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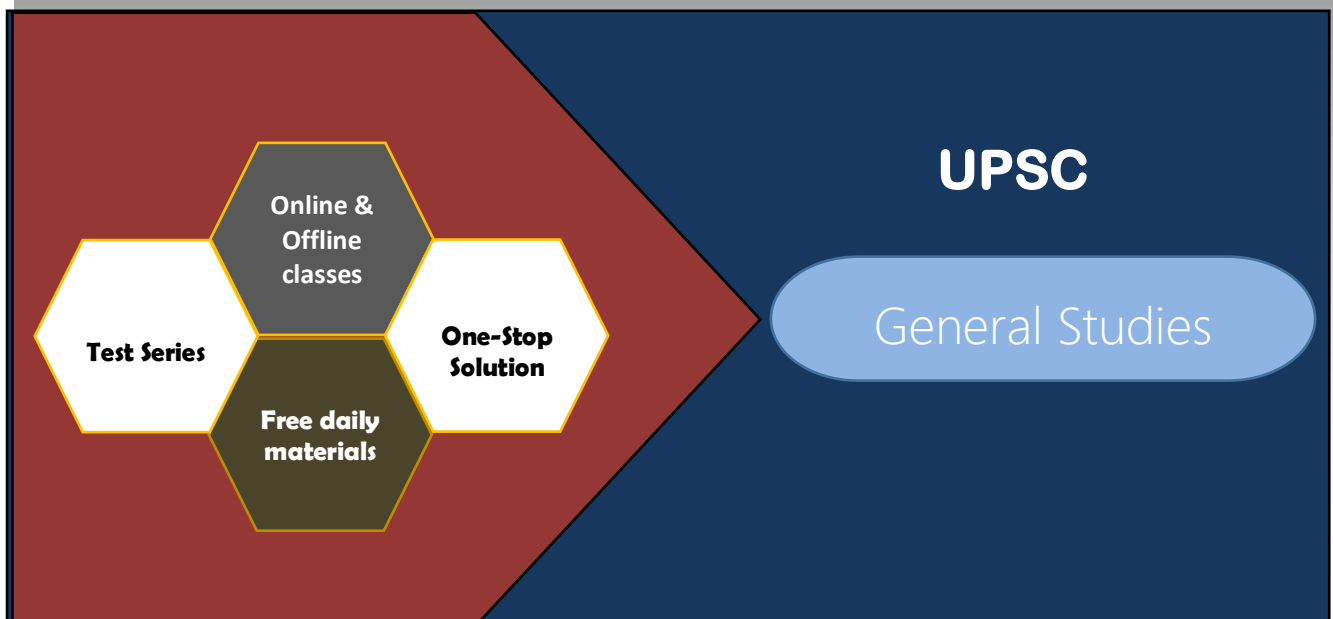
Monthly current affairs magazine

CURRENT AFFAIRS

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THE HINDU & INDIAN EXPRESS**



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GS 1 : Heritage, culture ,Geography of the World and Society

1. Is La Nina a fair weather friend of our country?

This year the La Nina is being blamed for worsening the longest spell of heatwaves from March to April in north, west and Central India.

In most years, meteorologists considered the La Nina to be a friend of India.

What is El Nino and La Nina?

- While El Niño (Spanish for 'little boy'), the more common expression, is the abnormal surface warming observed along the eastern and central regions of the Pacific Ocean (the region between Peru and Papua New Guinea).
- The La Niña (Spanish for 'little girl') is an abnormal cooling of these surface waters.
- Together, the El Niño (Warm Phase) and La Niña (Cool Phase) phenomena are termed as El Niño Southern Oscillation (ENSO).
- These are large-scale ocean phenomena which influence the global weather – winds, temperature and rainfall. They have the ability to trigger extreme weather events like droughts, floods, hot and cold conditions, globally.
- Each cycle can last anywhere between 9 to 12 months, at times extendable to 18 months – and re-occur after every three to five years.
- Meteorologists record the sea surface temperatures for four different regions, known as Niño regions, along this equatorial belt.
- Depending on the temperatures, they forecast either as an El Niño, an ENSO neutral phase, or a La Niña.

Impact on India

- El Nino during winter causes warm conditions over the Indian subcontinent and during summer, it leads to dry conditions and deficient monsoon.
- Whereas La Nina results in better than normal monsoon in India.
- It has been established that Indian summer monsoon is a fully coupled land-atmosphere-ocean system and that it is linked to ocean temperature variability.
- In an agricultural country like India, the extreme departure from normal seasonal rainfall seriously affects the agricultural output and thus the economy of the country.

2. Rakhigarhi skeletons' DNA samples sent for analysis

DNA samples collected from two human skeletons unearthed at a necropolis of a Harappan-era city site in Rakhigarhi, Haryana have been sent for scientific examination.

- DNA analysis might tell about the ancestry and food habits of people who lived in the Rakhigarhi region thousands of years ago.

About Rakhi Garhi

- The ancient site of Rakhi-Khas and Rakhi-Shahpur are collectively known as Rakhigarhi, located on the right bank of the now dried up Palaeo-channel of Drishadvati.
- It is located in the Ghaggar-Hakra river plain in the Hissar district of Haryana.
- Seven mounds are located here.
- The site has yielded various stages of Harappan culture and is by far one of the largest Harappan sites in India.
- The site shows the sequential development of the Indus culture in the now dried up Saraswati basin.

Major findings at Rakhi Garhi

- Findings confirm both early and mature Harappan phases and include 4,600-year-old human skeletons, fortification and bricks.
- Digging so far reveals a well-planned city with 1.92 m wide roads, a bit wider than in Kalibangan.
- The pottery is similar to Kalibangan and Banawali.
- Pits surrounded by walls have been found, which are thought to be for sacrificial or some religious ceremonies.
- There are brick-lined drains to handle sewage from the houses.
- Terracotta statues, weights, bronze artefacts, comb, copper fish hooks, needles and terracotta seals have also been found.
- A bronze vessel has been found which is decorated with gold and silver.
- A granary belonging to the mature Harappan phase has been found here.
- Fire altars structures were revealed in Rakhigarhi.

3. Literacy and delivery of services, not religion, influences fertility

The National Family Health Survey (NFHS) 5 report that was awaited for nearly six months is finally out. And it provides a heartening outlook.

About NHFS

- Started in 1992-93, it has culminated in the fifth round 2019-21.
- The NFHS is a large, multi-round survey that, inter alia, provides information on **fertility, infant and child mortality, the practice of family planning, reproductive health, nutrition, anaemia**, quality and utilisation of health and family planning services.
- The surveys provide essential **data needed by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare** and other agencies for policy and programme purposes.
- The Ministry assigned the nodal responsibility for the task to the International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS), Mumbai.
- Several international agencies are involved in providing technical and financial assistance, mainly **USAID, DFID, UNICEF, and UNFPA**.

Replacement rate achieved

- **Replacement rate achieved:** The report shows that India has finally achieved the replacement rate of 2.1TFR (Total Fertility Rate is the total number of children a woman will bear in her lifetime).
- In fact, it has **gone below the mark to 2.0**.
- There are, of course, large interstate variations.
- The lagging states are UP, Bihar, Jharkhand, Manipur and Meghalaya.
- Significantly, there were four states which were keeping the figures poor, namely, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh.
- Two states, Rajasthan and MP, have struggled to get out of this group, while Jharkhand and the two northeastern states have replaced them.
- UP and Bihar because of their sheer size are pulling down the national average.
- Rajasthan and MP have reached the TFR of 2, which shows the success of their efforts.

Influencing factors

- It is not religion as commonly propounded but literacy, especially of girls, income and delivery of family planning, and health services.
- **1] Delivery of services:** The figures would have been even better if all those who have been made aware of the benefits of family planning had **received the services they desire**.

- Making people informed of the need and methods of family planning and motivating them to adopt family planning is difficult enough.
- Having achieved the difficult task, we are not able to provide the services communities need – the “**unmet need**” – which is still very high at 9.4 per cent.
- If we focus on this issue in a mission mode, the family planning performance will dramatically improve.
- **2] Male attitude towards family planning:** They tend to put the **onus for birth control on women**.
- As many as 35 per cent men believe that using contraceptives is a woman’s responsibility. They ignore the fact that male vasectomy is a much simpler procedure than female tubectomy.
- **3] Acceptance of family planning:** Muslim acceptance of family planning has continued through the five surveys spread over three decades at a rate faster than all other communities.
- Though birth control practice among Muslims is still the least – 47.4 per cent (up from 45 per cent in NFHS-4).
- Other communities – for example, Hindus – are not far behind with 58 per cent (up from 56 per cent).
- This means that 42 per cent of the 80 per cent of the population are not practising family planning.
- **Education:** Women who have not attended school have 2.8 TFR as against 1.8 for those who have completed class XII.
- **Poverty:** Similar gap of figure one is visible in the context of poverty with the poorest segment having higher TFR than the richest.

Conclusion

The time has come to leave politics behind and work together for achieving the goals set by National Population Policy 2000. Instead of misleading narratives, we need to address the real determinants of fertility behaviour – literacy, income generation and improvement of health and family planning services.

GS 2 : Polity, Governance, International Relations

1. Governments ignoring court orders: CJI

The CJI pointed to how courts had to deal with the new problem of “contempt petitions” triggered by the “deliberate inaction” of governments that chose to ignore judgments and orders.

What did the CJI say?

- The contempt petitions are a new category of burden on the courts, which is a direct result of the defiance by the governments.
- Such actions show sheer defiance of governments towards judicial pronouncements.
- There is visible inclination to pass off the responsibility of decision-making to courts.
- The legislature’s work show ambiguity, lack of foresight and public consultation before making laws have led to docket explosion.

What is Contempt of the Court?

- Contempt of court is the offense of **being disobedient to or disrespectful toward a court of law** and its officers in the form of behaviour that opposes or defies the authority, justice, and dignity of the court.
- There are broadly two categories of contempt: **being disrespectful to legal authorities in the courtroom**, or **wilfully failing to obey a court order**.

How did the concept came into being?

- The concept of contempt of court is several centuries old.
- In England, it is a common law principle that seeks to protect the judicial power of the king, initially exercised by him, and later by a panel of judges who acted in his name.
- Violation of the judges’ orders was considered an affront to the king himself.
- Over time, any kind of disobedience to judges, or obstruction of the implementation of their directives, or comments and actions that showed disrespect towards them came to be punishable.

What is the statutory basis for contempt of court?

- There were pre-Independence laws of contempt in India. Besides the early High Courts, the courts of some princely states also had such laws.

- When the Constitution was adopted, contempt of court was made one of the restrictions on freedom of speech and expression.
- Separately, Article 129 of the Constitution conferred on the Supreme Court the power to punish contempt of itself.
- Article 215 conferred a corresponding power on the High Courts.
- The Contempt of Courts Act, 1971, gives statutory backing to the idea.

What are the kinds of contempt of court?

The law codifying contempt classifies it as **civil** and **criminal**.

- Civil contempt is fairly simple. It is committed when someone wilfully disobeys a court order or wilfully breaches an undertaking given to the court.
- However, Criminal contempt is more complex.
- It consists of three forms: (a) words, written or spoken, signs and actions that “scandalise” or “tend to scandalise” or “lower” or “tends to lower” the authority of any court (b) prejudices or interferes with any judicial proceeding and (c) interferes with or obstructs the administration of justice.
- The rationale for this provision is that courts must be protected from tendentious attacks that lower its authority, defame its public image and make the public lose faith in its impartiality.
- The punishment for contempt of court is simple imprisonment for a term up to six months and/or a fine of up to ₹. 2,000.

What does not account to contempt?

- Fair and accurate reporting of judicial proceedings will not amount to contempt of court.
- Nor is any fair criticism on the merits of a judicial order after a case is heard and disposed of.

Is truth a defence against a contempt charge?

- For many years, the truth was seldom considered a defence against a charge of contempt.
- There was an impression that the judiciary tended to hide any misconduct among its individual members in the name of protecting the image of the institution.
- The Act was amended in 2006 to introduce truth as a valid defence if it was in the public interest and was invoked in a bonafide.

2. What is the Delhi Dual Governance Conundrum?

New Delhi has been at the flashpoint of innumerable power struggles these days.

- In the absence of statehood for Delhi, there has been a prolonged confrontation on the relative powers of the territorial administration and the Union government.

Dilemmas of Dual Governance

- Article 239AA of the Constitution of India granted Special Status to Delhi among Union Territories (UTs) in the year 1991 through the 69th constitutional amendment.
- It provided a Legislative Assembly and a Council of Ministers responsible to such Assembly with appropriate powers.
- That's when Delhi was named as the National Capital Region (NCT) of Delhi.
- As per this article – Public Order, Police & Land in NCT of Delhi fall within the domain and control of Central Government which shall have the power to make laws on these matters.
- For remaining matters of State List or Concurrent List, in so far as any such matter is applicable to UTs, the Legislative Assembly shall have the power to make laws for NCT of Delhi

[a] Centre-State Dispute

- Delhi was given a fully elected legislative assembly and a responsible government through an amendment in the constitution in 1991.
- Since 1991, Delhi had been made a UT with an assembly with “limited legislative powers”.
- Cordial relations have prevailed between the Central and Delhi governments since 1996 and all differences have been resolved through discussions – with a few exceptions.

[b] Lt. Governor vs the CM

- The Article 239AA while conferring on the assembly the power to legislate on all matters in the state list as well as the concurrent list except land, police and public order – contained one sore point.
- It said that in case of a difference between the L-G and the council of ministers, the matter shall be referred to the president by the LG for his decision and pending such decision the LG can take any action on the matter as he thinks fit.

- It is this issue that the constitution bench of the Supreme Court resolved in 2018, when it said that the government does not have to seek the concurrence of the L-G on its decisions.
- Any differences between them should be resolved to keep in view the constitutional primacy of representative government and co-operative federalism.

It is after this judgement, the Centre brought up this Bill.

[c] NCT of Delhi (Amendment) Bill, 2021

- Among the major proposed amendments, one makes it explicitly clear that the term “government” in any law made by the Legislative Assembly shall mean the L-G.
- This, essentially, gives effect to the former L-G 2015 assertion that “Government means the Lieutenant Governor of the NCT of Delhi appointed by the President under Article 239 and designated as such under Article 239 AA of the Constitution”.
- The Bill adds that the L-G’s opinion shall be obtained before the government takes any executive action based on decisions taken by the Cabinet or any individual minister.

3. Making the most of the diplomatic attention

India has witnessed a flurry of diplomatic activity during the past week with a long line of ministers, senior military officers and diplomats from a number of countries visiting Delhi and engaging with their Indian counterparts.

Highlights of this year’s Raisina Dialogue

- The senior-most official and inaugural speaker was Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission.
- The European presence was prominent.
- China and Russia were absent from among official delegates, which is a pity.
- The European presence was prominent. China and Russia were absent from among official delegates.
- The focus narrowed down to the Ukraine war and, more specifically, **India’s posture** on Russia’s increasingly brutal assault on the hapless people of Ukraine.
- It fell to the external affairs minister to deflect the expectations of India on this score.

What should be India's approach toward West?

- India will need the West more than it has in the recent past, whether in building up its **deterrent capabilities** or accelerating its own economic and technological transformation.
- India's Quad partners the US, Japan, Australia, its partners in Europe and several ASEAN countries, see **India as an anchor** that could help stabilise the international situation.
- They have a **stake in India emerging as an influential power** and are willing to contribute to that end.
- The temptation to indulge in criticising each other should be avoided.

Why India should recalibrate its ties with Russia?

- **Assumptions about Russia-China ties:** A key assumption in India's Russia policy has been that as a great power, Moscow would be **unlikely to accept a junior partnership with China**.
- It was also assumed that in the long run, Russian and Chinese interests would not be aligned and, therefore, India should maintain a close relationship with Moscow.
- Even if the Ukraine war had not erupted, the February 4 Sino-Russian Joint Declaration should have led India to **question the continuing validity of these assumptions**.
- There are valid legacy reasons for maintaining **positive ties with Russia** just as some European countries have had to do.
- The reality is that India-Russia relations are not a **continuation of the old Indo-Soviet ties**.
- That strategic partnership that helped India cope with the Cold War and the Chinese and Pakistani threats evaporated with the end of that war and the collapse of the Soviet Union.
- Moscow no longer saw Beijing as its main security challenge but **for India, China became a bigger challenge**.
- **Marginal economic and trade relations:** India's economic and trade relationship with Russia has become increasingly marginal.
- **Defence relationship diminishing progressively:** Even the **defence hardware relationship has diminished progressively** as India has rightly tried to diversify its sources of supply.
- The legacy in this respect, too, is of **diminishing relevance**.
- India may have its issues with the existing order but what is envisaged in the Joint Declaration is not the alternative which would enhance India's interests.

Way forward for India

- **Remain engaged with Russia and China:** In a shifting geopolitical landscape, it is in India's interest to remain engaged with Russia and China as two leading powers in the world.
- Such engagement is important to gauge how these powers are themselves adjusting to the changing geopolitical equations across the world.
- The US has shaken off the taint of its chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan but its domestic politics is unpredictable and this calls for caution.
- **Europe will likely emerge as a more coherent and cohesive entity**, anchored in German power, and playing a role more independent of the US than hitherto.
- **Deepen partnership with Europe:** All the more reason why India must deepen its all-round partnership with Europe, build a shared vision of an altered geopolitical landscape and encourage Europe to play a greater role in the Indo-Pacific.

Conclusion

The attention being paid to India is substantive. A rare but perishable opportunity has presented itself to significantly advance India's long-term prospects. It must be grasped with single-minded tenacity.

4. Autism Support Network to give Specialised Care in Rural India

The Centre for Autism and Other Disabilities Rehabilitation Research and Education (CADRRE), a not-for-profit organization will launch "**Pay Attention – a different mind is a gifted mind**", India's first bridgital autism support network.

Pay 'Attention'

- The initiative shall pave the way for small towns and rural India to access specialised care and support and help create an auxiliary network of champions for the differently-abled.
- This platform shall also enable mentoring, skilling and meaningful livelihoods for people with autism.
- In the first phase, the initiative will primarily focus on supporting children with autism, and subsequently, in the second stage, it will focus on young adults, empowering them with life skills and career readiness.
- The content is designed and delivered in collaboration with specialists from CADRRE who have expertise in training children with autism.

- The project aims to create a network of grassroots champions, enable early identification, first-level care, teach social skills, ways to ease activities of daily living, hold workshops for sensory and motor development.
- It also focuses on art and craft, dance, music therapy, physical and mental fitness, communication skills and enable support for academics.

What is Autism?

- Autism, also called autism spectrum disorder (ASD), is a complicated condition that includes problems with communication and behaviour.
- It can involve a wide range of symptoms and skills.
- ASD can be a minor problem or a disability that needs full-time care in a special facility.
- People with autism have trouble with communication. They have trouble understanding what other people think and feel.
- This makes it hard for them to express themselves, either with words or through gestures, facial expressions, and touch.
- People with autism might have problems with learning. Their skills might develop unevenly.
- For example, they could have trouble communicating but be unusually good at art, music, math, or memory.

What are the signs of Autism?

Symptoms of autism usually appear before a child turns 3. Some people show signs from birth. Common symptoms of autism include:

- A lack of eye contact
- A narrow range of interests or intense interest in certain topics
- Doing something over and over, like repeating words or phrases, rocking back and forth, or flipping a lever
- High sensitivity to sounds, touches, smells, or sights that seem ordinary to other people
- Not looking at or listening to other people
- Not looking at things when another person points at them
- Not wanting to be held or cuddled
- Problems understanding or using speech, gestures, facial expressions, or tone of voice
- Talking in a sing-song, flat, or robotic voice
- Trouble adapting to changes in routine

What causes Autism?

- Exactly why autism happens isn't clear. It could stem from problems in parts of your brain that interpret sensory input and process language.
- Autism is four times more common in boys than in girls. It can happen in people of any race, ethnicity, or social background.
- Family income, lifestyle, or educational level doesn't affect a child's risk of autism. But there are some risk factors:
 1. Autism runs in families, so certain combinations of genes may increase a child's risk.
 2. A child with an older parent has a higher risk of autism.
 3. Pregnant women who are exposed to certain drugs or chemicals, like alcohol or anti-seizure medications, are more likely to have autistic children
 4. Other risk factors include maternal metabolic conditions such as diabetes and obesity.

Prevalence of Autism in India

- Prevalence and incidence statistics about autism in India is 1 in 500 or 0.20% or more than 2,160,000 people.
- According to a study, an estimated three million people live with autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) on the Indian subcontinent.

5. India-Denmark relations

As Russia, isolated by unprecedented Western sanctions, deepens its alliance with China, Europe has begun to loom larger than ever before in India's strategic calculus. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Berlin, Copenhagen, and Paris this week could give us a glimpse of India's post-Russian strategic future in Europe.

Engagement with collective Europe

- In her visit to Delhi, the **president of the European Commission**, Ursula von Der Leyn, unveiled the new contours of the EU's strategic partnership with India by launching the **India-Europe Trade and Technology Council**.
- This week, the focus is on India's key **bilateral partnerships with European majors** – Germany and France – as well as a critical northern corner of Europe, the so-called **Norden**.

- Having built up a significant engagement with Moscow over the decades, India and Germany are under pressure to **disentangle from the Russian connection.**
- Modi and Scholz could also exchange notes on how their long-standing illusions about China came crashing down.
- Macron's return to power in France offers a good moment for Modi to imagine the next phase in bilateral relations.
- For some time now it has been said that **France is India's "new Russia"** – Delhi's most important strategic partner.
- In recent years, France has emerged as a strong defender of India's interests in the United Nations Security Council and a regional ally in the vast Indo-Pacific theatre.
- France has also been a **major supplier of advanced arms to India.**
- But Delhi and Paris have been some distance away from demonstrating full possibilities of their defence partnership.
- There is no doubt that Western Europe has moved from the margins to the centre of India's foreign and security policies.
- The crisis in Ukraine, which has shattered the regional order that emerged in 1991, intensifies the imperatives for **deeper strategic cooperation between India and its European partners.**

India's engagement with smaller European countries

- In Copenhagen, the bilateral talks with Danish leadership are about Delhi finally finding time for the smaller European countries.
- The Nordic summit hosted by Denmark underlines India's discovery of the various sub-regions of Europe – from the **Baltics to the Balkans and from Iberia to Mittleuropa.**
- The Nordic Five – **Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden** – have a population of barely 25 million but their GDP at \$1.8 trillion is greater than that of Russia.
- Two members of the Nordic five – Sweden and Finland – are now rushing to end their long-standing neutral status and join NATO.
- The other three – Denmark, Iceland, and Norway – have been founding members of NATO, set up in 1949.
- Listening to the Nordic leaders might help Delhi appreciate the deeply-held fears about Russia among Moscow's smaller neighbours.
- In Copenhagen, Modi would want to build on the unique bilateral **green strategic partnership** with Denmark.

