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Headlines:

- Reforming India's Entrance Examination System
- Tackling Obesity through Health Taxes and Food Labelling
- Western Ghats Ecologically Sensitive Area (ESA) Notification
- Regulating Live-Streaming of Court Proceedings
- Pradhan Mantri Surya Sarovar Yojana (PM-SSY)



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1. Reforming India's Entrance Examination System

GS Paper II | Education | Governance | Social Justice

Why in News?

Recent debates on examination-related stress, the commercialisation of coaching institutes and the need for equitable access to higher education have renewed calls for reforms in India's entrance examination system to make it more inclusive, transparent and competency-based.

Challenges

- **High-Stakes Testing:** Overreliance on single competitive examinations places excessive psychological and academic pressure on students.
- **Coaching Culture:** The rapid commercialisation of coaching institutes widens socio-economic inequalities and shifts focus away from school education.
- **Limited Assessment:** Existing examinations largely test memory and speed rather than creativity, analytical thinking, problem-solving and communication skills.
- **Regional Disparities:** Variations in language, schooling quality, digital access and socio-economic conditions affect the fairness of a uniform examination system.
- **Narrow Definition of Merit:** Excessive emphasis on examination scores often overlooks aptitude, creativity, ethical values, resilience and practical skills essential for holistic development.

Suggested Reforms

- **Holistic Assessment:** Combine school performance, aptitude tests, portfolios, projects, internships and interviews (where appropriate) to assess overall competence.
- **Competency-Based Evaluation:** Shift from rote learning to assessing conceptual understanding, application and higher-order thinking, in line with NEP 2020.
- **Strengthen Student Support:** Expand career counselling, aptitude guidance and mental health services to reduce examination-related stress.
- **Regulate Coaching Ecosystem:** Introduce standards for fees, advertisements, student welfare and grievance redressal to curb exploitative practices.
- **Institutional Flexibility:** Enable higher educational institutions to design discipline-specific assessments within a broad national regulatory framework while ensuring transparency and fairness.
- **Technology & Examination Security:** Adopt encrypted digital transmission of question papers, AI-based anomaly detection, biometric verification and stronger anti-paper leak mechanisms to enhance examination integrity.

Policy Linkages

- **National Education Policy (NEP), 2020:** Emphasises competency-based, multidisciplinary and learner-centric education.

- **National Curriculum Framework (NCF), 2023:** Promotes holistic assessment, conceptual understanding and reduced reliance on rote learning.

Constitutional Basis

- **Article 21A:** Right to Education.
- **Article 41:** Provision for the right to education (Directive Principle).
- **Article 45:** Early childhood care and education.
- **Article 46:** Promotion of educational interests of weaker sections.

Way Forward

India's entrance examination system should balance merit, equity and student well-being through holistic, competency-based assessments, robust examination security, effective regulation of the coaching ecosystem and greater institutional flexibility. Such reforms, aligned with NEP 2020 and NCF 2023, can foster quality human capital while ensuring that educational opportunities remain fair, inclusive, transparent and learner-centric.

2. Tackling Obesity through Health Taxes and Food Labelling

GS Paper II – Health, Nutrition, Government Policies, GS Paper III – Food Processing, Consumer Protection

Why in News?

- A Parliamentary Standing Committee has recommended mandatory Front-of-Pack Nutrition Labelling (FoPNL) for packaged foods high in fat, sugar and salt (HFSS).
- The ICMR–National Institute of Nutrition (ICMR-NIN)-led ‘Let’s Fix Our Food’ consortium has recommended a health tax on HFSS foods, stricter food advertising regulations and measures to curb obesity and diet-related non-communicable diseases (NCDs).

Why is it Needed?

- **Rising Obesity & NCDs:** Increasing prevalence of obesity, diabetes, hypertension and cardiovascular diseases.
- **Growing HFSS Consumption:** Higher intake of ultra-processed foods rich in fat, sugar and salt, particularly among children and adolescents.
- **Lack of Consumer Awareness:** Hidden sugar, salt and fat in packaged foods limit informed dietary choices.
- **Rising Healthcare Costs:** Lifestyle diseases impose a significant economic and public health burden.

Key Recommendations

- **Front-of-Pack Nutrition Labelling (FoPNL):** Introduce mandatory warning labels on HFSS foods to enable informed consumer choices.

- **Health Tax on HFSS Foods:** Levy higher taxes on unhealthy foods to discourage excessive consumption.
- **Advertisement Regulation:** Restrict marketing of unhealthy foods, especially advertisements targeting children.
- **Healthier School Food Environment:** Promote nutritious food choices and discourage the sale of HFSS foods in and around educational institutions.
- **Mandatory Sugar Disclosure:** Clearly display sugar content in baby foods to improve parental awareness.

Significance

- **Improves Public Health:** Helps reduce obesity and diet-related NCDs through healthier dietary choices.
- **Promotes Behavioural Change:** Health taxes and simplified nutrition labels encourage healthier consumption patterns.
- **Empowers Consumers:** Transparent labelling enables informed food purchasing decisions.
- **Reduces Healthcare Burden:** Preventive measures can lower long-term healthcare expenditure and productivity losses.
- **Strengthens Nutrition Security:** Complements efforts to address both undernutrition and overnutrition.

