is 2025.

Features of the Project

- The project will have trains of electric multiple unit (EMU) type, each with preferably nine cars extendable to 12.
- A nine-car rake can seat a maximum of 675 passengers in business and standard class settings.
- The trains can run at a maximum speed of 220 km/hr on a standard gauge track, completing journeys in either direction in fewer than four hours.
- At every 500 metres, there will be under-passages with service roads.

Need for the SilverLine project

- **Time saving:** On the existing network, it now takes 12 hours. Once the project is completed, one can travel from Kasaragod to Thiruvananthapuram in less than four hours at 200 km/hr.
- **Old infrastructure:** Existing railway infrastructure in Kerala cannot meet the demands of the future.

- **Terrain limitations:** Most trains run at an average speed of 45 km/hr due to a lot of curves and bends on the existing stretch.
- **De-trafficking:** The project can take a significant load of traffic off the existing stretch and make travel faster for commuters, which in turn will reduce congestion on roads and help reduce accidents.
- **Others:** The project would reduce greenhouse gas emissions, help in expansion of Ro-Ro services, produce employment opportunities, integrate airports and IT corridors, and enable faster development of cities it passes through.

Present status of the Project

Ans. Land acquisition is underway

- The state government has begun the process of land acquisition after the cabinet approved it this year.
- As part of the first stage of acquisition, local revenue and K-Rail officials are on the ground, demarcating land and placing boundary stones.
- This is done to give the officials a sense of how much private land will have to be acquired and the number of families who will be displaced.

Issues with the Project

- **Political rhetoric:** All political parties have been spearheading separate protests.
- **Huge capital requirement:** They argue that the project was an “astronomical scam in the making” and would sink the state further into debt.
- **Displacement of families:** The project was financially unviable and would lead to the displacement of over 30,000 families.
- **Ecological damage:** It would cause great environmental harm as its route cuts through precious wetlands, paddy fields and hills.
- **Flood hazard:** The building of embankments on either side of the major portion of the line will block natural drainage and cause floods during heavy rains.

7. Reintroduction of African Cheetahs in India

Kuno National Park in Madhya Pradesh was all prepped to welcome the African cheetahs — a project that has been a decade in the making — this year. The project has now been postponed, as the new coronavirus variant of concern omicron prompted travel restrictions.

About Asiatic Cheetah

- Cheetah, the world's fastest land animal was declared extinct in India in 1952.
- The Asiatic cheetah is classified as a "critically endangered" species by the IUCN Red List, and is believed to survive only in Iran.
- It was expected to be re-introduced into the country after the Supreme Court lifted curbs for its re-introduction.
- From 400 in the 1990s, their numbers are estimated to have reached to 50-70 today, because of poaching, hunting of their main prey (gazelles) and encroachment on their habitat.

Why reintroduce Cheetahs?

- Reintroductions of large carnivores have increasingly been recognized as a strategy to conserve threatened species and restore ecosystem functions.
- The cheetah is the only large carnivore that has been extirpated, mainly by over-hunting in India in historical times.
- India now has the economic ability to consider restoring its lost natural heritage for ethical as well as ecological reasons.

Why was the project halted?

- The court was worried whether the African cheetahs would find the sanctuary a favorable climate as far as the abundance of prey is concerned.
- Those who challenged the plan argued that the habitat of cheetahs needed to support a genetically viable population.

8. Vernacular Innovation Program (VIP)

In News: With an ambition to empower innovators and entrepreneurs across the country, Atal Innovation Mission (AIM), NITI Aayog has come up with a first of its kind Vernacular Innovation Program (VIP).

- Will enable innovators and entrepreneurs in India to have access to the innovation ecosystem in 22 scheduled languages by the Government of India.
- Help to lower the language barrier in the field of innovation and entrepreneurship such that will systematically decouple creative expressions and languages of transaction
- Assist local entrepreneurs, artisans and innovators to seamlessly assimilate the knowledge cum technical materials that AIM will develop. This would assist India in building a strong local network of design experts and innovation practitioners.

The Need

- The struggle of not being able to expose one's idea or innovation to the world is quite important to address, especially in India with its great diversity of languages.
- Only 10.4% of Indians speak English, most as their second, third, or fourth language. Not surprisingly, only 0.02% of Indians spoke English as their first language.
- Ten years later these numbers are not likely to be very different.

Therefore there is a need to create equal opportunity for the vernacular innovators who represent the staggering 90% of our population. After all, we know for sure that this excluded population, no matter which Indian language they speak, is at least as creative as the rest.