Germany and India's engagement with Russia

- Berlin is tied far more deeply to Russia than India.

- Germany's annual trade with Russia is about \$60 billion while India's is at \$10 bn.
- Germany relies heavily on Russian natural gas, while Russian arms **dominate India's weaponry**.
- Irrespective of their Russian preferences, Germany and India have no option but to live with circumstances over which they have no control.
- **Opportunity for India:** Making India an attractive new destination for German capital, now under pressure to reduce its exposure to Russian and Chinese markets, should be the highest priority for PM Modi.
- Germany is one of India's oldest economic partners, but the full potential of the commercial relationship has never been realised.
- If there ever was a moment to think big about the future of German trade and investment in India, it is now.

Conclusion

A new paradigm is beckoning India – strong commercial and security partnerships with Europe that stand on their own merit and bring the many synergies between them into active play.

6. What is Office-of-Profit?

The Election Commission (EC) has sent a notice to Jharkhand CM over an office-of-profit charge against him for allotment of a mining lease in his name last year.

- Under Section 9A of the Representation of the People Act, 1951, the CM could face disqualification for entering into a government contract.
- The Constitution of India does not define the Office of Profit. It has only mentioned it under Article 102 (1) and Article 191 (1).

What is 'Office of Profit'?

- MPs and MLAs, as members of the legislature, hold the government accountable for its work.
- The essence of disqualification is if legislators hold an 'office of profit' under the government, they might be susceptible to government influence, and may not discharge their constitutional mandate fairly.
- The intent is that **there should be no conflict between the duties and interests of an elected member**.

- Hence, the office of profit law simply seeks to enforce a basic feature of the Constitution- the principle of separation of power between the legislature and the executive.

What governs the term?

- At present, the **Parliament (Prevention of Disqualification) Act, 1959**, bars an MP, MLA or an MLC from holding any office of profit under the central or state government unless it is exempted.
- However, **it does not clearly define what constitutes an office of profit.**
- Legislators can face disqualification for holding such positions, which bring them financial or other benefits.
- Under the provisions of **Article 102 (1) and Article 191 (1)** of the Constitution, an MP or an MLA (or an MLC) is barred from holding any office of profit under the Central or State government.

An undefined term

- The officials of the law ministry are of the view that defining an office of profit could lead to the filing of a number of cases with the Election Commission and the courts.
- Also, once the definition is changed, one will also have to amend various provisions in the Constitution including Article 102 (1) (a) and Article 109 (1) (a) that deal with the office of profit.
- It will have an overarching effect on all the other sections of the Constitution.

Factors constituting an 'office of profit'

- The 1959 law does not clearly define what constitutes an office of profit but the **definition has evolved over the years with interpretations made in various court judgments.**
- An office of profit has been interpreted to be a position that brings to the office-holder some financial gain, or advantage, or benefit. The amount of such profit is immaterial.
- In 1964, the Supreme Court ruled that the test for determining whether a person holds an office of profit is the test of appointment.

What is the 'test of appointment'?

Several factors are considered in this determination including factors such as:

1. whether the government is the appointing authority,
2. whether the government has the power to terminate the appointment,
3. whether the government determines the remuneration,

4. what is the source of remuneration, and
5. the power that comes with the position.

7. India-Germany relations

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Berlin for the sixth Indo-German Inter-Governmental Consultations (IGC) is significant for its timing and substantial results.

Strategic and economic importance of India-German ties

- The timing of the IGC, which Germany chose not to delay, showed **outreach to India and the Indo-Pacific**.
- **Impact of pandemic on economy:** The pandemic hit German economy and sanctions on Russia will further dent its prospects.
- The country requires new markets for trade and investment.
- India is an important partner in this regard due to its **sustained economic growth and market size**.
- **Ukraine crisis:** The Ukraine crisis created an urgency to engage with India as part of Germany's fledgling Indo-Pacific policy.

Opportunities for India

- As Germany does the reassessment of China's role in world affairs it creates an opportunity for India.
- The Bundestag will discuss the situation of Uyghurs in China's Xinjiang on May 7.
- Any departures from China will bring business engagement to India.
- Germany and India **do not have a traditional strategic partnership**.
- It is a **green partnership** based on trade, investment, technology, functional collaboration, skill development, and sustainability.
- There are several initiatives like the **Indo-German energy forum**, environmental forum, **partnership on urban mobility**, skill development and science and technology.
- The biggest gain from the IGC has been the **Joint Declaration of Intent (JDI)** establishing the **Green and Sustainable Development Partnership**.
- This will raise the quality and quantum of the existing partnership between the two countries.
- Germany is reaching out with new and additional financing of €10 billion to fund green projects in India under public, private and PPP models.
- To support this, a ministerial segment is being introduced under the IGC.

- The IGC is the only such format that India has with any country.
- Another significant development is the JDI on **Triangular Development Cooperation** for projects in third countries.
- This will provide **avenues to work together in the Indo-Pacific, Africa and beyond.**
- The **Indo-German Education Partnership**, which the German Bundestag passed in 2016 as a New Passage to India, has borne fruit – from about 4,000 students in 2015, there are nearly 29,000 Indian students in Germany.
- The **Indo-German Science and Technology Centre** has made valuable contributions.
- Now, under the energy partnership, the **Green Hydrogen Task Force** will develop a Green Hydrogen Roadmap.
- This will attempt to take R&D to the level of commercialisation.
- The JDI on **migration and mobility** is an important step taken during this IGC.

Conclusion

A new period is reflecting new priorities in view of crises like the pandemic, the economic downturn and now, Ukraine. The German response to India as evidenced through the IGC has been promising. Both sides may justifiably call it a defining moment in the Indo-German partnership.

8. How a trade deal with EU could shape up?

After signing comprehensive economic and trade agreements with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Australia, India has stepped up efforts to negotiate a free trade agreement (FTA) with the European Union (EU).

What is a Free Trade Agreement (FTA)?

- A FTA is a pact between two or more nations to reduce barriers to imports and exports among them.
- Under a free trade policy, goods and services can be bought and sold across international borders with little or no government tariffs, quotas, subsidies, or prohibitions to inhibit their exchange.
- The concept of free trade is the opposite of trade protectionism or economic isolationism.
- Countries often agree to FTAs if their economic structures are complementary, not competitive.

India-EU Trade Ties

- The EU is India's **third largest trading partner**, accounting for 11.8% of India's total trade in 2020-21, after the US (12.61%) and China (12.59%).
- It is India's **second-largest export destination** after the US.
- India is the **EU's tenth largest trading partner**, accounting for 1.8% of the EU's total trade in goods in 2020.
- The EU is also a **major source of FDI** in India. Between April 2000 and March 2021, FDI flows from the EU to India totalled \$88.32 billion.

How would the FTA help India?

- It will help Indian exporters gain competitive advantage in the EU markets while helping domestic manufacturers get cheaper access to imports from the EU.
- India's major exports to the EU include mineral fuels, mechanical appliances, electrical and electronic machineries, organic chemicals, automobiles and auto components, pharmaceuticals, precious stones, and iron and steel products.
- The untapped export potential for India in the seven major markets of the EU – Germany, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, Belgium, and Switzerland – is around \$26.8 billion.

Why is the FTA important for the EU?

- After Brexit, the EU is trying to clinch trade deals **to diversify supply chains and find profitable exporting destinations** for European companies.
- The EU is looking for a **large market** as intra-EU trade remains stagnant and trade with the UK shrinks because of new institutional trade barriers.
- The FTA with India will also help the EU **reduce trade ties with Russia**.

What are the key stumbling blocks?

- A major point of contention has been the EU's **demand for reduction in India's tariff rate**.
- **Earlier talks did not resolve issues** involving trade in agriculture and services, digital trade, intellectual property rights, and commitments on sustainable development issues such as environmental, social, and labour rights.
- **Visa requirements and work permits for Indian workers** to the EU have been a major bone of contention.
- **Restrictions on transfer of personal data** from the EU to other countries is a barrier for trade in digital services.

What is the likelihood of an agreement?

- The two sides have set the ball rolling on the FTA.
- The president of the European Commission recently agreed to establish a trade and technology council to deliberate on data protection regulations and strengthening digital trade between India and the EU.
- PM Modi's recent visit to three key EU member countries is expected to further reinvigorate the FTA talks.

9. Ukraine conflict won't make the US abandon Indo-Pacific strategy

When Russian President Vladimir Putin invaded Ukraine at the end of February, it was widely asked in Delhi if the new challenges of European security would result in a dilution of the US's strategic commitment to the Indo-Pacific.

The Challenge of balancing China and Russia

- There are two parts of Biden's answer to the Europe-Asia or Russia-China question.
- **1] Engagement with allies:** When Russian President Vladimir Putin invaded Ukraine at the end of February, it was widely asked in Delhi if the new **challenges of European security** would result in a **dilution of the US's strategic commitment to the Indo-Pacific**.
- Biden came to power with a determination to make the **Indo-Pacific the highest priority** of his foreign policy.
- He is not going to abandon that objective in dealing with the unexpected crisis in Europe.
- The assumption that China was the principal challenge and Russia was less of a threat led Biden to meet Putin in June 2021 to offer prospects for a reasonable relationship with Russia in order to devote US energies to the China question.
- But Putin's calculations led him towards a deeper strategic partnership with China
- But America's assessment of the Russian and Chinese threats has not changed since the war began in Ukraine.
- The idea that China will gain from the Russian war in Ukraine has also proven to be false.
- Expectations that Russia's triumph in Ukraine will be followed by a successful Chinese invasion of Taiwan have begun to dissipate.
- Meanwhile, China is reeling under **self-inflicted problems**, most notably Xi Jinping's zero Covid strategy and his crackdown on the large internet companies.

- **The costly foreign policy of China:** Beijing's prospects look a lot less rosy than before as the Chinese economy slows down and XI's foreign policy turns out to be quite costly for China.
- **The muscular approach of China:** In Asia, China's muscular approach to disputes with its neighbours has helped strengthen the US alliances, create new forums like the AUKUS, elevate old ones like the Quad to a higher level, and consolidate the strategic conception of the Indo-Pacific.
- **2] Coordination with allies and partners:** Biden's lemma to the theorem on a **two-front strategy** is a simple one – that Washington will address the simultaneous challenge in Europe and Asia not by acting alone but in **coordination with allies and partners**.
- The idea was rooted in the recognition that alliances and partnerships are America's greatest strength and most important advantage over Russia and China.

Engagement with Asia

- **ASEAN:** This week's summit level engagement with the ASEAN comes after sustained high-level US outreach to the region since the Biden Administration took charge.
- In northeast Asia, the election of Yoon Suk-yeol as the president of South Korea has tilted the scales slightly towards the US in the continuing battle for influence between Beijing and Washington.
- The US is also actively trying to reduce the differences between its two treaty allies in the region – South Korea and Japan.
- Asia's new coalitions are a response to Xi Jinping's **unilateralism** and his quest for regional hegemony.
- India's enthusiasm for the Quad can be directly correlated to Xi's military coercion on the disputed frontiers with India.

Implications for India

- The two parts of Biden's answer to the Europe-Asia or Russia-China question have **worked well for India**.
- **Tolerance toward India-Russia engagement:** For one, the US's emphasis on the long-term challenge from China has meant that Washington is willing to **tolerate India's engagement with Russia**.
- **Time for the diversification of defence ties:** This gives India time to **diversify its defence ties** that have been heavily dependent on Russia.
- The US emphasis on **partnerships rather than unilateralism** in dealing with the China challenge means India's agency in the region can only grow.
- The Quad allows Delhi to carve out a larger role for itself in Asia and the Indo-Pacific in collaboration with the US and its allies.

Conclusion

Contrary to the initial assumptions that America is on the retreat and the West is in disarray, it is Moscow and Beijing that are on the defensive as the war in Ukraine completes three months.

10. Union Finance Ministry revises MPLADS Rules

At a time when MPs have been asking for an increase in the MP Local Area Development Scheme (MPLADS) fund, the Union Finance Ministry has ordered revised rules, under which the interest that the fund accrues will be deposited in the Consolidated Fund of India.

What is the MPLAD scheme?

- The Members of Parliament Local Area Development Scheme (MPLADS) is a program first launched during the Narasimha Rao Government in 1993.
- It was aimed towards providing funds for developmental works recommended by individual MPs.

Funds available

- The MPs then were entitled to recommend works to the tune of Rs 1 crore annually between 1994-95 and 1997-98, after which the annual entitlement was enhanced to Rs 2 crore.
- The UPA government in 2011-12 raised the annual entitlement to Rs 5 crore per MP.

Implementation

- To implement their plans in an area, MPs have to recommend them to the District Authority of the respective Nodal District.
- The District Authorities then identify Implementing Agencies that execute the projects.
- The respective District Authority is supposed to oversee the implementation and has to submit monthly reports, audit reports, and work completion reports to the Nodal District Authority.
- The MPLADS funds can be merged with other schemes such as MGNREGA and Khelo India.

Guidelines for MPLADS implementation

- The document 'Guidelines on MPLADS' was published by the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation in June 2016 in this regard.

- It stated the objective of the scheme to enable MPs to recommend works of developmental nature with emphasis on the creation of durable community assets based on the locally felt needs in their Constituencies.
- Right from the inception of the Scheme, durable assets of national priorities viz. drinking water, primary education, public health, sanitation, and roads, etc. should be created.
- It recommended MPs to works costing at least 15 percent of their entitlement for the year for areas inhabited by Scheduled Caste population and 7.5 percent for areas inhabited by ST population.
- It lays down a number of development works including construction of railway halt stations, providing financial assistance to recognized bodies, cooperative societies, installing CCTV cameras etc.

11. On the question of notifying minorities

A public interest litigation (PIL) that questions the competence of the Centre to notify minorities at the national level is being considered by the Supreme Court.

Power to notify minorities

- The **National Commission for Minorities (NCM) Act, 1992** in its **Section 2(c)** defines a minority as “a community notified as such by the Central government”.
- **Section 2(f)** of the **National Commission for Minority Educational Institutions (NCMEI) Act 2004**, which says “minority” for this Act, means a community notified as such by the Central Government,” also accords similar powers to the Centre.
- In 2005, the Central government notified five communities namely **Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists and Parsis** as minorities at the national level.
 - In 2014, the government notified **Jainism** as the sixth minority community.

Arguments raised in the public interest litigation (PIL)

- The PIL particularly challenges the validity of **Section 2(f)** of the **NCMEI Act 2004**, saying that it is arbitrary and violates the principles enshrined in Articles 14, 15, 21, 29 and 30 of the Indian Constitution.
- The PIL quotes the SC’s judgement in the **T. M. A. Pai Foundation vs State Of Karnataka case** (2002) which said that “for the purpose of determining minority, the unit will be State and not whole India”.

- The PIL also says that the Centre's notification has created an unusual situation wherein the communities declared as minorities by the Centre enjoy the status even in States/UTs in which they are in majority. Whereas, a few other communities are not accorded the status despite being minorities in those States/UTs.
- The PIL urges the SC to curtail the Centre's power to notify national minorities or order the Centre to notify those communities as minorities in States/UTs that are "socially, economically and politically non-dominant" apart from being numerically smaller.

Centre's Response

- The Centre has filed two affidavits in the case, wherein it has held that the Centre had the power to notify minority communities.
- The Centre defended the concept of minorities at the national level whereas it remains muted on the specific question.
 - i.e. the Centre has not taken a position, about continuing the national list of minorities while it highlighted its power to notify minorities under various Acts.
- The Centre has reiterated that it has concurrent powers with the States to ensure the welfare of minorities.
 - The centre quoted the examples of Maharashtra recognising Jews as a minority community and Karnataka recognising speakers of several languages as linguistic minorities and said that the States could have notified minorities within their jurisdiction.
 - But the Centre in its second affidavit claimed that the Centre alone was vested with the power to notify a minority community.
- The Centre in its first affidavit defended the constitution of the Ministry of Minority Affairs and the Sachar Committee to study the backwardness of a community in India.

Way forward

- The Centre said the PIL deals with crucial matters and sought time to consult with the States and other stakeholders before it could take a position.
- The Centre has said that it would take a position on the issue only after verifying various sociological and other aspects as any stand without thorough considerations would lead to an unintended complication in the country.

12. With delimitation over, a look at the slate for J&K

The article analyses the final report of the Delimitation Commission.

The background:

- The redrawn map of Jammu and Kashmir for the assembly election was notified by the Delimitation Commission.
- As a consequence of the final report of the Commission, huge protests emerged among the political parties of Kashmir.
- It is alleged that there were significant concerns raised when the report was being drafted. However, the commission overlooked the recommendations and concerns of the political leaders.
- This has highlighted major shortfalls of the report, inviting enormous arguments.
- The commission agreed to invite sound recommendations of the legislative assembly and consider them once delimitation came into force and not before the elections.

What is meant by Delimitation?

- Delimitation can be defined as an exercise that involves the redrawing of boundaries, particularly of electoral precincts, states and other municipalities.
- This exercise, in the context of elections, is carried out to ensure adequate representation of the people of the constituencies without any biases.

About the Delimitation Commission:

- The Delimitation Commission has been headed by a retired Judge of the Supreme Court, the Chief Election Commissioner and the State Election Commissioner of Jammu & Kashmir as ex-officio members of the Commission.
- It has made the following recommendations to the Central Government in the final delimitation order:
 - Provision of at least two members (one of them must be a female) from the Kashmiri migrant communities in the Legislative Assembly and such members may be given power at par with the power of nominated members of the Legislative Assembly of the Union Territory of Puducherry.
 - The Central Government may consider giving the Displaced Persons from Pakistan occupied Jammu & Kashmir some representation in the legislative assembly by way of nomination of those representatives.

The Discontent: Challenges Ahead

- According to the Commission, the report has successfully addressed the issues raised by the members and reflected their support.
- Such a claim has resulted in the creation of a prominent gap between the commission's self-projection and the views of the Valley's political leaders.
- The government was firm with its decision to redraw the constituencies for Jammu and Kashmir for elections to be held under the Jammu and Kashmir Reorganisation Act 2019.
- With the decision to reorganize J&K, a large number of people including noted leaders of political parties were held captive under preventive detention along with the charges of sedition.
- After notifying the redrawn constituencies, the Election Commission realised the urgent need to conduct elections in Jammu and Kashmir with an objective to offer leadership to the region which has been, so far, under non-local administration.
- This move of the election commission also added to the discontent with an enhanced risk of violence.
- The major challenge will be witnessed if the election results determine a sharp divide between Jammu and the Valley, leading to political instability.
- There is a possibility that the delimitation exercise can be nullified provided the Supreme Court declares the challenges put forth against the reorganisation act valid after a thorough hearing.

Shortfalls in the report of the delimitation commission:

- It does not summarise nor does it address the objections put forward by the people and representatives.
- There were arguments surrounding the reason for allocating six seats to Jammu and only one seat to Valley. The reasons behind the disproportionate allocation of seats have not been clarified precisely by the report.
- There is an inadequate explanation of the methodology that was applied in the allocation of seats.
- The reduction in the Muslim majority seats despite the fact that the Muslim community occupies the majority of the population of the region, has not been well defined with a rationale.

Way Forward:

- It is suggested that there must be clean and fair elections to restore peace in the region of Jammu and Kashmir.

- It should be the responsibility of the administration, legal authorities and the government to ensure a speedy revival of statehood for Jammu and Kashmir.
- Attention should be paid to the freedom of the individuals and to protect them from arbitrary arrests that dilute the spirit of nationalism among the people of the region.
- The stakeholders of policymaking in Jammu and Kashmir, in the upcoming days, must uphold a credible and accountable leadership regulating the misuse of draconian legislations. This would nurture and boost the true confidence of the people and the representatives for elections.

13. Erdogan opposes Finland, Sweden joining NATO bloc

Turkey has opposed the plans of Finland and Sweden to join NATO.

Background

- Finland's leaders said that the Nordic country must apply for membership in NATO immediately in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.
- Sweden is also expected to undertake similar actions.
- However, the Turkish President has said that Turkey is "not favourable" towards Finland and Sweden joining NATO.

Finland and Sweden's aspirations

- Since the onset of the Ukraine crisis, Finland and Sweden have sought the protection of NATO and are considering a paradigm shift of their respective security policies of neutrality and military independence.
- Recently held polls in the two countries suggest that a substantial majority of people are backing the countries to join NATO.
- Amid the concerns of cyber and hybrid attacks, violations of airspace and territorial sea by Russia, Finland and Sweden are looking forward to their membership in NATO as the membership offers them numerous advantages in this context.

Turkey's stance

- The Turkish President said that the country is not of a favourable opinion as Sweden and other Scandinavian countries allegedly support Kurdish and other militants whom Turkey considers to be terrorists.
- The Turkish President said that he does not want to repeat Turkey's past "mistake" of agreeing to readmit Greece into NATO's military wing in 1980.

- He claimed that the action helped Greece take a stance against Turkey due to the backing of NATO.
- As NATO decides on all matters based on consensus i.e all the 30 member countries have potential veto power, Turkey might block the induction of Finland and Sweden into NATO.

Russia's Response

- Considering that this expansion of NATO would surround Russia with NATO countries in the Baltic Sea and the Arctic, Russia warned Finland and Sweden of retaliatory military-technical actions to counter the threats to its national security.
- Russia is also set to suspend its electricity to Finland citing that Finland has not paid for the electricity sold in May.

14. An industry barely hanging by a thread

This article discusses the issues with the jute industry in India.

Jute industry in India

- The jute industry in India is 150 years old.
 - India's first jute factory was established in Kolkata in 1854.
- India is the world's biggest producer of jute which is followed by Bangladesh and China.
- Jute is mainly grown in the states of West Bengal, Odisha, Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Andhra Pradesh.
- According to the Indian Jute Mills Association (IJMA), there are about 93 jute mills in India, of which 70 are in West Bengal.
- The jute industry employs over 4 lakh workers across the country and supports the livelihood of about 40 lakh farm families.