Global Best Practices

- **WHO Recommendation:** Advocates health taxes as an effective measure to reduce consumption of unhealthy foods and prevent NCDs.
- **International Experience:** Countries such as Colombia, Hungary, Norway and Denmark have introduced taxes or regulatory measures on unhealthy foods to promote healthier diets.

Way Forward

- **Strengthen Nutrition Literacy:** Promote awareness on healthy diets through sustained public education campaigns.
- **Enhance Food Regulation:** Implement FoPNL, regulate food advertising and strengthen food safety standards.
- **Adopt Preventive Healthcare:** Integrate fiscal measures such as health taxes with broader NCD prevention strategies.
- **Leverage Existing Initiatives:** Build on Eat Right India, POSHAN Abhiyaan and the National Programme for Prevention and Control of Non-Communicable Diseases (NP-NCD) to promote healthier lifestyles and improve nutrition outcomes.

3. Western Ghats Ecologically Sensitive Area (ESA) Notification

GS Paper III – Environment & Ecology, Biodiversity Conservation, Environmental Governance

Why in News?

The Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC) has extended the tenure of the expert panel examining stakeholder concerns over the proposed Ecologically Sensitive Area (ESA) notification for the Western Ghats, as consensus among the six concerned States remains unresolved.

Background

- The Western Ghats, spanning Gujarat, Maharashtra, Goa, Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu, is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and one of the world's eight 'hottest' biodiversity hotspots.
- It is the source of major peninsular rivers, including the Godavari, Krishna, Cauvery and Tungabhadra, supporting water security, agriculture and livelihoods for millions.
- The proposed ESA is to be notified under the Environment (Protection) Act, 1986, to regulate environmentally harmful activities in ecologically fragile landscapes.

Evolution of the ESA Proposal

- Madhav Gadgil Committee (WGEEP), 2011: Recommended declaring the entire Western Ghats as an ESA with graded protection through three Ecologically Sensitive Zones (ESZs).
- Kasturirangan Committee, 2013: Recommended limiting ESA coverage to about 37% of the Western Ghats, balancing ecological conservation with developmental needs.
- Recent Developments: Since 2014, multiple draft notifications have been issued, with consultations continuing due to concerns raised by stakeholder States.

Activities Regulated in ESA

- Restricts environmentally harmful activities such as mining, quarrying and thermal power projects.
- Regulates large construction projects and polluting industries in ecologically fragile areas.
- Promotes sustainable agriculture, eco-tourism and community-based conservation practices.

Why is ESA Important?

- **Biodiversity Conservation:** Protects endemic flora, fauna and critical wildlife habitats.
- **Water Security:** Conserves river catchments and safeguards freshwater resources.
- **Disaster Risk Reduction:** Minimises the risks of landslides, floods and soil erosion by protecting fragile mountain ecosystems.

- **Climate Resilience:** Enhances ecosystem resilience and supports climate change adaptation.
- **Global Commitments:** Supports India's commitments under the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and the Kunming–Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF).

Key Challenges

- Concerns over restrictions on agriculture, plantations, mining and infrastructure development.
- Livelihood concerns of forest-dependent and indigenous communities.
- Disputes over ESA delineation based on satellite imagery, with demands for ground-level verification.
- Inter-State Coordination: Divergent developmental priorities among the six States have delayed consensus on the final notification.

Way Forward

- Adopt scientific, transparent and participatory mapping with regular stakeholder consultations.
- Ensure community participation while safeguarding the rights of forest-dependent and indigenous communities.
- Promote sustainable livelihoods, eco-tourism and climate-resilient development in ecologically sensitive regions.
- Implement a balanced, science-based ESA framework that harmonises biodiversity conservation with sustainable economic development.

4. Regulating Live-Streaming of Court Proceedings

GS Paper II – Judiciary, Transparency & Accountability, E-Governance | GS Paper IV – Transparency, Accountability & Public Trust

Why in News?

The Supreme Court has proposed framing a protocol for access to archived live-streamed court proceedings, enabling public access through official court archives while preventing misuse, unauthorised circulation and commercial exploitation of judicial content.

Background

- The principle of Open Justice promotes transparency by ensuring public access to judicial proceedings, thereby strengthening accountability and public confidence in the judiciary.
- The Supreme Court has progressively introduced live-streaming of Constitution Bench and other significant proceedings to improve accessibility and transparency.

- The proposed protocol seeks to ensure that only authenticated court records are accessed while preventing misuse in the digital ecosystem.

Constitutional & Legal Basis

- **Article 19(1)(a):** Guarantees freedom of speech and expression, including the public's right to receive information.
- **Article 21:** Protects the right to a fair trial, privacy and dignity of litigants.
- **Principle of Open Justice:** Judicial proceedings should ordinarily remain open to public scrutiny, subject to reasonable restrictions, to uphold transparency and accountability.

