



VAJIRAM & RAVI
Institute for IAS Examination

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CURRENT AFFAIRS - March 2024



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- Economic Inequality In India
- Income Tax Rules for Political Parties
- Cross Voting In Rajya Sabha
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Lancet Projects Further Fall In India's Fertility Rate

A recent study by Lancet on global fertility rates has projected fall in India's total fertility rate (TFR).

- TFR is the average number of children a woman would have during her lifetime if she were to experience the current age-specific fertility rates, and if she lived from birth until the end of her reproductive life.
 - TFR is a demographic and socio-economic statistic.
- **Calculation:** The total fertility rate is the **sum of the age-specific fertility rates for all women multiplied by five**.
 - The age-specific fertility rates are those for the 7 five-year age groups from 15–19 to 45–49.

Why Fertility Went Down In India

- **Role of Family Welfare Programme:**

Post-independence, there was a need to restrict the population. So, the Family Welfare Programme, including maternal and child health-related cash transfer inducements, were intended to convince people to have no more than two children.

- Slowly that behaviour change started showing up.

- **Small families became the norm:** Infant mortality declined substantially because of various maternal and child health-related programmes and successful immunisation.
 - As a result, child survival was guaranteed and hence small families became the norm.
- **Economic factors:** With development, the inter-generational flow of wealth has reversed.
 - This means parents now do not receive much benefit from their children the way they used to.
 - Now, elderly parents may find themselves relying less on their children for financial support.
 - Instead, they might depend more on their own savings, retirement plans, or government assistance programs.
 - This has influenced their decision to have an additional child that would involve a substantial cost of bringing them up.
- **Rise in Female literacy and women's participation in the workforce:** Career consciousness, financial returns and economic independence have meant that women are reconsidering their options of having a second child.

Long-term Consequences

- Share of the elderly in the population will increase sharply. By 2050 the share of senior citizens in India will be more than 20%.

Key highlights of the study

Global trends in Total Fertility Rate (TFR)

- Researchers estimate that by 2050, 155 of 204 countries (76% of the world) will be below the replacement level of fertility.
- The number of countries and territories below replacement level is predicted to further increase to 198 (97%) by 2100.
 - This means that in these locations, populations will shrink unless low fertility can be offset by ethical and effective immigration.

Livebirths in India: There were more than 1.6 crore livebirths in 1950 and over 2.2 crore in 2021. The number is projected to fall to 1.3 crore in 2050.

Decline in India's Fertility Rate

The TFR was 6.18 in 1950 which reduced to 4.60 in 1980 and further declined to 1.91 in 2021.

- TFR at 1.9 is below the necessary replacement fertility level of 2.1.

- It is projected to dip further to 1.29 in 2050 and 1.04 in 2100.



- Labour force shortages and potential social imbalances due to gender preferences.

Way Forward

- We need to learn from Scandinavian countries (like Sweden and Denmark). They provide affordable childcare, investing in healthcare and taking on large-scale male-engagement initiatives to build gender equity.
- For women to be able to manage careers with motherhood, it would be crucial for men to take greater responsibility for household and care work.
- Economic policies that stimulate growth and job creation, alongside social security and pension reforms, will also be essential in adapting to and mitigating the impacts of declining fertility rates.



Economic Inequality In India

- A new working paper, titled “*Income and Wealth Inequality in India, 1922-2023: The Rise of the Billionaire Raj*” has been released by World Inequality Lab (WIL).
 - ✓ WIL is a Paris based global research center focused on the study of inequality and public policies that promote social, economic and environmental justice.
- The paper combines data from national income accounts, wealth aggregates, *tax tabulations*, rich lists, and surveys on income, consumption, and wealth to arrive at the results.

Key Findings

- The share of national income in India going to the top 10% fell from 37 per cent in 1951 to 30 per cent by 1982 after which it began steadily rising.
- From the early 1990s onwards, the top 10 per cent share increased substantially over the next three decades, nearly touching 60 per cent in the most recent years.
- This compares with the bottom 50 per cent getting only 15 per cent of India’s national income in 2022-23.
- **By 2022-23, the top 1 per cent income share in India was 22.6 per cent and the top 1 per cent wealth share rose to 40.1 per cent, which are the highest historical levels.**
- The top 1 per cent earn on average Rs 5.3 million, 23 times the average Indian (Rs 0.23 million).
- Average incomes for the bottom 50 per cent and the middle 40 per cent stood at Rs 71,000 (0.3 times national average) and Rs 1,65,000 (0.7 times national average), respectively.
- The richest, nearly 10,000 individuals (of 92 million Indian adults) earn on average Rs 480 million (2,069 times the average Indian).
- In 2022, just the top 0.1% in India earned ~ 10% of the national income, while the top 0.01% earned 4.3% share of the national income and top 0.001% earned 2.1% of the national income.
- In terms of wealth, in 2022-23, the top 1% wealth share was ~40%, ~29% went just to the top 0.1%, ~22% to just the top 0.01% and ~16% to just the top 0.001%.

Wealth inequality in India, 2022-23					
Wealth Group	Adults	Wealth share (%)	Threshold (INR)	Average wealth (INR)	Ratio to average
Average	92,23,44,832	100.0	-4,10,00,000	13,49,029	1.0
Bottom 50%	46,11,72,416	6.4	-4,10,00,000	1,73,184	0.1
Middle 40%	36,89,37,933	28.6	4,31,138	9,63,560	0.7
Top 10%	9,22,34,483	65.0	21,98,344	87,70,132	6.5
Top 1%	92,23,448	40.1	81,60,022	5,41,41,525	40.1
incl. Top 0.1%	9,22,345	29.7	5,26,17,860	40,04,54,807	296.8
incl. Top 0.01%	92,234	22.2	36,86,80,160	2,99,67,73,491	2,221.4
incl. Top 0.001%	9,223	16.8	2,75,66,99,904	22,61,33,54,928	16,762.7

Income inequality in India, 2022-23					
Income Group	Adults	Income share (%)	Threshold (INR)	Average income (INR)	Ratio to average
Average	92,23,44,832	100.0	0	2,34,551	1.0
Bottom 50%	46,11,72,416	15.0	0	71,163	0.3
Middle 40%	36,89,37,933	27.3	1,05,413	1,65,273	0.7
Top 10%	9,22,34,483	57.7	2,90,848	13,52,985	5.8
Top 1%	92,23,448	22.6	20,73,846	53,00,549	22.6
incl. Top 0.1%	9,22,345	9.6	82,20,379	2,24,58,442	95.8
incl. Top 0.01%	92,234	4.3	3,46,06,044	10,18,14,669	434.1
incl. Top 0.001%	9,223	2.1	20,01,98,548	48,51,96,875	2,068.6

- However, the quality of economic data in India is notably poor and has seen a decline recently. It is therefore likely that the data might have underestimated the actual inequality levels.

Reasons For Sharp Rise In Top 1% Income Shares

- The probable reasons could be the public and private sector wage growth till the late 1990s. Further, capital incomes likely played a role in subsequent years.
- For the shares of the bottom 50 per cent and middle 40 per cent remaining depressed, the primary reason has been the *lack of quality broad-based education, focused on the masses and not just the elites.*

International Comparison

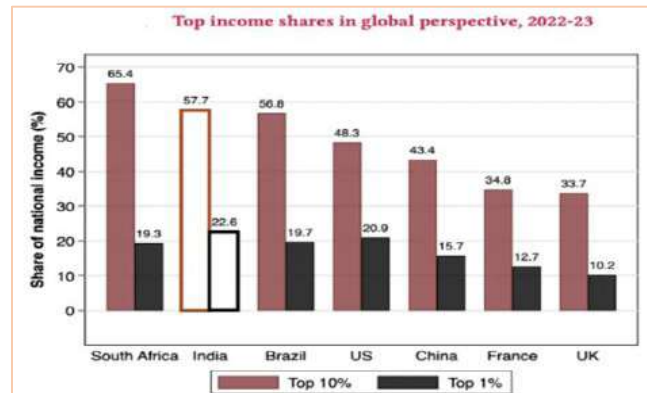
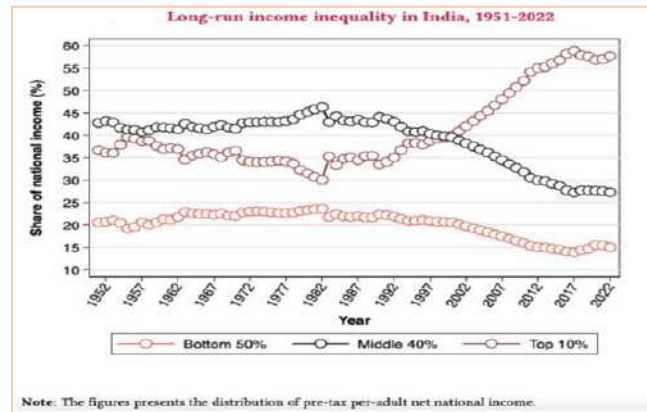
- The paper puts India's income and wealth inequality levels (as of 2022) in global perspective by comparing India with Brazil, China, France, South Africa, United Kingdom, and the United States.
- In terms of income share of the top 10%, India stands second only second to South Africa. In terms of the income share of the top 1%, India ends up having the highest levels at 22.6%.

Negative Fallouts

- As per the report, extreme concentration of incomes and wealth is likely to facilitate disproportionate influence on society and government. This is even more so in contexts with weak democratic institutions.
- After largely being a role model among post-colonial nations in this regard, the integrity of various key institutions in India appears to have been compromised in recent years.
- This makes the possibility of India's slide towards plutocracy even more real. For this reason, income and wealth inequality in India must be closely tracked and challenged.

Recommendation

- The paper finds evidence that the Indian income tax system might be regressive when viewed from the lens of net wealth.
- A restructuring of the tax code to account for both income and wealth, and broad-based public investments in health, education and nutrition are needed.
- This will enable the average Indian, and not just the elites, to meaningfully benefit from the ongoing wave of globalisation.
- A **super tax** of 2% on the net wealth of the 167 wealthiest families in 2022-23 would yield 0.5% of national income in revenues and create valuable fiscal space to facilitate such investments.



Income Tax Rules for Political Parties

Recently, the Congress party alleged that the Income Tax department withdrew Rs 65 crore from its accounts in different banks.

Income Tax Rules for Political Parties

Do Political Parties Get Tax Exemptions? If So, How Much?

- Under **Section 13A** of the Income Tax Act, 1961 Political parties registered with the Election Commission of India (ECI) are exempt as long as the political parties file their *Income Tax Returns* every Assessment Year along with their audited accounts, Income/ Expenditure details and balance sheet.
- They enjoy 100% tax exemption, if the income comes under the heads of:

income from house property

income from other sources

capital gains

Income from voluntary contributions

What Are The Sources From Which Political Parties Derive Their Income?

- From the Income Tax Returns filed by political parties, it can be safely said that they function mainly on the basis of donations from individuals and companies/ institutions.
- Apart from voluntary contributions, income received from sale of coupons, membership fee collected, and interest earned from the major sources of income of political parties.
 - ✓ Coupons: There is no cap or limit as to how many coupons can be printed or the total quantum
 - ✓ Details of donors is not required for coupons with small amounts (say Rs 5/10/20 etc), and might be where all the unaccounted/black money might be pumped in.
 - ✓ The only source of information regarding the coupon system is the party itself.
 - ✓ Coupon system does not come under the scope of ECI, and they have no control over it.

Conditions for Exemption from Income Tax:

The exemption is only valid if the political party-

maintains books of account and other documents that would enable the Assessing Officer to "properly deduce its income";

maintains a record of all contributions above Rs. 20,000 each;

has its accounts audited by an accountant; and

does not accept any donation above Rs. 2,000 each in cash.

the treasurer of the party or any other person authorized by the party submits a declaration of its donations to the Election Commission before the due date of filing Income Tax returns.

How Is The 'Donations' Given In The ITR Different From The Donations Report Submitted To The ECI?

- Donations need not necessarily be above Rs 20,000 and in this case, it does not provide information about the individual amount collected nor the mode of payment of these donations.
- Whereas the donations report submitted to the ECI are those made above Rs 20,000 listing the details of the donors, their address and their mode of payments.

What Are The Types Of Accounting Methods Followed By Political Parties And What Is The Suggested Method Of Accounting?

- There are two types of accounting methods:

Cash accounting

Accrual accounting

- The former method registers the transactions when done in **cash**. Thus, the revenue of political parties such as donations, grants etc is recognized when funds are actually received while failing to show a proper picture of the financial position of the party.
- On the other hand, Accrual accounting allows a company to record revenue before receiving payment for goods/ services sold and record expenses as they are incurred.

- ✓ Accrual method of accounting records transactions during the period they occur such as revenue, expenses, assets and liabilities in real-time thus providing information about the real level of organisation's activities.

** **Accrual basis of accounting is recommended by the Institute of Chartered Accountants of India (ICAI)** for the political parties. ICAI defines the way the Income Tax returns have to be audited and submitted.

** ICAI had laid down a few recommendations to the ECI for improving transparency and accountability in dissemination of accounts of the political parties *which were accepted by the ECI*.

** ICAI has recommended for audit of the accounts of political parties, by a firm of Chartered Accountants, appointed on rotation every 3 years, by the ECI.

Filing The Returns: As per Section **139 (4B)** of the ITA, if the total income of a political party exceeds the maximum exempted amount, then its chief executive officer is required to furnish a return of such income of the previous year in the prescribed form.



Cross Voting In Rajya Sabha

The Member of Parliament (MP) elections for Rajya Sabha in Uttar Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh and Karnataka witnessed crossvoting by MLAs belonging to different parties, raising concerns about the sanctity of the election process.

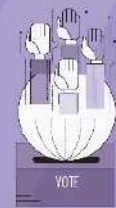
- ✓ **Article 80(4)** of the Constitution provides for the election of Rajya Sabha MPs by elected MLAs through the **proportional representation** process with the single transferable vote (STV) system where each MLA's vote is counted only once.

Solution to Crossvoting

- **Suggestion:** Following the Maharashtra crossvoting incident, an **Ethics Committee of Rajya Sabha** was set up headed by Rajya Sabha MP S B Chavan, which in its first report (1998), observed that- to curb the practice of big money and other considerations of playing mischief in elections, instead of *secret ballot*, the **option of open ballot** must be examined for Rajya Sabha and Legislative Council elections.
- **Amendment:** Based on the above recommendation, **Section 59** of the Representation of the People Act (RPA), 1951 was amended in 2003 by Atal Bihar Vajpayee Government to allow voting in Rajya Sabha elections through an **open ballot**. As per the amendment-

What is Cross Voting?

It is a phenomenon where a legislator goes against his party's designated candidate and votes for a candidate belonging to a different party or alliance.



Reasons for Cross Voting

- » **Conscience Voting:** A legislator may choose to vote as per his own choice/belief rather than strictly adhering to party lines
- » **Political Alliances and Rivalries:** among state or national level parties
- » **Personal Agendas:** can also influence the legislators' voting decisions leading them to support candidates or parties that align with their thoughts.
- » **Internal Party Conflicts:** within a political party, dissatisfaction with party decisions, or disagreements with leadership
- » **External Factors:** such as inducements, political maneuvering, or attempts to influence the election outcome

Was it the first time that a crossvoting incident took place?

- » No, the first instance of crossvoting was witnessed in 1998 Rajya Sabha elections in Maharashtra.
- » The Congress in UP expelled six MLAs after they cross-voted for the BJP in the 2016 Rajya Sabha polls.
- » BJP bagged two Rajya Sabha seats in Haryana in 2022 elections because of crossvoting by then Congress leader Kuldeep Bishnoi who reasoned that he voted as per his inner conscience and was therefore expelled from the party.



MLAs are required to show their ballot paper to the **authorized agent** of their Party before voting.

Not showing the ballot paper to the authorized agent or showing it to anyone else will disqualify the vote.

Independent MLAs are barred from showing their ballots to anyone

** This amendment bill was challenged in the Supreme Court (SC), but the SC upheld its constitutionality in ***Kuldip Nayar versus Union of India, 2006***.

- **Expulsion:** Since then, leaders who cross-vote in the Rajya Sabha polls can be expelled by their party through the **Anti Defection Law**.
 - ✓ The Anti Defection Law, introduced through the **52nd constitutional amendment in 1985** under the **Tenth Schedule** provides that any MP/MLA who voluntarily gives up the membership of their political party or votes against the instructions of their party (issued by the whip) in a House are liable for disqualification from such House.
- **Exclusion as per Election Commission of India (ECI):** The ECI in 2017 drawing reference from *Kuldip Nayar versus Union of India, 2006* case clarified that anti defection law will not be applicable for a Rajya Sabha election with respect to voting against the instruction of the party as these elections are not treated as a proceeding within the Legislative Assembly. Therefore, political parties cannot issue any 'whip' to its members for such elections.

Related Judgements

1. **Ravi S. Naik and Sanjay Bandekar versus Union of India, 1994:** The SC in this case held that voluntarily giving up membership under the Tenth Schedule is not synonymous with only formally resigning from the party to which the member belongs. The conduct of a member both inside and outside the house can be investigated to infer if it qualifies as voluntarily giving up membership.
2. **Kuldip Nayar versus Union of India, 2006:** The SC upheld the system of open ballot for Rajya Sabha elections stating that "if secrecy becomes a source for corruption, then transparency has the capacity to remove it". It also clarified that an elected MLA of a political party cannot not face disqualification under the Tenth Schedule for voting against their party candidate but only a disciplinary action from their political party.

Way Forward

- Crossvoting in Rajya Sabha elections is a serious threat to democracy, it has undermined the higher principle of free and fair elections. Despite introducing the system of open ballot, there is no sense of fear among the MLAs getting involved in such tactics.
- Therefore, the apex court should review its judgement in the *Kuldip Nayar case*.
- Crossvoting can be construed as a strong reason to infer that the member had voluntarily given up membership of such party.
- If the court decides so, this would be a valid ground for disqualification under the Tenth Schedule and would act as a deterrent against such crossvoting instances in future.



'One Nation One Election' Report

The High-level Committee (HLC) on **One Nation, One Election** constituted under the chairmanship of former President **Ram Nath Kovind** submitted its report to the President.

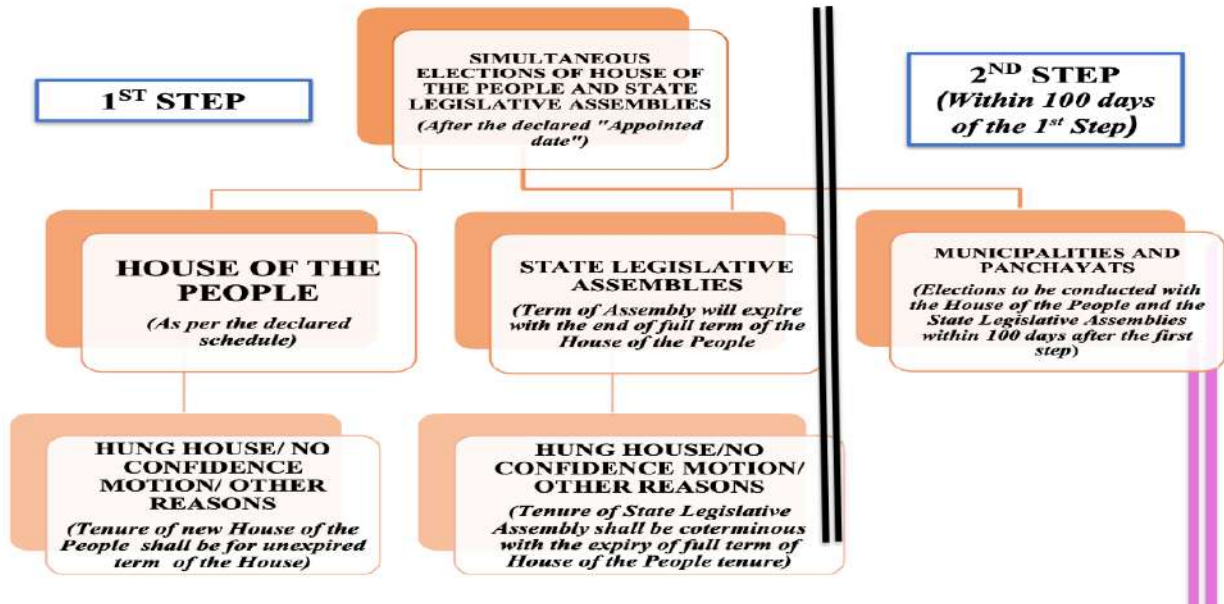
- ✓ One Nation, One Election concept refers to conducting simultaneous elections for Lok Sabha, all state Legislative Assemblies, and urban and rural local bodies (municipalities and panchayats).

✓ Currently elections to all these seats are held independently of each other based on the duration of their tenure.

Key Recommendations

1. **Simultaneous Elections:** The HLC while highlighting that simultaneous elections would reduce voter fatigue arising from frequent elections year after year, increase voter turnout, enhance efficiency, political stability, and fiscal sustainability recommended the following two step model for its implementation-

- a) Simultaneous elections to Lok Sabha & State Legislative Assemblies (Vidhan Sabha) will be held.
- b) Elections to Municipalities and Panchayats will be synchronized in such a way that they are held within a hundred days of holding elections to the Lok Sabha and the State Legislative Assemblies.



2. **Elections in Case of Hung House/No-Confidence Motion/or Any Other Such Event:**

- For Lok Sabha & State Legislative Assemblies: Given in fig.
- For Municipalities and Panchayats: Mid-term elections to the unexpired period of their term until the next General elections will be held.

3. **Synchronizing Elections at National and State Levels:**

- For this purpose, after the General elections, the President would issue a notification on the day of the first sitting of Lok Sabha. This date would be called the “Appointed date” to bring into force the provisions for transition.
- Once the transition provisions are implemented, the tenure of all State Legislative Assemblies constituted in any election after the “Appointed date” would come to an end on the expiry of the full term of the Lok Sabha, irrespective of when that Assembly was constituted.
- This will result in synchronization of the elections for Lok Sabha and the State Legislative assemblies.
- If simultaneous elections to any State Legislative Assembly cannot be conducted with General elections, the Election Commission of India (ECI) may make a recommendation to the President, to allow elections to that Legislative Assembly to be conducted on a later date. However, its term of will end with the term of Lok Sabha.

4. **Single Electoral Roll:** To streamline resources/Process by consolidating voter information into a single database, minimizing redundancy and duplication across multiple agencies, increase the coordination between the ECI and State Election Commissions (SECs), ensure seamless collaboration and information exchange.

5. **Constitutional Amendments Required:** Two Constitutional Amendment Bills will be introduced-

- One for **Article 83** (Duration of Houses of Parliament), **Article 172** (Duration of State Legislatures) and to insert **Article 82A** (*Readjustment after each census*). Ratification by the States will not be required for this purpose.
- Another for inserting **Article 324A** for elections to Municipalities and Panchayats, passed with ratification by the states.
- Amendments will also be required to be made in-

Section 5 (Duration of Legislative Assembly) of the Government of National Capital Territory of Delhi Act, 1991 for the Legislative Assembly of Delhi.

Section 5 (Duration of Legislative Assembly) of the Government of Union Territories Act, 1963 for the Legislative Assembly of Puducherry.

Section 17 (Duration of Legislative Assembly) of the Jammu and Kashmir Reorganization Act, 2019.

Article 327 to add the words “conduct of simultaneous elections” after the words “delimitation of constituencies”.

Article 325 (No person to be ineligible for inclusion in, or to claim to be included in a special, electoral roll on grounds of religion, race, caste or sex), so that a ***Single Electoral Roll and Single Elector’s Photo Identity Card*** could be prepared by the ECI in consultation with the State Election Commissions. This amendment will require ratification by not less than half of the States will be required under Article 368(2) of the Constitution of India

6. **Logistics and Resource Requirement:** The ECI may draw up a plan and provide advanced estimates for the procurement of equipment, such as EVMs and VVPATs, deployment of polling personnel and security forces, and make other necessary arrangements. Similar arrangements can be made by the State Election Commission(s) in consultation with the ECI for the elections to Municipalities and Panchayats.
7. **Implementation Panel:** to be constituted for the implementation of recommendations by HLC.
{For more information on “One Nation, One Election”, please refer to *The Recitals- September 2023 edition*}



EC’s 10-point Advisory

With the announcement Lok Sabha (LS) election schedule, the Model Code of Conduct has come into force and ECI has issued a 10-point advisory to all the political parties.

About Model Code of Conduct (MCC)

It is a set of guidelines (a list of dos and don’ts) issued by the ECI regarding general conduct of election candidates or political parties, their meetings, processions, election manifestos etc. to ensure free and fair elections.

**** Article 324 of the Constitution gives ECI the power to supervise and conduct free and fair elections to the Parliament and State Legislatures.**

Duration: It comes into force as soon as the election schedule is announced and until the results are announced.

What Are The Restrictions Imposed?

- **For Ruling Party (Both Centre and State):**

- It cannot use its official position for campaigning and announce any *new* policy, project or scheme that can influence voting behavior. It should also avoid advertising at the cost of the public exchequer or using official mass media for showcasing its achievements to influence the voters. It cannot use government transport or machinery for its campaigning and should provide public places such as maidans etc., for holding election meetings, and facilities like the use of helipads to the opposition parties on the same terms and conditions on which they are themselves using it. Official visits must not be combined with an election rally by any minister. No ad-hoc appointments can be made; financial grants can be announced.
- **Hate Speech:** Criticism is only allowed on the work record of politicians and not on caste & communal sentiments.
- **Using Place of Worship** (Mosques, Churches, Temples) cannot be used for election campaigns.
- **Avoiding Corrupt Practices:** like bribing, intimidation, impersonation of voters, canvassing within 100 meters of polling stations, holding public meetings during election silence and arranging the transport and conveyance of voters to and from polling station.
 - ✓ Election Silence is the last 48-hour period before the election when all campaign-related or election-related activity is halted.

** The Commission has been clarified that the Code does not stand in the way of ongoing schemes of development work or welfare, relief and rehabilitation measures meant for people suffering from drought, floods, and other natural calamities. However, the EC forbids the use of these works for election propaganda.

Is MCC Legally Binding? No, it is voluntary as it has no statutory backing and EC uses moral sanction or censure for enforcing MCC. The MCC by itself is not legally enforceable but certain provisions of the MCC may be enforced through invoking corresponding provisions in other statutes such as RPA 1951, IPC and CrPC.

** Additionally, the ECI holds authority under paragraph 16A of the Election Symbols (Reservation and Allotment) Order of 1968 to suspend or withdraw a party's recognition.

Is Social Media Covered Under The MCC?

- MCC will also apply to content posted by political parties and candidates on the Internet, including on social media sites.
- On October 25, 2013, the Commission laid down guidelines to regulate the use of social media by parties and candidates. Candidates have to provide their email address and details of accounts on Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, etc., and add the expenditure on advertisements posted on social media to their overall expenditure for the election.

What Happens If One Violates The MCC?

- The ECI issues a notice to a politician or a party either on its own or based on a complaint by another party or individual. Once a notice is issued, the person or party must reply in writing either accepting fault and tendering an unconditional apology or rebutting the allegation.
- If the person or party is found guilty subsequently then it can attract a written censure from the ECI.