Government initiatives for the jute industry

- Golden Fibre Revolution and Jute Technology Mission
 - The Government of India, in 2006, launched a Jute Technology Mission which included four mini targets that included jute research, development of raw jute agriculture and its extension; processing and marketing of raw jute.
- **Jute Packaging Mandatory Act, 1987**

- Under the Jute Packaging Materials (Compulsory Use in Packing Commodities) Act, 1987, the government prescribes mandatory jute packaging for various commodities.
- A decision was taken to ensure a minimum of 100% of food grains and a minimum of 20% of sugar are to be compulsorily packed in jute sacking.
- **Jute-ICARE**
 - Improved Cultivation and Advanced Retting Exercise for Jute (Jute – ICARE) was launched in 2015 to introduce better agronomic practices among farmers in West Bengal and Assam.
 - The improved agronomic practices include – line sowing of jute using seed drills, weed management by wheel hoeing instead of hand weeding and distribution of quality certified seeds at a 50% subsidy.
- **Jute Integrated Development Scheme (JIDS)**
 - JIDS was launched by the Government of India in 2015-16 with an aim to set up local units and agencies at far off locations around the country through collaboration with various bodies such as SHGs, cooperative societies, and NGOs.
 - The National Jute Board (NJB) is the implementing agency for JIDS.
- **Jute SMART**
 - Jute SMART is an e-govt initiative launched in December 2016 with an aim to promote transparency in the jute sector,
 - The initiative provides an integrated platform for procurement of B-Twill Jute sacking commonly known as jute sacking bags by the Government.
- **Jute Seeds Distribution Program**
 - The Union Textile Ministry launched the commercial jute seed distribution scheme in 2021.
 - The initiative was undertaken keeping in view the growing demand for Jute in the country and to improve the quality of Jute.

15. DCPCR challenges JJ Act change in apex court

The Delhi Commission for the Protection of Child Rights moved to the Supreme Court contesting an amendment made to the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act.

Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act

- The Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act or JJ Act was enacted in 2015 to conduct criminal trials of minors or children in conflict

with the law (CCLs) who are accused of petty or serious offences before the Juvenile Justice Boards (JJBs).

- The JJ Act also mentions provisions for children in need of care and protection.

Amendment to JJ Act

- The Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Amendment Act was passed in 2021 to amend various provisions of the JJ Act, 2015.
- The amendments include authorising the District Magistrate to issue adoption orders under Section 61 of the JJ Act, in order to ensure speedy disposal of cases and enhance accountability.
- It also introduced amendments to Section 86 of the JJ Act which categories serious offences which have maximum imprisonment of three to seven years against children as non-cognisable offences. The offences which are regrouped as non-cognisable include,
 - Sale and purchase of children
 - The exploitation of child workers
 - Use of children for begging
 - Vending, smuggling or trafficking narcotics and cruelty committed upon children by the staff of child care institutions (CCIs)

Concerns regarding the amendments

- The Delhi Commission for the Protection of Child Rights (DCPR) along with State child rights bodies of Punjab, West Bengal, Chandigarh and Rajasthan have urged the government to revert back the regrouping of offences.
- The DCPCR has initiated a writ petition in the Supreme Court seeking to declare the said amendment unconstitutional as it violates Articles 14 and 21 of the Constitution.
- Child rights organisations believe that making these offences non-cognisable would make reporting processes much tougher, particularly for children from the marginalised sections, who are most often the victims of such crimes.
- The organisations say that the amendments are inconsistent as these crimes are serious enough to be non-bailable but not serious enough to be cognisable.

16. Pardon and remission: Who grants them?

The governor's jurisdiction to refer the advice of the state government to the President to decide upon granting remission to life convicts, has been reserved by the Supreme Court.

A brief background:

- The context of granting remission to individuals under life imprisonment has come up in the wake of a petition from one of the convicts of the Rajiv Gandhi assassination case which is under examination by the apex court.
- A major concern has been raised through the petition regarding the delay in the release of the convict.
- It is alleged that the Tamil Nadu government had recommended the release of the convict and as a response to the advice tendered to the governor, it was referred to the President.
- It was then iterated by the Additional Solicitor General that only the President, according to the Constitution, holds the authority to consider a claim for pardon or remission and not the State Governor, provided the offence involved was based on a Parliamentary law.

The extent of the pardon power:

- The President, under Article - 72, can grant pardons, reprieves, respites or remissions of punishment or suspend, remit or commute the sentence of any person convicted of any offence in various cases.
- These cases involve:
 - Those cases where the punishment or sentence is by court-martial
 - Cases where the punishment or sentence is for offence under law relating to the Union government's executive power
 - All cases of death sentences
- The President's power will not in any way affect a Governor's power to commute a death sentence.

Under Article 161, a governor can grant pardons, reprieves, respites or remissions of punishment or suspend, remit or commute the sentence of anyone convicted under any law on a matter which comes under the State's executive power.

What does CrPC say about remission?

- The Code of Criminal Procedure (CrPC) provides for remission of prison sentences which depicts that the whole or a part of the sentence may be cancelled.
- Under **section 432** the 'appropriate government' may suspend or remit a sentence, wholly or partly, with or without conditions.
- Under **section 433**, the appropriate government may commute any sentence without the consent of the person sentenced.
- The appropriate government, under section 433, may commute:
 - A sentence of death for any other punishment provided by the IPC

- A sentence of life imprisonment for an imprisonment term not more than 14 years or for fine
- A sentence of rigorous imprisonment for simple imprisonment for any term for which the person might be sentenced or for fine.
- A sentence of simple imprisonment for fine
- **Section 435** says that if the prisoner had been sentenced in a case by the CBI, or any agency that probed the offence under a central act, the state government can order such release only in consultation with the Central Government.

What can be inferred?

- In the case of death sentences, the Central Government may also concurrently exercise the same power as the State governments to remit or suspend the sentence.
- Therefore, it can be inferred that the power of remission under CrPC is different from the constitutional powers of the President and the Governor.
- Under the CrPC, the government acts by itself whereas, under Articles 72 and 161, the respective governments advise the President/Governor.

The road ahead:

- After analysing the provisions enshrined in the constitution and the relevant statute book regarding the pardoning power, the immediate constitutional question remains intact with respect to the governor's purview to refer a case of granting remission to life convicts to the President. This perplexity needs thorough legal scrutiny on the grounds of constitutional validity.
- Moreover, the larger issue that demands urgent attention is whether the primacy accorded to the centre's opinion under the CrPC in the case discussed, can be extended to remission that may be granted by the governor under Article 161.

17. Finland's bid to join NATO

Finland intends to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

Background

- Finland had remained neutral in the last 20 odd years, this neutral position allowed France to improve their ties with both the Europe countries as well as with Russia during the European economic slump.
- In the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Finland is reversing its long-standing foreign policies.

- The leaders of Finland announced that the Nordic country must apply for membership in NATO immediately in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.
- Sweden is also expected to undertake similar actions.

The significance of NATO's Membership

- Amid the concerns of cyber and hybrid attacks, violations of airspace and territorial sea by Russia, Finland and Sweden are looking forward to their membership in NATO as the membership offers them numerous advantages in this context.
- The NATO membership would relieve Finland and Sweden of their security issues to a certain level as all the countries involved in the highly volatile region would reach a deadlock until someone looks to break the gridlock through a change in policies.

Russia's Response

- Russia believes that the U.S is playing a role of an agent which is trying to attract countries towards NATO.
- Finland's and Sweden's interest to join NATO has increased Russia's security concerns as this expansion of NATO would surround Russia with NATO countries in the Baltic Sea and the Arctic.
- Russia warned the countries saying that it will be forced to take retaliatory military-technical actions to counter the threats to its national security.
- Russia is also set to suspend its electricity to Finland citing that Finland has not paid for the electricity sold in May.

Path Ahead

- Russia has cited NATO's expansions as a key cause of concern for Russia's security interests.
- In the coming days, many countries might be pushed towards NATO or other alliances to seek security guarantees.
- Estonia has asked NATO for the supply of anti-Russia command centres and improved air defence systems to address its security concerns near the Baltic.
- Russia's aggression on Ukraine has resulted in isolating Russia from most countries in the world.
- The war has severely impacted Russia's economy and is further heightened by the economic sanctions against them by the West.
- Many countries and corporations have already exited the Russian economy and have continued to decrease their dependency on Russia for their energy requirements, the path ahead for Russia looks bleak.

- Finland and Russia share a 1,300 km border and as Finland seeks NATO membership, Russia might increase its forces deployed along the Russian-Finland border.

18. Understanding Long COVID and its effects

This article discusses the key symptoms associated with Long COVID.

Background

- With no universally-accepted definition, post-COVID Syndrome is regarded as signs and symptoms that develop during or after an infection consistent with COVID-19 which continue for more than 12 weeks and are not explained by alternative diagnosis.
- A recent Lancet report calls for more attention towards Long COVID syndrome.
- Survivors of COVID infection have exhibited lower health status compared to normal people.

Long COVID

- Reports have proved that a sizable number of people who have recovered from COVID-19 infections experienced long-term effects on multiple organs and systems.
- Long term effects have also been reported in people who did not exhibit any COVID related symptoms in their infection stage.
- Conventionally, **post-COVID** is regarded as symptoms that continue for four weeks after infection and **Long COVID** refers to symptoms that persist for 12 weeks past an infection.
- The symptoms include skin rashes, sleep difficulties, fatigue, muscle weakness, hair loss, joint pain, palpitations, dizziness, cough, headache, sore throat, chest pain, smell and taste disorders, anxiety and mobility issues.

Lancet study

- The study for the first time defined Long COVID as the longest time possible of two years.
- The study monitored the changes in the health outcomes in COVID survivors with different initial disease severity throughout the two years post an acute infection.
- The study points out that the share of individuals with at least one consequent symptom decreased from 68% at six months to 55% at two years.

- The study also reported an improvement in most of the domains, particularly in terms of anxiety or depression
- Nearly 89 % of individuals who were hospitalised for COVID, returned to their normal work by the end of two years.
- The study finds that at two years post-infection, long COVID symptoms were mainly related to a decline in health-related quality of life, exercise capacity, psychological abnormality, and increased dependence on health care post-discharge.
- At two-year check-up, the COVID-19 survivors still exhibited few symptoms, problems, discomfort, along with increased anxiety or depression
- Also, among the ones who had received higher-level respiratory support during their infection stage a higher number of survivors experienced persistent respiratory issues.

India's context

- The Indian government has formulated the National Comprehensive Guidelines for the management of post-COVID symptoms.
 - The document provides a detailed process to treat post-COVID complications affecting cardiovascular, gastrointestinal, nephrological, neurological and respiratory systems.
- Many hospitals in the country have established COVID wards to treat individuals with post-COVID symptoms.
- In January 2022, a hospital in New Delhi outlined that individuals infected in the second wave of COVID experienced four times more Long COVID conditions and multiple symptoms such as high-grade fever, diarrhoea and severe lung infection than those from the first wave.
 - The hospital reported that patients experienced severe weakness and fatigue even after a year post-infection.
- Experts believe that both Post COVID and Long COVID complications in India are fewer.
- Experts also added that the principles of immunology such as the immunogenic response to vaccination have largely remained uniform across the world but Long COVID symptoms will not be the same throughout the world as these are health conditions.

19. This Delhi High Court split verdict needs to be resolved

Two judges of the Delhi High Court gave a split verdict on the question of criminalising marital rape leaving the law unchanged.

Details

- Exception 2 to Section 375 (marital rape exception) of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) states that sexual intercourse by a man with his own wife, the wife not being aged under fifteen years is not rape irrespective of her willingness or consent.
- The two judgments discuss several important issues in the course of the judgement, they differed on key issues such as availability of evidence, the importance of consent, and whether remedies were available to women survivors of domestic violence in other laws.

Constitutionality of the exception in terms of Article 14

- Article 14 of the Constitution guarantees the right to equality before the law and equal protection of laws.
- The articles aim to ensure that like classes are treated alike and don't prevent differential treatment of two classes of persons completely.
- The reasonable classifications under the article include:
 - **Condition of intelligible differentia:** two classes of persons can be treated differently if it is established that they are indeed distinguishable from each other.
 - There should be a rational relationship or a logical justification for a law which treats the two classes differently and the purpose of the law.
- The intelligible differentia in the case of marital rape exception is the difference between married and unmarried women. But according to Justice Rajiv Shakti, the marital rape exception is not in accordance with the second condition that is the purpose of the law.
 - According to him, lack of consent is what defines the wrong of rape and its harmful nature.
 - He believes a non-consensual sexual act is considered rape irrespective of the woman's relationship with the perpetrator.
 - As there is no rational relationship between the differentia (married and unmarried women) and the purpose of the law, he feels that the marital rape exception fails the test of reasonable classification and must be declared unconstitutional.

Differential views

- However, according to Justice C. Hari Shankar, the purpose of the marital rape exception is to prevent allegations of rape outside the marital sphere and thereby safeguard the institution of marriage.

- He believes that the differential treatment of married and unmarried women is not unconstitutional and is of the opinion that the recognition of marital rape would threaten the institution of marriage.

Arguments against this differential opinion of Justice C. Hari Shankar

- Experts have pointed out the examples of countries where marital rape is declared unconstitutional and argue that there is no evidence of a weakening or destruction of the institution of marriage.
- Critics question this opinion as it does not explain why it is 'legitimate expectation of sex within the purview of marriage' that determines the nature of sex in marriage and not the consent.
- Though the judge agrees that women's sexual autonomy deserves respect, and the expectation of sex within marriage ends when women's rights to sexual autonomy and bodily integrity begin, he does not recognise the fact that it means that non-consensual sex within marriage should be considered rape.
- Experts say that autonomy (the right of self-governance) is contrary to force and any attempts to force or compel an individual against their will or consent undermines the right to autonomy and even the institution of marriage cannot compel or force an individual.
- The opinion of the judge which confirms that rape by a stranger is worse than rape by a husband fails to acknowledge the horrifying experiences of rape victims.
- Critics say that marital rape in fact results in an increased breach of trust and fear of constant violation of bodily integrity thereby damaging the basic structure of the institution of marriage.

20. The road to safety

Background

- All the megacities in India experience about 50,000 accidents annually.
- About 25% of these accidents are fatal.
- Over 50% of these accidents are due to speeding and 25% of them are due to dangerous driving.
- Close to 50% of those who lose their lives are pedestrians and 50% of these avoidable deaths are due to bus and truck accidents.

Initiatives aimed at reducing accidents

- The deaths due to accidents in Delhi peaked in 2009 and there has been a gradual decrease in the number despite the increase in the number of vehicles on account of interventions made by the Delhi Police.
- The Delhi Police have undertaken interventions on black spots, traffic calming measures, enhanced enforcement and a drive to enforce strict lane discipline, starting with the compliance on the bus lane.
- Delhi has also automated driving test centres, further reducing the margin of human intervention which has often been criticized for its inefficiency owing to corruption.

Changes brought in by these interventions

- These interventions have made sure that Indian drivers have adequate skill sets as automated driving test centres have ensured strict compliance with the issue of learner's and driving licences which are now issued only after a test on a basic understanding of road signages, traffic rules and a driving skill test.
- Compliance with the road design to accommodate all users.
 - Example: Buses are required to adhere to the rules of the bus lane thereby providing space to accommodate other users.
- The installation of cameras which recognise speeding vehicles and capture the number plate with the automatic number plate recognition system saw an increase in the number of challans issued and ultimately slowed down the speed of vehicles in the city.

Recommendations

- Mandatory simulators and psychological tests must be used in the regulatory framework of issuing licences, especially for drivers of heavy transport vehicles.
- Designing the roads in such a way that they accommodate all users such as pedestrians, cyclists, motorists, etc.
- Adoption of advanced technology such as artificial intelligence in the traffic management systems.
- Collaboration of multiple agencies such as the road-owning agency, the municipal body, the traffic police and the transport enforcement wing in the enforcement of traffic discipline.
- Improving the efficiencies of public transportation.
- **Mobility as a Service (MaaS) solutions** – It is a platform where the information of all the modes of transport is integrated.
 - This provides the option for the passenger/commuter to choose the mode of transport based on feasibility.

- A government-backed digital solution with all mobility options would make public transport more efficient and provide last-mile and first-mile connectivity.

21. A war that is shrinking India's geopolitical options

- The **U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan**, Russia's **Ukraine war**, and the **rapid expansion of Chinese influence** have created great turmoil in global geopolitics and this article analyses how these developments are having an adverse impact on India's geopolitical choices.

Implications of the Russia-Ukraine war for India:

- India was able to manage its options well during the initial phases of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, wherein the two sides were seeking India's support for their positions in the ongoing war. India took a neutral stand and this stand seemed to propel India to the centre stage of global attention.
- However, the prolonged war would no doubt adversely impact India's interests in the long term by diminishing the options available to India.
- The following factors could prove detrimental to India's interests.

Diminishing Russian influence:

- India would not be able to rely on Russia any longer as a key strategic partner for balancing purposes. The lack of definitive victory in the conflict seems to have made Russia more dependent on India today than the other way round. Hence, Russia would no longer be available for India's pursuit of its regional interests. Also, there are concerns that in the longer run, **a war-fatigued and weakened Russia will become a junior partner to China.**

Growing Chinese influence:

- Russia's focus on its western borders would result in **Russia's absence from the Asian balance of power equations.** This would only result in enhancing Chinese influence in the region which has been busy consolidating the region under its influence. China has been making **inroads into the Central Asian region** through enhanced economic relations.

Shifting focus of the Western world:

- The diversion of the interests of the United States and its western partners towards eastern Ukraine would **limit their attention towards their Indo-**

Pacific policy and containment of China. This could result in the weakening of the American influence in the Southern Asian region and the ability to produce favourable geopolitical outcomes for India in the region. This would give China a free hand in the region's geopolitics.

Implications of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan for India:

- India's north-western continental strategy, towards Afghanistan and Central Asia, has been adversely impacted by the hasty withdrawal of the U.S. from Afghanistan.
- As a result of the rise of the Taliban, **India's presence in Afghanistan has almost entirely disappeared.** This means giving up India's strategic interests in Afghanistan and **reducing our engagement in the Central Asian region** at a time when China is making inroads into the region.

22. Symbolism and beyond

The article provides an insight into Prime Minister Modi's visit to Lumbini in Nepal on the occasion of Buddha Jayanti.

About the Visit:

- The visit by the Prime Minister of India was an attempt to establish a symbolic way to expand the India-Nepal relationship through religious diplomacy.
- The Prime Ministers of both countries led the foundation stone for the India International Centre for Buddhist Culture and Heritage in the Lumbini Monastic Zone.
- The centre has been jointly established with a shared vision to promote and propagate the values and principles of the Buddha's teachings. The objective is to find shared solutions to global problems.
- This centre is envisaged to play a role in challenging China's emerging influence in Nepal.
- The assertion by the Indian Prime Minister in the recognition of Lumbini as the birthplace of Gautama Buddha was welcomed and resolved the issues related to the actual birthplace of the Buddha to a certain extent.
- The visit was accompanied by the signing of MoUs between the two governments.
- A Memorandum of Understanding was signed for the development and implementation of the Arun- 4 hydropower project.

- Overall, the visit exemplified a sign of refurbishing the India-Nepal relationship after the situation became hostile due to the Kalapani dispute.

Significance of Lumbini:

- It highlights the strong cultural ties between the two countries that share a special relationship which was nurtured by the Treaty of Peace and Friendship signed in 1950.
- Lumbini is believed to be a holy place and according to Buddhist traditions, Queen Mahamayadevi gave birth to Siddhartha Gautama at around 623 B.C.
- It is believed that Lord Buddha was born in the gardens of Lumbini which transformed into a place of pilgrimage.
- Lumbini is recognised as the holiest and most important place in Nepal and it is listed as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO.
- The visit took place at the eventful time of Vaishakha Buddha Purnima at Lumbini which was organised by the Lumbini Development Trust under the aegis of the Government of Nepal.
- In the light of art and culture, Buddhism has been an integral part of India's cultural heritage and a prominent thread of its diplomatic relationship with Nepal. Lumbini acts as the testimony to such a cultural bond.
- The construction of the Centre for Buddhist Culture and Heritage will be undertaken by the International Buddhist Confederation (IBC) in association with Lumbini Development Trust and will be financed by the Ministry of Culture, Government of India. The IBC is a grantee body under the Ministry of Culture, GoI.
- IBC is headquartered in New Delhi and was established in 2013 acting as an International Buddhist umbrella body serving as a common platform for Buddhists worldwide.
- Lumbini will house the symbolic Buddhist centre reflecting the enriching friendship between India and Nepal and the centre will be the first **Net Zero Emission** building in Nepal. It is significant for India to be at the forefront of such an initiative.

Way ahead

- There are a group of experts who believes that the visit of the Indian Prime Minister to Nepal was an essential step but it served a limited purpose in the midst of a growing Chinese influence in the region. There needs to be a multidimensional approach that India must advocate to strengthen its ties with Nepal.
- India needs to develop new avenues of collaboration that involve developmental, economic and geopolitical subjects to offer dynamism to the relationship.

- The revival of the India-Nepal friendship must be taken forward with a focus on infrastructure development in Nepal which includes hydropower projects, transportation and connectivity that would benefit the citizens.
- This will pave the way for the Indian government to retain a substantial role in partnering with the Nepal regime in development, progress and opportunities.

23. The confusion over the status of the Assam NRC

- A member of one of Assam's Foreigners' Tribunals (FTs) urged the State Coordinator of the National Register of Citizens (NRC) to limit their interference in the functioning of the tribunals.
- This was a reply to the State Coordinator of NRC's letter to all the FT members which asked them not to treat the NRC as "final" while judging the nationality of a person suspected to be a non-citizen.

National Register of Citizens (NRC)

- The NRC started as a part of the census conducted in 1951 which was the first census of independent India.
- NRC is a register prepared in respect of each village, showing the houses or holdings in serial order and indicating against each house or holding the number and names of persons staying therein.
- NRC was supposed to be compiled in all the states throughout the country but it was done only in Assam.
- The objective for compilations of NRC in Assam was to identify the illegal immigrants in Assam who had migrated to Assam from Bangladesh during the 1971 war with Pakistan, as there were fears that the indigenous people are being outnumbered by the "illegal immigrants"
- The demand for updating the 1951 NRC to expel illegal immigrants from Assam was raised during the agitation between 1979 to 1985.
- The Assam Accord was signed in August 1985 which prescribed March 24, 1971, the eve of the Bangladesh War, as the cut-off date for detecting, detaining and deporting foreigners.
- This date was used in the up-gradation of the NRC which started in 2014 under the control of the Supreme Court.
- People who were listed in the 1951 NRC and their descendants were included in the NRC draft published in August 2019, however, the draft excluded 19.06 lakh out of the 3.3 crore people who had applied for inclusion.

The status of the NRC

- The next step in the process is the issuing of rejection slips to all the 19.06 lakh individuals who have been excluded from the draft NRC.
- Post the issue of slips which includes the justification for the rejection of the NRC, the individual will have to approach the FT within 120 days with documents to prove their citizenship.
- The FT would adjudicate the case and declare an individual as a 'citizen' or 'foreigner' for inclusion or rejection in the NRC.