Judicial Precedent

- **Swapnil Tripathi v. Supreme Court of India (2018):** The Supreme Court recognised live-streaming of court proceedings as an extension of the principle of open justice, while emphasising the need for appropriate safeguards.

Key Issues

- **Misuse of Judicial Content:** Unauthorised editing, selective clipping and circulation may distort judicial proceedings and spread misinformation.
- **Privacy & Fair Trial:** Judges, advocates and litigants require protection from trolling, reputational harm and violations of privacy.
- **Commercial Exploitation:** Judicial proceedings should not be monetised or used for commercial gain.
- **Implementation Challenges:** Uniform standards are required across the Supreme Court and High Courts for archival access and content regulation.

Significance

- **Strengthens Judicial Transparency:** Reinforces the principle of open justice while ensuring responsible dissemination of court proceedings.
- **Improves Access to Justice:** Enables citizens, researchers, students and the media to access authentic judicial proceedings.
- **Enhances Public Trust:** Promotes confidence in the judiciary through reliable and unaltered judicial records.
- **Promotes Digital Governance:** Establishes standards for the responsible use and dissemination of digital judicial content.
- **Protects Judicial Integrity:** Safeguards the dignity, credibility and independence of the judicial process.

Way Forward

- Formulate uniform national guidelines for live-streaming and archival access across all constitutional courts.

- Develop secure technological safeguards, including authenticated archives and protection against tampering or unauthorised dissemination.
- Balance the principles of open justice, privacy, fair trial rights and judicial independence while framing regulatory measures.
- Promote stakeholder consultation involving the judiciary, Bar, technology platforms and civil society to ensure a transparent, accessible and accountable digital justice system.

5. Pradhan Mantri Surya Sarovar Yojana (PM-SSY)

GS Paper III – Infrastructure, Energy, Environment & Climate Change | Prelims – Floating Solar Photovoltaic (FSPV), Energy Storage Systems (ESS), Renewable Energy

Why in News?

The Union Cabinet has approved the Pradhan Mantri Surya Sarovar Yojana (PM-SSY) with a total outlay of ₹5,070 crore to promote 5,000 MW of Floating Solar Photovoltaic (FSPV) projects integrated with Energy Storage Systems (ESS) by 2030-31.

Key Features

- **Nodal Ministry:** Ministry of New and Renewable Energy (MNRE).
- **Implementing Agency:** Solar Energy Corporation of India (SECI).
- **Target Capacity:** Develop 5,000 MW of floating solar projects with 10,000 MWh (minimum two-hour) co-located Battery Energy Storage Systems (BESS).
- **Financial Assistance:** Central Financial Assistance (CFA) of ₹1 crore/MW after commissioning and up to ₹50 lakh per project for feasibility studies.
- **Coverage:** Applicable across all States and Union Territories with suitable reservoirs and inland water bodies.

Why Floating Solar?

- Utilises reservoirs and other water bodies, reducing pressure on scarce land resources.
- Minimises land acquisition and rehabilitation challenges associated with ground-mounted solar projects.
- Improves solar panel efficiency through the natural cooling effect of water.
- Helps reduce water evaporation while enabling productive use of idle water surfaces.

Significance

- **Promotes Clean Energy:** Accelerates renewable energy capacity addition and supports India's energy transition.
- **Strengthens Energy Security:** Diversifies the renewable energy mix and reduces dependence on fossil fuels.
- **Enhances Grid Reliability:** Battery Energy Storage Systems facilitate renewable energy integration and help meet peak electricity demand.

- **Resource Efficiency:** Optimises the use of reservoirs and industrial water bodies while reducing land-use conflicts.
- **Geographical Diversification:** Promotes solar deployment in reservoir-rich States with limited land availability.
- **Climate & Economic Benefits:** Expected to reduce nearly 10 million tonnes of CO₂ emissions annually, generate 16,000–17,000 jobs, and promote domestic manufacturing under Aatmanirbhar Bharat.

Challenges

- **High Capital Costs:** Floating solar installations and Battery Energy Storage Systems require substantial upfront investment.
- **Technical & Environmental Concerns:** Corrosion, anchoring, fluctuating water levels and potential impacts on aquatic ecosystems require careful management.
- **Grid Integration:** Expanding transmission infrastructure and integrating variable renewable energy with storage remain operational challenges.
- **Implementation Capacity:** Timely identification of suitable reservoirs, environmental clearances and effective Centre–State coordination are crucial for successful implementation.

Policy Linkages

- Supports the National Solar Mission under the National Action Plan on Climate Change (NAPCC).
- Contributes to India's Panchamrit commitments, including the target of 500 GW non-fossil fuel-based electricity capacity by 2030, and the goal of achieving Net Zero emissions by 2070.

Way Forward

- Promote indigenous manufacturing, advanced battery storage technologies and public-private partnerships to scale up floating solar deployment.
- Strengthen reservoir mapping, environmental safeguards, transmission infrastructure and Centre–State coordination for sustainable implementation.
- Encourage research and innovation in floating solar technologies to improve efficiency, reduce project costs and enhance long-term energy security.

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