Evolution of MCC

- In 1960, Kerala was the first state to adopt a code of conduct for elections. Election Commission (EC) decided to emulate Kerala's example and circulate the draft among all recognised parties and state governments for the Lok Sabha elections of 1962.
- However, it was only in 1974, just before the mid-term general elections, that the EC released a formal Model Code of Conduct.
- In 1979, EC learned of ruling parties misusing power like monopolising public spaces & using public money for advertisement. The EC revised MCC to include ruling political parties.
- The MCC has been revised on several occasions since then. The last time this happened was in 2014, when the Commission introduced Part VIII on manifestos, pursuant to the directions of the Supreme Court.

- Part I: General precepts of good behaviour expected from candidates and political parties.
- Parts II and III: Public meetings and processions. Parts IV and V describe how political parties and candidates should conduct themselves on the day of polling and at the polling booths.
- Part VI: Authority appointed by the EC to receive complaints on violations of the MCC.
- Part VII: Party in power.

The 10-point Advisory Issued by ECI to Ensure Model Code of Conduct

No hate speeches	No caste or religious appeals	No criticism of any aspect of private life
Issue-based campaigning	Fostering political discourse which inspires rather than divides	
Pattern of past MCC violations to prepare grounds for civilized campaigning in general election 2024	Refraining from unverified and misleading advertisements.	
	No masquerading of advertisement as news	
	Restraint on social media posts vilifying/insulting rivals	
Responsibility on star campaigners to maintain decorum		

Extra Mile: Star Campaigners

Who is a Star Campaigner

Star campaigners (under Section 77 of RPA, 1951) often include top leaders of political parties, celebrities, popular public figures, and influential personalities from various fields

Who Bears Their Cost Of Campaigning

It depends on the following circumstances-

- **For General Campaigning:** It is borne by the concerned political party
- **Sharing the Stage with a Candidate:**—The entire campaign cost except expenditure incurred on travelling is added to the candidate's election expenses. This is valid even if he/she mentions the name of the candidate while seeking the vote. If the stage is shared with more than one candidate while campaigning, then the rally expenditure will be shared equally.
- **Displaying Candidate Posters in Rally Background:** If only the posters or photographs of candidates have been displayed in the constituencies where a star campaigner holds a poll rally, the entire expense is added to the election expenses of the contestants.
- **Prime Minister (PM) is the Star Campaigner:** In such a case, the expenditure incurred on security of the PM including on the bullet-proof vehicles is borne by the government itself. But if another campaigner travels with the prime minister or a former minister, 50% of the expenditure incurred on the security arrangements must be borne by the individual candidate.

Does Removal From Star Campaigner List Bar Them From Campaigning

No, they can still get involved in the campaigning process, however the expenditure incurred will be added to the concerned candidate's budget.

How are they Appointed?

There is no rule regarding this matter. They are generally nominated by the concerned political parties specifying their constituencies and duration. All the parties should share their list of star campaigners with the Chief Electoral Officer (CEO) and EC within a week from the date of notification of the election.



Is there any limit on the number of Star Campaigners?

- Yes, a recognized political party can have a maximum of 40-star campaigners and an unrecognized (but registered) political party can have 20-star campaigners.
 - Registered unrecognized parties are the ones which are either newly registered or which were unable to secure enough votes in the general or assembly elections to be a state party.

Extra Mile: Cash Carrying Limit During MCC

Need for Cash-Carrying Limit

- Once the MCC kicks in, the ECI issues detailed instructions to police, Railways, airports, the Income Tax department, and other enforcement agencies, to keep a strict vigil on the movement of cash, liquor, jewelry, drugs and gifts- anything which can disrupt the process of free and fair elections. This is done to keep an eye on campaign expenditure by candidates.

- ✓ The expenditure is capped at Rs 95 lakh per constituency in bigger states, and Rs 75 lakh per constituency in smaller ones.

Process Followed For Checking Illegal Cash

- For the checking purpose, **expenditure observers** are appointed by the EC for every district, alongside static surveillance teams (SST) and flying squads.
 - ✓ The flying squads headed by a *Senior Executive Magistrate* consists of a senior police officer, a videographer, and three or four armed police personnel. They are provided with a dedicated vehicle, a mobile phone, a video camera, and necessary documents required for seizing cash or goods.
 - ✓ *Surveillance teams set up check posts on roads* from the date of announcement of polls (the location is changed frequently). The final 72 hours before polling witness enhanced enforcement. The entire checking process is video-graphed.

Limit on Cash and Action Taken

- *For Ordinary Citizen*- One cannot carry cash of Rs 50,000 or more without supporting documents. Unexplained cash is confiscated and cash above 10 lakh is seized and reported to the Income-Tax authority (ITA), for necessary action under Income Tax Laws.
- *For Candidate/Agent/Party Worker*- If one is found with over Rs 50,000 in cash or drugs, liquor, arms, or gift items worth over Rs.10,000, then it will be seized and if there is any suspicion of a crime, the seizure is done under the Criminal Procedure Code (CrPC) along with an FIR (to be filed within 24 hours). The seized amount is deposited in such manner as directed by the Court. If the seized amount exceeds 10 lakh rupees, then the information is forwarded to the IT department.

Grievance Redressal: A *district-level committee* Suo-motu examines each case of seizure where no FIR/complaint has been filed, or where the seizure is not linked with any candidate, political party or election campaign. Immediate steps are taken to return any cash seized to avoid inconvenience to the public and genuine people.

- ✓ The committee consists of the district election office's nodal officer for expenditure monitoring, and the district treasury officer.



Citizenship Amendment Rules 2024

The Centre notified **Rules** for The Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), paving the way for the implementation of the law *more than four years* after it was passed by Parliament in December 2019.

****The Supreme Court recently issued a notice to the union government seeking its response on a batch of applications challenging the CAA and the Citizenship Amendment Rules 2024.**

- ✓ Citizenship in India is enumerated in the Union List within the Constitution, thereby falling solely under the jurisdiction of Parliament.
- ✓ The Matua community in West Bengal, comprised of Hindu refugees from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), has welcomed the CAA rules.

About the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), 2019

- It amends the Citizenship Act, 1955 to provide citizenship to individuals belonging to Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, Parsi or Christian communities from Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Afghanistan who entered India seeking refuge due to religious persecution.
 - ✓ These people are currently living in India illegally or on long-term visas (LTV).

- It also excludes them (also exempted under the Passport (Entry into India) Act, 1920, or the Foreigners Act, 1946) from being treated as “illegal migrants (foreigners who enter India without a valid passport or travel documents or stay beyond the permitted time)”.
- ✓ As per the 1955 act, citizenship could be acquired in India under **five categories**: *by birth, by descent, through registration, by naturalization (extended residence in India), and by incorporation of territory into India.*
- ✓ The 1955 Act grants non-Muslim minorities from Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan- citizenship through registration or naturalization in nine states: Gujarat, Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh, Haryana, Punjab, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Delhi, and Maharashtra.
- ✓ CAA 2019 introduced religion (excluding Muslims) as the **sixth criteria** to acquire citizenship in India.

Eligibility: Citizenship will be granted to the individuals who have entered India on or before December 31, 2014.

- ✓ Under 1955 act, Indian citizenship was granted to those born in India or who have lived in the country for at least 11 years. CAA reduced this period to **five years** for the persecuted minorities who are eligible.

Exceptions: It excludes the tribal areas of Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Tripura, as included in the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution and the states regulated by the “Inner Line” permit (ILP).

- ✓ Inner Line Permit regulates the visit of all persons, including Indian citizens, to Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, and Nagaland.

Overseas Citizen of India (OCI): It also amends provisions related to OCI cardholders and provides for cancellation of OCI registration if a cardholder violates any law notified by the central government.

- ✓ A foreigner of Indian origin or the spouse of a person of Indian origin may register as an OCI under the 1955 Act and enjoy benefits such as the right to travel to India, and to work and study in the country.

Legal Challenge to the Law: The law was challenged before the SC in 2020 by the Indian Union Muslim League (IUML). Since then, more than 200 petitions have been filed against the law on the following grounds-

- *Discriminatory in Nature* as it sidelines the Muslim community
- *Violates Article 14:* Special treatment given to the specific “persecuted religious minorities” from the **three Muslim-majority neighboring countries** does not constitute a reasonable classification under *Article 14* as groups like the Tamil Hindus in Sri Lanka, the Rohingyas in Myanmar, Tibetan Buddhist and minority Muslim sects like the Hazaras in Afghanistan also face persecution but no protection has been given to them under this law.
- *Promotes Influx of Illegal Migrants-* It will allow people left out of **Assam NRC** to seek citizenship under amended rules and there will be uncontrolled influx of illegal migrants from Bangladesh to Assam. Also, Muslims fear that this law, combined with a proposed National Register of Citizens (NRC)- currently implemented in Assam only, would marginalize them.
 - ✓ The CAA is seen in Assam as a violation of the **1985 Assam Accord** which allows foreign migrants who came to Assam after January 1, 1966 but before March 25, 1971 to seek citizenship.
 - ✓ NRC is a list of names of all genuine Indian citizens who came to Assam by 24 March 1971 (before Bangladesh’s independence).

Government’s Stand: Since Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh are Islamic republics with a Muslim majority, therefore Muslims cannot be considered persecuted minorities. But it ensured to review applications from other communities on a case-by-case basis.

The CAA Rules, 2024

Process of Application:

1. **Filling up the Form:** One can submit an online application on <https://indiancitizenshiponline.nic.in/> or through the 'CAA-2019' mobile application to the **Empowered Committee (EC) through the District Level Committee (DLC)**

- ✓ Earlier, citizenship applications were made to the **district collector**, who is under the administrative control of the state government.
- ✓ The new rules provide for an EC and DLC to be instituted by the Centre

Empowered Committee (EC)- It will be headed by the Director (Census Operations) of the concerned State or Union Territory and will consist of the following

- *Members-*
 - ✓ An officer in the Subsidiary Intelligence Bureau not below the rank of Deputy Secretary;
 - ✓ Jurisdictional Foreigners Regional Registration Officer concerned;
 - ✓ State Informatics Officer of National Informatics Centre (NIC);
 - ✓ Postmaster General of the State or UT or a Postal Officer nominated by the Postmaster General not below the rank of Deputy Secretary;
- *Invitees-* Representatives of Principal Secretary (Home) or Additional Chief Secretary (Home) of the State or UT and of jurisdictional Divisional Railway Manager (DRM) of Railways.

District Level Committee (DLC)- will be headed by the jurisdictional Senior Superintendent or Superintendent of Post and will consist of following:

- *Members-*
 1. District Informatics Officer or District Informatics Assistant of the District concerned;
 2. Nominee of Central Government;
- *Invitees-* A representative not below the rank of Naib Tehsildar or equivalent from the Office of District Collector and Jurisdictional Station Master.

2. **Scrutinizing the Application:** Once the application has been submitted, the DLC scrutinizes the application and then an intimation is sent to the applicant via email/SMS about the date and time for original document verification.

✓ Background and security checks will be conducted by Central security agencies like the Intelligence Bureau (IB).

3. **Oath of Allegiance:** If the documents are found in order upon verification, an oath of allegiance will be administered to the applicant by the designated officer. If an applicant fails to appear in person for document verification and oath of allegiance despite giving reasonable opportunities, DLC can forward the application to the EC for consideration of refusal.

4. **Powers of EC:** The EC can scrutinize the application under Section 6B (to provide certificate of registration or naturalization) and on being satisfied after making any inquiry and based on the report of the security agency, it may approve/reject the application for citizenship.

5. **Renunciation Declaration:** Every application includes a declaration by the applicant renouncing their citizenship of their current country, irrevocably and without future claim.

Eligibility: The applicant must-

- Be a national of Pakistan, Afghanistan or Bangladesh.
- Belong to Hindu, Sikh, Jain, Buddhist, Parsi or Christian community.
- Have entered in India on or before 31st December 2014.
- **Any document** that shows that *“either of the parents or grandparents or great grandparents of the applicant is or had been a citizen of one of the three countries”* is also acceptable.
- The requirement of a certificate from an educational institution, certifying that the applicant knows one of the languages mentioned in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution, **has also been done away with**. Now, merely a declaration to that effect, and the ability to speak the language, will be enough.

Required Documents: (Importantly, these documents will be admissible **even beyond their validity period** and can also be used to establish the religion of the applicant).

1. **Proof of Country of Origin:** A copy of any one identity proof like passport, school certificate, birth certificate, license, land record etc. Issued by the government of Afghanistan or Bangladesh or Pakistan to prove their nationality.
2. **Proof of Date of Entry into India:** Any of the 20 documents issued by an Indian authority to prove the entry of applicant in India before 31.12.2014:
 - i. Copy of the visa and immigration stamp on arrival in India
 - ii. Registration Certificate or Residential Permit issued by the Foreigners Regional Registration Officer (FRO) or Foreigners Registration Officer (FRO) in India.
 - iii. Slip issued by the Census Enumerators in India to such persons while conducting census related survey.
 - iv. Government issued license or certificate or permit in India (including Driving License, Aadhaar Card etc.)
 - v. Ration Card of the applicant issued in India
 - vi. Any letter issued by the Government or Court to the applicant with an official stamp etc.
3. An affidavit verifying the accuracy of the statements made in the application along with an affidavit from an Indian citizen testifying the character of the applicant.
4. A copy of the valid or expired Foreign Passport, if available.
5. A copy of the valid or expired Residential Permit, if available.



No Immunity To Legislators For Accepting Bribes

In a landmark judgement, a seven-judge Constitution Bench unanimously overruled its **1998** judgment in ***P.V Narasimha Rao v. State*** and **took away the immunity**, the Members of Parliament (MPs) and Members of Legislative Assemblies (MLAs) enjoy from being prosecuted for **accepting bribes to cast a vote or make a speech in the House in a particular fashion**.

Therefore, the law enforcement agencies will now be able to initiate prosecution against legislators in bribery cases under the Prevention of Corruption Act (PCA), 1988.

Immunity Available To Legislators

Constitutional Provisions: Article 105(2) for MPs and Article 194(2) for MLAs- provides immunity to MPs/MLAs from being prosecuted with respect to anything said or any vote given in Parliament or on any parliamentary committee.

Legal Provisions: Section 135A of the Code of Civil Procedure, 1908 exempts a member of a legislative body from arrest and detention under civil process.

Background

- **What Happened?** CBI accused Sita Soren (from Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM)) of accepting bribe to cast her vote in favour of a certain candidate in the **Rajya Sabha elections of 2012**. She appealed against this order in the Jharkhand HC claiming that she enjoyed legal immunity under Article 194(2) and therefore cannot be prosecuted. But her appeal was dismissed. Therefore, she approached to the SC.
- **The SC Judgement 2019-** A three-judge bench in 2019 noted that the decision in *P.V. Narasimha Rao v State, 1998* dealt directly with the case but as it had been decided by a narrow margin (a 3:2 split among the five judges), it was referred to a five-judge bench as the issue was “substantial and of general public importance”.
- **Case Transferred to a Seven Judge Bench:** In 2023, a five-judge bench led by CJI Chandrachud while referring the case to a seven-judge bench, demarcated three issues that needed to be reconsidered from the *P.V. Narasimha Rao* case-

- 1) The purpose of Articles 194(2) and 105(2) was to allow legislators to cast their votes without fear of reprisal, not to protect them from possible violations of criminal law.
- 2) The decision in Narasimhan case seemingly protects bribe-takers who vote in accordance with the purpose of the bribe, and not those who act contrary to the purpose of the bribe.
- 3) There is a need to decide if the offence of bribery is complete when the payment of the bribe is made or when the bribe is acted upon by the legislator.

The Final Judgement

1. No Violation of the Doctrine of Stare Decisis

Issue: The petitioners claimed that overruling the long-settled law in P.V. Narasimha Rao is impermissible owing to the doctrine of stare decisis (a legal principle that obligates judges to adhere to prior verdicts while ruling on a similar case).

Ruling: The doctrine is not an “inflexible rule of law”, and a larger bench can reconsider a prior decision in appropriate cases.

2. Legislative privileges must conform with constitutional parameters- The court held that rights in India have always flown from a statute, which after independence transitioned to a constitutional privilege. Thus, whether a claim to privilege in a particular case conforms to the parameters of the Constitution or not, is amenable to judicial review.

3. Fails the Two-Fold Test: Court held that constitutional immunity from bribery charges **does not** fulfill “two-fold test” which is based on two conditions:

- 1) If the actions of a legislator were meant to *enhance* the dignity and authority of the House and its members.
- 2) If the actions were in *exercise of his rights to free speech, protest and freedom from arrest*, among others.

4. Immunity to bribe takers based on the manner a vote is cast:

Issue: In P.V. Narasimha Rao, the Court examined the provision under Article 105(2) which stated-

“No member of Parliament shall be liable to any proceedings in any court in respect of anything said or any vote given by him in Parliament or any committee thereof, and no person shall be so liable in respect of the publication by or under the authority of either House of Parliament of any report, paper, votes or proceedings.”

It held that the words “in respect of” must receive a “broad meaning” to protect MPs from any proceedings in a court of law and therefore concluded that a bribe given to purchase the vote of an MP was immune from prosecution under this provision.

Ruling: The court held that the expressions “anything” and “any” must be read in the context of the accompanying expressions in Articles 105(2) and 194(2) and therefore the words “in respect of” means ‘arising out of’ or ‘bearing a clear relation to’ and cannot be interpreted to mean anything which may have even a remote connection with the speech or vote given. Engaging in bribery is a crime which is not essential to the casting of the vote or giving a speech in the house.

5. Offence of Bribery Complete the Moment it is Taken:

Issue: P.V. Narasimha Rao judgement resulted in a paradoxical outcome i.e. a legislator is conferred immunity when they accept a bribe and follow through by voting in the agreed direction. But not, if a legislator agrees to accept a bribe but eventually decides to vote independently.

Ruling: The offence of bribery is complete at the point in time when the legislator accepts the bribe, *whether it is followed up by voting or making a speech in the manner wanted by the giver of the bribe.*

6. Parallel Jurisdictions:

Issue: Court’s jurisdiction is unwarranted in this case since corruption charges against a parliamentarian are treated as a breach of privilege by the House resulting in expulsion or punishment.

Ruling: The Court's jurisdiction to prosecute a criminal offence and the authority of the House to act for a breach of discipline operate in distinct spheres. Thus, judicial proceedings cannot be excluded merely because bribery charges can also be treated by the House as contempt or a breach of its privilege.

7. Corruption Erodes the Foundation of Democracy

8. Legislative privileges apply equally to other elections: The principles enunciated by this verdict will apply equally to elections of President, Vice-President and to the Rajya Sabha. Thus, overruling the observations in *Kuldip Nayar v. Union of India* (2006).

✓ The SC in *Kuldip Nayar v. Union of India* (2006) case- which dealt with using **open ballots** in Rajya Sabha elections, held that elections to the Rajya Sabha fall outside the ambit of parliamentary privileges under Article 194 as they are not proceedings of the legislature but a mere exercise of franchise.

9. Immunity a Parliamentary Privilege: The court held that immunity guaranteed to legislators has been colloquially (informally) called a "parliamentary privilege" and not "legislative privilege" therefore, it cannot be restricted to only law-making on the floor of the House but extends to other powers and responsibilities of elected members, which take place in the legislature or Parliament, and even when the House is not in session.

Critical Analysis

The SC by overruling the majority verdict in *P.V. Narasimha Rao* case has foregrounded **probity as the main aspect of parliamentary functioning** and has clarified that parliamentary privilege, enshrined in Article 105 and Article 194 is aimed at protecting the freedom of speech and independence of the legislators in their functioning in the House **which cannot be extend to bribery**. The judgement restores the faith of public in judiciary as it ensures that the legislators do not act under monetary inducement.



India-EFTA Trade & Economic Partnership Agreement

- India-European Free Trade Association (EFTA) signed a **Trade & Economic Partnership Agreement (TEPA)**.
- This agreement aims to encourage investments and enhance trade in goods and services between the two parties.

Key Highlights of The TEPA

- **Legal commitment for promoting target-oriented investment and creation of jobs**
 - increase the stock of FDIs by USD 100 billion in India in the **next 15 years**, and
 - to facilitate the generation of 1 million direct employment in India, through such investments.
 - The investments do not cover foreign portfolio investment (FPIs).
- **Coverage**
 - EFTA is offering 92.2% of its tariff lines which covers 99.6% of **India's exports**.

Trade and Economic Partnership Agreement (TEPA)

About

- India signed a trade agreement with the **four-nation EFTA**, an intergovernmental grouping of **Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland**.
- This agreement is officially dubbed Trade and Economic Partnership Agreement (**TEPA**).
- The agreement comprises of **14 chapters** with main focus on market access related to goods, rules of origin, trade facilitation, trade remedies, etc.
- This is India's **fourth** such agreement since 2014. The previous agreements were signed with **Mauritius, the UAE, and Australia**.

Aim: For the first time in history of FTAs, **binding commitment of \$100 bn investment and 1 million direct jobs in the next 15 years** has been given.

- The EFTA's market access offer covers 100% of **non-agri products** and tariff concession on **Processed Agricultural Products (PAP)**.
- India is offering 82.7% of its tariff lines which covers 95.3% of EFTA exports of which more than 80% import is Gold.
 - The effective duty on Gold remains untouched.
- Sensitivity related to PLI in sectors such as pharma, medical devices & processed food etc. have been taken while extending offers.
- Sectors such as dairy, soya, coal and sensitive agricultural products are kept in exclusion list.
- **Sub-sectors included**
 - India has offered 105 sub-sectors to the EFTA and secured commitments in 128 sub-sectors from Switzerland, 114 from Norway, 107 from Liechtenstein, and 110 from Iceland.
- **Inclusion of Services**
 - Services offers from EFTA include better access through digital delivery of Services (Mode 1), commercial presence (Mode 3) and improved commitments and certainty for entry and temporary stay of key personnel (Mode 4).
 - TEPA has provisions for Mutual Recognition Agreements in Professional Services like nursing, chartered accountants, architects etc.
- **Robust IPR regime**
 - IPR chapter with Switzerland, which has high standard for IPR, shows India's robust IPR regime.
 - India's interests in generic medicines and concerns related to evergreening of patents have been fully addressed.

Significance of TEPA for India	TEPA - Challenges for India
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Trade opportunities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ It will empower <i>Indian exporters access to specialized inputs and create conducive trade and investment environment.</i> ○ This would boost exports of Indian made goods as well as provide opportunities for services sector to access more markets. ● Opportunity to integrate into EU markets <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Over 40% of Switzerland's global services exports are to the EU. Indian companies can look to Switzerland as a base for extending its market reach to EU. ● Diversified supply chain (imports) away from China. ● Boost to Make in India & Atmanirbhar Bharat by encouraging domestic manufacturing in various sectors. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ These include: Infrastructure and Connectivity, Manufacturing, 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● India runs a trade deficit with most of its top trade partners, except for the US <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ This is also true in the case of FTAs that India has signed in the past, especially with ASEAN nations. ○ This is due to high average tariffs in India which hovers around 18%, among the highest in the world. ○ The India-EFTA deal also expected to widen the trade gap. ○ That is why India pushed for investment commitment in the EFTA deal. Such investment could help India generate economic activity and jobs in exchange for giving market access to EFTA. ○ Also, India could see gains in the services sector ● Difficulty for India to access the EFTA market <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Switzerland, which is India's biggest trade partner among EFTA countries, decided to eliminate import duties on all industrial goods for all countries starting from January 1, 2024. ○ The abolition of tariffs on all industrial products, including chemicals, consumer goods, vehicles and clothing is a concern for India. ○ Industrial goods accounts for 98% of India's \$1.3 billion merchandise exports to Switzerland in FY2023.

<p>Machinery, Pharmaceuticals, Chemicals, Food Processing, Transport & Logistics, Banking & Financial Services and Insurance.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creation of large number of direct jobs including better facilities for vocational and technical training. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <u>India's goods will face stiffer competition despite any tariff elimination that would be part of the deal.</u> ○ Also, exporting agricultural produce to Switzerland remains challenging due to the complex web of tariffs, quality standards, and approval requirements. ○ EFTA has not shown any inclination to make agriculture tariffs zero on most basic agricultural produce.
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European Free Trade Association (EFTA)

- EFTA is the **intergovernmental** organisation of **Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland**.
 - It was set up by the **Stockholm Convention in 1960** by its then seven Member States for the **promotion of free trade and economic integration between its members**.
 - The **organisation operates in parallel with the European Union (EU)**, and all 4 member states participate in the **European Single Market** and are *part of the Schengen Area*.
 - However, they are *not* a party to the European Union Customs Union.
- **The main tasks of EFTA-**
 - Maintaining and developing the EFTA Convention, which regulates economic relations between the four EFTA States;
 - Managing the Agreement on the European Economic Area (EEA Agreement), which brings together the EU and 3 of the EFTA States - Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway - in a single (internal) market.
 - Developing EFTA's worldwide network of free trade agreements (FTAs).
- **Trade relation between India and EFTA countries**

EFTA countries	Exports	Imports	Trade balance
Iceland	13	5	8
Liechtenstein	0	8	-8
Norway	484	782	-298
Switzerland	1,382	19,657	-18,275
TOTAL	1,879	20,452	-18,574

*CY2023



India-Pakistan Bilateral Trade

Recently, Pakistan's Foreign Minister said that his country may seriously examine the question of resuming trade with India. Pakistan had stopped trade after the constitutional changes in Jammu and Kashmir in 2019.

Bilateral Trade Between India And Pakistan

- **Composition of India-Pakistan Trade**
 - Despite having MFN status since 1996, Pakistan maintained a Negative List of 1,209 products that were not allowed to be imported from India.
 - **Most Favoured Nation (MFN) status** is a principle in the WTO that ensures that countries treat all other members equally.
 - This means that if a country improves the benefits it gives to one trading partner, it must give the same treatment to all other WTO members.
 - Only 138 products were allowed to be imported from India through the Wagah-Attari border land route.

Financial Year	Exports from India	Imports to India	Total Trade	Increase	Balance of Trade
2003-04	286.94	57.74	344.68	80%	+229.2
2004-05	521.05	94.97	616.02	78.72%	+426.08
2005-06	689.23	179.56	868.79	41.03%	+454.23
2006-07	1,350.09	323.62	1,673.71	92.64%	+1,026.47
2007-08	1,950.53	287.97	2,238.50	85.23%	+1,662.56
2008-09	1,440	370.17	1,810.17	7.52%	+1,179.83
2009-10	1,573.32	275.94	1,849.26	2.1%	+1,297.38
2010-11	2,039.53	332.52	2,372.05	28.27%	+1,707.01
2011-12	1,541.28	397.66	1,939.21	-18.25%	+1,140.37
2012-13	2,064.79	541.87	2,606.66	34.42%	+1,523
2013-14	2,274.26	426.88	2,701.15	3.62%	+1,847.38
2014-15	1,857.18	497.31	2,354.49	-12.83%	+1,359.87
2015-16	2,171.14	441.03	2,612.16	10.94%	+1,730.11
2016-17	1,821.87	454.49	2,276.36	-12.86%	+1,367.38
2017-18	1,924.28	488.56	2,412.83	6%	+1,435.72
2018-19	2,066.56	494.87	2,561.44	6%	+1,571.69

Source: Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Government of India

- Still, India maintained a significant trade surplus over Pakistan.
- In 2018-19, cotton and organic chemicals accounted for around half of Pakistan's imports from India.
 - Other major Pakistani imports from India that year included plastic, tanning/dyeing extracts, and nuclear reactors, boilers, machinery, and mechanical appliances.
- Meanwhile, India's imports from Pakistan in 2018-9 included mineral fuels and oils, edible fruits and nuts, salt, sulphur, stone and plastering materials, ores, slag & ash and raw hides & leather.
- **Why Was India-Pakistan Trade Paused?**
 - Pakistan suspended bilateral trade with India in August 2019, after the Indian government abrogated Article 370 of the Indian Constitution.
 - However, experts believe an underlying reason for suspending trade was the 200% tariff imposed by New Delhi on Pakistani imports earlier that year after India revoked Pakistan's MFN status.
 - India took this step in the aftermath of the Pulwama terrorist attack in February 2019. India withdrew Pakistan's MFN status within 24 hours of the attack.