Controversy over NRC

- In 2021, the State Coordinator of NRC filed an affidavit to the Gauhati High Court, which said that the August 2019 NRC exercise was just a "supplementary list" and not the final draft and asked for a re-verification.
- Whereas, an Assam's Foreigners' Tribunals (FT) member declared a doubtful migrant as Indian in Karimganj district by acknowledging that the member's family featured in the August 2019 list referred to as the "final NRC".
 - The list has also been referred to as final in several other instances.
- Recently, the State Coordinator of NRC urged the FTs not to rely on the NRC to adjudicate cases of citizenship as the Final NRC is not yet released by the Registrar General of Citizens Registration.
 - He also claimed that the NRC was inaccurate due to wrong data entry and there were several flaws in the process used in the updating exercise.
- As per the State Coordinator, only the office of the Registrar General of India has the powers to issue the final NRC and a notification is not yet issued in this aspect.
 - However, the FT members instead of adjudicating the cases of individuals declared as foreigners independently of the NRC, have been taking decisions by referring to the NRC as final.
- A member of FT responded saying that the NRC was drafted in accordance with relevant clauses of the Citizenship Rules of 2003 and was final.
 - He also reiterated that the official website of the NRC mentions it as final.
 - He further added that the State Coordinator should not spread his erroneous view on law, rules, notifications and orders of the Supreme Court about the finality of NRC and must not interfere in the lawful functioning of the FT which is beyond his jurisdiction and limits.

Assam government's stand on the issue

- The Assam government opines that the NRC was erroneous.

- The government claims that a minimum of 20% of the enlisted names in districts bordering Bangladesh and 10% of names in other districts need re-verification.
- The government has not accepted the list as final and has decided to approach the Supreme Court in this regard.
- The government has urged for the unfreezing of the biometrics of 21 lakh individuals which were collected during the updating exercise, to help them get their Aadhaar cards which can be frozen once the individual is declared as a non-citizen.

24. SC says Centre, States have equal powers to make GST-related laws

Supreme Court's ruling on the Goods and Services Tax (GST) related laws.

Details

- In a judgement that confirmed Gujarat High Court's ruling, the Supreme Court said that the Union government cannot levy Integrated Goods and Services Tax (IGST) on ocean freight from Indian importers.
 - The judgment resolved a prolonged battle between the government and the companies on the implementation of IGST on ocean freight on a reverse charge basis.
 - This has provided relief for importers as they are not liable for paying GST on ocean freight and also can claim refunds for previous such payments.
- The apex court further said that the Union and State legislatures have "equal, simultaneous and unique powers" on GST related laws and the recommendations of the GST Council are not binding on them.

Supreme Court's ruling

- The SC bench opined that the GST Council recommendations are a result of collaborative dialogue involving the Union and the States and these are only recommendatory in nature and making them binding would disrupt fiscal federalism as both the Union and the States have equal power to formulate laws on GST.
- While passing the ruling the court highlighted constitutional Articles such as
 - **Article 246A** - provides the States power to legislate on GST.
 - The court believed that the Constitution through Article 246 treats the Union and the States as equal units and conferred

simultaneous power to the Centre and States for legislating laws on GST.

- **Article 279A** – provides that a GST Council is to be set up by the President to govern GST and the Union Finance Minister will be its chairperson with ministers from the state governments as its members.
 - The Council will make recommendations to the Union and the States on important issues related to GST.
 - The SC bench interpreted that the Article foresees that neither the Union nor the States is dependent on the other.
- The Court further said that the Union and the States were autonomous, independent and competing units with respect to GST laws.
- The Court urged the Union and the States to operate in a harmonious manner as it is necessary for the well-being of the nation and that fiscal security can be achieved by collaboration and contestations between the two tiers of government.

Court's views on federalism

- Reiterating the importance of federalism the Court held that “the federal system is a means to accommodate the needs of a pluralistic society in a democratic manner and that democracy and federalism are interdependent. Federalism would only be stable in a well-functioning democracy. The constituent units of a federal polity check the exercise of powers of one another to prevent one group from exercising dominant power”.
- The SC bench also believed that the “Indian federalism is a dialogue between cooperative and uncooperative federalism where the federal units are at liberty to use different means of persuasion, ranging from collaboration to contestation”.

Response from the State

- Ministers from states like Kerala and Tamil Nadu have welcomed the Supreme Court's ruling and say that it protects States' rights and strengthens cooperative federalism.
- Kerala Finance Minister said that the ruling would have a large scale impact on the country's tax structure and Centre-State relations.
- The Tamil Nadu Minister alleged that the Centre had been arbitrarily imposing its decisions on the States, impacting State's revenue and expressed that the ruling would help the States to protect their rights and ensure financial stability.

Centre's response

- The Union Finance Ministry said that the Supreme Court ruling does not mandate any changes in the functioning of the GST regime.
- Regarding the GST Council as a remarkable example of collaborative and cooperative federalism, the Ministry asserted that the court had only elaborated on its functional mechanism.
- The minister further stated that the GST Council was a collaborative institutional framework, and the Union and States followed its recommendations that were made with consensus.

25. The neighbourhood in turmoil, lessons for India

The article offers a discussion on India's transition to a more friendly and strategically viable neighbourhood policy.

An overview: The background in brief

- India, over the years, has sustained in the midst of sensitivities that have a huge impact on its national security and territorial integrity.
- The Indian subcontinent has been under perennial threats from China's aggressive expansionist policies, cross border terrorism facilitated by Pakistan, extremist ideologies disturbing the internal peace and security of the northeast region and other forms of illegal activities through the Golden Crescent and Golden triangle.
- The year 2016 introduced a new method of treating the hostile neighbours of India with the aid of a muscular foreign policy alarming them with the bitter consequences of infringing India's national security.
- It was evident that India would be willing to use all its levers to prevail over any uncooperative South Asian neighbour.

The transition:

- With the gradual progress of time, the muscular approach did not work well as the central dogma of India's neighbourhood policy.
- Therefore, a prominent transition was witnessed in New Delhi's approach to a more consensual, conciliatory and amiable neighbourhood policy.
- The new approach intended to promote the national interest in the region through soft power diplomacy.
- The transition is also backed by the fact that the neighbouring democracies (at that time) like Myanmar, Nepal, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Sri Lanka have undergone non-electoral changes that have an influence on India's national interests.

- New Delhi abandoned its uniformly muscular “one size fits all” approach to the region.
- In the case of Myanmar, the government of India continued its engagement with the military junta that overthrew the National League for Democracy (political outfit led by Aung San Suu Kyi).
- Keeping its neutral stance intact regarding the ongoing developments in the neighbourhood, especially with respect to Pakistan and Afghanistan, India has tried to strengthen its diplomatic ties in the region.
- The visit of Prime Minister Modi to Lumbini has been a testimony of India’s intent to advocate the doctrine of friendship in the neighbourhood and its attempt to promote cultural diplomacy. This was a welcoming move to better the India-Nepal relationship.
- India’s transition has also been reflected in the focus of New Delhi on people in the neighbourhood rather than just those in power.

India as a friendly neighbour:

- The emerging friendly approach towards neighbouring countries entailed high-level visits, trade agreements, collaborations in developmental and infrastructure projects, and extension of lines of credit.
- India’s compassionate behaviour towards its friendly neighbours like Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal and Myanmar was exemplified during the pandemic through the delivery of vaccines.
- India has been active in extending humanitarian aid to its neighbouring countries.
- Financial assistance along with the supply of essentials from India was rendered to Sri Lanka in the midst of the ongoing crisis in the island country.

China’s Debt Trap: A major challenge

- It is alleged that China, in order to expand its global influence along with its political, economic and military strategies, has been extending loans to financially vulnerable states, thereby paving a way to intrude into the sovereignty of such states.
- This practice, over the gradual progress of time, has taken the shape of a debt trap.
- Many experts define it as China’s Debt Trap Diplomacy.
- China has emerged as the biggest official creditor with its international loans reported to surpass more than 5% of the global GDP.
- Under this, China lends money to the borrowing country without gauging the country’s creditworthiness. This leads to a huge burden on the borrowing country leveraging China’s vested interests.

- The debt trap can be prominently identified in Pakistan which is China's sole strategic ally. Under extensive loans borrowed from China, Pakistan has given it exclusive rights coupled with a tax holiday, to run Gwadar Port for the next four decades. About 91% of the port revenues from Gwadar port as a part of CPEC would go to China.
- In this way, China has successfully converted big loans given to small island countries into the acquisition of entire islets through exclusive development rights. It has enhanced its influence over a couple of islands in the Indian Ocean archipelago of the Maldives and one island in the South Pacific nation of the Solomon Islands.
- The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is central to the debt trap diplomacy of China.

The China Factor of the Sri Lankan Crisis:

- Sri Lanka has transferred the Hambantota Port, along with more than 6000 hectares of land around it, to Beijing on a 99-year lease. This has been an outcome of Sri Lanka's failure to repay the infrastructure loans borrowed from China.
- The 99-year lease is a concept that derives its roots from the European colonial expansionism that has taken the form of China's aggressive expansionist policies in the 19th century.
- China is involved in more than 50 projects in Sri Lanka which are much beyond trade and economic considerations.
- Gaining political and security leverage against India in the Indian Ocean Rim is the real intention of China which can be well realised through its strategic String of Pearls.

Shaping the way ahead:

- It is an emphasised demand that the Government of India must explore new avenues to energise regional groupings or provide more impetus to the existing grouping like BIMSTEC.
- There must be efforts, according to the experts, to revamp SAARC in order to promote economic prosperity through
 - Tourisms
 - Exports
 - Labour exchange
 - Building common pools of food and fuel
 - Mitigating inflationary blows on the South Asian economy
 - Strengthening cultural networks
- It is envisaged that for a better understanding of future challenges rattling India's policy, the government should not only analyse the implications of

changes in the socio-economic and political dynamics of neighbouring countries but also assess and consider the notion of the neighbouring countries towards India.

- A consensus within the South Asian region will contribute to a stable and prosperous region.

26. When a nip and tuck goes awry

The recent death of an actor while undergoing fat reduction surgery has brought the debate on the safety of aesthetic surgical interventions into the limelight.

Details

- Reports from the International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery suggest that 5,24,064 aesthetic procedures (surgical and non-surgical) took place in India in 2020.
- The industry is experiencing high demand in recent years due to increased advertisements that are attracting a lot of patients through promises of instant results and other benefits.

Risks involved with aesthetic or cosmetic surgeries

- The major complication experienced with cosmetic fat removal surgeries is that of an embolism which leads to the formation of blood clots, which can turn fatal.
- Staple-line leak or bleeding can also be life-threatening if bleeding is excessive and not monitored.
- The stress of surgery or infections
- Lack of sleep and recuperation that leads to pain and fatigue
- Hematoma and damage to nerves causing sensory or motor loss
- Complications of anaesthesia
- Experience of depression

Need to regulate the industry

- The industry is thriving and the reports of unfortunate incidents are on the rise due to inadequate legislation, regulations and implementations.
- Fake and incorrect advertisements, institutions with no hospital backup, inadequate safety standards and sub-standard staff are thriving in the market and there is a need for urgent interventions

- There is a need to spread awareness in public to help them make informed choices that will result in standardised treatment options.

27. Has Kerala changed its stance on NEP?

The article discusses the changing views of the government of Kerala regarding the National Education Policy.

The perspective:

- The National Education Policy was introduced in 2020 and became the central theme of several debates.
- There were significant disagreements expressed by the government of Kerala regarding the policy.
- Gradually with the progress of time, a shift in the views of the government of Kerala has been observed. However, certain concerns remain.
- Despite the observed shift in the views regarding the implementation of the new policy on education, there are very less chances of a speedy roll-out due to various factors.
- The government of Kerala has hinted that the proposed reforms of the policy can be enforced during the 2023-24 academic year.

The Initial Apathy:

- To assess the impact of the NEP, the Kerala State Higher Education Council had constituted a committee that inferred that the policy is retrograde and exemplified an exclusionary vision of education as opposed to aspiring for inclusiveness in education.
- The policy has been alleged to accompany the challenges with respect to accessibility, equity, social justice, and the reservation system.
- The policy seemed to have ignored the democratic doctrines and the ethos of the federal system, thereby only promoting the need for private investments in education and techno-capitalism.
- The provisions of relaxing the entries at various levels of academic programmes have opened the avenues to legitimise dropouts which is already an existing challenge.
- Moreover, the state government opined that the NEP will destroy the democratic spirit and the autonomy of universities.

Going forward:

- There must be a thorough discussion involving the Centre, States, educational institutions, universities, educationists, investors, and all the essential

stakeholders to introduce the roadmap for the implementation of the National Education Policy.

- The legitimate issues of the stakeholders must be considered for the effective enforcement of the policy.
- Many educationists advocated that the State would do well to be mindful in the implementation of the policy with a better understanding of the challenges that vary from one state to another.
- With the ever-changing socio-economic conditions, skill education needs to ramp up which will add to the overall growth of students, industries, and communities.
- Therefore, the lofty goals of skilling the youth and churning out the potential of the demographic dividend can only be possible by the active participation of all the stakeholders of the entire education system contributing to nation-building.
- The innovation in education has a far-reaching impact on human development for productivity, research, and improved value chain interaction across different spheres of the economy.
- Emerging disciplines must be inculcated in the educational institutions to make innovation a habit as education is not immune to the dynamic nature of the world with a faster pace of digital revolution. For instance, the academic curriculum of technical institutes must encourage an understanding of automation, machine intelligence, data analytics, and Artificial Intelligence. This would assist the area of manufacturing with skilled labour and gear up the country to head towards Industry 4.0.

28. The case against Mehul Choksi

The Dominican government has decided to drop all charges against Mehul Choksi.

Background

- Mehul Choksi is wanted by the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) and the Enforcement Directorate (ED) in the ₹13,578 crores Punjab National Bank (PNB) fraud case.
- He had fled to Antigua and Barbuda in January 2018, a few days before a case was filed against him.
- He was missing from Antigua and Barbuda in May 2021 and was found in Dominica, where he was detained on the charge of illegal entry.

- In July 2021, a Dominica High Court permitted him to travel back to Antigua and Barbuda after giving him bail for medical treatment.
- The Dominican government has recently dropped all criminal proceedings against him.

Charges against Mehul Choksi in India

- Based on the Punjab National Bank's complaint, the CBI had registered a case against Choksi, Nirav Modi and others in January 2018 for their role in alleged bank fraud of about ₹280 crores in conspiracy with some officials.
- The alleged role of three firms namely Diamonds R US, Solar Exports and Stellar Diamonds, was found after they approached the PNB's branch in Mumbai for buyer's credit to make payment to the overseas suppliers.
- CBI also registered another case against three Gitanjali group companies of Choksi for causing an alleged ₹4,887 crore loss to the bank. After the investigations, the CBI filed a chargesheet alleging that the amount involved was about ₹7,080 crores.
- The CBI registered another case against Gitanjali Gems Limited and others for allegedly cheating the IFCI Limited of ₹22.06 crore.
- The ED has filed cases under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act and has attached properties worth hundreds of crores in India and abroad.
- Proceedings have also been initiated against him under the Fugitive Economic Offenders Act.

Mehul Choksi's shift to Antigua and Barbuda

- Mehul Choksi and his relatives fled India in January 2018, a few days before the bank filed a complaint with the CBI.
- CBI found that he had applied for Antiguan citizenship in May 2017 and his application was processed in November 2017 and in January 2018, he took the oath of allegiance to Antigua and has been living in the country.
- It is also said that he had visited Hong Kong in December 2017 and told the dummy directors of his so-called supplier companies to apply for a Thailand visa.
- This has made the ED allege that he knew about the following criminal proceedings very much earlier.

Measures undertaken by the Indian agencies to bring back Choksi

- CBI approached the Interpol and succeeded in getting a Red Notice issued against Choksi in December 2018.
- Although India does not have an extradition treaty with Antigua and Barbuda, as per a Ministry of External Affairs' order provisions of the Extradition Act, 1962, (other the Chapter III) apply to Antigua and Barbuda with effect from the date of notifying India as a Designated Commonwealth Country under the Extradition Act of Antigua and Barbuda on September 17, 2001.
- India is trying for Choksi's extradition in the court of Antigua and Barbuda
- He also faces charges against the validity of his Antiguan citizenship.

29. India needs to keep an eye on its myopia prevalence

Overview

- The World Health Organization (WHO) says that there were about two billion people with myopia in 2010.
- WHO predicts that by 2030, myopia will affect 3.3 billion people.
- East Asian and the Pacific countries have been witnessing the highest number of people with myopia in the last ten years but the current reports in India do not reflect this trend.

What is Myopia?

- Myopia or Nearsightedness occurs when the eye loses its ability to focus on far-off objects as the lenses do not possess a long focal length.
- People with myopia have difficulty seeing distant objects, but can see objects that are near clearly
- Myopia is commonly found in children
- Causes:
 - **Genetics:** Inherited from the parents having the defect
 - **Environmental factors**
 - **Elongation of the eyeball:** generally young people suffer from myopia that occurs due to elongation of the eyeball or bulging of the cornea.

Concerns around the prevalence of Myopia

- A pair of spectacles is usually prescribed to correct this defect, but the spectacles address the symptom and fail to address the cause which results in the progression of myopia through childhood.

- Progressive myopia might lead to 'high' myopia, increasing the risk of retinal detachment, glaucoma or macular degeneration that can cause permanent loss of vision.
- Children, particularly in urban environments, are spending extensive hours indoors and on near-work looking at books, television, phones or laptops
- The COVID-19 pandemic has also increased the number of hours children are spending indoors; this is robbing the children of outdoor time and exposure to sunlight.
 - It is said that exposure to sunlight can arrest the progression of myopia.
- Reports from the East Asian countries suggest that 80%-90% of high school children in East and Southeast Asia were facing myopia even before COVID pandemic.
 - About 20% of them had high myopia.
- WHO warns of a global myopia epidemic, where several children are at risk of vision impairment as estimates predict that close to 50% of the world's population will be myopic by 2050.

Trends in India

- Studies have recorded low levels of myopia prevalence among schoolchildren as compared to East Asia.
- One in 30 to one in five schoolchildren is presenting with myopia in India.
- According to a study of about 12 lakh schoolchildren in Telangana and parts of Andhra Pradesh, myopia prevalence was found to be 5% including those who already use spectacles.

Impact of urbanisation on the prevalence of Myopia

- Myopia is two times more prevalent among urban children compared to rural ones.
- A study found a higher prevalence among South Asian children in the United Kingdom compared to those living in rural India.
- Studies also show that myopia prevalence in urban Indian schools is relatively high and the spectacle power of urban children with myopia is also increasing.
 - This proves that urban schools are causing an increase in myopia in children

- Despite a demographic shift towards cities and towns, about 65% of India's population still live in villages but as urbanisation increases the burden of myopia also increases.
- Considering these factors it is predicted that myopia prevalence would be about 50% in India by 2050.

Recommendations

- Although there is treatment available to address myopia, prevention of myopia is better than cure.
- There is a need to spread awareness among parents about the benefits of outdoor activities to children.
- Schools should also be encouraged to ensure that children are exposed to sunlight adequately.
 - There is a need for setting up an education policy that helps balance near-work with distance-work.
- Screening facilities have to be strengthened and spectacles must be provided for those with defects.
 - Basic, annual screening can be done by teachers at schools and refer myopic children to eye-care professionals.
- Social stigma around spectacles must also be addressed through sensitisation and awareness programs

30. India to join Biden's new trade initiative for Indo-Pacific region

- The Indian Prime Minister along with the U.S. President, Japanese Prime Minister, and leaders of 10 other countries, participated virtually in the launch of the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF) in Tokyo.

Details:

Membership:

- The IPEF grouping includes **seven out of 10 members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)**. It does not include Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos.
- All the **four Quad countries** – India, U.S., Japan and Australia along with **New Zealand** are members of the IPEF.

Focus areas:

- The four main pillars of the proposed framework include **trade, supply chain resiliency, clean energy and decarbonisation, and taxes and anti-corruption measures.**
- Notably, the IPEF's contours are still to be formally agreed upon and negotiations for the same are to begin.

Significance of the new framework:

- The new framework with its focus on trade could help strengthen economic ties between the member countries. This gains more significance given the fact that the member nations represent about 40% of global GDP.
- The measures focussing on supply chain resiliency would help build a more **inclusive and flexible economic framework in the region.** More resilient supply chains would also help **counter inflation pressures.**
- The focus on clean energy and decarbonisation would contribute to the global **climate action efforts.**

India's take:

- India has signalled its readiness to be part of the new economic initiative and would be actively taking part in the proposed negotiations.
- There have been repeated clarifications from the U.S. officials stressing that the IPEF **won't be a free trade deal** nor are countries expected to discuss reducing tariffs or increasing market access. This gains significance in the backdrop of India's decision to walk out of the 15-nation RCEP (Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership).
- One of the focus areas of IPEF would be to set and follow **standards for the digital economy and cross-border data flows and data localisation.** Notably, India has had strong differences with the U.S. and its partners on this issue.

31. Meeting family planning goals

Background:

- According to the latest **National Family Health Survey (NFHS)**, there has been a **reduction in the Total Fertility Rate** from 3.4 in 1990-92 to 2.0 in 2019-21.
- This could be mainly attributed to the success of India's family planning programme which has helped improve access to contraceptives.

Government initiatives:

- **Mission Parivar Vikas** has been able to enhance access to high-quality family planning choices. It has been successful in increasing the **modern Contraceptive Prevalence Rate (mCPR)**, especially among female non-users from vulnerable communities.
- In present times there is a wide range of options available for contraceptives. Apart from barrier methods such as male and female condoms and oral contraceptive pills (COCP), there are also injectable contraceptives available now.

Recommendations:

- While there has been impressive progress, the article makes the following suggestions.

Involving youth population:

- As per the NFHS-5 and the 2022 report by the United Nations Population Fund, there has been a rise in adolescent childbearing in some States. This requires improving access to family planning services to even the youth population. This will help address the low mCPR in youth in some districts in India.

Capacity building among health workers:

- Building capacity among health workers in using the **Family Planning Logistics Management Information System** will empower them to ensure better availability of and access to contraceptives by marginalised communities.
 - Family Planning Logistics Management Information System is a dedicated software for family planning commodities across all the levels of health facilities.

Customizing interventions:

- Family planning interventions need to be tailored around the diversity of contexts, health needs, and populations for whom the intervention is to be implemented. This will ensure better effectiveness of such interventions.

Promoting male engagement:

- Involving men in the family planning discourse should be mainstreamed given that this would not only be gender neutral but also more effective.

Involving the private sector:

- There is the need to leverage the capabilities of the private sector to improve service delivery in terms of family planning. The private sector can offer innovative solutions in family planning, thereby improving the community's access to services.

32. On Quad; its origins, goals and future plans

- India, U.S., Australia, and Japan are meeting for the second in-person summit of the **Quadrilateral Security Dialogue or Quad** in Tokyo.

Background:

- The Quad is an informal multilateral grouping of India, the U.S., Australia, and Japan aimed at cooperation for a **free and open Indo-Pacific region**.