India may be the first nation in the world to launch such an initiative where an innovation ecosystem catering to 22 languages plus English is being built. By providing access to learning in one's language and culture, AIM looks forward to enriching the local, regional, national and global innovation pipelines.

Prelims Practice Questions

1. Consider the following statements:

1. Cooperative Societies is an item in state subject.
2. Multi-State Cooperative Societies are regulated by the Union Government.

Which of the above statements are correct?

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

Answer : C

Explanation

- The item “**Cooperative Societies**” is a **State Subject in the 7th Schedule (entry 32)** of the State List in the Constitution of India. **Hence, statement 1 is correct.**
- There are **many Cooperative 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 Multi-State Cooperative Societies (MSCS) Act, 2002** governs such cooperatives.
- According to MSCS Act, 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. **Hence, statement 2 is correct.**

2. What is the application of Somatic Cell Nuclear Transfer Technology?

- a. Production of biolarvicides
- b. Manufacture of biodegradable plastics
- c. Reproductive cloning of animals
- d. Production of organisms free of diseases

Answer: c

Explanation:

- In genetics and developmental biology, somatic cell nuclear transfer (SCNT) is a laboratory strategy for creating a viable embryo from a body cell and an egg cell. The technique consists of taking an enucleated oocyte (egg cell) and implanting a donor nucleus from a somatic (body) cell.
- It is used in the reproductive cloning of animals.

3. 'Aurobindo Ghose' was associated with which of the following?

- A Alipore bomb case
- B Meerut conspiracy case
- C Kakori train action
- D Chauri chaura incident

Answer : A

Explanation

- Aurobindo Ghose was born in Calcutta on 15th August 1872. He was a yogi, seer, philosopher, poet, and Indian nationalist who propounded a philosophy of divine life on earth through spiritual evolution.
- He died on 5th December 1950 in Pondicherry.
- From 1902 to 1910 he partook in the struggle to free India from the British. As a result of his political activities, he was imprisoned in 1908 (**Alipore Bomb case**). **Hence, option A is correct.**
- Two years later he fled British India and found refuge in the French colony of Pondichéry (Puducherry), where he devoted himself for the rest of his life to the development of his “integral” yoga with an aim of a fulfilled and spiritually transformed life on earth.

4. Which of the following statements about compassionate employment is/are correct?

1. Compassionate appointment is not a matter of right.
2. Dependent family of missing government employees can be considered for compassionate appointment.

Options:

- a. 1 only
- b. 2 only
- c. Both
- d. None

Answer: c

Explanation:

- Compassionate Appointment is a social security scheme launched by the Government to grant appointment to a dependent family member on a compassionate basis when a government servant dies while in service or retires on medical grounds.

- The Supreme Court has held in an order that compassionate employment is not a vested right, but is to enable the family to tide over an immediate crisis that may result from the death of the employee.

5. The World Press Freedom Index (WPFI) is an annual ranking of countries compiled and published by

- a. World Economic Forum (WEF)
- b. Amnesty International
- c. Economist Group
- d. Reporters Without Borders

Answer: d

Explanation:

- The Press Freedom Index is an annual ranking of countries compiled and published by Reporters Without Borders since 2002 based upon the organisation's own assessment of
- the countries' press freedom records in the previous year.

6. Consider the following statements with respect to the Indian flapshell turtle (*Lissemys punctata*):

1. It is only found in India, Bangladesh and Pakistan.
2. Its IUCN status is Vulnerable.
3. These turtles are omnivores.

Which of the above statements is/are correct?

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

Answer: b

Explanation:

- The Indian flapshell turtle (*Lissemys punctata*) is a freshwater species of turtle found in South Asia. Apart from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, it is also found in Nepal, Sri Lanka and Myanmar.
- It is morphologically an evolutionary link between the softshell and hardshell aquatic turtles.
- Exploitation for profit and habitat change are threats to their survival. Its IUCN status is Vulnerable.
- The Indian flapshell turtle is known to be omnivorous. Its diet consists of frogs, shrimp, snails, aquatic vegetation, plant leaves, flowers, fruits, grasses, and seeds.

Mains Practice Questions

1Q. What do you understand by coral bleaching? Examine the reasons for coral bleaching and suggest corrective measures in this regard. (250 words)

Approach

- Define coral bleaching in introduction.
- Describe reasons for Coral bleaching.
- Suggest corrective measures to deal with Coral bleaching.
- Give conclusion

2Q. In countries like India, social security in its modern form has been a response to many issues arising out of the development process. Discuss. (250 words)

Approach

- Introduce by defining Social Security.
- Mention the steps and policies by government to address the issue.
- Conclude with challenges and suggestions with a way forward.