Why Pakistan Might Be Reconsidering Trade With India?

- **Change of government in Pakistan:** There has been a change of face, if not regime, since Imran Khan following elections held earlier this year.
 - While the Pakistani military remains firmly in control, a new government indicates the possibility of a new policy.
- **Economic crisis in Pakistan:** Devastating floods in 2022, high inflation, and political instability alongside structural issues, have led to multiple crises related to meeting the food and energy needs of the population.
- **Pakistan is approaching IMF and friendly countries (Saudi Arabia and China) for loan**
 - With the pause in trade with India, importing goods from faraway countries further depletes its low foreign exchange reserves.
- **Direct trade will increase the efficiency:** Trade between India and Pakistan is already taking place through Dubai or other countries. This raises costs, and the logic of efficiency and geography demand a resumption of direct trade.
- **Pakistan's relationships with Afghanistan and Iran have become tense.**
 - In fact, Pakistan's ties with India are more stable than its western frontier with Afghanistan and Iran.

Challenges To Normalisation Of India-Pakistan Trade

- **Role of hardliners:** Given that PPP chairman Bilawal Bhutto Zardari has taken a hard line against India in public statements over the last few years, it is not clear if his party will support trading with India.
- **Role of Pakistani Army:** Pakistani army traditionally opposes any steps taken to normalise the relationship between these two countries.
- **Pakistan's demand on Article 370:** Pakistan has put preconditions on talks with India, demanding the reversal of the decision on Article 370 — which will not happen.
- **Terrorism** India too would not want to trade without major steps from Pakistan on curbing terrorism. External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar has frequently said trade and terrorism cannot go together.

Conclusion

Today, India's position is stronger, and the Indian government is not going to make any concessions. The ball then is in Pakistan's court; and there is no domestic consensus on how to reset ties with India. This is the problem: **trade with India makes economic sense for Pakistan. But the politics of doing the right thing are quite hard in Pakistan.**



UN Resolution To Combat Islamophobia

India abstained from voting on a UN General Assembly resolution on Islamophobia, calling out the prevalence of religiophobia" against Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, and other faiths. The resolution was introduced on the International Day to Combat Islamophobia by Pakistan and co-sponsored by China.

Key Highlights Of UN Resolution On Measures To Combat Islamophobia

• Adopted By The UNGA

- The 193-member General Assembly adopted the resolution 'Measures to combat Islamophobia'.
- 115 nations voted in favour, none against and 44 abstentions, including India, Brazil, France, Germany, Italy, Ukraine and the UK.

• Resolution

- The resolution criticized the encouragement of unfair treatment, aggression, or violence towards Muslims, shown by more incidents of:
 - disrespecting their holy book, attacking mosques, sites, and shrines, and
 - other acts of religious intolerance, negative labelling, hate, and violence against Muslims.
- The new resolution calls for, among other things, concerted action to fight ongoing violence against Muslims.
- It requests the UN Secretary-General to appoint a special envoy to combat Islamophobia.

India's Stand On The Resolution

• Other forms of religiophobia must be acknowledged

- India asserted that the prevalence of religiophobia against Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism and other faiths facing violence and discrimination must also be acknowledged rather than singling out just one religion.
- Indian representative at the UN noted that Hinduism has more than 1.2 billion followers, Buddhism more than 535 million and Sikhism more than 30 million and are all subject to religiophobia.
 - As per India, it is crucial to acknowledge that such phobias extend beyond Abrahamic religions.

• Highlighted the *incidents* of other forms of religiophobia

- She said the contemporary forms of religiophobia are evident in:
 - the increasing attacks on religious places of worship such as gurudwaras, monasteries and temples,
 - as well as the spreading of hatred and disinformation against non-Abrahamic religions in many countries.
- The destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas, violations of gurudwara premises, massacres of Sikh pilgrims in gurudwaras, attacks on temples, and the glorification of breaking idols in temples all contribute to the rise of contemporary forms of religiophobia against non-Abrahamic religions.

• Concerns About UN Resolution

- India emphasized that passing the resolution should not set a precedent leading to many resolutions focused on fears linked to particular religions.
- India is worried that this could split the United Nations into religious groups.
- Hence, India called on all member states to consider the broader scope of religious discrimination that persists globally.
- Allocating resources solely to combat Islamophobia, while neglecting similar challenges faced by other faiths, might inadvertently perpetuate a sense of exclusion and inequality.

Religiophobia

- Religiophobia represents an irrational or obsessive fear or anxiety of religion, religious faith, religious people or religious organisations.
- **Global counter-terrorism strategy of UN** recognises different types of religiophobia such as Islamophobia, Christianophobia and anti-Semitism.
- Off late, analysts have started a discussion around the **need to recognise new phobias, hatred or bias against other major religions of the world.**
 - The emergence of contemporary forms of religiophobia, especially anti-Hindu, anti-Buddhist and anti-Sikh phobias is a matter of serious concern.

International Day to Combat Islamophobia

- In 2022, the UN General Assembly adopted a Pakistan-sponsored resolution to declare **March 15 as International Day to Combat Islamophobia.**
 - The resolution, introduced by Pakistan on behalf of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), was adopted by consensus.
 - It was backed by 57 members of OIC and eight other countries, including China and Russia.
- The resolution was adopted in the wake attacks on two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand in 2019, that left 51 people dead.



Food Waste Index Report 2024

- Food Waste Index Report 2024 has been launched by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and WRAP (Waste and Resources Action Programme - a U.K.-based non-profit). It was first launched in 2011.
- The objective of this report is to catalyze essential action towards reducing food waste and achieving UN's Sustainable Developmental Goal (**SDG 12.3**).
 - SDG 12 seeks to "ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns."
 - Target 12.3 calls for **cutting in half per capita global food waste at the retail and consumer level**, and reducing food losses along production and supply chains (including post-harvest losses) by 2030.

Key Highlights of Food Waste Index Report 2024

- **In 2022, the world wasted 1.05 billion tonnes of food.**
 - This amounts to one fifth (19%) of food available to consumers being wasted, at the retail, food service, and household level.
 - That is in addition to the 13% of the world's food lost in the supply chain, as estimated by FAO, from post-harvest up to and excluding retail.
- **Most of the world's food waste comes from households.**
 - Out of the total food wasted in 2022, households were responsible for 631 million tonnes equivalent to 60%, the food service sector for 290 and the retail sector for 131.
- **Households waste at least one billion meals a day.**
 - On average, each person wastes 79kg of food annually.
 - The equivalent of at least *one billion meals of edible food* is being wasted in households worldwide every single day, using a very conservative assessment on the share of food waste that is edible.
- **Temperature and Food Waste Correlation.**
 - Hotter countries appear to have more food waste per capita in households, potentially due to increased consumption of fresh foods with substantial inedible parts and lack of robust cold chain.

- **Urban-Rural Disparities**
 - Middle-income countries display variations between urban and rural populations, with rural areas generally wasting less.
 - Possible explanations include greater diversion of food scraps to pets, animal feed, and home composting in rural areas.
 - The report recommends focusing efforts to strengthen food waste reduction and circularity in cities.
- **Contribution to Greenhouse Gas Emissions:** Food loss and waste contribute for 8-10% of annual global emissions.
- **G20 Role in Food Waste Reduction.**
 - Only four G20 countries (Australia, Japan, UK, and USA) and the European Union have food waste estimates suitable for tracking progress to 2030.
 - An additional two G20 countries have suitable household estimates (Canada, Saudi Arabia), with Brazil's estimate expected in late 2024.
- **Food waste must be addressed at both individual and systemic levels**, including targeted efforts in urban areas and international collaboration among countries and across supply chains.



13th Ministerial Conference of WTO

- The World Trade Organization (WTO) held its 13th Ministerial Conference (MC13) at **Abu Dhabi in the UAE** between February 26 and March 2.
- At the conclusion of the meeting, a ministerial declaration was adopted that set out a forward-looking, reform agenda for the WTO.
- Through this declaration members agreed to:
 - support and enhance the multilateral trading system, with the WTO as its core;
 - address current trade challenges, seize available opportunities; and
 - ensure the proper functioning of the WTO & Chart its future course.

13th Ministerial Conference (MC13) of WTO

- **Key decisions:** The ministers took a number of decisions, including:
 - renewing the commitment to have a fully & well-functioning dispute settlement system by 2024;
 - to improve use of the special and differential treatment (S&DT) provisions for developing and least developed countries (LDCs).
- **Outcomes at MC13**
 - On the agriculture side, the WTO's Director-General, Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, noted in her closing speech that this was the first time a text had been agreed upon.
 - She mentioned that this effort had been ongoing for over two decades, with no agreement reached at MC12.
 - Despite challenges, there is now a text for the first time.
 - Regarding fisheries, consensus on an agreement seems likely to be reached by mid-year.
 - However, India is disappointed that the exemption from customs duties for e-commerce will continue for moratorium of at least two more years.

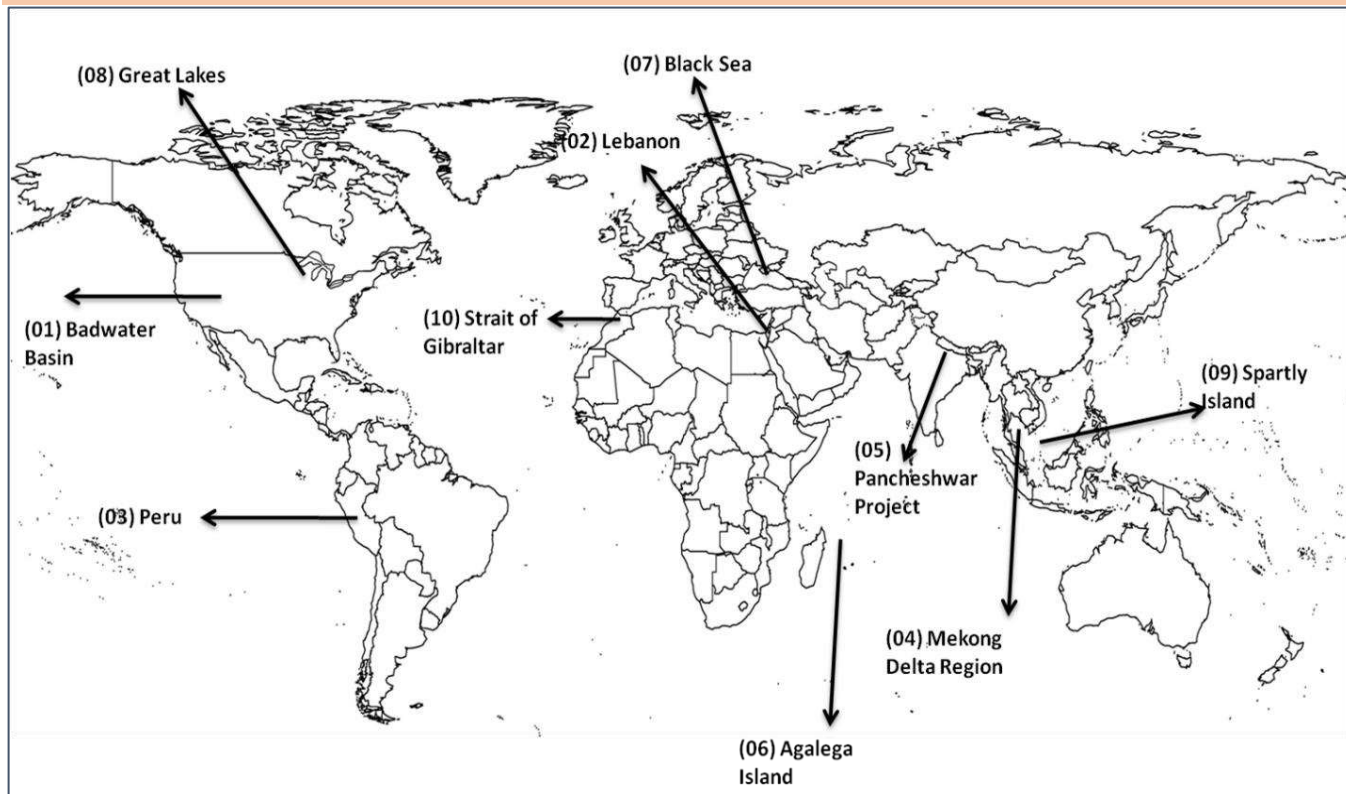
- **Highlighted the challenges faced by current global trade**
 - **Approach of different countries**
 - Some of the biggest challenges to the multilateral trading order have come from an increasingly *vocal movement* across different countries particularly in developed economies.
 - These economies seek to turn inwards and move away from a globalised and relatively harmonised-tariffs approach to world trade.
 - **Ongoing conflicts in various parts of the world**
 - Combined with the sanctions that some states have applied on others over these conflicts, threaten supply chains and the smooth flow of goods and services.
 - **One-size-fits-all approach**
 - The relative levels of development among the richer nations and the LDCs have also focussed attention on the need to ensure norms do not adopt a 'one-size-fits-all' approach.

India's Approach at MC13

- **On public stockholding (PSH) programme**
 - India tried hard to resolve the concerns pertaining to the **public stockholding (PSH)** programme, which is at the heart of ensuring food security.
 - The PSH is a vital policy tool for the Indian government to procure crops such as rice and wheat from farmers at **minimum support price (MSP)**, and subsequently store and distribute the foodgrains to the poor.
 - The MSP is normally higher than the prevailing market rates and the government supplies the cereals at a low price to ensure food security for the country's more than 800 million beneficiaries.
 - However, **under WTO norms, a member nation's food subsidy bill should not exceed 10% of the value of production based on the reference price of 1986-88.**
 - Developed nations contend that these kinds of programmes **distort global trade in foodgrains**, especially by either potentially pushing up or depressing global grain prices.
- **On fisheries**
 - India, as a low subsidizer of the fisheries sector, suggested that developing countries should be permitted to provide subsidies to their impoverished fishermen for fishing within the nation's exclusive economic zones (EEZs), up to 200 nautical miles from the shore.
 - Additionally, India proposed that wealthy countries should **cease providing any subsidies** for fishing conducted by their nation's industrialized vessels in the high seas beyond the EEZs, at least for the next 25 years.
- **On e-commerce**
 - India along with several developing nations has been consistently **seeking an end to the moratorium in place since 1998 on their ability to levy customs duties on cross-border e-commerce.**
 - India has argued that this undermines its ability to generate revenue from a rapidly burgeoning area of global trade.

MAPS: PLACES IN NEWS

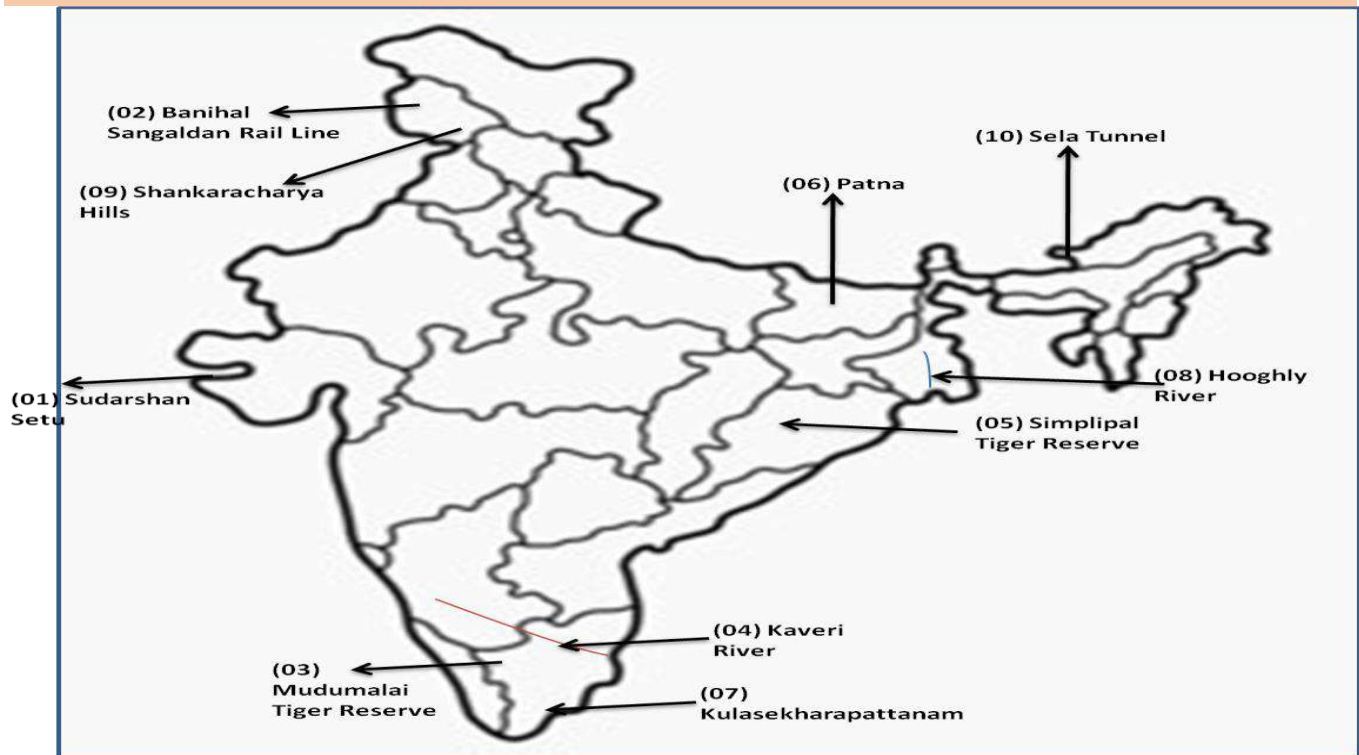
International Places in News



1	Badwater Basin	NASA images show Bad water Basin in Death Valley . It is North America’s lowest point. It features a spring-fed pool of “bad water,” surrounded by salt flats, making the water undrinkable.
2	Lebanon	The Israeli military struck targets of the militant Hezbollah group “deep inside Lebanon”. It is bordered by Syria to the north and east, by Israel to the south, and by the Mediterranean Sea to the west. Lebanon’s capital and largest city is Beirut.
3	Peru	Peru Declared Health Emergency Amidst Dengue Surge. The capital Lima is located on the western side of South America. Peru shares its borders with five countries: Ecuador and Colombia to the north, Brazil to the east, Bolivia to the southeast, and Chile to the south. Its western border lies along the Pacific Ocean.
4	Mekong Delta Region	Southern Vietnam, including its “rice bowl” Mekong Delta region, suffered an unusually long heatwave. The Mekong Delta is one of the largest and most fertile deltas. It is also considered among the world’s five most vulnerable deltas.
5	Pancheshwar project	PMP is a bi-national hydropower project to be developed in River bordering Nepal and India. Development of PMP, is a mutual interest project between two countries, and is covered under integrated Mahakali Treaty signed between Nepal and India in 1996
6	Agalega Island	Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Prime Minister Pravind Jugnauth of Mauritius jointly inaugurated an airstrip and a jetty that India has built on Agaléga. Mauritius, is an island country in the Indian Ocean, off the south-eastern coast of East Africa, east of Madagascar.

7	Black Sea	Ukraine claimed that its forces destroyed a Russian military patrol ship in the Black Sea. The Black Sea is a marginal Mediterranean Sea lying between Europe and Asia. It is bounded by Bulgaria, Georgia, Romania, Russia, Turkey, and Ukraine.
8	Great lakes	These have experienced historic lows in ice cover recently. The Great Lakes are a series of large interconnected freshwater lakes located in the east-central interior of North America. These magnificent lakes connect to the Atlantic Ocean via the Saint Lawrence River. The five Great Lakes are: Lake Superior, Lake Michigan, Lake Huron, Lake Erie, Lake Ontario
9	Spratly Islands	Tensions are rising in the South China Sea after Chinese vessels attempted to block a Philippine mission to resupply their troops on the contested reef. The Spratly Islands are a disputed archipelago in the South China Sea. Composed of islands, islets, cays and more than 100 reefs, the archipelago lies off the coasts of the Philippines, Malaysia and southern Vietnam.
10	Strait of Gibraltar	It is the only natural link between the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea and is one of the busiest waterways in the world. It serves as a strategic maritime route between Europe and Africa.

National Places In News

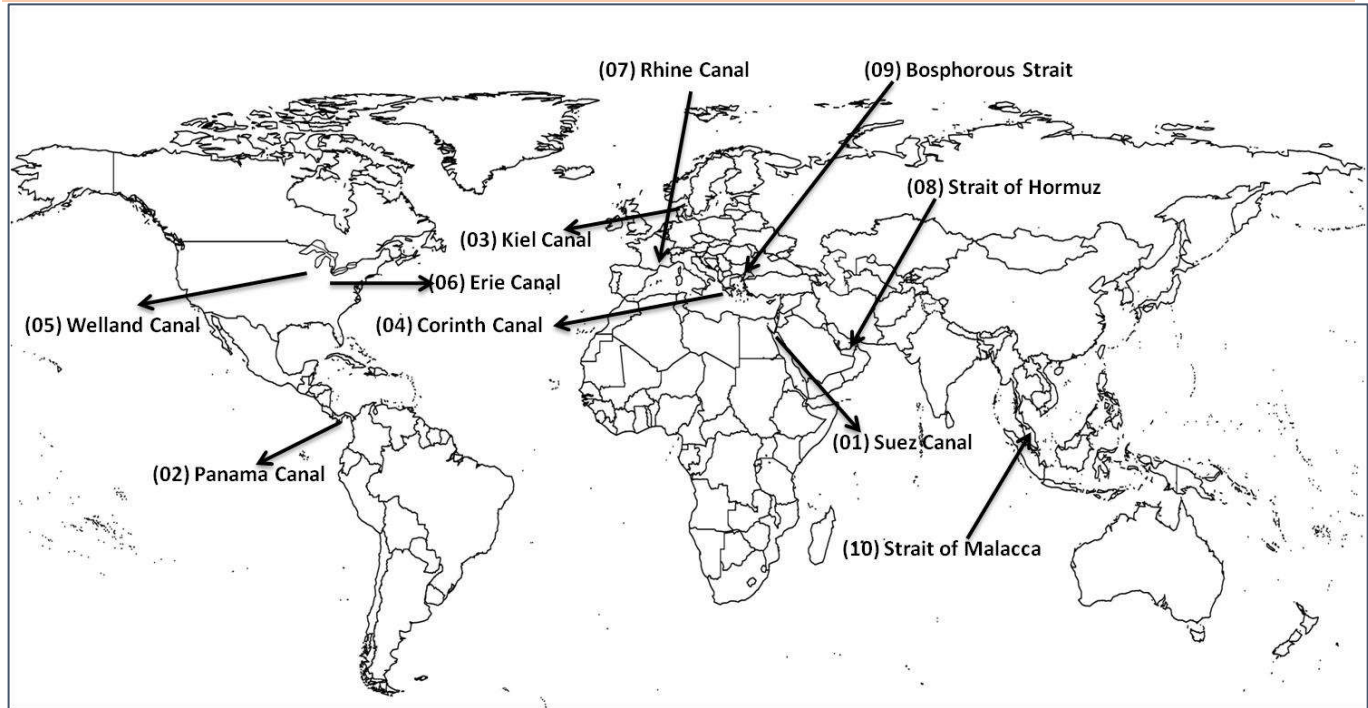


1.	Sudarshan Setu	The Prime Minister inaugurated the Sudarshan Setu, a cable-stayed bridge connecting Okha mainland and Beyt Dwarka island in Gujarat . The bridge, spanning 2.32 km, is India's longest cable-stayed bridge. Featuring a unique design with verses from the Shrimad Bhagavad Gita and images of Lord Krishna, the Sudarshan Setu also incorporates solar panels generating one megawatt of electricity. The bridge aims to enhance transportation and reduce travel time for devotees visiting Dwarka and Beyt-Dwarka, replacing the reliance on boat transport.
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2.	Banihal-Sangaldan railway line	The PM inaugurated the Banihal-Sangaldan railway line in Jammu and Kashmir, aiming to connect Baramulla in North Kashmir to Udhampur in Jammu. The railway section includes tunnels, bridges, and escape tunnels for passenger safety. The new train route significantly reduces travel time between Srinagar and Jammu and facilitates the transportation of goods, benefiting the people of Kashmir economically.
3.	Mudumalai Tiger Reserve	The first-ever herpetofaunal survey in Mudumalai Tiger Reserve recorded 82 species of reptiles and amphibians. It covered Theppakadu, Kargudi, and Nilakottai forest ranges. Mudumalai Tiger Reserve is located in the Nilgiris District of Tamil Nadu state at the tri-junction of three states, viz, Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu. It is a part of the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve (1 st Biosphere Reserve in India). The Reserve has tall grasses, commonly referred to as 'Elephant Grass'
4.	Kaveri River	Acute scarcity of water has been reported in various parts of Karnataka as rivers carry less water. The Kaveri River (Cauvery) is designated as the 'Dakshin Bharat ki Ganga' or 'the Ganga of the South'. The Cauvery River rises at Talakaveri on the Brahmagiri range near Cherangala village, Kodagu (Coorg), Karnataka. <u>The Tungabhadra River</u> is a river in India that starts and flows through the state of Karnataka during most of its course, Andhra Pradesh and ultimately joining the Krishna River near Murvakonda in Andhra Pradesh.
5.	Simlipal Tiger Reserve	The Odisha government has sought the National Tiger Conservation Authority's (NTCA) nod to introduce some female tigers to the Similipal Tiger Reserve. Similipal Tiger Reserve is a national park and tiger reserve located in the Mayurbhanj district of Odisha, India. It is part of the Mayurbhanj Elephant Reserve. The reserve derives its name from the abundance of red silk cotton trees, known as ' <i>Simul</i> ' in the local language.
6.	Patna	India's first centre for research on conserving the endangered Gangetic River dolphin was inaugurated in Patna, Bihar. Bihar is home to around half of the estimated 3,000 Gangetic dolphins in India.
7.	Kulasekharapattanam	Recently, PM laid the foundation stone for India's second spaceport at Kulasekharapattanam, Tamil Nadu. The new spaceport is dedicated to Small Satellite Launch Vehicles (SSLVs) developed by the private sector. Operational in about two years, it will exclusively serve private sector launches.
8.	Hooghly river	PM Modi inaugurates India's first underwater Metro in Kolkata . The Howrah Maidan-Esplanade section underwater Metro line has the first transportation tunnel under a river in India. It passes under the Hooghly River. The Hooghly River is a distributary of the Ganges River in West Bengal, India. It starts at Nurpur in the Murshidabad district, where it branches off from the Ganges.
9.	Shankaracharya Hills	Prime Minister of India recently paid obeisance to Shankaracharya Hill during his visit to Jammu and Kashmir. The ancient Shankaracharya Temple, constructed with grey stones, stands on Shankaracharya Hill, on the Zabarwan Range in Srinagar, Jammu and Kashmir. Initially known as Takht-i-Sulaiman, which means Throne of Solomon, it was later renamed after a saint who preached enlightenment here in AD 750.