Origins and growth of the grouping:

- India took up large scale humanitarian and disaster relief work in the aftermath of the **Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004**. It helped its maritime neighbours: Sri Lanka, the Maldives and Indonesia. The other three naval powers of the region – the U.S., Australia and Japan also joined in the efforts. This marked an important moment in the coming together of the four countries that led to the birth of a new framework: the Quadrilateral or Quad.
- The then Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe promoted the idea of an “**arc of prosperity and freedom**” that brought the Quad countries closer together in cooperation and collaboration.
- The dynamism between the member countries got an impetus with the 2007 **Indo-U.S. Malabar naval exercise** which saw participation from Japan, Australia and Singapore apart from India and the U.S.
- The Quad lost momentum post-2007 meeting and was only revived later in 2017 amid increasing assertiveness of China and revised assessments of the China challenge. Though regular meetings were taking place between leaders of the four countries, the meetings were termed the ‘**India-Australia-Japan-U.S.’ dialogue** and not referred to as a Quad dialogue to avoid the perception of it being a “gang-up” against China. The grouping thus far had failed to come up with an explicit set of objectives, areas of cooperation, and even the definition of Indo-Pacific.
- It was in March 2021 that the leaders met virtually, for the first time as an official Quad summit, releasing a set of objectives for the grouping called the

'The Spirit of the Quad' and outlined actionable goals, and formed expert working groups in multiple areas.

Objectives of the grouping:

- The realization of a free, open, rules-based order, rooted in international law and ensuring security and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific was the main objective of the grouping.
- Though unstated, a major basis for the grouping is to check China's growing influence in the Indo-Pacific region. This was evident in the emphasis laid on rule of law, territorial integrity, freedom of navigation and overflight, peaceful resolution of disputes, and democratic values. This was an indirect reference to China's actions in the region.

Notable initiatives of the grouping:

- The grouping sought to strengthen equitable vaccine access for the Indo-Pacific, through the **Quad Vaccine Initiative (QVI)**, which sought to manufacture and distribute at least a billion COVID-19 vaccines for the Asia region by the end of 2022.
- In the domain of emerging and critical technologies, the four countries aimed to work on the **development of 5G telecommunications** with an emphasis on diversification. They also aimed at the creation of supply chains for critical minerals and technologies for making semiconductors used in smartphones. Notably, China has been a leader in these areas.
- Quad nations have agreed to build **joint connectivity projects and transparent infrastructure funding** for countries in the region. This is aimed to counter China and its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).
- The Quad has also created a **working group for climate action** with a major focus on fostering green shipping by decarbonising maritime supply chains and promoting the use of clean hydrogen.

Future of the Quad:

- The **ongoing Russia-Ukraine crisis has triggered geopolitical shifts**. Notably, India is the only member of the Quad that has not imposed sanctions against Russia and has in fact ramped up its intake of Russian oil.
- The newly unveiled '**Indo-Pacific Economic Framework**' (IPEF) offers an opportunity to bind the countries in closer economic cooperation.

33. A new road for India's Fiscal Federalism

The Supreme Court has delivered a ruling on the levy of Integrated Goods and Services Tax (IGST). As a consequence of the new ruling, a new road has been carved out for India's fiscal federalism.

The Background:

- The apex court, in the case of Union of India vs Mohit Minerals, questioned the validity of a levy of IGST on ocean freight paid by foreign sellers to foreign shipping lines.
- This tax has been declared illegal by the Gujarat High Court.
- According to the Supreme Court, the tax levied on importers constituted double taxation.
- Therefore, it was asserted by the apex court that the importers who were already paying tax on the composite supply of goods could not be charged with additional taxes on a perceived service.
- The judgement was delivered by taking into account the technical readings of various laws, especially the Central GST Act.

Points to be considered:

- The court's ruling cannot be interpreted as the limited purview of a legislature (whether Parliament or the States) to make the recommendations of the GST Council binding on the executive bodies through statutory laws.
- However, in the court's ruling, constitutional power cannot be limited through statute.
- It must be noted that Article 246A, which was introduced by the 101st Constitutional Amendment Act, consists of the provision that empowers equal powers to both Union and the States to legislate on GST. It does not discriminate based on the allocation of authority.
- The court pointed out that the provisions in the Constitution are not clear about treating the recommendations of the GST Council as a binding decision and transforming them into legislation.
- The court defined Indian federalism as a dialogue between cooperative and uncooperative federalism where the federal units have the liberty to employ different means of persuasion ranging from collaboration to contestation.
- The judgement of the Mohit Minerals case has paved the way for states to exercise their independent powers to legislate on GST freely.

Addressing the concerns:

- Awarding the states the liberty to legislate on GST might have the possibility of further complicating the taxation regimes and a rising discontent between the centre and the states.
- The judgement on GST is perceived as contradictory to the idea of 'One Nation One Tax' with which the new tax regime was introduced.

Way Ahead:

- More clarity is required to define the qualification of the GST Council to act as a decision-making authority and to what extent their recommendations are to be considered.
- GST was introduced with the perception of establishing a pooled sovereignty. Such sovereignty has been contested with the major allegation of having a centralising tendency.
- The judgement of the Supreme Court that has conferred liberty to the States to make laws on GST can open the doorway to more cooperative federalism, reforming and simplifying the existing tax regime.

34. Why transfer of case to district judge by Supreme Court sends the wrong signal

The Supreme Court order of May 20, transferring the suit on the Gyanvapi Masjid dispute from the civil judge (senior division) Varanasi to the district judge casts aspersion, though unintended, on the competence of civil judges in general.

Background

- The matter had reached the Supreme Court on a petition filed by the Mosque Management Committee, which challenged the civil judge's orders.
- The order permitted inspection, survey, and videography of the mosque's complex to collect evidence about the alleged existence of idols of Hindu deities inside the mosque, which is adjacent to the Kashi Vishwanath Temple.
- The Mosque Management Committee had filed an application before the civil judge seeking the rejection of the plaint on the ground that it was barred by the **Places of Worship (Special Provisions) Act, 1991**.
- Places of Worship (Special Provisions) Act, 1991 prohibits individuals and groups of people from converting, in full or in part, a place of worship of any religious denomination into a place of worship of a different religious denomination, or even a different segment of the same religious denomination.

- It was argued before the SC that given the said Act, the suit was liable to be rejected at the threshold as the civil judge had no jurisdiction to entertain the same, much less to pass the aforesaid interim orders.
- The SC has not found any fault with the order of the civil judge, though there is also a view that it was mandatory on the part of the civil judge to have first passed an order on whether he had the jurisdiction to entertain the suit.
- However, it appears that in the SC's view, this was not a serious infraction.
- So, in a way, the SC has affirmed the orders of the civil judge.
- The civil court had territorial and pecuniary jurisdiction to deal with the matter.
- The question that arises is: Why has the Supreme Court transferred the matter to the court of the district judge?

Issues with the SC transferring the case to the district judge

- The SC has seemingly declared civil judges to be not competent to decide a matter alleged to be complex.
- When the Civil Procedure Code, the High Court Rules and Orders invest a civil judge with jurisdiction, why take it away merely on the plea that the matter is complex?
- **Unhealthy precedent:** Transfer of the case to the district judge has set an unhealthy precedent and will have a demoralising effect on the subordinate judiciary.
- In the recent past, many lower-level judicial officers have passed outstanding orders in matters concerning the liberties of the citizens, which are under threat as never before.
- The subordinate judiciary provides the foundation of our judicial system.

Conclusion

Supreme Court order inadvertently casts aspersions on competence of subordinate judiciary. District court should not be weighed down by SC observation.

35. Allow Surrogacy For Single Men, Mothers: Delhi HC

The Delhi High Court issued a notice to the Union government on a petition challenging some provisions of the Surrogacy (Regulation) Act and the Assisted Reproductive Technology (Regulation) Act.

Issues raised by the petition

- Currently, the laws does not allow single men to have child through surrogacy.
- Married women can only avail surrogacy services if they are unable to produce a child due to **medical conditions**.
- Otherwise, for women to avail of surrogacy services, they **must be aged between 35 and 45 and widowed or divorced**.
- Women can only offer surrogacy if they are **aged between 25 and 35 and married with at least one biological child**.
- The laws also require a **surrogate to be genetically related** to the couple who intend to have a child through this method, their petition said.

Basis of the Petition

- The personal decision of a single person about the birth of a baby through surrogacy, i.e., **the right of reproductive autonomy is a facet of the right to privacy guaranteed under Article 21** of the Constitution.
- Thus, the right to privacy of every citizen or person affecting a decision to bear or beget a child through surrogacy cannot be taken away.

Distinct features of the Surrogacy (Regulation) Act, 2021

- **Definition of surrogacy:** It defines surrogacy as a practice where a woman gives birth to a child for an intending couple with the intention to hand over the child after the birth to the intending couple.
- **Regulation of surrogacy:** It prohibits commercial surrogacy, but allows altruistic surrogacy which involves no monetary compensation to the surrogate mother other than the medical expenses and insurance.
- **Purposes for which surrogacy is permitted:** Surrogacy is permitted when it is: (i) for intending couples who suffer from proven infertility; (ii) altruistic; (iii) not for commercial purposes; (iv) not for producing children for sale, prostitution or other forms of exploitation; and (v) for any condition or disease specified through regulations.
- **Eligibility criteria:** The intending couple should have a 'certificate of essentiality' and a 'certificate of eligibility' issued by the appropriate authority ex. District Medical Board.

Eligibility criteria for surrogate mother:

- To obtain a certificate of eligibility from the appropriate authority, the surrogate mother has to be:
 1. A close relative of the intending couple;

2. A married woman having a child of her own;
 3. 25 to 35 years old;
 4. A surrogate only once in her lifetime; and
 5. Possess a certificate of medical and psychological fitness for surrogacy.
- Further, the surrogate mother cannot provide her own gametes for surrogacy.

36. AKRUTI Program to start in Kudankulam

The Nuclear Power Corporation of India Limited is all set to launch AKRUTI programme in the villages surrounding Kudankulam Nuclear Power Project (KKNPP).

AKRUTI Program

- The Nuclear Power Corporation of India Limited is assisting unemployed youth living near the Tarapur Atomic Power Station (TAPS) through AKRUTI.
- AKRUTI stands for Advanced Knowledge and Rural Technology Implementation (AKRUTI) program.
- Areas of water, food processing, agriculture and waste management in rural areas are covered under the AKRUTI program.
- The scheme aims at empowering villages through implementing different technologies for usage.
- This scheme will lead to sustainable growth of the rural sector across the country.

What is the objective?

- To provide information and mechanism for implementation of BARC technologies in rural areas thereby aiming at overall rural development.

37. Criminal justice system

The key to an improved criminal justice system is quality forensic labs and well-trained staff, not more legislation and harsher punishments.

About forensic science

- Forensic science is the **application of scientific perspectives and techniques** to the legal process, including investigations and courtroom protocol.
- It is the **use of scientific data and procedures** specifically for the legal system.
- There is rigorous procedure involved, including **controlled conditions, reliable data collection** and the attempt to disprove hypotheses.
- Methodologies like the autopsy procedures, fingerprinting, testing and matching for poisons, blood spatter analysis, matching guns to bullets fired (ballistics), voice sample matches, handwriting assessments and DNA analysis are all facets of forensic science.

Inadequate state forensic facilities

- We have a woefully **inadequate** number of forensic science laboratories (FSL).
- There are seven **central forensic laboratories** in India at Hyderabad, Kolkata, Chandigarh, New Delhi, Guwahati, Bhopal and Pune.★
- Six of these laboratories, barring Delhi, are under the control of the **Directorate of Forensic Science Services (DFSS)**, and its mission is to render high quality and credible forensic services to the justice delivery system.
- **A National Forensic Sciences University** was established in Gandhinagar, Gujarat in 2020.
- The existing National Institute of Criminology and Forensic Science in Delhi has been integrated into this new university.
- There are 32 state FSLs and about 529 mobile FSL units, of which Delhi has one state FSL and six mobile units.
- The DNA tests discovered in 1985 are used to identify individuals involved in alleged crimes.
- In 2017, The Hindu reported that while the United Kingdom completes DNA testing on over 60,000 crimes annually, India with over 13 times the population completes such tests on less than 7,500 cases.
- The average pendency at each lab is huge.
- In all states, there were over 50 per cent vacancies in personnel at their facilities.

Way forward

- **More investment:** We certainly need more investment in the establishment of FSL laboratories, the training and appointment of personnel adept at forensic methodologies and reforms within our police to establish a trained and skilled detective cadre tasked with solving complex and heinous crimes.

- **Quality training and accreditation:** There is a desperate need for good quality training facilities, **standards of accreditation** and continuous education programmes for our forensic experts.

Conclusion

It is not more legislation and harsher punishments that will solve crimes, but well-trained forensic staff plying their craft in good quality laboratories that will aid our criminal justice system.

38. Making India a digital power

There are several reforms and governance initiatives that have successfully steered India to its current strength.

Contribution of Digital India program

- A report carding of Digital India's performance shows impressive progress.
- Thus far, the government has transferred more than Rs 17 lakh crore through DBT while saving Rs 2.2 lakh crore.
- Today, India has the world's fastest-growing and most vibrant startup ecosystem with close to **70,000 registered startups** and around **100 unicorns**, with a unicorn coming up every week.
- **GST regime:** Thanks to the most significant reform in indirect taxation through the GST and tax compliance, India has registered its highest ever collections.
- Revenue increased from Rs 22 lakh crore in FY 21 to Rs 27 lakh crore in FY 22 – a whopping 22 per cent growth.
- **Role in India's response to pandemic:** Digital India played a significant role in India's response to the pandemic.
- It ensured that the government could reach people in remote parts of the country.
- Health, education and other essential services migrated swiftly to the online mode.

Use of technology for governance amid pandemic

- Digital India played a significant role in India's response to the pandemic.
- It ensured that the government could reach people in **remote parts of the country**.
- Health, education and other essential services migrated swiftly to the **online mode**.

- It would not be an aberration to say that post-Covid, India emerged as a preeminent nation in the use of technology for governance.

Conclusion

The rapid digitalisation of the world along with a new focus on trust in the global supply chains for digital products and services presents tremendous opportunities for India and its youth. It is now up to all of us to engage in a collective “sabka prayas” to realise New India’s economic potential.

39. India needs a forward-looking strategy on Pakistan

India’s approach in dealing with Pakistan today is very different from the framework that emerged at the dawn of the 1990s.

Terms of engagement with Pakistan

- From the 1990s, for nearly three decades, it was Pakistan that had the political initiative.
- The turmoil in Kashmir, the international focus on nuclear proliferation, and the relentless external pressure for a sustained dialogue with Pakistan put Delhi in a difficult situation.
- If Pakistan was on the political offensive, a series of weak coalition governments in Delhi were forced onto the back foot.
- At the heart of Pakistan’s ambition was to change the status quo in Jammu and Kashmir.
- Islamabad also played up to the concerns in Western chancelleries that the conflict in Kashmir might escalate to the nuclear level.
- The new international consensus that Kashmir is the “world’s most dangerous nuclear flashpoint” aligned well with Pakistan’s strategy.
- Delhi had no option but to respond, but any move to counter Pakistan would make the situation worse.
- Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India has begun to reset the terms of the engagement agenda.
- **Change in regional and international context:** Meanwhile, the regional and international context has also altered in many ways since the early 1990s essentially in India’s favour.

Reset in engagement

- India's transformed relations with the US, the resolution of Delhi's dispute with the global nuclear order, and getting the West to discard its temptation to mediate on Kashmir enormously improved India's diplomatic position.
- But the most consequential change has been in **the economic domain**.
- The persistent neglect of economic challenges left Pakistan in an increasingly weaker position in relation to India.
- If India has inched its way into the top six global economies, Pakistan today is broke.
- Modi had the opportunity to build on these **shifting fortunes of Delhi** and Islamabad and develop a three-pronged strategy of his own.
- **1]** India bet that the heavens won't fall if Delhi stops talking to Islamabad or negotiating with Pakistan-backed militant groups in Kashmir.
- **2]** Delhi has been unafraid of staring at nuclear escalation in responding to Pakistan's cross-border terrorism.
- **3]** By changing the constitutional status of Kashmir in 2019, India has reduced the scope of India's future negotiations with Pakistan on Kashmir.

Way forward

- Pakistan's hand today is much weaker than in the 1990s and Delhi's room for manoeuvring has grown, notwithstanding the challenges it confronts on the China border.
- That opens some room for new Indian **initiatives toward Pakistan**.
- Getting Pakistan's army and its political class to be more practical in engaging India is certainly a tall order; but Delhi can afford to make a move.

Conclusion

While there can be much disagreement on Pakistan's capacity to respond, Delhi's new initiatives can reinforce the positive evolution of Indian foreign policy, and expand the space for Indian diplomacy in the region and beyond.

40. Pacific Nations reject China Security Pact

China has suffered a big diplomatic humiliation in the Pacific. 10 island nations in the region rejected China's proposed security pact.

Why in news?

- Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi has returned empty-handed in a highly decorated visit to the Pacific Nations.
- The secret deal that was to be brokered got leaked in public media, caused huge embarrassment to the Chinese.

Conspicuous features of the Pact

- China has had offered to radically ramp up its activities in the South Pacific, directly challenging the influence of the US and its allies in the strategically vital region.
- The failed deal saw Beijing to:
 1. Train Pacific island police,
 2. Become involved in cybersecurity,
 3. Expand political ties,
 4. Conduct sensitive marine mapping and
 5. Gain greater access to natural resources on land and in the water
- As an enticement, Beijing is offering millions of dollars in financial aid, the prospect of a potentially lucrative China-Pacific islands free trade agreement and access to China's vast market.

Why Pacific Nations rejected this lollipop?

- The offer is perceived was "disingenuous" and would "ensure Chinese influence in government" and "economic control" of key industries.
- The nations also cited a **lack of regional consensus**.

GS 3 : Economy, Science and Technology, Environment

1. India must use markets to decarbonise

Climate change is bound to impact human lives and the global economy at an exceptionally high scale in the not-so-distant future. The solution to the problem calls for government intervention.

Carbon intensive nature of India's energy ecosystem

- After China and the United States, **India, which releases 2.44 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide annually**, is the third-largest emitter of this GHG, making it a key player in emissions reduction.
- The International Energy Agency's (IEA) World Energy Outlook 2017 Report estimates that India will account for nearly **one-fourth of the global energy demand by 2040**.
- As per the IEA's **India Energy Outlook 2021 Report**, India's energy system is **highly dependent on fossil fuels** – coal, oil and bioenergy – that supply about 90 per cent of the country's demand.
- **Low electrification:** About 38 per cent of primary energy is consumed for power generation, implying that the **level of electrification is still low in the country**.
- **Power generation is highly dependent on coal** – about **78 per cent of it comes from this fossil fuel** – and, transportation is almost entirely dependent on oil.
- The Indian energy ecosystem is, thus, **highly carbon-intensive**.

Climate change as a feature of market failure

- **Market failure due to climate change:** Economic activities by consumers (driving or air-conditioning, for instance) and by producers (such as electricity generation and manufacturing) cause emissions, leading to pollution and global warming.
- **Negative externalities:** These negative externalities, causing outcomes that are not efficient, are not reflected in the costs incurred by consumers or producers.
- The true costs to the consumers, producers and society are not reflected in the market interactions.
- This leads to an uncontrolled rise in emissions and also breeds apathy towards mitigation efforts.

Way forward

- **Government intervention:** Achieving economic growth sustainably requires a strategy for reducing carbon emissions aggressively while also **focusing on efficiency, equity, fairness and behavioural aspects**.
- The solution to the problem of market failure calls for **government intervention**.
- **Limits of emission:** The most natural option of government intervention for reducing emissions is by **fixing limits of emissions** through regulation,

taking into consideration the **Nationally Determined Contribution** targets set by the country under the Paris Agreement.

- Experts have shown that the wrongly set emission levels could **lead to cost-inefficient outcomes**.
- It makes it difficult for the regulator to obtain the information about each firm's abatement-cost and damage-cost schedules in advance.
- Therefore, setting emission targets and regulating emissions through command and control might be good only during the initial phase of the mitigation strategy.
- **Why Carbon tax is a better option?** The carbon tax is a better option than regulating the pre-fixed levels of emissions.
- The **marginal cost of abatement rises as the firms keep on reducing the emissions further**, and the firm will stop reducing emissions and choose to pay tax at the point when the cost of abatement becomes higher than the rate of tax.
- This option will lead to near-efficient outcomes.
- The trading scheme will bring in higher efficiency as the price of certificates will be determined by allowing firms facing low and high abatement costs to compete in the free market as per their own abatement and damage cost schedules.
- The emissions trading scheme will determine the optimal and cost-efficient levels of emissions reduction by providing a choice to the firms to either mitigate or trade – the net effect of this will be a reduction in emissions.
- The low abatement-cost firms will keep reducing emissions as they would profit by trading the certificates.
- **Equity in energy access:** The issue of equity in energy access must be addressed by **channelling the revenues generated from carbon pricing to households and firms impacted by the carbon trading and carbon tax** – these could be through incentives or lump-sum transfers.

Conclusion

The socio-economic impact of decarbonising the economy and the way humans live would be crucial in setting our priorities. We have limited time and our resources are scarce.

2. PDS has had a spectacular run. That may not last

2020-21 was one of Indian agriculture's finest moments, as memorable as 1967-68 that inaugurated the Green Revolution. Agriculture was the only sector to grow 3.3 per cent in 2020-21, even as the economy overall contracted by 4.8 per cent.

Increase in grain offtake under PDS

- NFSA along with PMGKAY has led to a **massive jump in grain offtake** through the PDS.
- More importantly, this **increase has largely taken place in the poorer states**.
- UP, Bihar and Jharkhand together accounted for 21.6 per cent of national grain offtake in 2012-13, which was pre-NFSA.
- Sales of rice and wheat under various government schemes totalled **92.9 million tonnes (mt) in 2020-21 and 105.6 mt in 2021-22**.
- This was as against an **average offtake of 62.5 mt during the first seven years** after the implementation of the National Food Security Act (NFSA) in 2013-14 and 48.4 mt in the seven years preceding the legislation.

Provisions under NFSA

- The NFSA legally entitles **up to 75 per cent of India's rural and 50 per cent of the urban population** – translating into some 813.5 million people – to receive 5 kg of grain per person per month at highly subsidised rates of Rs 2/kg for wheat and Rs 3/kg for rice.
- In the wake of the Covid-induced economic disruptions, a new **Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana (PMGKAY)** scheme was launched giving NFSA beneficiaries an extra 5 kg grain per person per month free of cost.
- PMGKAY was implemented for eight months (April-November) in 2020-21 and 11 months (May-March) of 2021-22.

PDS reforms in states

- Only a handful of states – Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh – had well-functioning PDS till the early 2000s.
- In the late-2000s, Chhattisgarh initiated reforms to curb diversion/leakages by entrusting the running of fair price shops **to cooperatives and local bodies** (as against private licensees), making timely allocation and supplying grain directly to PDS outlets (bypassing middle-level distribution agencies), and **using IT to track dispatches** right from procurement centres to points of sale.
- Chhattisgarh's example was emulated by Odisha, followed by Madhya Pradesh and West Bengal – all by 2015-16.
- The **three poorest states are the latest entrants to the list**.
- The accompanying charts show the offtake of rice and wheat both at the all-India level and for the three poorest states as per the NITI Aayog's National Multidimensional Poverty Index – Bihar, Jharkhand and Uttar Pradesh (UP).
- UP particularly has seen its grain offtake soar from 9.5 mt to 17.3 mt in the last two years.

- Out of the 17.3 mt (10.7 mt wheat and 6.6 mt rice) distributed in 2021-22, 7.8 mt comprised free grains under PMGKAY.
- The PDS, indeed, turned out to be the only **effective social safety net during the pandemic**.
- Some states went beyond rice and wheat.

Challenges

- The expansion of the PDS, especially post-NFSA, was underwritten by the superabundance of rice and wheat in government granaries.
- Official wheat procurement is likely to halve this time from last year's **record 43.3 mt**, because of a poor crop singed by the abnormal spike in March temperatures.
- Rice stocks are far more comfortable, though the precarious supply situation in fertilisers raises questions about the prospects for the coming kharif season.
- Looking ahead, the Food Corporation of India's stocks can probably sustain the pre-2020-21 annual offtake levels of 60-65 mt - enough for NFSA, but certainly not schemes such as PMGKAY.

Conclusion

The PDS was originally meant to protect ordinary people from extraordinary price rises. Whether it can do that at a time of renewed global inflation remains to be seen.

3. Recent woes of the jute industry in West Bengal

Member of Parliament (MP) from Barrackpore constituency in West Bengal met the Union Textile about issues concerning jute farmers, workers and the overall jute industry.

What is the news?

- The Barrackpore MP had earlier written to West Bengal CM, seeking her intervention into the "arbitrary decision" of capping the price for procuring raw jute from the mills.
- He was referring to the Office of the Jute Commissioner (JCO)'s September 30 notification mandating that no entity would be allowed to purchase or sell raw jute at a price exceeding ₹6,500 per quintal.

What is Jute?

- Jute is the only crop where earnings begin to trickle in way before the final harvest.
- The seeds are planted between April and May and harvested between July and August.
- The leaves can be sold in vegetable markets for nearly two months of the four-month jute crop cycle.
- The tall, hardy grass shoots up to 2.5 metres and each part of it has several uses.
- The outer layer of the stem produces the fibre that goes into making jute products.
- But the leaves can be cooked, the inner woody stems can be used to manufacture paper and the roots, which are left in the ground after harvest, improve the yield of subsequent crops.
- A 'Golden Fibre Revolution' has long been called for by various committees, but the jute industry is in dire need of basic reforms.

Jute production in India

- India is the world's biggest producer of jute, followed by Bangladesh.
- Jute is primarily grown in West Bengal, Odisha, Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Andhra Pradesh.
- The jute industry in India is 150 years old.
- There are about 70 jute mills in the country, of which about 60 are in West Bengal along both the banks of river Hooghly.
- Jute production is a labour-intensive industry. It employs about two lakh workers in the West Bengal alone and 4 lakh workers across the country.

Significance of Jute

- Compared to rice, jute requires very little water and fertiliser.
- It is largely pest-resistant, and its rapid growth spurt ensures that weeds don't stand a chance.
- Jute is the second most abundant natural fibre in the world.
- It has high tensile strength, acoustic and thermal insulation, breathability, low extensibility, ease of blending with both synthetic and natural fibres, and antistatic properties.
- Jute can be used: for insulation (replacing glass wool), geotextiles, activated carbon powder, wall coverings, flooring, garments, rugs, ropes, gunny bags, handicrafts, curtains, carpet backings, paper, sandals, carry bags, and furniture.

Why in news now?

- Mills are now procuring raw jute at prices higher than what they are selling them at after processing.
- The government has a fixed Minimum Support Price (MSP) for raw jute procurement from farmers, which is ₹4,750 per quintal for the 2022-23 season.
- However, as the executive stated, this reached his mill at ₹7,200 per quintal, that is, 700 more than the ₹6,500 per quintal cap for the final product.
- Though the Union government has come up with several schemes to prevent de-hoarding, the executive believes the mechanism requires a certain “systematic regulation”.

What happened to supply?

- What made the situation particularly worrisome recently was the occurrence of Cyclone Amphan in May 2020 and the subsequent rains in major jute producing States.
- These events led to lower acreage, which in turn led to lower production and yield compared to previous years.
- Additionally, as the Commission for Agricultural Costs and Prices (CACP) stated in its report, this led to production of a lower quality of jute fibre in 2020-21 as water-logging in large fields resulted in farmers harvesting the crop prematurely.
- Acreage issues were accompanied by hoarding at all levels – right from the farmers to the traders.

Where does India stand in comparison to Bangladesh?

- As per the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), India is the largest producer of jute followed by Bangladesh and China.
- However, in terms of acreage and trade, Bangladesh takes the lead accounting for three-fourth of the global jute exports in comparison to India’s 7%.
- This can be attributed to the fact that India lags behind Bangladesh in producing superior quality jute fibre due to infrastructural constraints and varieties suitable for the country’s agro-climate.
- Further, as the CACP report stated, Bangladesh provides cash subsidies for varied semi-finished and finished jute products.
- Hence, the competitiveness emerges as a challenge for India to explore export options in order to compensate for the domestic scenario.

What is at stake?

- The jute sector provides direct employment to 3.70 lakh workers in the country.
- It supports the livelihood of around 40 lakh farm families, closure of the mills is a direct blow to workers and indirectly, to the farmers whose production is used in the mills.
- West Bengal, Bihar and Assam account for almost 99% of India's total production.

4. Health Star Rating System of FSSAI for Packaged Food

The “health star rating” system that the Food Safety Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) plans to adopt in order to help consumers reduce their intake of unhealthy foods has been opposed by close to a dozen consumer and health advocacy groups.

What is the Health Star Rating System?

- In February, the FSSAI decided to adopt the “health-star rating system”, which gives a product 1/2 a star to 5 stars, in its draft regulations for front of package labelling (FOPL).
- The HSR format ranks a packaged food item based on salt, sugar, and fat content and the rating will be printed on the front of the package.
- The underlying premise of the HSR is that positive ingredients such as fruits and nuts can offset negative nutrients such as calories, saturated fat, total sugar, sodium to calculate the number of stars ascribed to a product.
- The decision was based on the recommendations of a study by the IIM-Ahmedabad the regulator had commissioned in September 2021.
- In the same meeting, the regulator decided that FOPL implementation could be made voluntary for a period of four years.

What is FoPL?

- In India, packaged food has had **back-of-package (BOP)** nutrient information in detail but no FoPL.
- Counter to this, FoPL can nudge people towards healthy consumption of packaged food.
- It can also influence purchasing habits.
- The study endorsed the HSR format, which speaks about the proportions of salt, sugar, and fat in food that is most suited for consumers.

- Countries such as the UK, Mexico, Chile, Peru, Hungary, and Australia have implemented FoPL systems.

What warranted the HSR rating in India?

- **Visual bluff:** A lot of Indian consumers do not read the information available at the back of the packaged food item.
- **Burden of NCDs:** Also, India has a huge burden of non-communicable diseases that contributes to around 5.87 million (60%) of all deaths in a year.
- **Healthy dietary choices:** HSR will encourage people to make healthy choices and could bring a transformational change in the society.
- **Supreme Court order:** A PIL seeking direction to the government to frame guidelines on HSR and impact assessment for food items and beverages was filed in the Supreme Court in June 2021.

Which category of food item will have HSR?

- **All packaged food items or processed food** will have the HSR label.
- These will include **chips, biscuits, namkeen, sweets and chocolates, meat nuggets, and cookies.**
- However, **milk and its products such as chenna and ghee are EXEMPTED** as per the FSSAI draft notified in 2019.

Will there be pushback from food industry?

- **Negative warning:** Some experts opposed the use of the HSR model in India, suggesting that consumers might tend to take this as an affirmation of the health benefits rather than as a negative warning of ill effects.
- **Lack of awareness:** This is significant because there is lack of awareness on star ratings related to consumer products in India.
- **Impact on Sale:** Certain organisations fear it might affect the sale of certain food products.

Arguments against health star rating

- Experts argue that “**warning labels**” instead have been most effective in various countries.
- They said the HSR system adopted in countries like Australia and New Zealand has **not resulted in any meaningful behavior change.**
- Even after eight years of their implementation, there is still **no evidence of HSRs having a significant impact** on the nutritional quality of people’s food and beverage purchases.
- Also, the HSR system “**misrepresents nutrition science**”.

- The **algorithm of adding and subtracting nutrients** does not fit with our understanding of biology.
- For example, the presence of fruit in a fruit drink juice does not offset the impacts of added sugar in the body.

5. The supply bottlenecks causing power shortages

The power sector in India is going through a crisis. Peak shortages in some states have reached double digits.

Chronology of the crisis

- First, with summer approaching before time, power demand has shot up to record levels.
- The second reason for the rise in power demand is that the economy is recovering, and demand from the industrial sector is going up.
- All things put together, **power demand crossed 207 GW** on April 29, which is about 14 per cent higher than what it was a year ago.
- Experts feel that the peak demand may even touch **215 GW in the coming months**.

Coal shortage crisis

- On average, coal stocks available are only good enough for about eight days' generation against a norm of 24 days.
- In some plants, the stocks available are just about enough to run the plant for a day or two more.
- Part of the problem of poor coal stock is also rumoured to be on account of the non-payment of dues of coal companies.
- But this is not the major cause of the shortage.

Reasons for coal shortage and fall in generation

- The fall in coal stock in power stations is because of two main reasons.
- **1] Rise in international price of coal:** The first is that due to a **rise in the international price of coal** on account of the Ukraine crisis, all plants that were importing coal have either stopped generating completely or are generating at much lower levels.
- We have a sizeable generating capacity based on imported coal, estimated at about 16 GW to 17 GW.

- All these plants after stopping imports are now looking for domestic coal, creating pressure on domestic coal.
- **2] Non-availability of rakes with Indian railways for transporting coal:** Though about 22 MT of coal may be available in power stations, if one includes the stocks available with mining companies, the figure is well over 70 MT.
- So, it is all a question of transporting the coal to the power stations.
- **3] Fall in generation from gas-based plants:** To make matters worse, **generation from gas-based plants has also fallen** due to high gas prices in the world market.
- **4] Impact on hydro generation:** Reservoirs, too, are drying up due to intense heat which will adversely affect hydro generation.

Transportation problem faced by Indian railways

- The railways have about **2,500 rakes** which can be used for coal transportation.
- With a turn-around time of about four-and-a-half days which goes up to nine days for coastal regions, the railways can provide only about **525 rakes on any single day**.
- Of this, about **100 rakes are used for transporting imported coal** and therefore, only about 425 rakes are available on a daily basis for transporting domestic coal.
- But only 380 rakes were being provided in the first half of April this year, though efforts are on to increase this to about 415 rakes.
- The railways prefer to transport coal over short distances in order to **save on the turn-around time**.
- There is also the issue of **availability of tracks** since they are being used on a back-to-back basis.
- Thus production has to be enhanced so that the replenishment rate is higher than consumption.
- Unless we do that, the total stock of coal in the country will deplete further and it will no longer be a mere transportation problem as it is now, but a general lack of supply of coal.

Conclusion

This is the right time to enhance coal production and build adequate stocks because once the monsoon sets in, production will fall.

6. National Open Access Registry (NOAR)

National Open Access Registry (NOAR) has successfully gone live from 1st May 2022.

What is NOAR?

- NOAR is a centralized online platform through which the short-term open access to the inter-state transmission system is being managed in India.
- It is an integrated platform accessible to all stakeholders in the power sector, including open access customers (both sellers and buyers), power traders, power exchanges, National/Regional/State LDCs and others.
- The platform provides automation in the workflow to achieve shorter turnaround time for the transactions.
- NOAR platform also has a payment gateway integrated for making payments related to interstate short-term open access transactions.
- NOAR platform provides transparency and seamless flow of information among stakeholders of open access.

Key features

- **Centralized System:** Single point electronic platform for all the stakeholders
- **Automated Process:** Automated administration process of the short-term open access
- **Common Interface:** Interface with the RLDCs scheduling applications and Power Exchanges (s)
- **Payment Gateway:** Make payments related to STOA transactions

7. LIC

LIC is now at a transformational moment. Its listing on the bourses should lift LIC to be a part of the elite corporate community in India.

Insurance sector in India

- **Opening of the insurance sector:** A milestone in the history of India's insurance industry was the opening of the sector for private participation **in the year 2000** and this caused widespread concern that LIC will find the competition tough and could very well be marginalised.
- Today, there are **24 private players in the life insurance** space and many of them have foreign collaborations.

- LIC has steadily grown in the past six decades and today with over **290 million policyholders** and an **asset value of ₹38 lakh crore (\$520 billion)**, it ranks as one of the largest insurance companies in the world.
- Yet, LIC remains a colossus **capturing 75% of the life insurance business in the country.**
- Its claim settlement at 99.87% is far above the industry average of 84%.

Role of LIC in skilling and women's employment

- LIC created large scale employment for women right from its **inception in 1956.**
- Thousands of women became LIC agents in the 1950s and 60s, when job opportunities were scarce.
- There was **no entry barrier in terms of age or fixed time** for work.
- Education requirement was a mere high school pass.
- Many of these women were housewives who could earn an extra income by selling LIC policies.
- This was a period before the arrival of digital technologies and mobile phones.
- **Skill development program:** LIC's training programme with its mix of online education and real-life case studies offer the best model for India's skill development programmes.
- LIC's relevance comes from its track record of creating vast number of **employment opportunities for ordinary Indians**, male and female, urban and rural.

Policies focused on savings

- In a country of vast poverty and low income, LIC recognised from the beginning that it cannot sell insurance as a risk cover on premature death.
- It, therefore, devised policies focussing on savings and the need for children's education and daughter's marriage which are fundamentals to family values in India.
- These policies also ensured that a part of the premium paid was returned at regular intervals before the maturity period, **providing liquidity for emergencies.**
- They simultaneously covered risk caused by death.
- **People-centric approach:** While the private players concentrated on technology-driven marketing, LIC's approach was **significantly people-centric.**
- When **Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana** was launched for financial inclusion of over 300 million of the rural population on August 15, 2014, LIC was already there with its policies covering a rural population of 200 million.

Conclusion

The nation must not forget the fact that LIC was built on sweat and tears, pain and sacrifice of ordinary Indians. It is these democratic credentials that remain LIC's most valuable asset.

8. France pulls out of P-75I Project

Ahead of PM Modi's scheduled visit, France has denounced its participation in the P-75 India (P-75I) project under which six conventional submarines are to be built in India for the Indian Navy.

Why did France pull out?

- The reason was that the Request for Proposal (RFP) requires that the fuel cell AIP be sea proven, which not the case is for us yet since the French Navy does not use such a propulsion system.
- AIP refers to **Air-Independent Propulsion**, a technology for conventional – that is, non-nuclear – submarines.

Project 75

- Project 75 India is a part of India's **thirty-year-old submarine building plan** by which all the six submarines which are under the project should already be sailing and it should have been followed by the submarines now for which the RFP has been issued.
- It is a **long-awaited and long-overdue project**.
- This should have happened way back but it got delayed because it was difficult to find a strategic partnership model.

What is P-75I?

- The Project 75I-class submarine is a follow-on of the Project 75 Kalvari-class submarine for the Indian Navy.
- In the late 1990s, around the time of **Kargil war**, a three-decade plan took shape for indigenous construction of submarines.
- It was known to have two separate series of submarine building lines – codenamed Project 75 and Project 75I – in collaboration with foreign entities.
- Under this project, the Indian Navy **intends to acquire six diesel-electric submarines, which will also feature advanced air-independent propulsion systems.**

- This is for enabling them to stay submerged for longer duration and substantially increase their operational range.

What is the status of the project?

- The navy is slightly behind the curve on P-75I.
- The project faces choppy waters; the Naval Group has already announced it is pulling out, and sources said the Russian and Spanish companies might also not proceed with their bids.
- Among the concerns, is the requirement to demonstrate a sea-proven fuel cell AIP.
- While some manufacturers may have the technology, it may not have been proven at sea yet.
- Another problem for the OEMs is the transfer of technology, which is built into the process.

Why does the Navy want AIP subs?

- Simply put, AIP technology allows a conventional submarine to **remain submerged for much longer than ordinary diesel-electric submarines**.
- All **conventional submarines have to surface** to run their generators that recharge the batteries that allow the boat to function under water.
- However, the more frequently a submarine surfaces, the **higher the chances of it being detected**.
- AIP allows a submarine to **remain submerged for more than a fortnight**, compared to two to three days for diesel-electric boats.
- IP has a force **multiplier effect on lethality** of a diesel electric submarine as it enhances the submerged endurance of the boat several folds.

What submarines does India have now?

- India has 16 conventional diesel-electric submarines, which are classified as SSKs.
- After the last two Kalvari Class subs are commissioned under P-75, this number will go up to 18.
- India also has two nuclear ballistic submarines, classified SSBN.

Strategic importance of submarines development

- **Ageing arsenal:** Currently, India has less number of submarines than what is required with some more of those from both types being at various stages of construction.

- **Combat roles in near future:** The nuclear powered and diesel-electric submarines have their designated roles in the Carrier Battle Groups, which are formations of ships and submarines with Aircraft Carriers at the lead role.
- **Strategic deterrence:** As per the basic principles of submarine deployment and the minimum requirement for India to create a strategic deterrence, there is a specific number of submarines of both types that India needs to have in active service.

Significance of P-75 I

- **'Make in India' Projects:** It will serve to facilitate faster and more significant absorption of technology and create a tiered industrial ecosystem for submarine construction in India.
- **Self-Reliance:** From a strategic perspective, this will help reduce current dependence on imports and gradually ensure greater self-reliance and dependability of supplies from indigenous sources.
- **Securing Indo-Pacific:** China is increasing its presence in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and this is creating pressure on the Indian Navy in sprucing up the submarine arm.

9. What are W Bosons?

Researchers from Collider Detector at Fermilab (CDF) Collaboration, in the US, announced that they have made a precise measurement of the mass of the so-called W boson.

What is W Boson?

- Discovered in 1983, the W boson is a fundamental particle.
- Together with the Z boson, it is responsible for the weak force, one of four fundamental forces that govern the behaviour of matter in our universe.
- Particles of matter interact by exchanging these bosons, but only over short distances.
- The W boson, which is electrically charged, changes the very make up of particles.
- It switches protons into neutrons, and vice versa, through the weak force, triggering nuclear fusion and letting stars burn.
- This burning also creates heavier elements and, when a star dies, those elements are tossed into space as the building blocks for planets and even people.

Debate over W Boson's mass

- The weak force was combined with the electromagnetic force in theories of a unified electroweak force in the 1960s, in an effort to make the basic physics mathematically consistent.
- But the theory called for the force-carrying particles to be massless, even though scientists knew the theoretical W boson had to be heavy to account for its short range.
- Theorists accounted for the mass of the W by introducing another unseen mechanism. This became known as the Higgs mechanism, which calls for the existence of a Higgs boson.

What is the news?

- CDF researchers stated that this precisely determined value did not match with what was expected from estimates using the standard model of particle physics.
- This result is highly significant because this implies the incompleteness of the standard model description.
- This is a major claim, since the standard model has been extraordinarily successful in the past decades.
- Hence, physicists are looking for corroboration from other, independent, future experiments.

What is the standard model of elementary particle physics?

- The Standard Model of particle physics is the theory describing three of the four known fundamental forces (the electromagnetic, weak, and strong interactions while omitting gravity) in the universe and classifying all known elementary particles.
- It is a theoretical construct in physics that describes particles of matter and their interaction. Ex. Proton, Neutron, Electron etc.
- It is a description that views the elementary particles of the world as being connected by mathematical symmetries, just as an object and its mirror image are connected by a bilateral (left-right) symmetry.
- These are mathematical groups generated by continuous transformations from, say, one particle to another.
- According to this model there are a finite number of fundamental particles which are represented by the characteristic "eigen" states of these groups.
- The particles predicted by the model, such as the Z boson, have been seen in experiments and the last to be discovered, in 2012, was the Higgs boson which gives mass to the heavy particles.

Why is the standard model believed to be incomplete?

- The standard model is thought to be incomplete because it gives a unified picture of only three of the four fundamental forces of nature and it totally omits gravity.
- So, in the grand plan of unifying all forces so that a single equation would describe all the interactions of matter, the standard model was found to be lacking.
- The other gap in the standard model is that it does not include a description of dark matter particles.

How are the symmetries related to particles?

- The symmetries of the standard model are known as gauge symmetries, as they are generated by “gauge transformations” which are a set of continuous transformations (like rotation is a continuous transformation).
- Each symmetry is associated with a gauge boson.
- For example, the gauge boson associated with electromagnetic interactions is the photon.
- The gauge bosons associated with weak interactions are the W and Z bosons. There are two W bosons – W^+ and W^- .

What is the main result of the recent experiment?

- The recent experiment at CDF, which measured the mass of the W boson as $80,433.5 \pm 9.4 \text{ MeV}/c^2$, which is approximately 80 times the mass of a hydrogen nucleus.
- This came out to be more than what is expected from the standard model.
- The expected value using the standard model is $80,357 \pm 8 \text{ MeV}/c^2$.
- Thus, the W boson mass itself is a prediction of the standard model.
- Therefore, any discrepancy in its mass means a lack of self-consistency in the standard model.

What is the discrepancy they obtained?

- The mass discrepancy of the W boson needs to be checked and confirmed to the same accuracy by other facilities, for example, the Large Hadron Collider (LHC).

Where do we stand now in terms of new physics?

- New physics is in the air, and experiments have been gearing up for some years now to detect new particles.

- With its high-precision determination of the W boson mass, the CDF has struck at the heart of the standard model.
- So it is a significant finding and if this is confirmed by the LHC and other experiments, it will throw open the field for ideas and experiment.

10. What is Monkeypox?

The UK health authorities have confirmed a case of Monkeypox, which is a virus passed from infected animals such as rodents to humans, in someone with a recent travel history to Nigeria where they are believed to have caught it.

What is Monkeypox?