10.	Sela tunnel	PM Modi inaugurated the strategically-important Sela tunnel in Arunachal Pradesh. The Sela Tunnel, situated at an elevation of 13,000 feet, will be the world's longest bi-lane tunnel at an elevation. The tunnel has been made on the road connecting Assam's Tezpur to Arunachal Pradesh's Tawang.
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Major Canals of World



1.	Suez Canal	Indian trade worth \$200 billion to/from North America, South America and Europe is carried out using this route. For India, it is a major route for import and export of ethane with the US, and the imports of crude from Latin America. Hence, it is important for India's energy security. Connects the Mediterranean Sea to the Red Sea, facilitating maritime trade between Europe and Asia. Suez-Mediterranean Pipeline Carries crude oil from the Red Sea to the Mediterranean Sea, bypassing the Suez Canal for oil transportation.
2.	Panama Canal	It is a constructed waterway that connects the Atlantic and Pacific oceans across the Isthmus of Panama. It is one of the two most strategic artificial waterways in the world, the other being the Suez Canal. It is approximately 80 kilometres long, connects the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific Ocean, providing a shortcut for ships travelling between the two oceans.
3.	Kiel Canal	It connects Scandinavia and the Baltic States to international Maritime traffic via a short link and provides an attractive connection between the North Sea ports on the English Channel and the Baltic Sea ports in Germany. Links the North Sea with the Baltic Sea, providing a shortcut for ships travelling between the two seas.
4.	Corinth Canal	The Corinth Canal is an artificial canal in Greece that connects the Gulf of Corinth in the Ionian Sea with the Saronic Gulf in the Aegean Sea. It cuts through the narrow Isthmus of Corinth and separates the Peloponnese from the Greek mainland, making the peninsula an island Cuts through the Isthmus of Corinth in Greece.

5.	Welland Canal	It connects two of the Great Lakes (Ontario and Erie) and forms an integral part of the deep waterway that allows large Lakers and ocean vessels to navigate to and from the heart of North America.
6.	Erie Canal	The Erie Canal is the longest artificial waterway in North America. It Links the Great Lakes with the Hudson River, providing a navigable water route from the Atlantic Ocean to the Great Lakes.
7.	Rhine Canal	The Amsterdam-Rhine canal is one of the most important transport links in the Netherlands connecting the port of Amsterdam with the industrialized Ruhr district in Germany. Connects Amsterdam to the Rhine River, serving as an important waterway for transportation and trade in the Netherlands.
8.	Strait of Hormuz	The Strait of Hormuz is one of the world's most important straits due to its being the quickest route for oil to be transported to other countries from the Middle East. It is located in the Middle East, bordering Iran, the United Arab Emirates, and Oman. Located between Oman and Iran, it's a critical chokepoint for global oil transportation, connecting the Persian Gulf with the Gulf of Oman.
9.	Bosporus Strait	It is the 21st longest suspension bridge in the world. Separates European and Asian Turkey, serving as a key passage for maritime traffic between the Mediterranean and the Black Sea.
10.	Strait of Malacca	Malacca Strait is a narrow stretch of water located between the Indonesian island of Sumatra to the southwest and the Malay Peninsula to the northeast, connecting the Andaman Sea with the Singapore Strait and the South China Sea.

SOCIAL ISSUES

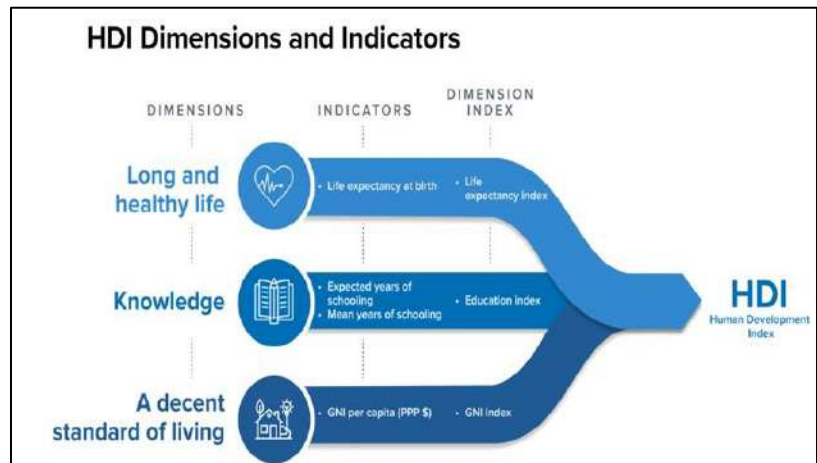
India Ranks 134th In Global Human Development Index

India's ranking on the United Nations Human Development Index (HDI) improved by one position in 2022 to **134 out of 193** countries ranked compared to 135 out of 191 countries in 2021. Switzerland has been ranked number one.

Human Development Index (HDI)

● About

- It was first published in 1990 by UNDP
- Along with HDI, Human Development Report (HDR) also presents:



- HDI also embodies **Amartya Sen's "capabilities" approach** to understand human well-being, which emphasizes the importance of ends (like a decent standard of living) over means (like income per capita).

Key Highlights Of The HDR 2023/24 – India Specific

● Theme of the report

- 2023/24 HDR was titled as **"Breaking the Gridlock: Reimagining Cooperation in a Polarized World."**

- India ranked 135 in 2021. It had moved up to 134 in 2022.

- **India in the medium human development category:** Between 1990 and 2022, the country saw its HDI value increase by 48.4%, from 0.434 in 1990 to **0.644 in 2022**.

● India's performance on various indicators

- India's life expectancy at birth has slightly improved from 67.2 years in 2021 to **67.7 years in 2022**.
- 5.88% increase in expected years of schooling (EYS) from 11.9 years to 12.6 years, leading to an improvement of 18 places.
- Gross National Income (GNI) per capita also improved from \$6,542 to \$6,951.

● Performance of India's neighbourhood

- Sri Lanka ranked at 78, while China is ranked 75, both categorised under the High Human Development category.
- Bhutan stands at 125 and Bangladesh at 129th position.
- Nepal (146) and Pakistan (164) have been ranked lower than India.

● India's progress in reducing gender inequality

- India has also shown progress in reducing gender inequality and **ranked 108 out of 166 countries in the Gender Inequality Index (GII) 2022**.
 - ✓ **GII** measures gender inequalities in three key dimensions – reproductive health, empowerment, and labour market.
- The **country's GII value of 0.437** is better than the global average of 0.462 and the South Asian average of 0.478.

- India's performance in reproductive health is better than other countries in the medium human development group or South Asia.
- India's adolescent birth rate in 2022 was 16.3 (births per 1,000 women ages 15-19), an improvement from 17.1 in 2021.
- However, India also has one of the largest gender gaps in labour force participation rate—a 47.8 percentage points difference between women (28.3%) and men (76.1%).

Observations Made By The HDR 2023/24

- The report shows that the two-decade trend of steadily reducing inequalities between wealthy and poor nations is now in **reverse**.
- The failure of collective action to advance action on climate change, digitalisation or poverty and inequality not only hinders human development but also worsens polarisation and further erodes trust in people and institutions worldwide.
- Nine in 10 people worldwide endorse democracy, but over half of the respondents expressed support for leaders who may undermine it.
- Political polarisation in countries is also responsible for protectionist or inward-turning policy.

Four areas for immediate action proposed by the report

- break through the current deadlock & reignite a commitment to a shared future:
 - planetary public goods** for climate stability as we confront the unprecedented challenges of the Anthropocene;
 - digital global public goods** for greater equity in harnessing new technologies for equitable human development;
 - new and expanded financial mechanisms**, including a novel track in international cooperation that complements humanitarian assistance and traditional development aid to low-income countries; and
 - dialling down political polarization** through new governance approaches focused on enhancing people's voices in deliberation and tackling misinformation.

Uniform Code for Pharmaceutical Marketing Practices (UCPMP) 2024

The Department of Pharmaceuticals issued the Uniform Code for Pharmaceutical Marketing Practices (UCPMP) 2024.



Highlights of the UCPMP 2024 on Ethical Practices of Pharma Companies

- Engagement of the pharmaceutical industry with healthcare professionals for **Continuing Medical Education (CME)** should only be allowed -
 - Through a well-defined, transparent, and verifiable set of guidelines, and
 - *Conduct of such events in foreign locations* is prohibited by the uniform code.
- Medical representatives must not use any incentive and must not pay for access to a healthcare practitioner.
- Companies or their representatives **should not pay cash or monetary grants** to any healthcare professional or their family members (both immediate and extended) under any pretext.
 - **Gifting is prohibited** by any pharmaceutical company or its agent (distributors, wholesalers, retailers, etc).

- Additionally, **no pecuniary advantage or benefit** in kind may be offered, supplied or promised to any person qualified to prescribe or supply drugs by any pharmaceutical company or its agent.
- **Paid travel, hotel stays should not be extended** to healthcare professionals or their family members by pharmaceutical companies or their representatives, unless the person is a speaker for a CME, etc.
- It has allowed firms to **provide research grants for healthcare professionals**, provided these are done in a transparent manner.
- The guidelines allow the industry **to support research for studies authorised** by bodies such as the Indian Council for Medical Research or the Drug Controller General of India.

Highlights of UCPMP 2024 on Drugs

- **Promotion of a drug must be consistent with the terms of its marketing approval.**
- Claims for the usefulness of a drug must be based on up-to-date evaluation of all available evidence.
- **The word 'safe' must not be used without qualification**, and it must not be stated categorically that a medicine has no side effects, toxic hazards, or risk of addiction.
- **The word 'new'** must not be used to describe any drug which has been generally available or any therapeutic intervention which has been generally promoted in India for more than a year.

Implementation of the UCPMP 2024

- The UCPMP is to be circulated for strict compliance, and all associations have been requested -
 - To constitute **an Ethics Committee for Pharmaceutical Marketing Practices**,
 - Set up a dedicated UCPMP portal on their website, and
 - Take further necessary steps for the code's implementation.
- All Indian pharmaceutical associations are to upload the UCPMP on their website along with the detailed procedure for lodging of complaints.
 - This will be linked to the UCPMP portal of the Department of Pharmaceuticals.

UGC's New Framework for Private Universities

In line with the future academic vision instead of "commercial interests", the UGC has notified modalities for state private universities.

- The country's private universities were not allowed to open off-campus centres so far in other states. UGC decided to allow state's private universities to open off-campus centres in any state in the country if they met the following criteria:
 - A minimum of five years of establishment and operations and
 - Accreditation from the **National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC)**.
 - However, it will not be required to have an A or a B grade in NAAC rankings.
- The private university that wants to establish off-campus centres will have to meet the minimum staff, infrastructure and financial requirements set by the commission.
- The universities will have to provide approvals from the statutory and regulatory bodies.
- The universities will have to assure they will provide courses being offered at the main campus to the students in their off-campus centres.
- The universities will have to pay Rs 10 lakh as establishment fees to UGC.
- The commission will have the right to carry out inspections and take punitive measures against the university in cases of irregularities and complaints.
- The UGC may also order closure of a university's off-campus center if it breaches any of the regulations.
 - In such cases, the university will have to facilitate shifting students to their main campus.

This decision may prove beneficial for students as they will get more options to choose from. However, it also means that the 16 government-run universities in the state will face more competition. More students may shift to these centres, leaving a large number of approved seats in the public universities vacant every year.

Obesity on the Rise, High Levels of Undernutrition Persist in India

According to a new study published by the Lancet, India has become one of the countries with a high “**double burden**,” of **Obesity** and **Undernutrition**.

Meaning of Obesity & Undernutrition in Health-Related Studies

Obesity:



Adults — anyone over the age of 20 years — are considered to be obese, if they have a **body mass index (BMI)** of 30 kg/m² or more.



▪ BMI is a person’s weight in kilograms divided by the square of height in meters, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.



School-aged children and adolescents — anyone between the ages of 5 and 19 years — are considered obese, if their BMI is two standard deviations above the mean.

Underweight



An adult is considered underweight if their BMI is less than 18 kg/m².



School-aged children and adolescents are considered underweight if their BMI is two standard deviations below the mean

Key Highlights of the Study Published by Lancet

• Obesity in India:

- Obesity in women has spiked in the past three decades — it increased from 1.2% in 1990 to 9.8% in 2022.
- There were **44 million women living with obesity in 2022**.
- Meanwhile, obesity in men increased by 4.9 percentage points during the same period, with 26 million men living with obesity in 2022.
- Notably, there has also been a significant increase in childhood obesity.
- There has been a spike of 3 percentage points in girls and 3.7 percentage points in boys over the 32 years.
- In 2022, 3.1% of girls and 3.9% of boys were obese.

• Underweight in India:

- Despite a significant decline, the prevalence of underweight and thinness continues to be high across genders and age groups.
- The study found that **13.7% of women and 12.5% of men were underweight**.
- Thinness — a measure of being underweight in children — in Indian girls was found to be the highest in the world, with a prevalence of 20.3%.
- And, it was the second highest in Indian boys, with a prevalence of 21.7%.

• Why Women are more Obese than Men?

- Most of women do not have access to or time for physical activities such as walks/ gyms.
- They are also likely to put the nutrition of the family above theirs.
- If central obesity were to be considered, obesity in women would be as high as 40% to 50% in many parts of the country.
 - ✓ A better predictor of future risk of diseases like diabetes and hypertension, **central obesity is an excess accumulation of fat in the abdominal area.**

Impact of Socio-economic Conditions on Obesity and Undernutrition

- Obesity is no longer the disease of the rich in India. Eating junk food is cheaper and easier.
- While it is affecting more people, there continues to be a rural-urban divide when it comes to obesity.
- An analysis of the National Family Health Survey-5 (NFHS-5) data from last year shows that the **prevalence of obesity was 31.7% in urban women and 19% in rural women**.
 - It was 28.6% among urban men and 18.8% among rural men.

- Undernutrition persists in extremely remote and rural parts of poorer states where access to any kind of food is low. It is prevalent in the extremely poor populations in states like Bihar, Jharkhand, or Odisha, where people might be eating just one meal a day.

India Employment Report 2024

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) and the Institute of Human Development (IHD) have jointly published a report titled “**India Employment Report 2024**”.

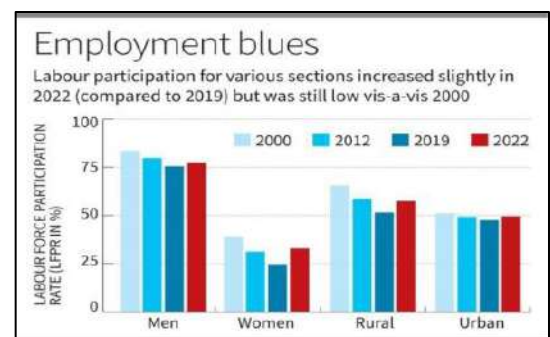
- IHD was established in the year **1998** under the aegis of the **Indian Society of Labour Economics (ISLE)**. It undertakes research in the areas of labour and employment, livelihood, gender, health, education and other aspects of human development.

Key Highlights of India Employment Report 2024

- It is the **third in the series**. The report is primarily based on analysis of data from the National Sample Surveys and the Periodic Labour Force Surveys between 2000 and 2022.

- **Employment Trends & Current Scenario:**

- The **female labour market participation rate**, after declining significantly in the earlier years, took to a faster upward trend as of 2019, particularly in rural areas.
- One of the most significant features of the Indian labour market is a slow and steady transition of the workforce away from agriculture and into the non-farm sectors.
- Employment in India is predominantly self-employment and casual employment.



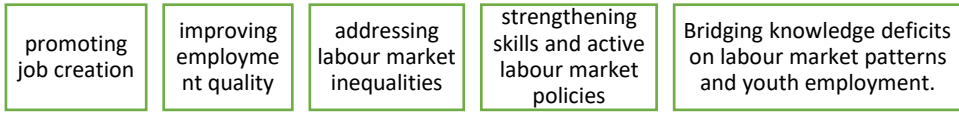
- **Nearly 82% of the workforce engages in the informal sector, and nearly 90% is informally employed.**

- While wages of casual labourers maintained a modest upward trend during 2012–22, real wages of regular workers either remained stagnant or declined.
- The migration levels in India are not adequately captured through official surveys. Rates of urbanization & migration are expected to considerably increase in future.
- India is expected to have a migration rate of around 40 per cent in 2030 and will have an urban population of around 607 million.

- **Challenges of Youth Employment**

- A large proportion of the population is of working age, and India is expected to be in the potential demographic dividend zone for at least another decade.
- But the country is at an inflexion point because the youth population, at 27% of the total population in 2021, is expected to decline to 23% by 2036.
- Each year, around 7–8 million youths are added to the labour force whose productive utilization could lead to India reaping a demographic dividend.
- Youth participation in labour market has been much lower than among adults and was on a long-term (2000–19) declining trend, primarily due to greater participation in education.
- Youth unemployment increased nearly threefold, from 5.7% in 2000 to 17.5% in 2019 but declined to 12.1% in 2022.
- After the lockdowns, the youth labour market indicators recovered quite quickly.
- But this movement was accompanied by additions to the labour force and workforce, primarily in poor-quality work.

- **Suggestions:** The report highlights five key policy areas for further action, which apply more generally and also specifically for youth in India:



India TB Report 2024

According to the India TB Report 2024 released by the Union Health Ministry, the gap between the estimated number and actual cases of tuberculosis (TB) is *closing*. This is an important marker *as the missing cases are assumed to not have received treatment & continue to spread infection to others*, which will **contribute to India's goal of eliminating TB by 2025**.

WHO's END TB Strategy

- It was adopted in **2014** with the aim to end the TB epidemic globally by 2035.
- It aims at 95% reduction by 2035** in the number of *TB deaths* compared with 2015, **90% reduction by 2035** in the *TB incidence rate* compared with 2015 and **Zero TB-affected families** facing catastrophic costs due to TB by 2035.

WHO End TB Strategy: 2025 milestones

India TB Report

- The annual India TB Report is prepared and published under the **National TB Elimination Programme (NTEP) by the Central TB Division** of the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare
- Published from the year **2001**, it captures the policy updates, programme implementation, and state and district wise performance indicators.

Highlights of India TB Report 2024

- Reporting of the cases:**
 - The majority of the TB cases are still reported by the government health centres, even as there has been an uptick in notifications by the private sector.
 - Nearly 33% or 8.4 lakh of the 25.5 lakh cases** reported in 2023 came from the private sector (only 1.9 lakh cases in 2015).
- The mortality due to the infection:** It remained the **same at 3.2 lakh** as per the data. India's TB mortality dropped from 4.94 lakhs in 2021 to 3.31 lakhs in 2022.
- Missing cases:**
 - There were only 2.3 lakh missing cases in 2023, as compared to 3.2 lakh the year before. This gap has been reducing over the years, especially with the government's Ni-kshay portal tracking all TB patients.
- Recommendations:**
 - The report shows that India reached its 2023 target of initiating treatment in 95% of patients diagnosed with the infection.
 - It says 58% of those diagnosed were offered a test to check whether their infection was resistant to the first line drugs, an increase from 25% in 2015.
 - The report suggests drug susceptibility treatment** to ensure that persons with drug-resistant TB have access to medicines from the start, rather than being treated with first-line medication immediately.

	India TB Report 2020	2023	2024
Estimated TB cases	26.9 lakh	27.4 lakh	27.8 lakh
Number of cases reported	24.04 lakh	24.2 lakh	25.5 lakh
Reporting from private sector	6.8 lakh	7.3 lakh	8.4 lakh
% cases from private sector	28.20%	30%	32.90%
Estimated mortality	4.36 lakh	3.2 lakh	3.2 lakh

ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE

Resource Classification Code: Industry Awaits Shift to JORC from UNFC

In a bid to spur private investment in India’s mining sector, representatives of Vedanta Group pushed the Mines Ministry to shift to an investor friendly **resource classification code**. The representatives asked the ministry to consider the adoption of **Joint Ore Reserve Committee (JORC) classification**, as opposed to the currently used **United Nations Framework Classification (UNFC)**.

Need For A Resource Classification Code And A Shift To JORC

- It is necessary -
 - **To assess resources and reserves in a mineral block,**
 - To prepare geological reports to facilitate its auction for both exploration and mining, &
 - For a mining company to evaluate its assets.
- Between FY19 and FY23, the mining industry recorded **FDI** in equity valuing \$1.1 billion, just 0.4% of gross equity inflows worth \$259 billion.
- According to experts, India’s current resource classification rules based on the **UNFC** -
 - **Have made the prospect of mineral exploration unattractive** to private companies, as it fails to provide any degree of economic certainty.
- Experts point out that India’s mining industry has already developed and recommended the **Indian Mineral Industry Code (IMIC)** in 2019, which is based on the same template as the **JORC** classification.
 - However, the ministry is *yet to formulate rules in line with IMIC* despite informal assurances.
- Both the IMIC and the JORC classification are aligned with the *Committee for Mineral Reserves International Reporting Standards (CRIRSCO)*.



UN Framework Classification for Resources (UNFC)	Comparing UNFC and JORC
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● UNFC is an international scheme for the classification, management and reporting of energy, mineral, and raw material resources. ● The UN Economic Commission for Europe's (UNECE) <i>Expert Group on Resource Management (EGRM)</i> is responsible for the development, promotion of UNFC. ● UNFC applies to energy resources including oil and gas; renewable energy; nuclear energy; minerals; injection projects for the geological storage of CO2; groundwater; etc. ● UNFC, in its core principles, encompasses the holistic management of all socio-economical, technological and uncertainty aspects of energy and mineral projects. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● JORC Code, developed by mining experts in Australia, is a professional code of practice that promotes robust standards for the <u>public reporting</u> of exploration results, mineral resources and ore reserves. ● Similarity between UNFC and JORC: Proved Mineral (Ore) Reserves has almost the same meaning. ● Differences between UNFC and JORC: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Intent: JORC Code is a required minimum standard for Public Reporting. UNFC is to harmonise various standards existing in countries, to facilitate international communication. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Unlike UNFC, JORC mandates disclosures pertaining to the <i>economic viability</i> of mining exploration projects.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● UNFC aims to provide clear and consistent specifications, guidelines and best practices for all energy and mineral sectors. ● As a unique tool for harmonising policy framework, government oversight, industry business process and efficient capital allocation, UNFC is capable of managing the natural resources for realising the objectives on SDGs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Content: While UNFC introduces the concepts of every class of the resources and reserves, JORC also specifies what kind of report or reporting should be done for <i>public investment</i>. ○ Implement: JORC Code is adopted by professional society. UNFC is a reference for countries who want to make international communication.
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Significance of IMIC/JORC

- It is critical for the Indian mineral sector to **communicate effectively and transparently with the investment community**, which are essential to earn their trust. This should be done using internationally accepted terminology and definitions, which is incorporated in the IMIC.
- While the UNFC framework allows for the reporting of resources in general, **the IMIC and JORC classification, indicate the likelihood of profitably mining a mineral block at the time of reporting.**

WEIDE Fund


The World Trade Organization (WTO) and the International Trade Centre (ITC) has launched a USD 50 million **“Women Exporters in the Digital Economy (WEIDE)” fund.**

- The launch took place during the *WTO-ITC High-Level Event on Women and Trade*, a two-day conference on women's economic empowerment.
- The fund will help women-led businesses and women entrepreneurs in developing economies and least-developed countries, adopt digital technologies and expand the online presence of their enterprises.
- The United Arab Emirates has allocated USD 5 million to the fund as its first donor.
- Digital trade, and more specifically digitally delivered services trade, is the fastest growing segment of international trade — growing at 8% on average since 2005.
- Digitalisation gives unprecedented opportunities to empower women entrepreneurs, level the playing field and promote inclusive growth.

National Urban Co-operative Finance and Development Corporation Limited (NUCFDC)

- The Ministry of Cooperation has launched National Urban Co-operative Finance and Development Corporation Limited (NUCFDC), the umbrella organization for the Urban Cooperative Banks (UCB).
- The initiative aims to **modernize and strengthen the Urban Cooperative Banking Sector** in India, ultimately benefiting both the banks and their customers.
- The NUCFDC has received Certificate of Registration (CoR) from RBI to operate as a **Non-Banking Finance Company (NBFC)** and serve as the

URBAN COOPERATIVE BANKS (UCBS)



- UCBs, though not formally defined, refers to primary cooperative banks located in urban and semi-urban areas.
- These member-owned and run entities cater to banking requirements of small businesses, individuals, and communities, who find it difficult to access services of the mainstream banking segment.
- At present, there are over 1,500 scheduled and non-scheduled UCBs in India with a total number of branches exceeding 11,000.
- The banks have a deposit size of over Rs 5.33 lakh crore, and total lending of Rs 3.5 lakh crore.

REGULATION

- UCBs are primarily **registered as cooperative societies** under the provisions of either the State Cooperative Societies Act of the State concerned or the Multi State Cooperative Societies Act, 2002 if the area of operation extends beyond the boundaries of one state.
- Banking laws were made applicable to cooperative societies in **1966** through an amendment to the **Banking Regulation Act, 1949.**
- Since then, **banking related functions** are regulated by the RBI and **management related functions** are regulated by respective State Governments/Central Government.
- Powers have also been delegated to National Bank for Agricultural and Rural Development (**NABARD**) to **conduct inspection** of State and Central Cooperative Banks.

umbrella organization for the urban cooperative banking sector.

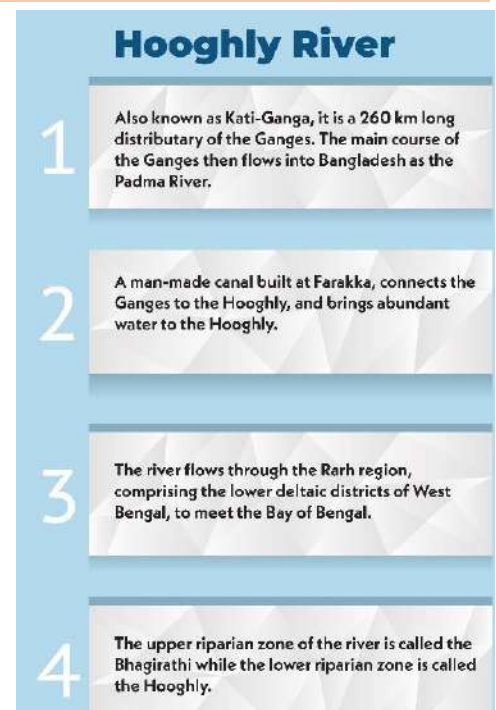
- Moreover, it will be allowed to operate as a **Self-Regulatory Organization (SRO)** for the sector.

Significance

- Establishment of NUCFDC will ensure *specialized function and services* to cooperative banks and facilitate communication between banks and regulators.
- It will also address challenges faced by UCBs, such as technology constraints and issues regarding range of services.
- NUCFDC aims to raise capital, with plans to reach a capital base of Rs.300 crores.
- Besides offering liquidity and capital support, the umbrella organization would set up a *technology platform* that can be shared by all UCBs, enabling them to widen their range of services at a relatively lower cost.
- It can also offer fund management and other consultancy services.

First Underwater Metro

- Prime Minister recently inaugurated **India's first underwater metro section** in Kolkata.
- The Kolkata Metro's Howrah Maidan-Esplanade section is the country's first underwater transportation tunnel. It also has the **deepest metro station in India, the Howrah metro station** at 30 metres.
- Out of the total 16.6 km length of the East-West Metro, the underground corridor constitutes 10.8 km, with the 1.2 km underwater tunnel under the Hooghly River.



International IP Index

- The US Chamber of Commerce has released the 12th edition of its International IP (intellectual property) Index.
- Published annually, the Index evaluates the IP frameworks of the world's top 55 economies using 50 unique criteria.
- The data shows economies how to improve IP-driven innovation and creativity and reveals trends in global IP protection.
- It demonstrates the benefits that economies can receive when they adopt robust and enforceable IP standards.

Indian Scenario

- **India ranks 42nd** out of 55 countries evaluated. India's overall score remained unchanged at 38.64%.
- As per the index, policymakers in India are recognizing the critical link between IP rights and economic activity, which will highlight India's global competitiveness.
- Continued strong efforts in copyright piracy and R&D and IP-based tax incentives were highlighted in India's context.

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE REPORT

- The index found that **20 economies are significantly improving**. While the United States is once again the world leader, there were notable advancements led by Saudi Arabia, Brazil, and Nigeria.
- The top five economies are **United States, UK, France, Germany and Sweden**.
- IP-intensive industries continue to be a major economic force in the United States, supporting tens of millions of jobs and contributing approximately \$7.8 trillion to the American economy, which accounts for ~40% of the nation's GDP.
- However, challenges persist, as **27 economies showed no change** and 8, including Ecuador, experienced declines due to weak IP enforcement.

- It points to India's *Cinematograph (Amendment) Bill 2023*, which includes new language and criminal sanctions on film piracy.
- In terms of weakness, the 2021 dissolution of the Intellectual Property Appellate Board was highlighted.
- Another issue is the long-standing problem of an *under-resourced and overstretched judiciary raising serious concerns about rights holders' ability to enforce their IP rights in India and to resolve IP-related disputes*.
- It also pointed to the limited framework for the protection of biopharmaceutical IP rights.

Sela Tunnel

- The Prime Minister recently inaugurated the strategically significant Sela Tunnel project in Arunachal Pradesh.
- Built at a cost of Rs 825 crore by the **Border Roads Organisation (BRO)**, the tunnel project is constructed at an **altitude of 13,700 feet** in West Kameng district, connecting Tezpur to Tawang.
- The project is world's longest twin-lane tunnel.
- It consists of two tunnels and a link road. While Tunnel 1 will be 980-metre long single-tube, Tunnel 2 will be 1,555-metre with one bi-lane tube for traffic and one emergency services. The link road between the two tunnels will be 1,200 meters long.

Strategic Importance

- It is aimed at providing **all-weather connectivity to the Tawang region** — the part, long contested by China.
- The lack of motorable roads and rail connections in Arunachal Pradesh were seen as distinct disadvantages for India vis à vis China along the border in the northeast.
 - China building infrastructure including access roads right up to the Indian border gave it a strategic advantage.
- The 1962 war saw Indian and Chinese forces clash with each other with the People's Liberation Army (PLA) overrunning Tawang.
- At the moment, Sela Pass stays closed for a few winter months. The project will provide a new alignment on the axis towards the Line of Actual Control (LAC) with easier movement for military personnel and equipment throughout the year.

National Bank for Financing Infrastructure and Development (NaBFID)

- The Union Finance Minister recently chaired a meeting of the National Bank for Financing Infrastructure and Development (NaBFID) w.r.t. business, resource raising, developmental initiatives, human resources, information technology and financials.
- NaBFID was set up in 2021, as **India's 5th All India Financial Institution (AIFI)** under ***The National Bank for Financing Infrastructure and Development Act, 2021***.
- It is a specialized **Development Finance Institution** aimed at supporting the country's infrastructure sector.
- Its **objectives** are addressing the gaps in long-term finance for infrastructure development, strengthening the development of bonds and derivatives markets in India, and sustainably boosting the country's economy.
- It aims to enable credit flow through innovative instruments such as longer tenor loans, blended finance, partial credit enhancement, takeout

Apart from NaBFID there are four more AIFIs in the country:

- Export - Import Bank of India (Exim Bank)

- National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD)

- Small Industries Development Bank of India (SIDBI)

- National Housing Bank (NHB)

Development Finance Institution (DFI)

- DFIs are organisations owned by the government or public institutions to provide funds for infrastructure and large-scale projects, where it often becomes unviable for large banks to lend.
- They provide two types of funds- **Medium (1-5 years) & Large (< 5 years)**.
- DFIs do not accept deposits from people but they raise funds by borrowing from governments, insurance companies, pension funds and sovereign funds.
- It also provides a guarantee to banks on behalf of companies and subscriptions to shares, debentures etc

financing, and facilitate crowding-in of infrastructure finance.

- It is **regulated and supervised by RBI** as an AIFI.

Initiative To Boost Fintech Education

- The Union government and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) has signed a \$23 million loan agreement to enhance access to quality **fintech** education, research, and innovation at the Gujarat International Finance Tec-City (GIFT-City).
- The project will establish an **International Fintech Institute (IFI)** to strengthen fintech education, boost *start-up* success rates, and drive fintech research & innovation (in climate fintech, regulatory technology, social inclusion, and gender equality in finance).
- IFI will offer industry-aligned fintech training programmes that meet international standards.
- It will strengthen entrepreneurship by supporting startups, especially women-led, through incubation and acceleration services.
 - It will also collaborate with industry and venture capital funds to support the growth of fintech startups.
- The project will lay emphasis on market-driven fintech skills programmes, enable private sector investment, enhance collaboration between industry, skill development institutes and development partners to promote holistic growth of fintech ecosystem in India.
- The project will also help establish a **state fintech readiness index**.



Speed Breeding Crop Facility

- The Ministry of Science and Technology inaugurated a National Speed Breeding Crop Facility at the National Agri-Food Biotechnology Institute (**NABI**) in **Mohali**.
- The biotechnology speedy seeds facility will cater to all states across India and will be particularly useful for the North Indian States like Punjab, Himachal Pradesh, Haryana and the UT of J&K
- The facility will be used to develop new *wheat, rice, soybean, pea, tomato, varieties among other by using a precisely controlled environment (light, humidity, temperature) to achieve more than four generations of a crop per year.*
- These crop varieties will be able to sustain climate change and contribute to the food and nutritional demand of the population with implementation of speed breeding cropping methods.
- The institute has developed a technology on *climate resistant crops*. By utilising these technologies, the farmers will not be limited to cultivate a crop in a particular season.
- Instead, they will have the liberty to practise farming irrespective of climate conduciveness.

NABI

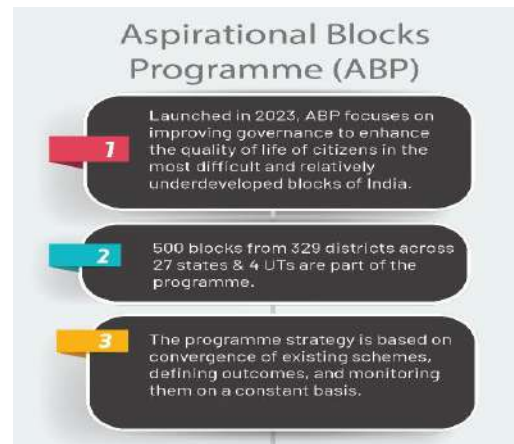
- NABI is the first Agri-Food Biotechnology Institute established in India in 2010. The institute aims at catalysing the transformation of agri-food sector in India.
- Its main research focus is to harness biotechnological tools in the area of agriculture biotechnology, food and nutritional biotechnology.

Vocal for Local Initiative

- NITI Aayog has launched the 'Vocal for Local' initiative as part of the Aspirational Blocks Programme. The initiative aims to bolster local economies and promote grassroots entrepreneurship.
- It is being implemented in partnership with Government e-Marketplace (**GeM**) and Open Network for Digital Commerce (**ONDC**) platforms.

- GeM and ONDC will provide technical and operational support for *e-commerce onboarding, establishing linkages, enhancing financial and digital literacy, facilitating documentation and certification, and promoting skill development*
- As a part of this initiative, indigenous local products from 500 Aspirational Blocks have been mapped and consolidated under **Aakanksha**.
 - *Akansha is an umbrella brand which could be supplemented into multiple sub-brands that have a potential to create an international market.*
- In order to encourage these products, a dedicated window for Aspirational Blocks Programme under the brand name 'Aakanksha' on GeM portal has been established.
- By nurturing a conducive ecosystem for local businesses to flourish, the initiative will help to bring in a new era of economic empowerment and self-sufficiency.

{For more details about ONDC, please refer *The Recitals -Feb 2024*}



PM SURAJ Portal

- The Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment launched the Pradhan Mantri Samajik Utthan and Rozgar Adharit Jankalyan' (PM-SURAJ) national portal.
- The portal is being launched in order to set up a one-stop point where people from **disadvantaged sections** of society can apply for and monitor the progress of **all loan and credit schemes** already available to them.
- During the launch, the Ministry disbursed around ₹720 crore worth of credit to 1 lakh beneficiaries from Scheduled Caste, Denotified, Nomadic and Semi-Nomadic Tribes, Other Backward Classes communities and Safai Karamcharis.
- The credit support will be provided to eligible persons across the country and facilitated through banks, NBFC-MFIs, and other organisations.
- The portal will help in providing financial assistance directly to beneficiaries, eliminating middlemen and commissions.

UNNATI 2024

- The Union Cabinet recently approved the **Uttar Poorva Transformative Industrialization Scheme, 2024 (UNNATI – 2024)**.

- UNNATI is **Central Sector Scheme** for the development of industries in the states of North East Region.
- The scheme's main objective is to generate gainful employment, which will lead to the area's overall socio-economic development.
- **Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade (DPIIT)** will implement the scheme in collaboration with the states. The scheme **duration** is for a period of **10 years** from the date of notification.
- The **financial outlay** of the scheme is Rs.10,037 crore for a period of 10 years from the date of notification along with 8 additional years for committed liabilities.
- All eligible industrial units will have to commence their production or operation within 4 years from the grant of registration.
- The scheme is proposed to be divided into **two parts**:
 - **Part A** caters to the incentives to the eligible units (Rs. 9737 crores), and
 - **Part B**, is for implementation & institutional arrangements (Rs. 300 Crore).
- 60% of the outlay of Part A has been earmarked to 8 NE states and 40% on First-In-First-Out (FIFO) basis.
- Maximum benefit to one unit from all components of the scheme is 250 crores
- Districts have also been categorized in **two zones**:

Zone A (Industrially Advanced Districts)

Zone B (Industrially Backward Districts)

- The following incentives would be available under the scheme to investors for setting up new units or undertaking significant expansion of the existing units:
 - Capital Investment Incentive
 - Central Capital Interest Subvention
 - Manufacturing and Services linked incentive (MSLI) (*for new units only*)

e-Kisan Upaj Nidhi

- The Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food & Public Distribution launched 'e-Kisan Upaj Nidhi'. It is a **digital gateway** of *Warehousing Development and Regulatory Authority (WDRA)*.
- The initiative with its no collateral, extra security deposit policy can prevent distress sale by farmers who often have to sell their entire harvest at cheaper rates due to poor post-harvest storage opportunities.
- It will ease the farmers' warehousing logistics and aid the farmers in receiving fair prices for their produce.
- With its simplified digital process, it can ease the procedure of farmers' storage at any registered WDRA warehouse for a period of **6 months at 7% interest per annum**.
- Moreover, with the 'e-Kisan Upaj Nidhi' and e-NAM, farmers will be able to utilise the technology of an interconnected market which benefits them above and beyond selling their produce to the Government at Minimum Support Price (MSP).



NWR	e-NWR
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> NWR system was launched in 2011 allowing the transfer of ownership of a commodity stored in a warehouse without delivering it physically. These receipts are issued in negotiable form, making them eligible as collateral. This has been enabled by enabling the financing of warehouse receipts through the Warehouse (Development and Regulation) Act, 2007. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> An e-NWR is available only in electronic form. It has a time validity that is co-terminus with the shelf-life of the commodity or withdrawal of the commodity fully from the warehouse, after which it expires. The single source of information for the e-NWR is the repository system where e-NWR is issued by registered warehouses. All e-NWR can be traded through off-market or on-market in Commodity Exchanges platforms. It can also be transferred fully or in part. An e-NWR can be auctioned under certain conditions such as loan not repaid, on expiry and delivery not taken, and on likely damage or spoilage of the commodity in the warehouse. <div data-bbox="1040 247 1487 653" style="border: 1px solid #ccc; padding: 10px; margin-top: 10px;"> <p style="text-align: center;">Benefits of e-NWR system</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Avoidance of forgery/loss/tamper/mutilation of a physical NWR. ➤ Avoidance of multiple financing against the same NWR. ➤ Reduction of monitoring costs and building credibility amongst market participants. ➤ Market participants have secured accessibility to view and manage their warehouse receipts via online portal. ➤ Easy access to finance by enabling multiple transfers without physical movement of goods. ➤ Splitting of NWRs for partial sale/pledge/withdrawal. </div>

Pledge Financing

- Pledging is a process in which holder of the eNWR will get a loan from the financial institution using the underlying commodity of eNWR as collateral.
- When a pledge is marked, the eNWR balances will remain in the client's account (borrower) only but the control on the balance will be with the financial institution.
- Thus, the client will not be able to use the eNWR balances *until the pledge in favour of the financial institution is active*.
- Further, if the client has repaid the loan, the financial institution will *release the pledge* and upon such release, the balances of eNWR will be available in client's account for his use.
- However, if the client does not repay the loan or defaults the repayment, the financial institution will have absolute right to get the eNWR balances (ownership of eNWRs) transferred to financial institution's account.

White Revolution 2.0

- The latest Household Consumption Expenditure Survey (HCES) for 2022-23 shows *milk emerging as India's top food spend item, both in rural and urban areas.*
- The monthly value of milk and dairy products consumed by an average person in rural India was Rs 314.
- This was ahead of vegetables (Rs 203), cereals (Rs 185), egg, fish & meat (Rs 185), fruits (Rs 140), edible oil (Rs 136), spices (Rs 113) and pulses (Rs 76).
- The HCES data reveals the same for urban India: milk (Rs 466), fruits (Rs 246), vegetables (Rs 245), cereals (Rs 235), egg, fish & meat (Rs 231), edible oil (Rs 153), spices (Rs 138) and pulses (Rs 90).

Measures To Improve Milk Yield

- One way is to boost milk yield per animal through *genetic improvement and new breeding technologies*.
- A typical crossbred cow giving birth first at 24-30 months can produce 5-7 calves over its lifetime.
- The normal breeding route, whether natural or via artificial insemination (AI), would result in only 50% of these being female calves or future milk-producing cows.
- But with the use of **sex-sorted (SS) semen**, there is a 90%-plus probability of only female calves being born, as against 50:50 with conventional semen.

ET and IVF

- A good cow, even with SS semen, can produce, at best, 5-6 as-good future milkers. That's where **embryo transfer (ET)** technology, to utilise the **high genetic merit (HGM)**, i.e. milking potential) of an existing cow, comes in.
- ET requires injecting follicle-stimulating hormone in cows to make them release multiple ova (eggs) in a single cycle.
- These ova – numbering 4-6 in Jersey, 6-8 in Holstein Friesian (HF) and 10-15 in Gir cows – are fertilised by sperms from the semen of a proven genetically-superior bull.
- The fertilised eggs (zygotes) are, then, collected from inside the donor cow and transferred for implanting in the uteruses of multiple recipient animals.
- Multiple ovulation and ET, thus, enables production of several calves from a single HGM cow.
- With 6 such procedures, each yielding 6 viable embryos, and 33-35% conception rate, it would result in some 12 calves being born from every donor cow per year.
- In 2020, Amul opened a Bovine Breeding Centre in Gujarat's Anand district. The objective was to breed a nucleus herd of HGM bulls and cows, whose superior semen and in vitro-fertilised embryos frozen at minus 196 degrees Celsius, could be used for AI.
- These include exotic (HF and Jersey giving 10,000-12,000 litres and 7,000-10,000 litres of milk respectively per year), HF-Gir and HF-Sahiwal crossbred (5,000-7,000 litres) and indigenous Gir, Sahiwal and Murrah buffalo (3,000-4,000 litres) breeds.

Animal Nutrition

- Further, there is intervention required to bring down feeding costs of animals. This should be done by farmers cultivating high-yielding protein-rich green fodder grasses and reducing reliance on expensive compound cattle feed and oil-meal concentrates.
- Amul is putting up a 30-tonnes-per-day **Total Mixed Ration (TMR)** plant at Sarsa in Anand. TMR will contain dry and green fodder, along with concentrates, vitamins and mineral mixtures, in a ready-to-eat mashed form for animals.
- It would save farmers the cost of purchasing and storing fodder separately, and administering it in addition to cattle feed.

CHALLENGES

INDIANS SPENDING MORE ON MILK – VIEWED AS A "SUPERIOR" FOOD – IS GOOD NEWS FOR THE DAIRY INDUSTRY, ESPECIALLY FARMERS. BUT THIS COULD FACE PROBLEMS FROM TWO SOURCES.

THE FIRST RELATES TO CONSUMER DEMAND ITSELF FROM **INFLATION**. THE ALL-INDIA MODAL (MOST-QUOTED) PRICE OF MILK HAS GONE UP FROM RS 42 TO RS 60 PER LITRE IN THE LAST FIVE YEARS.

MUCH OF THE INCREASE – FROM RS 52 TO RS 60 – HAS HAPPENED IN THE LAST ONE YEAR ALONE

THE **SECOND IS THE COST OF FODDER, FEED AND RAW MATERIALS/INGREDIENTS**. AS THESE HAVE INCREASED SIGNIFICANTLY, DAIRIES HAVE HAD TO HIKE PROCUREMENT PRICES PAID TO FARMERS AND, IN TURN, PASS-THROUGH THE SAME TO CONSUMERS.

THERE'S A LIMIT TO HOW MUCH MORE THE CONSUMER CAN PAY FOR MILK WITHOUT IT CAUSING DEMAND DESTRUCTION.

IF FARMER INCOMES ARE TO BE RAISED WITHOUT SHRINKING DOMESTIC DEMAND AND ERODING THE GLOBAL COMPETITIVENESS OF THE INDIAN DAIRY INDUSTRY, THE ONLY SOLUTION IS TO REDUCE THE COST OF MILK PRODUCTION.

- The plan is to source the fodder from farmer producer organisations, whose members would exclusively grow maize, jowar, hybrid napier or oat grass and make their silage for using in the TMR plant.

Livestock Health Services

- Inadequacy and unavailability of livestock healthcare services is a major concern. Thus, there is a need to improve veterinary services for better disease management, which will lead to improved productivity.

Krishi Integrated Command and Control Centre

- The Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers' Welfare inaugurated a Krishi Integrated Command and Control Centre (ICCC) - a big-screen dashboard of all **digital innovations in the agriculture sector**.
- The ICCC is a tech-based solution involving **multiple IT applications and platforms**, designed to help in making informed decisions.
- ICCC uses state of the art technologies such as AI, remote sensing, and Geographic Information Systems (GIS) to collect and process large amounts of granular data and present the macro picture.
- It collects data on *temperatures, rainfall, wind speed, crop yields and production estimates* and presents it in a graphical format.
- It can also show relevant trends (periodic and non-periodic), outliers, and Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), and share insights, alerts, and feedback on agriculture schemes, programmes, projects, and initiatives.

Practical Applications

- **Farmer's advisory:** The ICCC allows visualisation of GIS based soil carbon mapping as well as soil health card data for a particular district together at one place.
- This, when visualised with weather-related data from IMD for the selected district, will allow a customised and authentic advisory to be sent to the farmer about the type of crops that can be grown, and water and fertiliser requirements.
- Going forward, the ICCC can create an ecosystem based on which individual farmer-level advisories can be generated through apps like **Kisan e-mitra**, a chatbot developed for PM-Kisan beneficiaries.
- **Drought actions:** Increase or decrease in yield from a specific region (as per *General Crop Estimation Survey data*) can be correlated with weather, rainfall, and other information visualised through the Drought Portal.
 - ✓ This will enable the administration to understand the reason for increase/ decrease in yield and to take decisions proactively.
- **Crop diversification:** An analysis of crop diversification maps, together with field variability for paddy, will enable decision-makers to identify regions with scope for diversified cropping, so that farmers can be advised accordingly.
- **Farm data repository:** Krishi Decision Support System (K-DSS), a platform under development, will act as an agriculture data repository.
 - ✓ The ICCC uses K-DSS platform to collect micro-level data, process it, and present the macro picture. K-DSS will help in evidence-based, efficient, & data-driven decision-making, & assist in preparing customised advisories for farmers.

Mushk Budiji Rice

- A study recently published in Nature Scientific Reports reported that altitude and temperature play an important role in the development of aroma in **Mushk Budiji rice**.
- Cultivated in Kashmir, mushk budiji is an indigenous rice variety distinguished for its rich aroma and unique taste.

- It is mainly grown in areas of Sagam, Panzgam, and Soaf Shali of district *Anantnag* and Beerwah belt of district *Budgam*.
- The rice variety was on the verge of extinction for some time due to various factors, chief among them the prevalence of rice blast disease, its low yield and lack of profitability.
- But a revival programme launched in 2007 by the government saw the crop make a slow comeback.
- The current study was conducted using gas chromatography-mass spectroscopy (GC-MS) and an electronic nose (*tool with various sensors as well as AI component*).
 - ✓ GC-MS is an analytical method used to reveal the presence of volatile compounds present in organic mixtures extracted from geological, environmental, and biological samples.

Lab Grown Fish

- The *Indian Council of Agricultural Research-Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute (ICAR-CMFRI)* has entered into a collaborative research agreement with a private-sector startup to cultivate fish meat in the laboratory.
- Lab-grown fish is a type of lab-grown — or cultivated/ cultured — meat. It is grown in the same way as other cultivated meats are grown — **without the need to raise and kill an animal**.
- Cultivated fish meat is produced by isolating specific cells from fish and growing them in a laboratory setting using media that is free of animal components.
- The final product is expected to replicate the flavour, texture, and nutritional qualities of real fish meat.

Need To Grow Fish Meat In The Lab

- Experiments are ongoing in many countries on developing commercially viable lab grown fish meat, which is expected to address the ever growing demand for seafood, and reduce excessive pressure on wild resources.
- **Overfishing** — the removal of fish faster than the resource can replenish itself — has resulted in significant reductions in populations of certain species, which has impacted entire marine ecosystems in many areas.
- In theory, lab grown fish meat has significant potential for **ensuring food security and environmental benefits**.
- Besides taking some load off traditional fishing, lab grown fish meat will be **antibiotics- and environmental contamination-free** and will have **no contact with microplastics or heavy metals** in the polluted oceans.

Other Meats Produced In The Lab

- The Dutch pharmacologist Mark Post was the first to present a proof of concept for cultured meat in 2013.
- Several companies around the world are now working on developing lab-grown meat from cells, including chicken, pork, lamb, fish and beef.
- In 2023, the US Department of Agriculture cleared the sale of lab grown chicken meat in the country.
- Large-scale commercial manufacture of lab-grown fish meat is still some years away, but a number of countries have taken big steps in this pioneering technology. Israel is the frontrunner, followed by Singapore, the United States and China.

Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute (CMFRI)

- CMFRI was established in 1947 under the Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare. Later, in 1967, it joined ICAR family and emerged as a leading tropical marine fisheries research institute in the world.
- Headquartered in Kochi, Kerala. Initially, the CMFRI worked towards the estimation of marine fisheries landings and effort, taxonomy of marine organisms and the bio-economic characteristics of the exploited stocks of finfish and shellfish.

- One of the major achievements of CMFRI is the development and refinement of a stratified multistage random sampling method for *estimation of marine fish landings* in the country with a coast line of over 8,000 km and landing centres.

Payment Aggregator

- RBI recently gave two finch startups Juspay and Decentro the license to operate as payment aggregators. They will join the likes of Razorpay, Cashfree, Zomato and others who got the licence earlier.
- A payment aggregator is a third-party service provider that **enables customers to make and businesses to accept payments online**.
- Payment aggregators enable their clients to accept various payment methods such as debit cards, credit cards, cardless EMI, UPI, bank transfers, e-wallets, and e-mandates.
- Similarly, they also enable disbursing payments to various stakeholders, such as partners, employees, suppliers, and authorities.
 - ✓ To enable various payment methods a business would have to partner with various banks and non-banking financial companies (NBFCs). But, in India, there are 34 nationalized banks and 9,680 NBFCs.
 - ✓ Not every business has the ability to partner with such a huge number of institutions, so payment aggregators essentially act as a middleman between individual businesses and financial institutions.
- Further, the business entity does not have to undertake the technological burden of designing and building a checkout page that integrates well with the various payment methods.

Functions Of A Payment Aggregator

- **Merchant onboarding** - They onboard merchants to enable payment options like cards, UPI, wallets, etc., for their customers.
- **Transaction processing** - They collect the payment information from the merchant and send it to the acquiring banks to process the transactions.
- **Settlements** - They perform settlements for the merchants. They collect payment from the partner entities (banks, issuers,) and deposit it into the merchant account within a set timeline (T+0, T+1, T+2 days).
- **Refunds & Chargebacks** - They process the refunds for the merchant and coordinate with the acquiring bank and merchant to resolve chargebacks or disputes.
- **Support** - They provide support to merchants in integration as well as in operations.
- **Compliance** - They are responsible for adhering to security standards and compliances as directed by RBI, card networks and their banking partners.
- **Dashboard** - They provide a dashboard to their merchants for tracking payment-related activities. Some payment aggregators also provide data analytics with their dashboards.

KRP, LMS and SARTHI Initiatives Under PM-Kisan Scheme

SARTHI portal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Centre recently launched a portal SARTHI (<i>Sandbox for Agriculture, Rural Security, Technology and Insurance</i>) in collaboration with United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) India. • The portal aims to help insurance companies reach out to farmers and rural population with tailored products as well as the government's subsidised insurance products including Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana (PMFBY). • The portal will be a single-window platform for viewing, purchasing, and availing insurance products, simplifying the process for farmers.
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It will have digital payment options and streamlined premium collection, effortless claim initiation, tracking and resolution besides user-friendly interfaces for stakeholders. • A variety of insurance products will be introduced on the portal in a phased manner. • In the first phase, personal accident and hospital cash policies, while in the second phase health, shop and home insurance and in the third phase tractor, two-wheeler, livestock and non-PMFBY insurance products. • The government will be able to monitor the response of farmers to such non-subsidised products and in case of a requirement may intervene with suitable scheme for the overall welfare of the farming community.
Krishi Rakshak Portal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Krishi Rakshak Portal and Helpline 14447, will operate as a facilitator, bridging the gap between <i>insured farmer</i> on one hand and <i>insurance companies, bankers, Common Service Centres (CSCs) and State governments</i> on the other. • Farmers can register their complain either on portal or through helpline and the same will be forwarded to insurance companies for redressal. The Centre's role will be like a mediator to ensure the farmers' grievances are resolved. • The platform provides multilingual support, enabling transparent communication and real-time resolution of grievances related to compensation delays and insurance queries
Learning Management System (LMS)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • LMS developed in collaboration with the National E-Governance Division (NeGD) has also been launched. • Its goal is to provide stakeholders, including farmers, insurance companies, Government officials, and participants in the PMFBY, with the essential skills and knowledge needed for efficient crop insurance and agricultural credit. • The LMS will facilitate training and knowledge sharing through interactive modules, personalized training programs, and accessible resources.