- The monkeypox virus is an orthopoxvirus, which is a genus of viruses that also includes the variola virus, which causes smallpox, and vaccinia virus, which was used in the smallpox vaccine.
- It causes symptoms similar to smallpox, although they are less severe.
- While vaccination eradicated smallpox worldwide in 1980, monkeypox continues to occur in a swathe of countries in Central and West Africa, and has on occasion showed up elsewhere.
- According to the WHO, two distinct clade are identified: the West African clade and the Congo Basin clade, also known as the Central African clade.

Its origin

- Monkeypox is a zoonosis, that is, a disease that is transmitted from infected animals to humans.
- Monkeypox virus infection has been detected in squirrels, Gambian poached rats, dormice, and some species of monkeys.
- According to the WHO, cases occur close to tropical rainforests inhabited by animals that carry the virus.

Symptoms and treatment

- Monkeypox begins with a fever, headache, muscle aches, back ache, and exhaustion.
- It also causes the lymph nodes to swell (lymphadenopathy), which smallpox does not.
- The WHO underlines that it is important to not confuse monkeypox with chickenpox, measles, bacterial skin infections, scabies, syphilis and medication-associated allergies.
- The incubation period (time from infection to symptoms) for monkeypox is usually 7-14 days but can range from 5-21 days.

- There is no safe, proven treatment for monkeypox yet.

11. The grim forewarnings of a global study on birds

State of the World's Birds, an annual review of environmental resources, was published recently.

Key Findings of the Study:

- 48% of the existing bird species worldwide are known or suspected to be undergoing population declines.
- 39% of the species have stable trends, about 7% of species have increasing population trends.
- 13.5% of bird species are currently threatened with global extinction.
- The bird species are non-randomly threatened across the avian tree of life.
- The more threatened bird species (86.4%) are found in tropical climates than in temperate latitudes (31.7%).
- The hotspots for threatened species are concentrated in the tropical Andes, southeast Brazil, eastern Himalayas, eastern Madagascar, and Southeast Asian islands.

Importance of birds to ecosystems and culture:

- **Ecological Role:**
 - Birds are a truly global taxon, with one or more species occupying all habitats across the earth's terrestrial surface including urban environments with no natural analogues. Birds contribute toward many ecosystem services that either directly or indirectly benefit humanity.
- **Functional Role:**
 - The functional role of birds within ecosystems as pollinators, seed-dispersers, ecosystem engineers, scavengers and predators not only facilitates accrual and maintenance of biodiversity, it also supports human endeavours such as sustainable agriculture via pest control besides aiding other animals to multiply.
- **Cultural Role:**
 - Beyond its symbolic and artistic values, birdwatching is a global pastime practised by millions of people. Garden bird-feeding is another valuable part. Feeding birds helps to restore the balance of nature.

Threats contributing to avian biodiversity loss:

- Changes in land cover and land-use

- The continued growth of human populations leads directly to conversion and degradation of primary natural habitats and consequent loss of biodiversity
- The other factors are habitat fragmentation and degradation
- Impact of invasive alien species and disease
- Infrastructure, energy demands and pollution
- Agrochemical and pharmaceutical usage
- Global trade teleconnections – It refers to the climate variability links between non-contiguous geographic regions resulting due to global trade
- Climate change

Conclusion:

- The growing footprint of the human population represents the ultimate driver of most threats to avian biodiversity. So the success of solutions will depend on the degree to which they account for the social context in which they are implemented, and our ability to effect changes in individual and societal attitudes and behaviours.
- Emerging concepts of conservation social science can inform efforts to address avian biodiversity loss and to achieve more sustainable conservation outcomes.

12. The learning grounds of Ukraine

- The article written by former Air Vice Marshal, Manmohan Bahadur, analyses some of the important lessons for India from the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict in the realm of defence and internal security.

Important learnings for India:

Criticality of alliances:

- Alliances are of paramount importance in the inter-connected world no matter how powerful a country may be. This is evident in Russia's efforts to get China on its side despite its relatively higher military power.
- The fact that Ukraine has been able to resist Russian military might is chiefly attributable to the support offered to it in the conflict by Europe and NATO.
- Given the challenges faced by India in its neighbourhood surrounded by two adversarial nations, it would be in India's long-term interest to **build enough linkages with other like-minded nations.**

Importance of intelligence gathering:

- The availability of intelligence remains critical to India's security interests.
- India should focus on establishing a system of **high-resolution satellites** and also build sufficient capacity to gather **strategic intelligence** from within enemy territory as well.

Self-reliance:

- A country's vital interests can be protected only by that country. **Increasing Comprehensive National Power (CNP)**, which takes into account social and political stability, economic strength, availability of natural resources, R&D capability, manufacturing capacity and quality of its national leadership should be the top priority in this respect.
- CNP is indicative of a nation's deterrence capability and its ability to fight if deterrence fails.
- The government efforts towards **aatmanirbharta** should be further strengthened with adequate allocation of resources for its realization. **Self-reliance in the defence sector** is an important aspect in this respect.

13. Experts wary of sleeper cells in Punjab

A recent chain of incidents has raised questions over the presence of sleeper cells in Punjab and neighbouring states.

Background

- On May 9th 2022, the headquarters of the Punjab police's Intelligence Wing in Mohali was attacked with a rocket-propelled grenade (RPG).
 - One day before this attack, Punjab police had arrested two individuals and recovered an Improvised Explosive Device (IED) equipped with Royal Demolition eXplosive (RDX).
- A few days earlier, four individuals were arrested from Karnal by the Haryana police who recovered three IEDs and one pistol and claimed to have busted a Pakistan-based terror group.
- These explosives have been transported to India from Pakistan through drones and were supposed to be delivered to Adilabad in Telangana.
- Also in a separate incident, on May 8th (2022) few 'Khalistan' flags were on the gate and walls of the Himachal Pradesh Legislative Assembly in Dharamshala.
- In April 2022, a fight started between different groups amid a clash due to the conduct of a march in the wake of the announcement by banned separatist outfit Sikhs for Justice (SFJ) to commemorate the foundation day of 'Khalistan'.

Concerns over sleeper cells

- A sleeper cell refers to a group of agents who lie inactive until they receive orders or mandates to act.
 - Considering the level of secrecy within such groups it is difficult for law enforcement agencies to detect and monitor their movements and activities.
- The recent incidents have raised concern over the presence of 'sleeper cells' or pro-militant elements in Punjab, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh and other states.
- Experts believe that the recent events confirm that 'sleeper cells' of 'Khalistan' sympathisers are present and active.
- Experts say that the change in the leadership in Punjab has given a chance to the radical groups to attempt and gauge the strength of the new system and these groups cannot be ignored although the "Khalistan" movement has lost popular support in the region.

14. Why are India's foreign exchange reserves falling?

The Indian rupee has hit an all-time low against the US dollar and is anticipated to weaken further.

Details:

- The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has reported an anticipated a considerable decline of the Indian rupee that might pass the 94 rupees to a dollar mark by the financial year 2029.
- There has been an estimated decline in the Indian currency with a steady loss of 4% against the dollar.
- The forex reserves have also dropped below \$600 billion.
- The RBI stated that India's forex reserves dropped to \$595.954 billion.

Possible causes:

- According to the RBI, the decline in the forex reserves is attributed to a fall in the dollar value of assets held as reserves by the RBI.
- Many experts advocate that the sudden fall of forex reserves is due to the arbitrary actions taken by the central bank to support the rupee.
- Analysts believe that the continuation of significant differences in long-run inflation between India and the US will contribute to further depreciation of the rupee against the dollar.
- The current account deficit of the country is expected to embark a 10 year high of 3.3% of the GDP as predicted by Morgan Stanly.

- The rising global oil prices have also impacted the rupee negatively and moreover, there is a lack of foreign funds to capitalise on the existing deficit.
- Consistent higher domestic price inflation in India has also been a reason for the reduction in rupee value.

Suggestive measures:

- The central bank must plan a roadmap and consider the differences in the rates at which the US Federal Reserves regulate the supply of currencies which may play the role of an important determinant in tracking the value of the rupee in the long run.
- Considering the present scenario, it is suggested that by selling dollars in the open market in exchange for rupees, the RBI can improve demand for the rupee and buffer the loss incurred.
- RBI continues to take active measures to control the domestic consumer price inflation by increasing the interest rates and tightening the liquidity.
- With the emerging rise in interest rates across the globe, the threat of global recession also increases as economies intend to follow rigid monetary conditions.

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16. The repo rate in India

Background:

- Recently, the Reserve Bank of India's **Monetary Policy Committee (MPC)** decided unanimously to raise the repo rate by 40 basis points to 4.40%. The move was aimed to contain the increasing inflation rates in the Indian economy to help preserve macro-financial stability.

Repo rate:

- The repo rate is one of the **monetary policy tools** used by the RBI.
- Repo rate is defined as the fixed interest rate at which the RBI provides overnight liquidity to banks against the collateral of government and other approved securities under the **liquidity adjustment facility (LAF)**.

Working of the repo rate:

Influences loan pricing:

- Since the repo rate is the rate of interest that the RBI charges commercial banks when it lends them money, the repo rate serves as a key benchmark for the lenders to fix interest rates for the loans they offer to their borrowers. Hence there is a direct loan pricing relationship with the repo rate. This influences the **credit off-take in the financial system** and subsequently the money circulating in the economy.

Control of money supply in the economy:

- Lower repo rates incentivize the banks into higher borrowing from the Reserve Bank, thus increasing the money supply available in the economy. Conversely, higher repo rates act as a disincentive for banks to borrow from the Reserve Bank at the repo rates. This reduces the money supply in the economy.
- Thus, the repo rate system allows central banks to **regulate the availability of liquidity or money supply within economies** by increasing or decreasing the availability of funds in the banking system.

Effect of repo rate on inflation:

- The repo rate influences interest rates. Higher repo rates make credit more expensive and savings more attractive, thus dissuading consumption. Thus, higher repo rates will work on the **demand side of inflation** to help slow it down.
 - Inflation can broadly be demand-driven price gains or a result of supply-side factors pushing up the costs of inputs or even a combination of both demand and supply-side pressures.
- Inflation under traditional economic models is said to be caused by more money chasing the same quantity of goods and services available in an economy. So as per this model, **regulation of the money supply can help slow down inflation**.

Factors influencing the repo rate's efficacy:

- The Reserve Bank of India in its annual '**Report on Currency and Finance**' observed the lag in the transmission of the repo rate changes into the real economy.
- The report noted the various channels affecting the transmission of monetary policy changes like the interest rate channel, the credit or bank lending channel, the exchange rate channel, the asset price channel and the expectations channel encapsulating the perceptions of households and businesses on the state of the economy and its outlook.

17. Boon to ban: How the wheat export story changed in two months

- The Union government **banning the export of wheat.**

Background:

India's wheat exports:

- The **Russia-Ukraine conflict** had disrupted the global wheat supply chains given that these two countries alone accounted for a substantial portion of the global wheat production. This provided an opportunity for India to boost its own wheat exports to fill in the global shortage.
- Apart from increasing wheat exports to the current importers, India also sought to sign agreements with other countries to establish newer markets for Indian wheat. In this direction, India had even sent **trade delegations** to countries like Morocco, Tunisia, Indonesia, Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam, Turkey, Algeria and Lebanon to explore possibilities of boosting wheat exports.
- Wheat exports in the 2021-2022 financial year were estimated at 7.85 million tonnes, a quadrupling from 2.1 million tonnes in the previous year. **Competitive price, acceptable quality, availability of surplus wheat** and geopolitical reasons have resulted in a sharp rise in wheat exports from India. Exports this fiscal are expected to be almost **10 million tonnes worth \$3 billion.**

Reasons for the ban on wheat exports:

Decrease in production and procurement:

- The **extreme temperatures recorded in March and April across North India**, which has resulted in reduced wheat production, is one of the main reasons for the ban on wheat exports.
 - Maximum temperatures in Punjab, one of the prominent wheat-producing states was over 6°C higher than the usual, compared to the long period average. The actual maximum temperatures have been over the 40°C mark across the State in April.
 - The wheat production estimate for the crop year ending June has reduced from the previous **111.32 million tonnes (MT) to 105 MT.**
- The procurement of wheat has also been low compared to previous years.
- The decrease in production estimates and a considerable fall in wheat procurement have raised concerns that **domestic consumption may get impacted.**

Increase in domestic price:

- The domestic price of wheat and wheat flour has been on the rise with both **wholesale and retail inflation** reaching record highs. Given that wheat remains one of the important food grains, this price rise was adding to the burden of Indian households.

Food security concerns:

- India's pitch to boost wheat exports has been opposed by food security campaigners who have instead insisted on a more cautious approach. They emphasize that ensuring **sufficient availability of wheat grains for internal consumption and ensuring the stability of prices domestically** should be more important priorities rather than increasing exports.
- They have argued that the increase in exports should not be done at the cost of domestic consumption.

18. It is Navy's primary objective to keep Indo-Pacific safe: Rajnath

- Defence Minister Rajnath Singh launched two frontline warships at Mazagon Docks Limited (MDL) in Mumbai.

Details:

- The two ships launched include the following.
 - **Surat - Destroyer.** It is the fourth and last ship of **Project-15B**
 - The Visakhapatnam-class destroyers, also classified as P-15B, are a class of guided-missile destroyers currently being built for the Indian Navy.
 - **Udaygiri - Stealth frigate.** It is the third ship of **Project-17A**.
 - The Nilgiri-class stealth frigates, also known as Project 17A frigates, are being built by Garden Reach Shipbuilders & Engineers and Mazagon Dock Shipbuilders for the Indian Navy.
- Both these ships were indigenously developed.
- The defence minister in his speech noted the **importance of the Indo-Pacific region** both from strategic as well as economic points of view for India and highlighted the efforts being taken to develop a strong naval force for India.
- He stressed India's resolve to **keep the Indo-Pacific open, safe and secure** while supporting consensus-based principles, a rule-based and stable maritime order.

19. India's vulnerability to drought

Drought in Numbers, 2022 report by the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD).

Drought in Numbers, 2022 Report

- The Drought in Numbers report is a collection of data on the effects of droughts on our ecosystem and the ways for mitigating the effects through efficient planning for the future.
- The report also provides information about the negotiations surrounding important decisions by the UNCCD's 197 members at the 15th Conference of Parties (COP15).

Key findings of the "Drought in Numbers" report

- The report reveals that the frequency and duration of droughts around the world have increased by 29% since 2000.
- Drought in Numbers, 2022 by the United Nations suggests that many places in India will come under the list of regions vulnerable to drought globally.
- The report also reveals that India's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) was impacted by around 2 to 5% between 1998 and 2017 on account of severe droughts.
- Also, the droughts between 1998 and 2017 have caused economic losses of about \$124 billion worldwide.

The impact of drought

- The World Meteorological Organisation data suggests that the weather, climate and water hazards have constituted about 50% of all disasters and 45% of all reported deaths since 1970 and nine out of ten of these deaths have occurred in developing countries.
- Between the years 2020 and 2022, nearly 23 countries have been impacted due to drought emergencies which include Afghanistan, Brazil, Ethiopia, Iraq, Iran, Kazakhstan, Madagascar, Mozambique, Niger, Somalia, Pakistan, the U.S., and Zambia.
 - In 2022, over 2.3 billion people are facing water stress and about 160 million children are exposed to severe and prolonged droughts.
- Over one billion people across the world have been affected by drought between 2000 and 2019, making it the second-worst disaster after flooding.
- Africa has been the worst hit, with 134 droughts, of which 70 occurred in East Africa.
- The World Health Organization has found out that about 55 million people worldwide are directly impacted by droughts annually, making it the most significant danger to livestock and crops.
- The impact of drought is also not uniform across genders.

- Studies show that women and girls in developing countries are affected more in terms of education levels, nutrition, health, sanitation, and safety due to droughts.
- The burden of water collection also falls directly on women and girls.
- Australia's megadrought in 2019-2020 played its role in the "megafires" which destroyed most of the habitat of threatened species.
 - Close to three billion animals were killed or displaced due to the wildfires.
 - Also, 84% of terrestrial ecosystems are endangered due to intensifying wildfires.
- According to the Food and Agriculture Organisation's 2017 report, the share of plants impacted due to drought has more than increased by two times in the last four decades and nearly 12 million hectares of land are lost annually due to drought and desertification.

Path ahead

- As per a report, climate change will result in 129 countries experiencing a rise in drought exposure in the coming years.
- If global warming reaches 3°C by 2100, the losses due to droughts might increase by five times.
- The largest increase in drought losses is expected in the Mediterranean and the Atlantic regions of Europe.
- As per the World Bank, drought conditions could result in the migration of about 216 million people by 2050. Other key factors along with drought could be water scarcity, declining crop productivity, rise in sea levels, and overpopulation.

20. P-8I maritime aircraft

The Defence Minister undertook a sortie on a Navy P-8I maritime patrol aircraft.

P-8I maritime aircraft

- The aircraft is manufactured by Boeing.
- The aircraft is designed for long-range anti-submarine warfare (ASW), anti-surface warfare (ASuW), and intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) missions.
 - It is also used for low altitude, humanitarian, and search and rescue missions.
- The aircraft has two variants – the P-8I, which is developed for the Indian Navy, and the P-8A Poseidon, which is deployed by the US Navy, the United

Kingdom's Royal Air Force, the Royal Australian Air Force, and the Royal Norwegian Air Force.

- The P-8I can fly as high as 41,000 feet, and has a short transit time, which reduces the size of the Area of Probability when searching for submarines or search and rescue survivors.
- The aircraft has two engines, and is about 40 metres long, with a wingspan of 37.64 metres. The aircraft weighs about 85,000 kg and has a top speed of 789 km/hour. It requires a crew of nine, and has a range of 1,200+ nautical miles, with 4 hours on station, which means about 2,222 km.
- The induction of P-8I aircraft in 2013 has significantly enhanced the Indian Navy's persistent surveillance operations in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR).
- The P-8I's advanced sensors such as multi-mode radars, electronic intelligence system, sonobuoys, electro-optic, infrared camera and advanced weapons provide the Indian Navy with a very potent platform with significant capability to deter and destroy.
- The aircraft has been deployed along the International Border, the Line of Control and the Line of Actual Control.

21. Understanding India's ethanol blending policy

The Union Cabinet approved amendments to the National Policy on Biofuels, 2018, which requires the fuel companies to increase the percentage of ethanol in petrol to 20% (E20) by 2025 (which was 2030 earlier).

Ethanol-blending

- Ethanol is an agro-based product, mainly produced from a by-product of the sugar industry, namely molasses.
- An ethanol blend is defined as a blended motor fuel containing ethyl alcohol that is at least 99% pure, derived from agricultural products, and blended exclusively with petrol.
- The Ethanol Blending seeks to blend Ethanol with motor fuel which helps in reducing pollution, conserving foreign exchange and increasing value addition in the sugar industry which ultimately helps farmers.
- As ethanol burns more completely than petrol, it prevents the emissions of carbon monoxide. However, studies have shown that there is no reduction in the emissions of nitrous oxides which is one of the key environmental pollutants.

History of ethanol-blending in India

- For the last 20 years, India is looking to develop an ecosystem to have more ethanol blended into petrol for the use of vehicles.
 - According to Government reports, about 75% of India's 22 crore vehicles are two-wheelers and 12% are four-wheelers.
- India has been examining the viability of using ethanol-blended petrol since 2001, wherein 5% ethanol blended petrol (95% petrol – 5% ethanol) was supplied.
- In 2002, the government announced the Ethanol Blended Petrol (EBP) Programme and started selling 5% ethanol blended petrol in a few States and Union Territories.
- However, until 2013-14, the percentage of blending did not cross 1.5%. Hence, in 2015, the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways issued that E5 (blending of 5% ethanol) petrol and the rubber and plastic components used in gasoline vehicles produced since 2008 should be compatible with the E10 fuel (blending of 10% ethanol). In 2019, the Ministry notified the E10 fuel.
- The government has extended financial incentives for distilleries and other policy support which has resulted in average blending reaching 5%.
- The government has already laid Standards for E20, E85 and even E100 fuel.
- India intends to achieve 10% blending by the end of 2022 and 20% blending by 2030. The government has plans to achieve a 5% blending of biodiesel with diesel by 2030.

Switching to E20 blending

- India's net import of petroleum was estimated to be 185 million tons which cost around \$55 billion in 2020-21.
- Most of India's petroleum imports are used by automobiles and hence successful implementation of the E20 programme could help save about ₹30,000 crores per year.
- A report by NITI Aayog has provided a comprehensive framework of ethanol blending which includes challenges and a roadmap.
 - To achieve E20 blending, the committee foresees ethanol demand of 1,016 crore litres and considering the increase in the number of electric vehicles there would be a demand of 722-921 crore litres of ethanol in 2025.
- However, India's current ethanol production is about 426 crore litres from molasses-based distilleries and 258 crore litres from grain-based distilleries.
 - This is expected to rise to 760 crore litres and 740 crore litres respectively out of which 1016 crore litres of ethanol would be required for blending purposes and 334 crore litres for other uses.
 - This would require about 6 million tonnes of sugar and 16.5 million tonnes of grains per annum in 2025.

Impact of E20 blending on vehicles

- With E20 blending it is expected that there would be a loss of 6-7% fuel efficiency in four-wheelers and about 3-4% for two wheelers developed for E0 and scaled for E10.
- However, vehicle manufacturers believe that modifications in engines can offset the loss in efficiency.
- And also the government should look at ways to compensate the consumers for a drop in efficiency and extend tax incentives on E10 and E20 fuel.

Experience of ethanol blending in other countries

- Flex Fuel Engine technology (FFE) which consists of vehicles that operate completely on ethanol has been implemented successfully in Brazil and accounted for about 80% of the total number of new vehicles in 2019.
- Based on the experience, it is estimated that the cost of flex fuel vehicles (four-wheelers) could be about ₹17,000 to ₹25,000 more than the current generation of vehicles.
 - The two-wheeled flex fuel vehicles would be costlier by ₹5,000 to ₹12,000 compared to regular petrol vehicles.
- The global production of fuel ethanol has reached 110 billion litres in 2019.
- The U.S. and Brazil produce about 84% of the global share which is followed by the European Union (EU), China, India, Canada and Thailand.
- The prices of ethanol produced in India are costlier compared to the U.S. and Brazil which is due to minimum support prices provided by the government.

Path ahead for India

- An Institute for Energy Economics and Financial Analysis (IEEFA) report suggests that for India to meet its target of E20 blending by 2025, it must include an additional 30,000 sq kms of land under maize cultivation.
 - Half that land is enough to produce more efficient power from solar energy.
- In India, sugarcane is the cheapest source of ethanol and on average, a ton of sugarcane could produce 100 kg of sugar and 70 litres of ethanol.
 - This means that nearly 2,000 litres of water are required to produce 1 kg of sugar, and one litre of ethanol from sugar requires about 2,860 litres of water.