CAROTAR Rules

- Thailand has objected to India's **custom regulations** implemented in 2020. The regulation, CAROTAR, is aimed at **strictly verifying** the rules of origin under the free trade agreements (FTAs) to guard against misuse of benefits.
- Thailand objected during the recent India-ASEAN FTA review where India is trying to boost exports to ASEAN countries and bridge the increasing trade gap.
- India-ASEAN trade gap in FY23 surged to \$43.57 billion in favour of bloc countries, growing sharply by over 40% compared to \$25.75 billion in FY22.

CAROTAR 2020

- **Customs (Administration of Rules of Origin under Trade Agreements) Rules, 2020** aims to supplement the certification procedures related to implementing the Rules of Origin as prescribed under the respective Trade agreements (FTA/PTA/CECA/CEPA).
- An importer must do **due diligence** before importing the goods to ensure they meet the prescribed **rules of origin** provisions.
- A list of minimum information the importer must possess has also been provided in the rules, along with general guidance.
- Also, an importer will have to enter specific origin-related information in the **Bill of Entry**, as available in the **Certificate of Origin**.

- It empowers the customs officers to ask the importer to share further information, in case the officer has reasons to believe that the country-of-origin criteria have not been met.
- Where the importer fails to provide the requisite information, the officer can make further verification consistent with the trade agreement.

Benefits of CAROTAR Rules

- It helps the importer in correctly identifying the country of origin, properly *claiming the concessional duty*, and assisting Customs authorities in the smooth clearance of legitimate imports under FTAs.
- It gives more power to the Customs in checking any attempted **misuse of the duty concessions** under FTAs.

Rules of Origin norms

- Rules of origin norms help contain dumping of goods. The provision prescribes for minimal processing that should happen in the FTA country so that the final manufactured product may be called originating goods in that country.
- Under this provision, a country that has inked an FTA with India cannot dump goods from some **third country** in the Indian market by just putting a label on it.
- It has to undertake a prescribed **value addition** in that product to export to India.

Patent (Amendment) Rules, 2024

The government recently notified the Patent (Amendment) Rules, 2024. These rules introduce several provisions aimed at simplifying the process of obtaining and managing patents, thereby facilitating a conducive environment for inventors and creators.

Patent	Jurisdiction Of The Patent
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A patent is a type of intellectual property that gives its owner the legal right to exclude others from making, using, or selling an invention for a limited period of time in exchange of full disclosure of the invention. • An invention relating either to a product or process that is new, involving inventive step and capable of industrial application can be patented. • In India, the term of every patent granted is 20 years from the date of filing of application. • The patent system in India is governed by the Patents Act, 1970. The Patent Rules are regularly amended to keep up with the changing environment. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is no concept of a global patent. As patent protection is a territorial right, therefore, a patent granted by the Indian government is only effective within the territory of India. • Patents should be obtained in each country where the applicant requires protection of his/her invention.

Key Features Of The Revamped Rules

- A unique provision for New '**Certificate of Inventorship**' has been introduced to acknowledge the contribution of inventors in the patented invention.
- *Time limit* to furnish foreign application filing details has been changed from six months from the date of filing of application to three months from the date of issuance of first examination report.
- Considering the fast pace of technology, time limit for filing request for examination has been reduced from 48 months to 31 months from the date of priority of application or from the date of filing of application, whichever is earlier.
- Provision to extend time limit and accept delay in filing has been further simplified and made more explicit to ease in practice. Now, the time for doing any act/proceeding may be extended any number of times up to six months by a request.

- Renewal fee has been reduced by 10% if paid in advance through electronic mode for a period of at least 4 years.
- Frequency to file the statements of working of patents has been reduced from once in a financial year to once in every three financial years.
- Further, the provision to accept delay in filing of such statement for a period up to three months upon a request has been incorporated.

Patent Related Development In The Country

- **Patents:** Every 6 minutes one technology is seeking IP protection in India. In 2023, an all-time high of 90300 patent applications were received.
- Patent office granted over one lakh Patents in the last one year (Mar-2023 to Mar-2024). Every working day, 250 patents were granted.
- **Geographical Indications:** There has been a notable rise in GI registrations, demonstrating a threefold increase compared to the previous year.
- **Copyright:** FY 2023-24 witnessed a record-breaking number of copyright registrations, totalling 36,378. Measures to further promote awareness about the strategic role of copyright in creative industry is planned.
- **Design:** In FY 2023-24, the highest number of design registrations to date, totalling 27,819, were recorded.
- **IP Awareness:** In the last 2 years, National Intellectual Property Awareness Mission (NIPAM) has offered IP Training to 24 lakh youths, especially students and teachers and has covered over 7000 institutions.

Revenue Based Financing

- Revenue-based financing (RBF) is gaining popularity amongst startups and digital Small and Medium sized Enterprises (SMEs).
- A form of **non-collaterised debt**, RBF is an alternative financing product **for digitally-enabled businesses**.
- Under it companies can raise capital in exchange for a percentage of their gross revenue as a monthly repayment, in addition to a fixed fee between 8-10% of the principal amount.
- It generally has an average tenure of 12-18 months and a percentage of gross revenue varying between 5-20%.
- It is usually opted by companies with steady revenue flow that have a **high requirement for short-term working capital**, such as cloud kitchens, e-commerce merchants, financial services companies or software-as-a-service firms.
- While some of these companies may be unwilling to dilute any equity to venture capitalists, others may not qualify for bank loans on account of being loss-making or lacking collateral.
- Among the other alternate financing products for startups is venture debt, which is also largely restricted to late-stage companies that have venture capital backing.
- Besides the ongoing slowdown in equity financing, an increasing awareness of the options available in alternative financing, and the fast and flexible nature of RBFs, are the main reasons behind RBF's growth.
- However, RBF can often be more expensive than traditional credit. Moreover, automated monthly payments of a percentage of gross revenue can reduce the monthly cash flow of small companies.

POLITY AND GOVERNANCE

Laws Related to Misleading Drug Advertisements

Recently, the Supreme Court issued contempt notice against Patanjali Ayurved for publishing advertisements which violated Drugs and Magic Remedies (Objectionable Advertisements) Act, 1954 and its Rules, and banned it from marketing its products until its next orders.

Background

- **Petition Against Patanjali Ads:** In 2022, the **Indian Medical Association** filed a writ petition against an ad released by the Patanjali Ayurved titled- “Misconceptions Spread by Allopathy: Save Yourself and the Country from the Misconceptions Spread by Pharma and Medical Industry” alleging that the company violated the Drugs and Other Magical Remedies Act, 1954 (DOMA) and the Consumer Protection Act, 2019 (CPA) by-
 1. Defaming allopathy through a continuous, systematic, and unabated spread of misinformation.
 2. Making exaggerated claims about scientific, evidence-based medicines (allopathy drugs) to promote their products.
 - ✓ The petition had also pointed to controversial statements made by Patanjali, including derogatory remarks about modern medicine and unfounded claims about covid-19 vaccines and oxygen cylinders during the second wave of the pandemic.
 - ✓ IMA has also highlighted an MoU signed by the Ministry of AYUSH and the Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI) in January 2017.
 - ✓ AYUSH, which is responsible for developing and setting medical standards for traditional medicine, agreed to identify misleading advertisements that may be in violation of the DOMA, and send complaints to the Council for review. Despite this, the IMA claims that Patanjali has continued to disregard the law and violate the DOMA.
- **Warning Issued by Supreme Court (SC):** Responding to the petition, the SC in 2023 while avoiding the “Allopathy vs. Ayurveda” debate, warned Patanjali to not advertise permanent cures and to impose a penalty of ₹1 crore for every product for which such claims are made.
- **Assurance by Patanjali:** Patanjali gave an assurance to the court that there shall not be any violation of any law(s), especially relating to advertising or branding of products and no casual statements claiming medicinal efficacy or against any system of medicine will be released to the media in any form.
- **Violation of its Assurance:** The Chief Justice of India (CJI) in January 2024 received an anonymous letter stating that Patanjali continued to publish advertisements which claimed that their products could provide “permanent relief” for diseases and were superior to conventional medicines.
- **SC’s Stand:** In [Indian Medical Association v. Union of India and Ors] case, it deemed Patanjali’s actions “unacceptable”, placed a blanket ban until further orders on any further advertising or branding of Patanjali medicinal products, and warned the company against making adverse statements regarding conventional medicine on any media forum.

Related Laws

<p>Drugs and Magic Remedies (Objectionable Advertisements) Act, 1954</p> <p>About: It was enacted to regulate false advertisements (written/verbal/visual) of drugs (medicines for humans/animals) and remedies alleged to possess magic qualities.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Magic remedy here may refer to any talisman, mantra, kavacha, and any other charm which is alleged to possess miraculous powers for or in the diagnosis, cure, mitigation, treatment or prevention of any disease.	<p>Consumer Protection Act (CPA), 2019</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Defines “Misleading Advertisement”: as the ones which give false description of the product or service, partakes in <i>unfair trade practices</i>
Key Provisions	

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prohibition- The act prohibits: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ <u>Misleading advertisements of drugs</u> i.e. advertisements which directly or indirectly give a false impression regarding the true character of the drug; or makes a false claim of its efficacy for any disease (section 4) ➤ <u>Advertisements referring to any magic remedy</u> which directly or indirectly claims to be efficacious in diagnosis, cure, mitigation, treatment or prevention of any disease, disorder or condition (section 5). • Penalty (section 7)- Violating the provisions of the act may result in imprisonment or a fine (no limits on fines) or both. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ The violator may face up to six months of imprisonment or a fine or both in case of first-time violation. ➤ Imprisonment may be extended to one year or a fine or both for subsequent conviction. • Search and Seizure- Any Gazetted Officer authorized by the State Government may, within the local limits of his authorized area enter and search any place and seize any advertisement which violates this Act. • Power to Make Rules- Central Government is authorized to make rules and every such rule should be laid before each House of Parliament for its approval. 	<p>(UTPs), deliberately conceals important information, or likely misleads the consumer about the nature, substance, quantity or quality of the product or service.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Penalty (Section 89): It provides for imprisonment of up to two years and a fine of up to ten lakh rupees for false or misleading advertisements and every subsequent offence will attract imprisonment of up to five years and a fine up to fifty lakh rupees.
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“Digital Intelligence Platform” and “Chakshu”

Recently, Minister of Communications, Railway, and Electronics & Information Technology launched **Department of Telecommunication’s (DoT)** “Digital Intelligence Platform (DIP)” and “Chakshu” facility.

About Digital Intelligence Platform (DIP) (Developed by: Department of Telecommunications (DoT))

It is a secure and integrated platform aimed at curbing **misuse of telecom resources** in cyber-crime and financial frauds by real-time information exchange and coordination among the following stakeholders: - Telecom Service Providers (TSPS); Law Enforcement Agencies (LEAs); Banks and Financial Institutions (FIs); Social Media Platforms; Identity Document Issuing Authorities etc.

Accessibility: Excluding the citizens, all stakeholders can access this platform over secure connectivity for information relevant to their respective roles.

Features

- It contains information regarding the cases detected as misuse of telecom resources which could be useful to the stakeholders in their respective domains.
- It works as a backend repository for the citizen-initiated requests on the **Sanchar Saathi** portal for action by the stakeholders.

About Chakshu (Report Suspected Fraud Communication)

<p>What?</p> <p>It is a citizen centric facility available on Sanchar Saathi portal (https://sancharsaathi.gov.in) launched with the aim to help the citizens report <i>suspected fraud communications received over call, SMS or WhatsApp</i> with the intention of committing fraud in the name of KYC expiry or update of bank account / payment wallet /SIM / gas connection / electricity connection,</p>	<p>About Sanchar Sathi Portal</p> <p>It is a citizen centric initiative of DoT to empower mobile subscribers and strengthen their security by-</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ allowing them to know the mobile connections issued in their name and getting disconnected the connections either not taken by them or not required by them (CEIR module- <i>Central Equipment Identity Register</i>);
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<p>sextortion, impersonation as government official / relative for sending money, disconnection of all mobile numbers by Department of Telecommunications etc.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ blocking and tracing stolen/lost mobile phones (TAF COP module- <i>Telecom Analytics for Fraud Management and Consumer Protection</i>);
<p>Steps Taken After Reporting Fraud Communications The DoT, after verifying the reported event, acts against the sender of suspected fraud communication as per departmental procedure by reverifying the subscriber, disconnecting the connection and filing of police complaints/FIRs, if required.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ checking genuineness of devices while buying a new/old mobile phone (Know Your Mobile (KYM) module). ➤ reporting suspected fraud communication (Chakshu). ➤ Reporting Incoming International Calls With Local Indian Number (RICWIN) i.e. starting with '+91' thus helping the government unearth suspected illegal telecom setups which cause loss to Government's exchequer and pose threat to national security.
<p>What about false reports submitted by the citizens? In such case, DoT may initiate suitable action including reverification of the subscribers reporting non-genuine suspected fraud communication, blocking of such subscriber for reporting etc.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ checking the details of Wireline Internet Service Providers (ISPs) using Know Your Wireline Internet Service Provider (KYI) module by entering PIN code, address or name of the ISP.
<p>Benefit Reporting of suspected fraud communication will help DoT in preventing misuse of telecom resources for cyber-crime, financial frauds etc.</p>	

Extra Mile: Initiatives Taken Up by the Government to Check Cyber Crimes

- **Indian Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT-In):** is the national agency since 2004 for responding to computer security incidents in the country as and when they occur.
- **Indian Cybercrime Coordination Centre (I4C):** was established by Ministry of Home Affairs in 2018 to provide a framework and eco-system for **Law Enforcement Agencies (LEAs)** for dealing with Cybercrime
 - **Joint Cyber Coordination Teams (JCCTs):** have been constituted under I4C covering the whole country based upon cybercrime hotspots/areas having multi-jurisdictional issues by on-boarding States/UTs to enhance the coordination framework among the LEAs of the States/UTs.
 - **CyTrain:** is a **Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC)** platform developed under I4C for capacity building of police officers/judicial officers through online course on critical aspects of cybercrime investigation, forensics, prosecution etc. along with certification.
 - **National Cyber Forensic Laboratory (Investigation):** established as a part of I4C, it provides early stage cyber forensic assistance to Investigating Officers (IOs) of State/UT Police.
- **Cyber Surakshit Bharat (CSB):** launched by MeitY in association with **National e-Governance Division** and industry partners to educate & enable the Chief Information Security Officers (CISO) & broader IT community of Central/State Governments, Banks and Public Sector Undertaking to address the challenges of cyber security in partnership with the industry.
- **National Cyber Crime Reporting Portal (<https://cybercrime.gov.in>):** launched in 2019 to provide a centralized mechanism to the **citizens** for online reporting of all types of cybercrime incidents, with a special focus on cybercrimes against women and children.
- **Citizen Financial Cyber Frauds Reporting and Management System (CFCFRMS):** developed as a part of National Cybercrime Reporting Portal, it provides an integrated platform, where all stakeholders including LEAs of States/UTs, all major Banks and financial intermediaries, payment wallets, crypto exchanges and e-commerce companies work in tandem to ensure that quick, decisive, and system-based effective action is taken to prevent the flow of money from victim's account to cyber fraudster's account. Since its inception (2021), an amount of more than Rs. 1000 Crore have been saved in more than 4 lakh incidents. A toll-free Helpline number '1930' has been operationalized to get assistance in lodging online cyber incidents.
- **Cyber Crime Prevention against Women and Children (CCPWC):** MHA has provided financial aid to the States/UTs for their capacity building such as setting up of cyber forensic-cum-training laboratories, hiring of junior cyber consultants and training of LEAs' personnel, public prosecutors and judicial officers.
- **Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023:** enacted to process the digital personal data in a such a manner that it recognizes the right of individuals to protect their personal data as well as the need to process such personal data for lawful purposes.
- **Cyber Swachhta Kendra (Botnet Cleaning and Malware Analysis Centre):** to create a secure cyber space by detecting botnet infections and to notify, enable cleaning and securing systems of end users to prevent further infections.

Plaint

The Supreme Court recently held that **no application** seeking amendment of plaint should be allowed under **Order 6 Rule 17 of CPC** if the amendment alters the nature of the suit.

- ✓ Order 6 Rule 17 of CPC states that no application can be allowed for amendment after the commencement of the trial, unless court comes to the conclusion that party did not raise the relevant facts before the commencement of the trial.

About Plaint

- A plaint is a **legal document** containing all the grievances (a formal written complaint) of the plaintiff as well as all the possible causes of action that can be taken and is presented to a civil court of appropriate jurisdiction, for initiating a civil lawsuit.
 - ✓ Plaintiff is any person who initiates legal action against someone in a court.

Procedure in Plaint

- **Filing:** The plaint is filed in the appropriate court having jurisdiction over the subject matter and the parties involved. The filing must comply with procedural rules, including filing fees, and accompanying documents.
- **Service:** After the plaint is filed, it must be served on the defendant(s) in accordance with the rules of service prescribed by law. This ensures that the defendant has an opportunity to respond.
- **Pleadings:** The plaint and the written statement together form the pleadings in the case. These documents define the scope of the dispute and set out the issues to be determined by the court.
- **Amendment:** In certain circumstances, the plaintiff may be allowed to amend the plaint to correct any errors or to include additional claims or facts. However, amendments are subject to the discretion of the court and must not prejudice the rights of the other party.
- **Trial:** Once the pleadings are complete, the case proceeds to trial, where evidence is presented, witnesses are examined, and legal arguments are made before the court. The court then issues a judgment based on the evidence and applicable law.
- **Appeals:** If either party is dissatisfied with the judgment of the trial court, they may have the right to appeal to a higher court, seeking review of the decision.

Particulars of Plaint: It is the first step towards starting a legal suit consisting of following particulars ((Rules 1 to 8 of Order VII of the CPC))-

- ✓ Order VII of the Code of Civil Procedure (CPC) particularly deals with a plaint.
- The name of the civil/commercial court where the lawsuit is to be initiated.
- Name, address, and description of Plaintiff and defendant.
- A statement containing details of any health issues or disabilities being faced by the plaintiff/defendant.
- The reasons for filing the suit i.e., facts that led to the cause of action and when it arose.
- Facts that help determine the court's jurisdiction.
- Claim for relief or remedy.
- Any amount allowed or given up by the plaintiff
- If the plaintiff wants to set off a portion of their claim, the amount allowed should be stated.
- The value of the subject matter of the suit for jurisdiction and court fees.

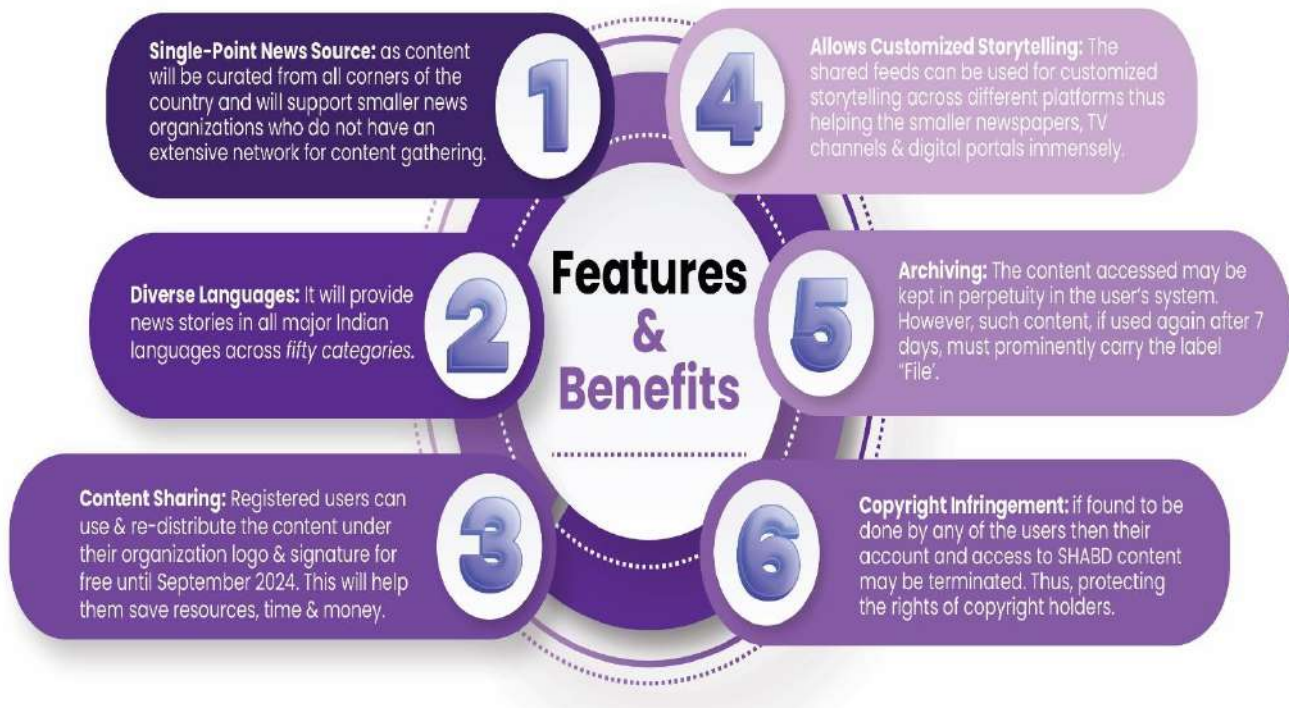
PB-SHABD

Prasar Bharti - Shared Audio Visuals for Broadcast and Dissemination (PB-SHABD), a news sharing service was launched recently.

About PB-SHABD

It is a news service launched by Prasar Bharati to provide the daily news feeds in video, audio, text, photo and other formats to registered news media organizations.

** It is powered by the vast network of Prasar Bharati reporters, correspondents and stringers.



Restrictions:

- All content would be **date and time stamped** and removing or masking it will be considered a violation of rules.
- Using Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools/software's for modification are strictly prohibited.
- Using the content for following acts is prohibited:
 - Wholly or partially to troll, defame, malign any person or organization.
 - To do mischief, commit fraud, deride the country & its institutions, or to create a law-and-order situation.
 - For morphing and voice cloning technologies and for Misquoting the content.

Extra Mile: New Prasar Bharti Chairman Appointed

Retired bureaucrat Navneet Kumar Sehgal has been appointed as the new Chairman of Prasar Bharati.

About Prasar Bharti (Public Service Broadcaster of the country- HQ at New Delhi)

- ▶ Established under the Prasar Bharati Act as a statutory autonomous body in 1997. Prasar Bharati oversees the operations of All India Radio (AIR), Door Darshan (DD), Prasar Bharati News Services & Digital Platform.
- ▶ **Objective:** To safeguard the citizen's right to be informed freely with balanced content from diverse fields for all sections of society.
- ▶ **Prasar Bharti Board-** Manages and overlooks the operations of Prasar Bharati. It comprises of a Chairman, a Chief Executive Officer, Member (Finance), Member (Personnel), six Part-time Members, a representative of the Ministry of Information & Broadcasting and the Directors General of All India Radio and Door Darshan as ex-officio Members.
 - The Chairman is a Part Time Member with 3 years tenure, subject to the age limit of 70 years.
 - The Chairman is appointed by the President on the recommendation of a 3-member Selection Committee consisting of the Vice President (Head of the Committee), Chairperson of the Press Council of India (PCI) and a nominee of the President.

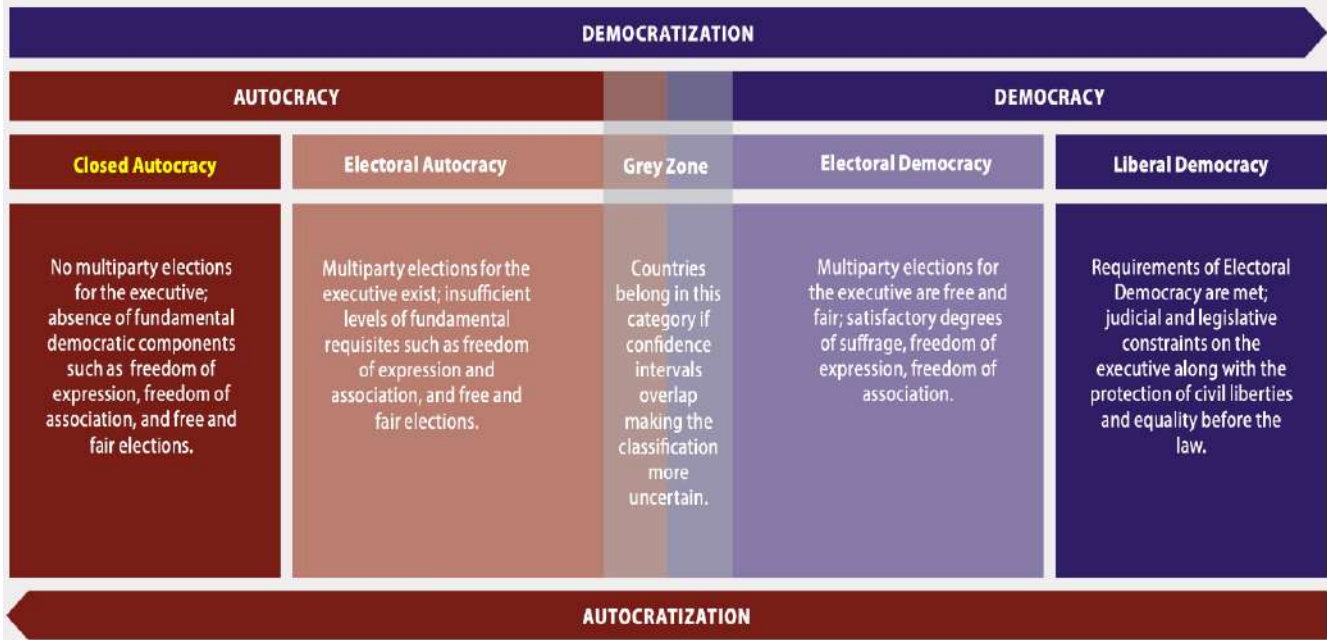
Democracy Report 2024

The recently released Democracy Report 2024 has listed India as “one of the worst autocratisers” as its position downgraded from the status of an “electoral autocracy” in 2018.

- ✓ The report is released by the Gothenburg-based Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute that tracks democratic freedoms worldwide. It conceptualizes and measures democracy by distinguishing between multiple core principles of democracy: electoral, liberal, majoritarian, consensual, participatory, deliberative, and egalitarian.

About the Democracy Report

- The Democracy Report published annually in March, describes the state of democracy in the world, with a focus on democratization and autocratization.
- The report categorizes countries into following categories:



Theme for 2024- Democracy Winning and Losing at the Ballot

Key Highlights of 2024 Report

The report is divided into five parts-

1. *Democracy in the World:*

- Deteriorating Components of Democracy:

Freedom of Expression	Clean Elections	Freedom of Association
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- The level of democracy enjoyed by the average person in the world in 2023 is down to 1985-levels and by country-based averages, it is back to 1998.
- Democracy levels increased in Latin America and the Caribbean.
- Large countries are more democratic than smaller ones.
- Israel fell out of the liberal democracy category for the first time in over 50 years and Bhutan is the only liberal democracy.

71% of the world’s population (5.7 billion) live in autocracies – an increase from 48% years ago.	44% of the world’s population is under electoral autocracy.	29% of the world’s population (2.3 billion people) live in liberal & electoral democracies.
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- #### 2. *Trends of Regime Change:* A total of 60 countries are in episodes of regime transformation – autocratizing or democratizing.

3. **Autocratizing Countries:** South and Central Asia is now the second most autocratic region in the world. 42 countries are currently in ongoing episodes of autocratization out of which-
 - 28 were democracies at the start of their episode; 23 are “stand-alone” processes
 - ✓ Stand-alone autocratizers are the ones where the process of deterioration starts independently, after a period of relative stability (Eg India)
 - 19 are “bell-turns” where democratization failed and turned into autocratization.
 - ✓ Bell turns are countries that are experiencing democratic declines despite having recently improved.
 - Elections are now increasingly undermined, and Election Management Body (EMB) autonomy is weakening substantially in 22 countries.
4. **Democratizing Countries:** Democratization is taking place in 18 countries
 - Freedom of expression and the media are typical areas of improvement increasing substantially in more than half of all democratizing countries.
5. **Windows to the Future:** Smaller changes and focal events such as elections can, sometimes, form the future of countries as they are the “critical events” that can either trigger democratization, enable autocratization, or aid stabilization of autocratic regimes.

From India's Perspective

Parameter	Key Features
Autocratization	autocratization in India started from 2008 gradually increasing with time
Curtailing of Rights	substantial deterioration of freedom of expression like curtailing media independence, crackdowns on social media and intimidation of the opposition
Media Censorship	India along with El Salvador and Mauritius as “among the worst government offenders when it comes to increasing their efforts to censor the media.”
Internet Freedom	India has been noted as the <i>Internet Shutdown Capital of the World</i> for the past five years. It accounted for 58% of the world's shutdowns last year.
Social Media Control	India ranked with Belarus, Hong Kong, Kyrgyzstan, Montenegro, Tanzania, Ukraine, Yemen where “social media has been increasingly controlled.”
Further Autocratisation	Given the already substantial democratic decline under ruling govt. & the enduring crackdown on minority rights & civil society”.

Fact Check Unit

The Supreme Court (SC) of India has put on hold the Fact Check Unit notified by the Centre to identify fake news on social media platforms- highlighting that it impacts free speech and expression of citizens.

About Fact Check Unit (FCU)

Established in 2019, under the Press Information Bureau (PIB)- the media and publicity arm of the government, the FCU was constituted to flag fake, false or misleading online content related to the government, its various ministries, Departments, Public Sector Undertakings, and other Central Government organizations.

Composition

- It is headed by a senior DG/ADG level officer of the Indian Information Service (IIS) assisted by other IIS officers who handle the day-to-day operations of the Unit at various levels.
- FCU reports to the Principal Director General, PIB who functions as the Principal Spokesperson of the Government of India.

Two Step Process followed for Fact Checking

1. The received queries are researched against authoritative Government sources like websites, press releases, government social media accounts etc.

2. The query is checked with the Ministry concerned through an attached PIB Officer and relevant information is gathered.

Fact Check Mechanism

FCU uses the **FACT model (Find, Assess, Create and Target)** to tackle a fake news.

1. **Find-** FCU not only acts against the complaints received from citizens or from various Ministries & Departments but also takes Suo Moto cognizance on Fact Checking.
 - ✓ One can file an Online complaint (free of cost) over WhatsApp, email or through the portal - <https://factcheck.pib.gov.in/>
2. **Assess-** FCU then checks if the received information falls within its ambit. The relevant complaints are then researched using various fact checking *tools and verified through authentic government open-source information available only on Government websites, notices, circulars, documents, and e-gazettes.*
 - ✓ FCU doesn't cover any matter that does not pertain to the Union Government.
3. **Create-** Once the authenticity has been verified from authorized sources, FCU utilizes the Information, Education & Communication (IEC) strategy to create awareness through creative content fit for dissemination on social media platforms. The Fact checked content is segregated into the following categories (*Fake, Misleading, True*)
4. **Target-** The content is then posted on its various social media platforms like Twitter, Instagram, Koo, Telegram and Facebook.

Achievements

- It acted in 28,380 instances involving “fake news” on digital platforms between November 2020 and June 2023.
- Last year, it called out various YouTube channels like ‘Bharat Ekta News’, ‘Bajrang Education’, ‘Bj News’, ‘Ab Bolega Bharat’ etc. for circulating fake news and misinformation.

FCU Notification

MeitY gave the FCU legal status by notifying it as the official FCU of central government under the amended Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021.

- ✓ The 2023 amendment to Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021: It introduced a legal framework for online gaming eco-system and for the government to fact-check online content pertaining to “government business”.
- ✓ The rules made it obligatory for the social media platforms to not to publish, share or host fake, false or misleading information in respect of any business of the Central Government.

Concerns Raised

1. **Need-** Government ministries and departments can already provide clarifications on their policies and functioning as and when needed through Parliament sessions or press releases. The need for an FCU is unclear except for providing the government more definitive control over online conversations and narratives.
2. **The scope** of the FCU is extremely broad and it may be considered as *disinformation*- any information published in the print media and shared on social media that the central government thinks is related to itself whether it can legally or constitutionally do so. Such powers would normally require concrete legislative backing instead of a mere executive order.
3. **No Appeal Mechanism**
4. **No Written Orders-** are required to be provided by the FCU giving reasons for any of its action. This will make subsequent notices hard to be challenged by intermediaries, violating the landmark SC judgment in *Shreya Singhal v Union of India*, which mandated these safeguards under the IT Act and Rules.
5. **Powers of Central Government-** The central government gets to decide what's true about itself as it becomes the judge, jury and executioner in its own case and the intermediaries must comply with the

government orders to avoid prosecution. This reduces the scope of contestation of ideas. For example, with the elections ahead, FCU managed by the government will impact free and fair election campaigns by opposition parties.

6. Freedom of Expression and Free Flow of Information- The threat of losing safe harbour status among social media platforms for not complying with FCU orders on information 'identified as fake, false, or misleading' about the government will pressurize them to act against even truthful but critical information about the government.

The Legal Challenge to IT Rules and Judgement

- **Petition:** was filed in the Bombay High Court (HC) challenging Rule 3(1)(b)(v) of the IT Rules 2021.
- **Grounds for Challenge:** The rule was challenged for being violative of Article 14- right to equality, Article 19(1)(a)-freedom of speech and expression and (g)- freedom to practice any profession, occupation, trade, or business and Article 21- protection of life and personal liberty, and Section 79 of the Information Technology Act, 2000 (IT Act).
 - ✓ The amendment to Rule 3(1)(b)(v) of the IT Rules 2021 essentially expanded the definition of "fake news" to include fake news involving government business identified by the FCU
 - ✓ Section 79 of the IT Act makes an intermediary unaccountable for any third-party information, data, or communication link made available or hosted by him.
- **HC Ruling:** The division bench gave a split verdict with one judge striking down the amended rules and another upholding them. Therefore, the case was heard afresh by a third judge to bring about a 2-1 verdict and he refused to grant an interim stay on the amended Rules after the court was informed by the Centre that the rules were yet to be notified in the official gazette. Thereafter, an appeal was filed before the Supreme Court against the rejection of interim stay.
- **SC Ruling:** The SC bench has stayed the amended Rules as the case involved serious constitutional question and the impact of the rule on free speech and expression.

Extra Mile: Staying of a Law

Can a law be stayed before being termed unconstitutional?

Although a law made by Parliament carries the presumption of constitutionality and the courts generally refrain from staying laws before giving any judgement on its constitutionality. This decision may depend upon two scenarios-

1. The Rules in question are not acts of legislation and are framed by the Ministry. Such rules should not be a direct expression of Parliament's will. Therefore, the threshold for the presumption of constitutionality varies.
2. If there is an explicit finding of unconstitutionality, then an interim stay can be granted. Even if it is a result of a split verdict in any case.

Previous Judgements

- *Maratha Reservation:* The SC in 2020 had stayed the operation of a Maharashtra law granting reservation to Marathas in jobs and educational institutions through an interim order.
- *Farm Laws:* which were ultimately repealed were also stayed by the SC in an interim order in 2021.

Delhi CM Arrested. What Next For Delhi Government?

In a first, a serving CM (Delhi CM Arvind Kejriwal) was arrested by the Enforcement Directorate (ED) in connection with Excise Policy case.

Background: The Excise Policy Case

- *Introduction-* The Delhi government in December 2021 introduced a new excise policy aimed at modernizing alcohol sales in the city.

- **Scrappage**- But it was scrapped within six months i.e. in July 2022 after the Delhi Lieutenant Governor (L-G) recommended a probe by CBI based on a report submitted by Delhi Chief secretary alleging procedural lapses in the formulation of the policy and financial losses of more than Rs. 580 crores to the exchequer.
- **Allegations**- ED alleged that-
 - The policy was intentionally designed with loopholes to favour AAP leaders and promote cartel formations.
 - AAP leaders received kickbacks from liquor businesses in exchange for preferential treatment, such as discounts, license fee waivers, and relief during the Covid-19 pandemic disruptions. These kickbacks were used to “influence” the Assembly elections in Punjab and Goa in early 2022.
 - ✓ Wholesale liquor businesses were given to private entities with a fixed margin of 12%, for a 6% kickback.

Accusations Against Delhi CM and his Response:

- As per ED, Delhi CM was the kingpin and key conspirator in the scam. He demanded ₹100 crore from the South Group which was used for Punjab and Goa elections.
- Before his arrest, a total of nine summons were issued by the ED to Kejriwal which he had skipped.

The South Group: The liquor cartel comprised of Influential people from South India like Telangana MLC Kavitha (also arrested by the ED for being the key accused).

Is There Any Immunity Available To CMs?

The President and State Governors are immune from civil and criminal proceedings for any actions carried out in the discharge of their official duties under Article 361 of the Constitution (in an exception to Article 14- right to equality). But this immunity is not available to Prime Ministers or Chief Ministers.

Will the arrest lead to disqualification?

Representation of the People Act, 1951, outlines disqualification provisions for certain offences, but only upon conviction. Therefore, the CM cannot be disqualified and ousted from his office until he is proven guilty.

Can the Delhi CM continue to run government from jail?

Yes, as the Delhi CM has not been convicted yet, he can technically and legally continue in office. But if he does so, as running the government will be difficult from jail premises owing to the oath of secrecy of CM’s office and jail restrictions, the L-G may cite “breakdown of Constitutional machinery” and can either recommend President’s Rule under Section 239 AB or dismiss the government under section 239 AA.

Way Forward

Mr. Kejriwal can name another person to fill in shoes for the CM’s post to save his government.

- ✓ In the case of the arrest of former Jharkhand CM Hemant Soren, he resigned and proved his strength before the Governor before his arrest, thus saving his government.

National Cooperative Database

Recently, the National Cooperative Database (NCD) was launched to foster a cooperative-centric economic model.

About National Cooperative Database

It is a web-based digital dashboard developed by the Ministry of Cooperation wherein data of cooperative societies, including National/State Federations is captured based on various parameters, such as their registered name, date, location, number of members, sectoral information, area of operation, economic activities, financial statements, status of audit etc.

Implementation: National Cooperative Database was completed in three phases-

10. Approximately 2.64 lakh societies in **Primary Agricultural Credit Societies (PACS-** rural grassroots financial centers), Dairy, and Fisheries were mapped.
11. Data from various sources like National Federations, State Federations, State Cooperative Banks (StCB), District Central Cooperative Banks (DCCB) etc. were collected/mapped.

12. Data mapping of all the remaining 8 lakh primary cooperative societies in other sectors was carried out.

Benefits (It aligns with Ministry's vision of "Sahakar se Samridhi".)

- All information (comprehensive, authentic and updated data) about registered cooperative societies across the country will be available at the click of a button.
- Help identify gaps as to where there are lesser number of Cooperatives and will help in expansion of Cooperative sector.
- Provides information on vertical and horizontal linkages amongst cooperatives.
- Facilitates planning, policy making & implementation for all stakeholders.
- It will help connect PACS, Mandi with the global market

Revised AI Advisory to Social Media Companies

MeitY revised an advisory issued earlier this month to social media companies/ intermediaries changing a provision that mandated intermediaries & platforms to get government permission before deploying "under-tested" or "unreliable" AI models & tools in the country.

✓ Advisories were issued to Facebook (Now Meta), Instagram, WhatsApp, Google/YouTube (for Gemini), Twitter, Snapchat, Microsoft/LinkedIn (for OpenAI) Share Chat, and Ola 'Krutrim', India's first AI unicorn.

Previously issued AI Advisory

All intermediaries or platforms were required to ensure that use of AI model(s) / Large Language Models (LLM)/Generative AI, software(s) or algorithm(s) on or through its computer resource **does not permit** its users to host, display, upload, modify, publish, transmit, store, update or share **any unlawful content**.

**The advisory was criticized by some AI startups on grounds of regulatory overreach impacting the still nascent industry and for being anti-innovative and anti-public

Key Pointers from the Latest Advisory

1. **No Requirement for Government Permission:** The need for intermediaries to obtain explicit government permission before deploying AI models (including under-testing) has been done away with.
 2. **Content Moderation and Bias Prevention:** The intermediaries are required to ensure AI models do not allow any unlawful content or perpetuate bias or discrimination, safeguarding the integrity of the electoral process.
 3. **Consent Mechanisms:** Intermediaries are advised to implement consent pop-ups or similar mechanisms to explicitly inform users about the reliability of AI-generated outputs, promoting transparency and user empowerment.
 4. **Deepfake Identification:** It urges intermediaries to adopt measures such as labelling and embedding unique metadata to identify artificially generated/modified/created content to help identify deepfakes and misinformation.
 5. **Non-Compliance:** with the provisions of the IT Act 2000 and/or IT Rules would result in prosecution under the IT Act 2000 and other criminal laws, for intermediaries, platforms and their users.
- ✓ *Rule 3(1)(b) of the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021 prohibits unlawful content like defamation, pornography, disinformation and anything that "threatens the unity and sovereignty of India".*

Concerns Raised

1. **Legally Binding or not-** There is significant ambiguity about whether an advisory is legally binding as it provides for legal implications for non-compliance however the government has assured that it is just an advisory and not a regulatory framework.
2. **Lack of Statutory Power to MeitY-** Unlike regulatory bodies like the Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI), MEITY lacks clear statutory powers to issue binding directives or advisories. The Information Technology Act, 2000 (IT Act), which forms the primary legislative basis for technology regulation in India, also does not

explicitly confer MEITY with the power to issue such advisories or directives to regulate emerging technologies like AI.

3. **Lack of Clear Definitions and Citations with Unassessed Rapid Policy Making** - The advisory fails to cite any specific provisions of the IT Act or other relevant laws empowering MEITY to mandate bias prevention. This contributes to the perception of MEITY's regulatory actions as arbitrary and potentially overreaching.
4. **Curtails Freedom of Expression**- This directive can lead to self-censorship among individuals and organizations, fearing reprisals for expressing dissenting views or challenging government policies.
5. **Expansion of Surveillance and Control** over online activities threatens individual autonomy
6. **Threats to Innovation & Economic Consequences**- Compliance requirements and enforcement mechanisms discourage investment and innovation in emerging technologies like AI.

Benefits

1. **Accelerated AI Development:** Removal of stringent approval processes will foster a more innovative environment, expediting AI deployment across sectors.
2. **Enhanced Trust:** Transparency measures will bolster user trust in AI-driven platforms, promoting responsible use and will mitigate potential risks.
3. **Electoral Integrity with Voter Empowerment:** AI transparency & bias prevention measures safeguard the integrity of the electoral process, combating misinformation & ensuring fair elections.

Extra Mile: Threat of AI over Elections		
Increased Quantity & Quality of Misinformation		
Increased Personalization of Misinformation	Involuntary Proliferation of Fake but Plausible Information.	
Impact of AI on Elections:		
1. Influences Voter Decisions: As per a survey by marketing research firm Ipsos, 87% of respondents in 16 countries registered disinformation on social media as one of the biggest factors influencing elections.		
2. Generate Campaign Content: AI is so powerful that people with very little technical expertise can use it to disseminate <u>fake text, images, videos, and audio across a large digital base in multiple different languages</u> . It can be used to positively impact elections, by helping to generate campaign content and creating microtargeting messaging. China and Russia have also allegedly used AI to influence foreign elections, particularly in Taiwan. According to an investigative report published by the <i>Financial Times</i> , pro-government news outlets and influencers in Bangladesh promoted disinformation using AI at a meagre cost of USD 24 per month.		
3. Reach Out to Masses: In India, politicians are using AI to reach out to masses, especially in rural areas. For example, a real-time AI-powered tool was used to translate Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s speech from Hindi to Tamil in December 2023.		
4. Save Resources: Personalized messages at scale but for small segments, minor sub-segments, like parts of the constituency or villages or the Panchayat could be very effective as it may help save resources and reach as many people as it can in the shortest time.		
5. Producing and Disseminating Disinformation: It can be done by AI in three ways		
Magnifying the scale of disinformation by 1000 times.	Spreading hyper-realistic deep fakes of pictures, audio, or video before they can be possibly fact-checked.	Microtargeting

National Generic Document Registration System

The National Generic Document Registration System (NGDRS) was launched throughout Assam last month along with the launch of *Unique Land Parcel Identification Number (ULPIN)*. *Pilot launch of **Blockchain** in certain District to bring radical transformation in Land Records Management*

- ✓ ULPIN is a 14-digit alpha numeric identification number (like AADHAR or Bhu-Aadhar/fingerprint for land) assigned to every land parcel based on its longitude & latitude & is dependent on geo-referenced cadastral maps (Bhunaksha). It Provides standardization across states, easy sharing of land records, protects government land, and ensures transparency.
- ✓ Some States are also using ULPIN in SVAMITVA (Survey of Villages Abadi and Mapping with Improved Technology in Village Areas) portal.

About National Generic Document Registration System (NGDRS)

- It is initiated by the Department of Land Resources, under Ministry of Rural Development as part of the Digital India Land Records Modernisation Programme (DILRMP).
- NGDRS is a common, generic and configurable application specifically designed under One Nation, One Software initiative for sub registrars, citizens and apex users from registration departments. It can be used as per state specific requirements.

Developed By- National Informatics Centre (NIC), Pune.

Objective- To provide a single & Generic platform for registration of properties & documents across the country & empowering the citizens by enabling property valuation & online document submission.

Features

- Citizen's registration facility to allow online document entry, online valuation of land with stamp duty calculation and instant payment. Registration can be done anywhere within concurrent jurisdiction.
- Transactions of prohibited properties which are restricted for sale like government land, tribal land, mortgaged land etc., are also available, which ultimately helps them decide where and what type of land they should buy.
- Single login credentials for all modules.
- Role based access to citizens and department users.
- SMS/email facility to send alerts to citizens and departmental users.
- E KYC – UID based authentication with the help of biometric or iris at the time of admission.
- Allows linking the land details with land records system and stamp inventory software to avoid duplicate usage of used stamp paper.
- Copies of registered documents can be stored/viewed/downloaded and certified copy can be generated.
- Provides Unicode based local language support.

Benefits: Property buyers are required to visit the sub-registrar's office only for final signing & registration. Thus, saving their time and making the land buying and registration process smooth and easy.

- The entire workflow will increase the productivity of the department staff.

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Super Tuesday - Key Day In US Presidential Elections

- March 5, 2024, was a Super Tuesday in the ongoing cycle of the US Presidential elections, scheduled for November.
- On this day, supporters of the Democratic and Republican candidates in 15 states voted for their preferred party candidate in the presidential race.
- Super Tuesday is the day when the largest number of states hold their **Presidential primaries and caucuses**.
- Those state-level races help candidates from the two major political groups — the Democrats and the Republicans — gather the delegates they need to earn their party's nods.
 - Delegates are the *parties' members or local supporters* of a candidate.
 - Based on the result of each contest, delegates are awarded to the top candidates.
 - A certain number of delegates is needed to formally anoint the nominee at each party's convention this summer.
- Delegates ultimately represent their states at a party convention, where they cast votes for the nominee based on the **primary** and **caucus** results.

How US Elections Work?

• **Primaries and Caucuses**

- American voters usually have a strong affiliation with either of the two major political parties.
- As part of the Presidential elections, they first vote in the **primary** and **caucus polls**, or in a third setup that is a combination of the two.
- In some of these, only registered Democrats or Republicans can vote, instead of general voters.

In Primaries

- Voters go to polling stations and check the box against the name of their favoured candidate.
 - For example, Republican voters will have Donald Trump and Nikki Haley as their options, since other candidates have dropped out of the race.

In Caucuses

- Caucuses are lengthier. Voters attend meetings at public places such as school gymnasiums, churches, and community centres, debate candidate preferences and openly raise their hands for their choice of vote.

• **National Conventions of Each Party**

- After the primaries and caucuses are over, a **National convention** is held in which a party's nomination for president is formally announced to the public.
- During the convention, the *elected delegates* cast their vote for a party candidate and the candidate with the most delegates gets the party's nomination.

• **Significance of primary or caucus**

- For candidates, winning a primary or caucus means winning the support of the several delegates that are assigned to each state.
- At this stage, delegates matter because it is they who later vote to select the party nominee at the Democratic and Republican **National Conventions** held in the summer.
- If no candidate gets the majority of a party's delegates during the primaries and caucuses, convention delegates vote to choose the nominee.
- Delegates are seen as representing the party's will, although some have criticised the process for not letting voters directly choose their candidate.

Political Turmoil in Nepal

- Nepal's Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal Prachanda won a vote of confidence in the 275-member lower house of Parliament.
- Prachanda won his third trust vote since his assuming office in Dec.2022. It happened after the PM ended his party's partnership with Sher Bahadur Deuba's Nepali Congress and formed a new alliance with K P Sharma Oli's Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist).

India's Stand

• Extraordinary political instability -Cause of concern for India

- While Prachanda retains significant goodwill in New Delhi, his now partner in government, Oli, does not.
- The actions and statements by Oli in 2015 had caused a fair bit of bitterness in India.
 - During his tenure the Nepalese constitution was drafted, which led to protests and the infamous border blockade.

- Oli, who was PM then, portrayed India as the neighbourhood bully in his country.

- **Nepal being described as India-locked:** Politicians in Nepal have often described the country as being India-locked, meaning it needs India for access to ports.
- **Use of Chinese card by Nepal:** Nepal is sandwiched between the two Asian giants.
 - The Nepalese political leadership, including the country's former monarchs, has long sought to play the China card to manage the relationship with India.
- **China is pouring aid and investment (in infrastructure) to wean Nepal away from India**
 - Nepalese imports from China almost tripled from (*Indian*) Rs 49.5 billion in 2013-14 to Rs 138.75 billion in 2022-23.

Political crisis in Nepal

Floor test of January 2023

- ▶ Prachanda took oath for the third time in December 2022 (he had been Prime Minister earlier in 2008-09 and 2016-17).
- ▶ He won 268 votes in the floor test of January 2023 after receiving support from almost all parties, including both the Nepali Congress and the CPN-UML.

Second floor test in March 2023

- ▶ Prachanda had to seek a second vote in March 2023 after CPN-UML and the monarchist Rashtriya Prajatantra Party withdrew support.
- These parties withdrew support over Prachanda's backing for Ramchandra Paudel of the Nepali Congress to be President.
- ▶ Nepali Congress supported the Prachanda government during this floor test.

Third floor test in March 2024

- ▶ Prachanda dumped **Nepali Congress (led by Deuba)** and went back to **CPN-UML (led by K P Sharma Oli)**, which triggered the vote in Parliament.

Nepal had seen 13 governments since 2008

- ▶ In 2008, the country's 239-year-old monarchy was abolished and a republic was proclaimed. Over the years, Prachanda, Deuba, and Oli have been the leading political actors in Nepal.

Bilateral Cooperation Between India And Nepal

• Bilateral trade

- India is Nepal's largest trade partner. Bilateral trade has reached over NPR 976.78 billion during the last eleven months of the fiscal year 2020-21 with imports from India amounting to NPR 886.59 billion and exports to India standing over NPR 90.19 billion.
- India provides transit for almost all of Nepal's third country trade.
- Indian exports to Nepal have grown more than eight times over the past decade, while exports from Nepal have almost doubled.

• Cooperation during Covid Pandemic

- India provided assistance of more than \$7 million to Nepal.
- This included the supply of more than 23 tonnes of medicines and medical equipment, more than 9.5 million doses of vaccines, and a medical oxygen plant.

• People to people contact and remittances

- About 8 million Nepalese citizens live and work in India, and some 6 lakh Indians live in Nepal. Indians are about 30% of foreign tourists in Nepal.

- The bilateral remittance flow is estimated at \$3 billion from Nepal to India, and \$1 billion in the opposite direction.

Hong Kong Legislature Unanimously Passes National Security Bill

- The Hong Kong legislature has passed a new national security law unanimously, granting the government more power to curb dissent.
- The passing of the '**Safeguarding National Security Bill**' comes in the wake of a political crackdown sparked by 2019 pro-democracy protests (*one of the largest since Umbrella Revolution in 2014.*)
 - They were protesting against a proposed law change that would allow suspects accused of serious crimes to be sent to mainland China for trial.

About Safeguarding National Security Bill

- It extends the government power to curb any future dissent or challenges that might arise.
- This includes expanding the scope of punishing treason and insurrection upto life imprisonment.
- The law allowing criminal prosecution for specific acts committed anywhere in the world.
- It also incorporates provisions for imposing tougher penalties on people convicted of working with governments in foreign countries to commit crimes.

Political System of Hong Kong

- **Political system:** Hong Kong is a **special administrative region of China** located on the Delta of eastern Pearl River in South China.
 - It has its own currency, political system and cultural identity but it belongs to China.
- **Background**
 - The city was a colony of United Kingdom, until the British handed it back over to China in 1997.
 - Qing dynasty leaders ceded Hong Kong Island to the British Crown in 1842 after China's defeat in the First Opium War.
 - At the time of handover, the Chinese Communist leadership had agreed to a unique arrangement – "One Country, Two Systems".
 - This was agreed upon to maintain Hong Kong's prosperity, and its legal system and culture.
- **One Country, Two Systems**
 - Under this policy, Hong Kong maintains a de-facto constitution, known as the Hong Kong Basic Law.
 - It guarantees freedoms that are unavailable to Chinese mainlanders, such as the right to protest, the right to a free press and freedom of speech.
 - But in recent years, Beijing has repeatedly reinterpreted the **Basic Law** and now it says it has "complete jurisdiction" over Hong Kong.

Moscow Concert Hall Attack

- Multiple gunmen went on a shooting rampage in Moscow's famous Crocus City Hall.
- The Islamic State Khorasan (ISIS-K) claimed responsibility for the attack.