22. Pockets of Hope, linking nature and humanity

The article serves as a narrative on the importance of biodiversity and the need to protect and conserve the biosphere reserves to mitigate the risks of ecological disasters.

The perspective:

- Biodiversity is regarded as the living fabric of the planet and is an essential component of human well-being in the present and future.
- We are in an era wherein enormous damage has been done to nature that has resulted in significant devastation of biodiversity.
- According to Global Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services, released by the Inter-governmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) at the **UNESCO** headquarters in Paris, the major causes of biodiversity loss include:
 - Climate Change
 - Invasive Species
 - Over-exploitation of natural resources
 - Pollution
 - Rapid unplanned urbanisation
- The ecological carrying capacity of Earth has largely exceeded the tolerance limit due to collective human activities that are dominated by the primary goal of economic growth.

Challenges faced by wildlife:

- The neglect and collapse of basic wildlife protection capacity along with the inefficiency of forest administration have been underlying problems faced by the wildlife.
- A serious threat to the wildlife species is created by illegal poaching and hunting.
- Reckless developmental projects that include the construction of highways, mines and dams have detrimental effects on the habitats of wildlife.
- The illegal trade of wildlife has been prevalent and encourages the existence of criminal elements that result in the massive killing of animals and it is difficult to identify the practice of silent poaching and extremely challenging to educate the local community against poaching.
- A large chunk of human settlement in the protected areas represents an alarming situation which is commonly referred to as human-wildlife conflict.
- The extraction of non-timber forest products has adverse effects on wildlife.

- A study published in the Nature journal that displayed the biggest threats to wildlife found that agriculture and overexploitation of resources are the major threats.
- The power line projects pose an enormous threat to the birds along with considerable interference with their habitats. For example, the Great Indian Bustard which is a native species of the subcontinent is almost on the verge of extinction due to the developmental projects that are life-threatening to them.

Legal framework for Wildlife in India:

- Section 2 (37) of the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972 defined wildlife to include any animal, either aquatic or terrestrial and vegetation that forms a part of any habitat.
- The Wildlife Protection Act provides legal support for the protection and conservation of wildlife in India.
- The act was implemented to protect wild animals, birds and plants with the objective to ensure the environmental and ecological security of India.
- The Wildlife Crime Control Bureau has been established to eliminate the illegal trade of wildlife along with endangered species.
 - The Wildlife Crime Control Bureau is a statutory multi-disciplinary body established by the Government of India under the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change.
- The Constitution of India makes it a Fundamental Duty of the citizens to protect wildlife and have compassion for living creatures.
- According to Article 48A (a DPSP), it is the duty of the state to protect, safeguard and work for the improvement of forests and wildlife in the country.
- Wildlife is placed under the concurrent list (List III) of Schedule VII of the Constitution bringing it under the purview of both State and the Union governments.
- India is a part of many international conventions that intend to enhance the conservation of wildlife. Some of these conventions include the UN Convention on Biological Diversity, Convention on Migratory Species (CMS), and Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species.

Present Scenario:

- The IUCN Red List of threatened species put forth an estimate that over 8400 species of wild fauna and flora are critically endangered and 30,000 more are anticipated to be endangered and vulnerable.
- According to the IUCN data, 239 faunal species in India are classified as endangered species which includes 45 species of mammals, 23 species of birds, 18 species of reptiles, 39 species of amphibians and 114 species of fish.

- India has a network of 733 Protected Areas that include 103 National Parks, 537 wildlife sanctuaries, 67 conservation reserves and 26 community reserves.

Ways need to be adopted:

- It should be the collective responsibility of the governments, people and stakeholders to work towards cleaner air, high-quality drinking water and enough food and healthy habitats to ensure the continuity of ecosystem services benefiting human beings without critically affecting the natural environment.
- Protecting, promoting and expanding the Biosphere reserves through conservation areas and signing of international conventions will serve as the pillars to retain the ecological balance and mitigate the biodiversity loss.
- A landmark initiative by UNESCO in the creation of the World Network of Biosphere Reserves in 1971, has been exemplary in the identification and conservation of areas of rich biodiversity. Such programmes need to be extended and given effect in a productive manner.
- South Asia is a hub of biodiversity with India, Bhutan and Nepal noteworthy of mention.
- These reserved areas represent pockets of hope and proof that we are not absolutely heading towards the ecological doomsday without active interventions. However, experts envisage appropriate actions to be taken by the authorities along the lines of the existing legislation that protects wildlife and biodiversity.

23. FDI inflow 'highest ever' at \$83.57 bn

The inflow of foreign direct investment (FDI) for the financial year 2021-22 has reached \$83.57 billion which is the highest ever.

Foreign Direct Investment (FDI)

- Foreign direct investment (FDI) is an investment made by a firm or an individual of a country into business interests located in another country.
- FDI is a key driver of economic growth.
- FDI goes beyond capital investment, it includes the provision of management, technology, and equipment.
- India is emerging as a country preferred for foreign investments in the manufacturing sector.
 - FDI inflows in Manufacturing Sectors have raised by 76% in FY 2021-22 (USD 21.34 billion) compared to FY 2020-21 (USD 12.09 billion)

- FDI inflows have increased by 23% after the COVID pandemic compared to FDI inflow reported pre-COVID.

Trends in FDI in FY 2021-22

- **Top FDI inflow contributors:** Singapore is the biggest source of FDI accounting for 27%, followed by the U.S.A (18%) and Mauritius (16%).
- **Top FDI inflow recipient States:** Karnataka is the top recipient state accounting for 38% of the total FDI inflow, followed by Maharashtra (26%) and Delhi (14%).
 - The majority inflow of FDI to Karnataka is seen in sectors such as Computer Software & Hardware, Automobile Industry and Education.
- **Top FDI inflow recipient sectors:** Computer Software & Hardware is the top recipient sector with around 25% share followed by Services Sector (12%) and Automobile Industry (12%).
 - **Under the Computer Software & Hardware sector, the major recipient states** are Karnataka (53%), Delhi (17%) and Maharashtra (17%).

Government's initiatives to boost FDI

- The government has formulated a liberal and transparent policy for FDI, which has resulted in most of the sectors being open to FDI under the automatic route.
- The government has undertaken various reforms in sectors like coal mining, contract manufacturing, digital media, single-brand retail trading, civil aviation, defence, insurance and telecom which has further simplified and liberalised FDI inflows policies.

24. Talking Peace, negotiating with the Maoists

The government of Chhattisgarh is all set to engage in peaceful negotiations with the Maoists under certain conditions.

Delving deeper:

- For a long period of time, many parts of India have been struggling with the threats imposed by Maoist extremists.
- The Government of Chhattisgarh took the initiative to indulge in peace talks with the extremist group provided they laid down arms and expressed their faith in the Indian Constitution.

- It was alleged by a spokesperson of the Maoist group that the government proposal and conditions for peace talks lacked clarity and the conducive ambience for talks was absent.
- The state government has been accused of not implementing the PESA Act.
- There has been discontent that the talks held earlier between the government and the Maoist groups had failed.

Conditions put forth by the Maoists:

- Lifting of the ban on their party (People's Liberation Guerilla Army) and people's organisation
- Withdrawal of security forces from camps
- Release of jailed leaders in order to participate in the talks

Were the demands accepted by the government?

- On the grounds of maintaining internal security, the government did not pay heed to the demand put forward by the Maoist leaders.
- As a result, there was no progress that took place to resolve the existing issues.
- This encouraged the extremist group to continue to spread violence and threats in the region.

Ways suggested:

- Considering the background of failed talks between the government and the extremist groups, it can be concluded that Maoists' demand for withdrawal of armed forces can be met by a mutually agreed 'ceasefire' with its limited meaning of abjuring violence by the group.
- For a period of time, the security forces can keep the Maoist operations under check.
- It must be addressed before any decision is made that the State government cannot afford the risk of moving out security forces as a pre-condition for initiating peace talks.
- As the government is putting efforts to implement PESA in the sensitive areas of Chhattisgarh and it is also actively speeding up the process of withdrawing the criminal cases against the local communities, there are chances of a peaceful settlement between both the parties.
- Therefore, moving ahead with the lessons learned, suitable modalities may be worked out if both sides are serious about peace talks.

25. Centre slashes fuel taxes, sets ₹200 subsidy on LPG cylinders

The Union government announced a reduction in its excise duty on petrol and diesel.

Details

- The Finance Minister announced a number of measures to counter the increase in inflation which includes duty cuts on petroleum products, a ₹200 subsidy on LPG cylinders for the poor and a reform of import duties on plastic and steel products.
- A reduction of ₹8 on petrol and ₹6 on diesel (per litre) in central excise duty, will result in the reduction of retail prices by ₹9.5 and ₹7 per litre respectively.
- Previously tax cuts of ₹5 and ₹10 per litre for petrol and diesel, respectively were announced in November 2021 which is expected to cost the government about ₹1 lakh crore a year as foregone revenue.

Other Government initiatives to counter rising inflation

- Subsidy of ₹200 per gas cylinder for up to 12 cylinders per year is announced which will benefit about nine crore beneficiaries of the PM Ujwala Yojana.
 - This is expected to have a revenue implication of about ₹6,100 crores per year.
- The government also announced the reduction in customs duties on raw materials and intermediaries for plastic products where import dependence is high which would result in the reduction of final product prices that significantly helps the MSMEs.
- The government cut the import duty on raw materials and also levied an export duty on a few steel goods which help address the rising steel prices.
- Measures were also announced to improve cement supplies and boost the logistic facilities that help restrict the increasing cement prices.

The Government's stand on rising inflation

- The Finance Minister said that the world is facing a tricky situation, as the war in Ukraine has caused supply chain disruptions and acute shortages of various goods.
- The government believes that the war is the cause of rising inflation & economic distress and even a few developed economies are facing troubles due to shortages and disruptions
- Despite the current challenges, the government has ensured that there are adequate stocks of essential goods and is looking for ways to ensure that prices are kept under control.

- The Finance Minister believes that the fiscal cost incurred due to various tax cuts announced can be compensated by higher than budgeted revenues collected through other taxes.
 - She further said that the tax revenues of the central government are expected to cross the budget estimates by a minimum of ₹1.3 lakh crores despite the tax cuts.

26. 'Holes' in Biodiversity Bill

The Biological Diversity (Amendment) Bill has been under criticism that determines the loopholes in the proposed amendments.

A Brief Background:

- To give effect to the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), the Biological Diversity Act was enacted.
- The CBD envisaged a sustainable, fair, and equitable usage of biological resources along with the proper application of traditional knowledge.
- Under the Convention, Biological Diversity Act formulated a three-tier structure that includes:
 - National Biodiversity Authority (NBA) – at the national level
 - State Biodiversity Boards – at the state level
 - Biodiversity Management Committees – at the local body levels and are entrusted with documenting the local biodiversity and associated knowledge in the form of a People's Biodiversity Register.
- These authorities have the jurisdiction to regulate biodiversity conservation, maintain information regarding biodiversity and its changing scenario, and regulate the management of biological resources.

Present Status of the bill:

- The Biological Diversity (Amendment) Bill is under the review of the Joint Parliamentary Committee.

The need for Amendments to the Biological Diversity Act

- The amendment bill on biological diversity was drafted as a response to the complaints by the traditional Indian medicine practitioners, the seed sector, industries, and researchers.
- The act was alleged to impose a heavy compliance burden on the usage and benefit-sharing of the biological resources.
- This added to the difficulty in conducting collaborative research and investments and complicated the patent application processes.

- The introduction of the amendment bill was an attempt to address the concerns of the stakeholders.
- The amendment bill includes a text that encourages widening the scope of levying access and benefit-sharing with local communities and for further conservation of biological resources.

The Shortcomings:

- The Amendment bill exempted the registered AYUSH medical practitioners from providing prior information to the State Biodiversity Board for accessing the biological resources to carry out certain studies.
- Organisations that work towards environmental causes have criticised the proposed amendment asserting that they tend to benefit the AYUSH (Ayurveda, Yoga, Unani, Siddha, and Homoeopathy) practitioners and researchers.
- It is put forth that these set of amendments pave the way for bio-piracy that involves the exploitation of naturally occurring biochemicals and genetic materials.
- It will be a subject of concern if the AYUSH manufacturing companies are provided with regulatory exemptions that free them from getting approvals from authorities, through the amendments.
- Objections emphasised that the Environment Ministry has demarcated the difference between a registered AYUSH practitioner and a company. This failed to prevent a registered practitioner of AYUSH from developing informal links with a company structure, resulting in rigorous abuse of the law.
- As a result, the quality of AYUSH products will be brought under several questions and debates, thereby reducing the trust among consumers to use such products.
- The provision that mandated the requirement of approvals by the companies from the National Biodiversity Authority only at the time of commercialisation, and not during the application for a patent, was a major concern.
- Summing up the multiple arguments against the amendment bill, it was pointed out that the provisions of the bill intended to dilute the role of regulatory bodies like the NBA.
- Therefore, the entire cause of promoting AYUSH medicines globally, as the traditional legacy of India, will not bear enough fruit.
- Other major loopholes included the lack of clarity on the manner in which the Biological Diversity Act was practically implemented along with the absence of transparency in the financial transactions between companies and the traders for accessing the resources.

The Way Ahead:

- It suggested that the role of the regulatory bodies must be strengthened at all levels to ensure fair and just use of biological resources, and for the better conservation of biodiversity.
- The amendments to the Biological Diversity Act must put an effort to bring more transparency to the trade of biological and genetic resources.
- There must be regulatory norms, formulated to keep a check on unwarranted access to biological resources.
- The proposed amendments need to develop consensus with all the stakeholders for a precise understanding of the issue of biodiversity conservation and the upcoming challenges.

27. Poor recovery, increasing delays mar IBC resolution process

In the fourth quarter of FY22, the amount to be realised from the resolution process was found to be lower than the liquidation value of assets for the first time.

Details

- Poor recovery of claims and delays in resolving bad assets have been the problems for various recovery mechanisms
- It is important to recover the maximum amount possible from the defaulter, and also do it quickly without delays so that the amount can be freed-up to lend new credit.
- In 2016, the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code (IBC) was introduced to address the problems of bad debts and help the creditor with the resolution process.
- The IBC has performed compared to other recovery mechanisms such as SARFAESI, Lok Adalats, and Debt Recovery Tribunals. But IBC also suffers from systemic issues.
 - Example: Out of the 2,600 cases that were closed by December 2021, 55% ended in liquidation while only 16% were completed with proper resolution plans approved by the lender.
 - Also, the resolution process is affected due to delays in the process.
 - On average, about 700 days were taken in FY22 to complete a resolution process, against the stipulated deadline of 330 days.
 - The lenders continued to take steep haircuts (the debt foregone by the lender as a share of the outstanding claim).
 - In 100 out of 500 companies that saw proper resolutions, the haircuts were more than 90%.

- The main challenge has been delays and it is due to the capacity of tribunals.
 - The functioning of the NCLT [National Company Law Tribunal] during the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted IBC.
- Chart 1 denotes that most of the cases resulted in liquidation in most of the quarters while approved cases ranged between 15% and 25% since 2018
- Chart 2 suggests that in FY22, it took 772 days to resolve cases involving companies that had loans of more than ₹1,000 crores and the average number of days it takes to resolve such cases has increased significantly in the last five years.
- Chart 3 shows the actual value realised by the creditors through the resolution process as a share of outstanding claims. The wider the gap between the two values, the greater the impact of the insolvency process and it is seen that the gap has been narrowing.
- Chart 4 denotes that nearly 33 of 85 companies that owed more than ₹1,000 crores, lenders had to take above 90% haircuts.

28. World may have lost 11.2 crore jobs: ILO

- The ninth edition of the **International Labour Organisation (ILO) Monitor** on the “world of work” was released recently.

Details:

- The report notes multiple challenges or points of concern with respect to work or job opportunities.
 - There has been a **drop in the number of hours worked globally** in the first quarter of 2022. In fact, it has dropped to levels noted before the pandemic. This could be considered **indicative of job losses**. According to the report, about 11.2 crore jobs might have been lost during this period.
 - The growing divergence between richer and poorer economies in the post-pandemic economic recovery remains a point of concern given that the lack of decent job opportunities in low- and middle-income countries will only adversely impact the socio-economic development in these countries.
 - The **gender gap in the employment scenario** continues to remain a major point of concern in lower-middle-income countries including India. The number of women who have lost their jobs due to the pandemic is larger as compared to the number of men. Hence, the pandemic seems to have exacerbated the already substantial gender imbalances in employment.

- The fresh lockdowns in China and the conflict between Ukraine and Russia which would lead to **global supply chain disruption** and the global rise in the prices of food and fuel which would add to **financial turbulence and potential debt distress** could add more pressure to the current situation.

Recommendations:

- Given the direct link between work and standard of living, countries must adopt a humane approach to address the dire situation.
- The focus should be on the **creation of decent jobs and ensuring decent wages**. Implementing minimum wage and living wage will be critical. The focus should be on improving the purchasing capacity of the workers.
- **Ensuring social security** for all workers should also be pursued.

29. Supreme Court's ruling on GST deepens the churn in the tax regime

Last week, the Supreme Court ruled that the decisions taken by the GST Council are merely recommendations with “persuasive value” and are not binding.

GST as a advisory body

- The court has rejected the Centre's contention that the entire structure of GST would crumble if the Council's decisions were not treated as enforceable.
- In some ways, the verdict states the obvious.
- **Article 246-A** inserted after the **122nd constitutional amendment** states, “Notwithstanding anything contained in **articles 246 and 254**, Parliament, and, subject to clause (2), the Legislature of every state, have the power to make laws with respect to the GST imposed by the Union or by such state.”
- Thus, the power to levy the central **GST (CGST)** vests with Parliament, the power to levy **state GST (SGST)** vests with state legislatures and Parliament has exclusive power to make laws with respect to the GST on items that are part of inter-state trade or commerce.
- Thus, the **GST Council is only an advisory body** and the actual decisions regarding model GST levies, principles of levy, apportionment of **GST levied on inter-state supplies**, principles relating to place of supply, exemptions and rate structure and any special provisions will have to be taken by either Parliament in the case of **CGST and IGST** or the states in the case of **SGST**.
- In effect, decisions on the structure and operation of the tax can be made by the Centre and individual states without discussion and deliberation in the Council and both can ignore any recommendation made by the Council.

- The judgment reiterates that the **sovereign right to levy the tax still exists with the Union and state governments** and it is for them to consider the recommendations of the Council.
- The chance of having a harmonised GST and reforms in the tax regime will crucially depend upon continued negotiation and bargaining between the Union and states.
- **Intergovernmental cooperation** has been kept alive to ensure a harmonised GST and unless both the Centre and the states see the gains, reforms will be hard to come by and if the Centre desires the reforms more than the states, it will have to ensure a “buy in” from the states to agree for the reform.

Implications of the judgement

- Given that the GST Council has been declared as only an advisory body with a persuasive value, what happens to the dream of having a harmonised one nation, one tax, if a state or a group of states decides to deviate?
- But the judgment **paves the way for more intensive bargaining and negotiations**, placing states on an equal footing with the Centre in taking decisions on the structure and operations of the tax.
- At present, decisions get approved in the GST Council when passed by a majority of **three-fourths of the weighted votes** of the members present and voting, with the **Centre having one-third weight** and individual states (and UTs) having an equal share of the remaining two-thirds weight.
- However, in the past, all decisions in the Council have been taken by consensus (except in the case of determining the rate on lotteries), and **the Supreme Court decision reinforces this convention**.
- The immediate impact of this will be bargaining by states for **extending the period of compensation** for the loss of revenue.
- As the five-year period of compensation gets over at the end of June, this decision will now help the states to bargain hard for the extension.

Way forward

- Though the period of collecting compensation cess has been extended till March 2026 **to meet the interest and repayment requirements** of the funds borrowed from the RBI to meet the compensation requirements, the lasting solution lies in increasing the revenue productivity of the tax by pruning the list of exempted items, rationalising the rates and taking administrative measures.
- These reforms will require strengthening the cooperative spirit.

Conclusion

This has come at a time when reforms have to be set in motion and hopefully, the Court's decision will strengthen the cooperative spirit in reforming the domestic consumption tax system in the country.

30. Monkeypox Virus: Origins and Outbreaks

With cases being reported from across the world, monkeypox has caught everyone's attention.

What is Monkeypox?

- Monkeypox is not a new virus.
- The virus, belonging to the poxvirus family of viruses, was first identified in monkeys way back in 1958, and therefore the name.
- The first human case was described in 1970 from the Democratic Republic of Congo.
- Many sporadic outbreaks of animal to human as well as human to human transmission has occurred in Central and West Africa in the past with significant mortality.
- After the elimination of smallpox, monkeypox has become one of the dominant poxviruses in humans, with cases increasing over years along with a consequent reduction in the age-group affected.

How is it transmitted?

- Since the transmission occurs only with close contact, the outbreaks have been in many cases self-limiting.
- Since in the majority of affected people, the incubation period ranges from five to 21 days and is often mild or self-limiting, asymptomatic cases could transmit the disease unknowingly.
- The outbreaks in Central Africa are thought to have been contributed by close contact with animals in regions adjoining forests.
- While monkeys are possibly only incidental hosts, the reservoir is not known.
- It is believed that rodents and non-human primates could be potential reservoirs.

Does the virus mutate?

- Monkeypox virus is a DNA virus with a quite large genome of around 2,00,000 nucleotide bases.
- While being a DNA virus, the rate of mutations in the monkeypox virus is significantly lower (~1-2 mutations per year) compared to RNA viruses like SARS-CoV-2.
- The low rate of mutation therefore limits the wide application of genomic surveillance in providing detailed clues to the networks of transmission for monkeypox.
- A number of genome sequences in recent years from Africa and across the world suggest that there are two distinct clades of the virus – the Congo Basin/Central African clade and the West African clade.
- Each of the clades further have many lineages.

What do the genomes say?

- With over a dozen genome sequences of monkeypox, it is reassuring that the sequences are quite identical to each other suggesting that only a few introductions resulted in the present spread of cases.
- Additionally, almost all genomes have come from the West African clade, which has much lesser fatality compared to the Central African one.
- This also roughly corroborates with the epidemiological understanding that major congregations in the recent past contributed to the widespread transmission across different countries.

Does it have an effective vaccine?

- It is reassuring that we know quite a lot more about the virus and its transmission patterns.
- We also have effective ways of preventing the spread, including a vaccine.
- Smallpox/vaccinia vaccine provides protection.
- While the vaccine has been discontinued in 1980 following the eradication of smallpox, emergency stockpiles of the vaccines are maintained by many countries.
- Younger individuals are unlikely to have received the vaccine and are therefore potentially susceptible to monkeypox which could partly explain its emergence in younger individuals.