About Islamic State Khorasan (ISIS-K)

- Islamic State Khorasan (ISIS-K), emerged in eastern Afghanistan in late 2014, and is currently one of the most active **ISIS-affiliates**.
 - Khorasan refers to an ancient caliphate in the region that today encompasses parts of *Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan and Turkmenistan*.
- The group comprises breakaway fighters of the Tehreek-e-Taliban (TTP), and others pledging allegiance to the late ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.
- It has established a reputation for extreme brutality.

Pakistan Carried Out Airstrikes In Afghanistan

- Pakistani fighters carried out airstrikes inside the Afghan **provinces of Paktika and Khost**, leading to fighting along the border.
- As per Pakistan, the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and other splinter groups were the prime target of the intelligence-based anti-terrorist operations.

Afghanistan – Pakistan Border

- **About**

- The Durand Line is the 1,640-mile (2,640-kilometer) border between Afghanistan and Pakistan.
- It was established in 1893 as the border between British India and the Emirate of Afghanistan.
- The line is named after Sir Henry Mortimer Durand, the foreign secretary of the colonial government of India.

- **Dispute**

- The Durand Line has been a point of contention between Pakistan and Afghanistan since 1947, when Pakistan became an independent nation.
- The line cuts through Pashtun-dominated tribal areas, and the Pashtuns consider the line to be an artificial division.
- The dispute has its origins in the following events:
 - The fall of the Durrani dynasty in the 18th century
 - The British extending their control to the region
 - The Anglo-Afghan wars (1838-42 and 1878-80)
 - A policy reassessment due to fears of Russian advancement and a possible attack from the Pashtun tribes.

- **Tensions**

- Successive Afghan governments have also disputed the Line, claiming Pashtun territories in Pakistan, including the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and parts of the North West Frontier Province.
- The disagreement over the border has caused tensions between Pakistan and the Taliban— despite historically good bilateral ties.

Pakistan's Soured Relationship With The Taliban

- **Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in 2021**

- After the Taliban took control in 2021, tensions rose because they refused to accept the Durand Line as a permanent border. They said it split the Pashtun ethnic group.
- In the days after, there were small fights between the two sides along the border.

- **Role of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)**

- The tensions further escalated after the TTP, also known as the Pakistani Taliban, called off a ceasefire in November 2022, when talks brokered by the Afghan Taliban broke down.
- The Afghan Taliban and the TTP are separate groups with common ideological links.

- **Unprecedented terror attack across Pakistan**

- After the ceasefire ended, the regrouped TTP's actions resulted in an unprecedented surge in terror incidents across Pakistan.
- This led to a big increase in terror attacks, especially in the provinces of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan, which are next to Afghanistan.
- Amid a multifaceted crisis, Pakistan urged the Afghan Taliban to control the TTP.
- The Taliban assured that they wouldn't permit anyone to use Afghan soil for attacks against any country. However, the surge in attacks since 2021 has created distrust between Pakistan and the Taliban.

Sri Lanka To Secure Likely Moratorium On Debt Owed To India, Paris Club

- Sri Lanka is close to finalising a debt treatment plan with India and the Paris Club. Experts are pointing to a likely moratorium of upto six years and a reduced interest rate during the repayment period.
- After defaulting on its nearly \$ 50 billion external debt in April 2022, Sri Lanka has been engaging with its diverse lenders to work out a debt treatment plan that is compatible with its pace of recovery.
- As many as 17 countries that have extended loans to Sri Lanka formed the Committee last year for ease of debt restructuring negotiations.
- China opted to stay out of the platform, but has been attending its meetings as an observer.

About Paris Club

- It is a group of 22 official creditor countries that work together to provide sustainable solutions to debtor countries' payment difficulties.
 - All 22 are members of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).
 - India is not a member of the Paris Club. However, India is an observer, along with IMF, World Bank, OECD, and other organizations.
- The club was established in 1956 in Paris.
- Club offers credit facilities to eligible countries and provides solutions to indebted countries, including debt rescheduling and/or debt reduction.
- The solutions include reforms that the debtor countries can implement to improve their financial situation.
- The club's creditors agree in changing the profile of payments on debts due to them.

PM of India and Mauritius inaugurated airstrip, jetty, 6 other projects

- An air strip, a jetty and 6 other projects were inaugurated jointly by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Mauritius PM Pravind Jugnauth virtually.
 - Since 2003, several attempts had been made to upgrade the air strip, but nothing concrete materialised. This move came after PM Modi's visit to the island country in March 2015.
- These projects will enhance the island's capacity and capabilities in marine surveillance and security, while also meeting development objectives.
- The joint development of the **Agalega Islands** is in the socio-economic and national security interest of Mauritius, and also aligns with India's maritime vision of **Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR)**.

Agalega Island

- It lies approximately 650 nautical miles (1,050 km) north of Mauritius.
- It is a group of two islands with a total area of 26 sq km and a native population of about 300 people.

Indians End Up in the Russia-Ukraine War

- The deaths of two Indian nationals in the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war illustrate the plight of dozens of Indians trapped on the front lines after being duped into working with the Russian military.
- Also, recent CBI raids found a human trafficking network recruiting Indians as security helpers and other personnels for the Russian military, have sparked widespread concern.
- An Indian-origin Russian official associated with the Russian Ministry of Defence told that approx. 100 Indians were recruited at the Moscow recruitment centre in the past year.
- However, **the actual number of Indians hired could be higher**, since there are several recruitment centres across Russia.

How Did The Agents Deceive People?

- **A multi-State human trafficking network busted** by the CBI in a crackdown on visa recruiters in seven cities across India revealed how Indian youths were allegedly pushed into the war zone by consultancy firms.

- The Indian youths were duped on the pretext of a **better life and livelihood** with the Russian military as security guards and helpers, as well as **higher education**.

Visit of PM Modi to Bhutan

PM Modi had a State visit to Bhutan. The visit was in line with the Govt's Neighbourhood First Policy.

Key Highlights Of The Visit

- **MOUs signed on**
 - General supply of Petroleum, Oil, Lubricants (POL) and related products from India to Bhutan
 - Cooperation in the field of Energy Efficiency and Energy Conservation measures
 - Cooperation in Sports and Youth
 - Joint Plan of Action (JPOA) on Space Cooperation – It provides a concrete roadmap for further developing space cooperation through exchange programmes, training etc.
 - Establishment of Rail Links between India and Bhutan
 - There are two proposed rail links between India and Bhutan - **the Kokrajhar-Gelephu rail link** and **Banarhat-Samtse rail link**.
- **Order of the Druk Gyalpo**
 - PM Modi received Bhutan's highest civilian award, the Order of the Druk Gyalpo.
 - This was presented by Bhutan's King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, in appreciation for PM Modi's efforts towards:
 - strengthening India-Bhutan ties, and
 - in particular India's provision of the first round of 500,000 doses of Covid-19 vaccines in 2021.
- **PM Modi inaugurated Mother and Child Hospital** in Thimphu, one of the healthcare and referral facilities being developed in Bhutan with India's funding support.
- **Other areas of cooperation discussed**
 - Bhutan's plans for its 13th Five Year Plan (FYP 2024-2029), and
 - Bhutan's request for India's development assistance for various projects including the ambitious new "**Gelephu Mindfulness City**" planned on Bhutan's southern border with Assam.
 - India is Bhutan's top trading partner, and in the past decade, India's non-hydropower trade in goods with Bhutan has tripled from US\$ 484 million to US\$ 1.606 billion.
 - For the previous 12th Five Year Plan, India's contribution of In Rs 5000 Cr. (about US \$600 mn) constitutes 73% of Bhutan's total external grant component.

Trade Diplomacy

At present the Ministry of External Affairs oversees diplomacy, and the Ministry of Commerce negotiates Trade policies. However, off late, we are seeing both the ministries to come together more and more for trade talks.

In fact, in countries like the UK, Australia, Canada and others, Departments of Foreign Affairs and Trade are actually merged together. This highlights the importance of trade diplomacy in current geo-political environment.

India's Recent Activities Around Free Trade Agreement Negotiations

Existing FTAs That India Have	Work In Progress
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ India-ASEAN FTA, also CECAs with Singapore and Malaysia ○ India-Japan CEPA; India-S. Korea CEPA ○ SAFTA of all SAARC countries- along with separate FTAs with Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Australia- CECA was due to have been completed by December 2023 ○ Canada- Negotiations for CEPA suspended by Canada over the Nijjar killing last year

- India-Mauritius CECPA-implemented in 2021
- India-UAE CEPA, implemented in 2022
- India-EFTA FTA, expected to be implemented in 2025
- There is also **India-Australia Early Harvest Agreement** or ECTA, which is not a full-fledged FTA yet, that is being negotiated.
- **UK- FTA** was nearly done many times in the past few years, but first the rapid changes in UK PMs, and then India's own election process has tripped it up
- Oman- FTA is understood to have been finalised.
- Gulf Cooperation Council 6 nations-FTA has been delayed.
- European Union- BTIA- talks were suspended between 2013-2022, but now in advanced stages
- Eurasian Economic Union EAEU 5 Post Soviet States including Russia and Belarus- where talks may begin soon.

Benefits of FTAs

- Reduce or zero out tariffs in most sectors
- Increase market access for both parties
- Make for reliable supply chains
- Build a positive momentum for trade

Stumbling Blocks For India's Negotiations

- In 2019, India walked out of the RCEP- 15 nation Asian and Australian FTA. While India has refused to reconsider, neighbours like Bangladesh and Sri Lanka have applied to join RCEP.
- India's announcement of the Make In India or Atmanirbhar Bharat policy runs counter to free trade without subsidies negotiations.
- India has always been **protective of agricultural sector**, and most FTAs leave the subject out entirely.
- Concerns about Chinese goods flooding the markets via FTAs with third countries – mean **India pushes for strong Rules of Origin clauses.**
- **Intellectual Property Rights** is increasingly a problem as countries move towards R&D as an economic mainstay, India is being forced to accept more international patents
- Issues like Democratic freedoms, Human Rights issues, transnational operations are also bleeding into negotiations like the EU, EFTA and now Canada.

Conclusion

Free Trade Agreements are not just about tariffs reduction or bargaining over market access and intellectual property rights. They are a way for countries or regions to show trust in each other and promise to treat each other's businesses and investments fairly.

Protectionism and political disagreements are the main obstacles to free trade. Hence, it is important for India to make sure its trade policy matches its views on other issues at home and abroad before deciding to join or leave free trade agreements.

Benefits of FTAs - increase in export

India's exports - RTA Partner Countries/Region wise

Values in US\$ billion

India's RTA partner Countries/region	Names of RTAs	Export in 2011	Export in 2021
ASEAN	India-ASEAN FTA India-Singapore CECA India-Malaysia CECA India-Thailand FTA - Early Harvest Scheme (EHS)	34.5	40.6
Japan	India-Japan CEPA	5.6	6.1
South Korea	India-South Korea CEPA	4.6	7.0
SAFTA	Agreement on SAFTA India-Sri Lanka FTA India-Nepal Treaty of Trade India-Bhutan Agreement on Trade, Commerce and Transit	13.0	31.6

SUMMITS AND ORGANISATIONS

India To Set Up International Big Cat Alliance

- The Union Cabinet approved the establishment of International Big Cat Alliance (IBCA)
- Framework of Agreement of IBCA has been drafted largely on the pattern of International Solar Alliance (ISA).

International Big Cat Alliance (IBCA)

- **Background:** During the Global Tiger Day event in 2019, PM Modi urged global leaders to unite against poaching in Asia.
 - He repeated this call during the 50th anniversary celebration of India's Project Tiger on April 9, 2023, announcing the launch of an International Big Cat Alliance.
- **Aim:** To work towards the protection and conservation of the seven major big cats — tiger, lion, leopard, snow leopard, puma, jaguar and cheetah.
- **HQ:** India
- **Membership** will be open to 96 range countries. These are the countries which contain the natural habitat of these big cats.
 - The alliance is also open to other countries, conservation organisations, scientific organisations, businesses, and corporates interested in supporting big cats.
 - So far, 16 countries have given their written consent to be part of the IBCA.
 - In addition, nine international organizations, including the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), and the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) International, have given consent to join the alliance.
- **Governance Structure**
 - A **General Assembly** consisting of all member countries.
 - A **Council** of at least seven but not more than 15 member countries elected by the General Assembly for a term of 5 years
 - Upon the recommendation of the Council, the General Assembly will appoint the IBCA Secretary General for a specific term.
 - A Secretariat
- **Funding**
 - The first five years (2023-24 to 2027-28) will be supported by India's 'total grant assistance' of Rs.150 crore.

Is India Home to All Seven Big Cats?

- Out of 7 big cats, **India is home to 5:** Tiger, Lion, Leopard, Snow Leopard and Cheetah
- **Royal Bengal Tiger:** India has 3682 tigers, home to 75 per cent of global numbers according to "Status of Tigers 2022"
- **Asiatic Lion:** Gir National Park in Gujarat is the last abode for the surviving population of the Asiatic Lions in the world.
 - Since the late 1960s, population of Asiatic Lions has increased from less than 200 to **674** (Census 2020).
- **Leopard:** It is estimated that **12,000-14,000** leopards occur in India, and the population is the most genetically diverse/outbred out of all the subspecies in Asia.
- **Snow Leopard** is native to the mountain ranges of Central and South Asia.
 - In India, their geographical range encompasses a large part of the **western Himalayas** including the territories of Jammu and Kashmir, Ladakh, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand and Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh in the eastern Himalayas.
 - In 2021, **there are about 7,500 snow leopards left in the world, out of which 500 are in India.**
- **Cheetah** had become extinct in India since 1952.
 - In September 2022, Cheetahs have been reintroduced in the wild in India as 8 Cheetahs were imported from **Namibia**.
 - Twelve cheetahs from South Africa arrived in February, 2023
 - They were released into the **Kuno National Park in Madhya Pradesh**.

- After that, the IBCA is expected to sustain itself through membership fees and contributions from bilateral and multilateral institutions and the private sector.
- **Activities**
 - It will provide a platform for the member nations to share knowledge and expertise and extend support to recovery efforts in potential habitats.
 - Its major activities will include advocacy, partnership, knowledge e-portal, capacity building, eco-tourism, and finance tapping.
- **Benefits**
 - The advantages of membership are a central common repository for technical know-how and a corpus of funds.
 - The alliance will strengthen *existing species-specific intergovernmental platforms, networks, and transnational initiatives on conservation and protection.*
 - **Frontline staff** in member-countries will be trained in eliciting local support for big-cat conservation, and R&D in wildlife monitoring.
 - **Local communities** living in the vicinity of the forests will also be encouraged and trained in developing eco-tourism and livelihood opportunities.
 - It recognizes the importance of integrating biodiversity policies with SDGs to achieve holistic and inclusive conservation outcomes.

Report on Missing Migrants Project

- The International Organization for Migration (IOM) has published the alarming death toll in a report on its Missing Migrants Project.
 - The project has been investigating the disappearances of people fleeing conflict, persecution and poverty since 2014.
- As per the report, a total of 8,565 migrants died on land and sea routes worldwide in 2023.
- The report said the *biggest increase in deaths last year* was on the treacherous Mediterranean Sea crossing due to drowning.
- Report said the total number of deaths among migrants in 2023 was ~20% more than in 2022.
- Overall, the biggest jump in deaths in recent years was in Asia. The rise in Asia last year was primarily because of increased deaths among Afghans fleeing to places like neighbouring Iran and among Rohingya refugees on maritime routes.

About International Organization for Migration (IOM)

- **About:** IOM is an intergovernmental organization that provides services and advice concerning migration to governments and migrants alike.
 - Established in 1951, it operates globally, with a mandate that includes migration management, humanitarian assistance, and promoting understanding of migration issues.
- **Relation with UN:** IOM joined the United Nations in September 2016 as the UN Migration Agency.
 - In 2018 the Secretary-General established the United Nations network on migration, which IOM coordinates.

Grey Zone Warfare

On the last day of the 2024 Raisina Dialogue, India's Chief of Defence Staff General Anil Chauhan said that **grey zone warfare** is the latest in informal warfare.

Grey Zone Warfare

• About

- Grey zone warfare generally means a **middle, unclear space that exists between direct conflict and peace in international relations.**
- Multitude of activities fall into this zone — from nefarious economic activities, economic actions (*such as debt traps and economic sanctions*), influence operations, and cyberattacks to mercenary operations, assassinations, and disinformation campaigns.

• Features

- Activities in the grey zone have always been a feature of great-power competition.
- **Proxy wars, destabilizing insurgencies, legal warfare (lawfare), and information warfare—by adversaries and allies alike—have been a feature of this conflict.**

• Origin

- Experts believe the Cold War era, which began after the end of the Second World War in 1945, led to conditions that favoured grey zone warfare.
- Amid the US-USSR rivalry for ideological and economic dominance, the knowledge that both parties were armed with nuclear weapons meant direct conflicts had to be restrained.
- In today's nuclear age, the price of traditional wars has become too high, and the danger of things getting worse is very serious. Because of this, countries are trying to achieve their goals by being aggressive in secret or by hiding.

Grey Zone Warfare - A Separate Category Of Action

- The challenges that grey zone warfare poses differ from those of an open conflict.
 - Here, action is often covert or indirect, meaning a country's response needs to be appropriate in terms of its scale.
 - These actions could be designed to bait (*food placed on a hook or in a net*) the other party into escalation. If this happens, the use of force would then be legitimised as a form of self-defence or response in kind to what the other party does.
- Other reasons for engaging in such tactics include the projection of strength, and to normalise disputed territorial claims by repeatedly marking a presence in those regions.
- Judging by its appearance, grey zone conflict seems mild when compared to traditional strategic competition. However, the limited intensity does not make grey zone conflict less vicious.
- Rather than escalate in one-dimension, grey zone conflict tends to escalate in multiple dimensions and leads to unintended over-escalation, creating a nightmare for crisis management.

Recent examples of grey zone warfare

- Experts from US and Europe have characterised certain Russian and Chinese actions of late as its examples.
- It includes the Chinese military's presence in the South China Sea.
 - The Philippines is one of the countries which has challenged China's claims, extending over around 80 per cent of the region.
 - In December 2023, it accused China of firing water cannons at its boats and ramming into others, while the Chinese coast guard blamed the Philippines for hitting Chinese boats.
- A recent Reuters report mentioned that Taiwan has been expressing concerns for the past four years about increased military actions by China.
 - This includes Chinese fighter jets flying over the strait regularly. It is part of China's strategy to pressure Taiwan with activities that fall just short of starting a full-scale conflict.
- **US has also engaged in similar tactics.** These include its economic sanctions against China and imposition of duties on Chinese imports to the US, along with maritime reconnaissance.

International Arms Transfers Report By The SIPRI

- The latest data on international arms transfers has been released by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI).
- As per this report, India was the world's top arms importer between 2019-2023.

Key Highlights Of The Report By The SIPRI

- **India as the world's largest arms importer:** India continues to hold the title of the world's largest arms importer, despite ongoing efforts to bolster its defense-industrial base.
 - Between 2019 and 2023, the country accounted for a significant 9.8% of the total global arms imports.
- **Steady increase in arms import:** The report reveals a 4.7% increase in India's arms imports between 2014-18 and 2019-23.
 - This growth is partially attributed to emergency procurements made in response to the prolonged military standoff with China.
- **Changing Dynamics in Arms Suppliers:** Russia has historically been India's primary weapons supplier, accounting for 36% of its arms imports.
 - However, this trend is shifting, with India increasingly diversifying its sources to include Western countries and domestic manufacturers.
 - The report highlights that the period between 2019-23 marked the first five-year span since 1960-64 where Russian deliveries comprised less than half of India's arms imports.
- **Growing Role of Western Suppliers:** France and the United States are emerging as key suppliers to India, collectively accounting for 46% of its arms imports.
 - This trend is expected to continue with significant contracts in the pipeline, such as India's procurement of 31 armed MQ-9B Sky Guardian drones from the US and 26 Rafale-M fighters from France.
- **Global Arms Trade Landscape**
 - **Top importers:** India is followed by Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Ukraine, Pakistan, Japan, Egypt, Australia, South Korea, and China.
 - **Top exporters:** United States leads with a 42% share, followed by France and Russia.
- **India's Role as a Major Arms Customer:** India emerges as the largest arms customer for France, Russia, and Israel, indicating its significant role in global arms procurement.
 - This underscores India's reliance on diverse sources for its defense needs, reflecting its geopolitical positioning and security concerns.
- **China's Dominance in Supplying Pakistan:** China plays a pivotal role as the primary arms supplier to Pakistan, with a substantial 61% of its exports directed towards Islamabad.
 - Additionally, China exports 11% of its arms to Bangladesh, further solidifying its influence in the region.

Challenges Faced By India In Indigenous Production

- **Projects under Strategic Partnership (SP) model have not materialised yet**
 - Despite efforts to promote indigenous defense production, none of the 'Make in India' projects under the strategic partnership model have materialized yet.
 - Under this model, private companies are selected as strategic partners to work alongside the government-owned defense entities in the development and production of key defense platforms and systems.
- **Need for Overhaul in SP Policy**
 - The SP model, a cornerstone of India's efforts to boost indigenous defense production, has faced significant challenges.
 - Key areas for improvement include a reassessment of the pricing methodology, ensuring long-term orders to sustain production, and addressing other bottlenecks that hinder project implementation.

- **Low Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in Defense**

- India's defense sector has attracted only a meagre Rs 5,077 crore in FDI since its opening to private companies in 2001.
- This is despite the government's efforts to liberalize FDI regulations, allowing up to 74% through the automatic route and up to 100% through the government route in 2020.

Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI)

- SIPRI is an independent international institute dedicated to research into security, conflict, armaments, arms control and disarmament.
- Established in 1966, SIPRI is based in Stockholm, Sweden. It is regularly ranked among the most respected think tanks worldwide.

India's indigenous 5thgen Fighter Jet AMCA

The Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) has cleared a Rs 15,000 crore project to design and develop the *Advanced Medium Combat Aircraft (AMCA)*, India's fifth-generation multirole fighter jet.

Advanced Medium Combat Aircraft (AMCA)

The indigenous Light Combat Aircraft (LCA) Tejas is a 4.5-generation single-engine multirole aircraft.

- **About**

- This aircraft will be bigger than other fighters in the Indian Air Force inventory.
- The aircraft will put India in a select group of nations that have their own fifth-generation fighter aircraft.

- **Organisations involved**

- The Aeronautical Development Agency (ADA) under DRDO will be the nodal agency for executing the programme and designing the aircraft.
- It will be manufactured by state-owned Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL).

- **Features**

- **Stealth:** The 25-tonne twin-engine aircraft will have advanced stealth features to avoid detection by enemy radar.
- **Fuel & Weapons:** The aircraft will have a large, concealed internal fuel tank of 6.5-tonne capacity, and an internal weapons bay for a range of weapons, including indigenous weapons, to be buried in its belly.
- **Engine:** AMCA Mk1 variant will have US-built GE414 engine of the 90 kilonewton (kN) class.
 - The more advanced AMCA Mk2 will fly on the more powerful 110kN engine.
 - This will be developed indigenously by DRDO's Gas Turbine Research Establishment (GTRE) in collaboration with a foreign defence major.

Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS)

- **About**

- CCS is a cabinet committee of the GoI that acts as the apex body when it comes to the appointments of the officials in the national security bodies.
- It also makes all the important decisions on defence policy and expenditure and, generally, all matters of India's security.
- The Committee is chaired by the Prime Minister of India.

- **Other Members**

Union Minister of Defence

Union Minister of Home Affairs

Union Minister of Finance and Corporate Affairs

Union Minister of External Affairs

- **Functions**

- The CCS deals with all the issues related to the law & order, defence & security of India.

- It also deals with policy matters of foreign affairs which may have a bearing on internal or external security implications, including cases relating to agreements with other countries on security-related issues.
- The Committee discusses the political issues which can impact the security of our nation.

Fifth-generation Fighter Jets

- These are designed to carry out a range of missions, such as air-to-air combat and ground attack.
- They have plain surfaces, specially shaped exhaust nozzles, and engines located in the plane's body to hide heat signatures. They also have special radars to detect the aircraft's own radar emissions.
- The list of the aircraft currently in service includes the F-22 Raptor and F-35A Lightning II of the US, the Chinese J-20 Mighty Dragon, and the Russian Sukhoi Su-57.

INS Jatayu Base in Lakshadweep Islands

- The Indian Navy has commissioned its new base "INS Jatayu" at Minicoy in Lakshadweep islands.
- INS Jatayu is the second naval base in Lakshadweep after INS Dweep prakshak in Kavaratti.
 - Minicoy is the southernmost island of Lakshadweep, 215 nautical miles southwest of Kochi.
- This is important because it strengthens India's military capacity and maritime presence in the region.
- The base is located on Minicoy, the southernmost atoll in the archipelago, and overlooks vital Sea Lines of Communications (SLOCs), including the Eight Degree Channel and the Nine Degree Channel.
- This location enhances India's operational reach and helps to counter growing Chinese influence in the Indian Ocean. INS Jatayu also bolsters the Indian Navy's capabilities for anti-piracy, anti-narcotics, and surveillance operations.

Army Set To Raise 2 Sports Companies For Girls

- The Indian Army is establishing two Army Girls Sports Companies (AGSCs) at the Army Sports Institute in Pune and the Army Marksmanship Unit in Mhow (Indore, Madhya Pradesh).
- This will be set up to train young girls in archery, athletics, boxing, weightlifting, and shooting.
- The AGSCs will also provide formal education and opportunities for recruitment. The goal is to nurture girl talent and prepare them for a future in the military.

An all-weather Link to Tawang

- Sela Tunnel was dedicated to the nation. It is a key border infrastructure project as it connects Guwahati to the strategic Tawang sector round-the-year.
 - It will aid faster military movement to the Line of Actual Control (LAC).
- It was constructed by the Border Roads Organisation (BRO) at an altitude of around 13,000 feet.
- It aims to providing all-weather connectivity to Tawang across Sela Pass on the Balipara-Chariduar-Tawang (BCT) Road.
 - This road connects Tezpur in Assam to Tawang in Arunachal Pradesh.
 - Tezpur is the home of the Indian Army's IV Corps which looks after Assam and western Arunachal Pradesh.

Exercises/ Conferences

Exercise Bharat Shakti	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The Bharat Shakti exercise is a <u>fire power demonstration</u> that showcases the indigenous defense equipment of the Indian Army, Navy, and Air Force. ● Recently, the exercise took place at the Pokhran firing range in Rajasthan, and featured an array of indigenous weapons systems and platforms.
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The exercise also demonstrated the integration of the three forces in areas such as communications, training, inter-operability, and logistics.
Naval Commanders' Conference 2024	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The <u>first edition of the Biannual Naval Commanders' Conference 2024</u> was conducted <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The inaugural session of the Conference was held onboard the aircraft carrier INS Vikramaditya. Follow-on proceedings were conducted at New Delhi, in hybrid format. The Conference is an institutional forum that enables deliberations on important maritime security issues at the Military-Strategic level.
Tiger Triumph-24	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The bilateral tri-service exercise between India and the US, 'Tiger Triumph-24', was conducted in Visakhapatnam and Kakinada (Andhra Pradesh). The exercise was aimed at: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> developing interoperability for conducting <i>humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) operations</i> and refining standard operating procedures to enable rapid and smooth coordination between the forces of the two countries. The first exercise was conducted in November, 2019.
Maritime Security Belt – 2024	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The navies of China, Iran and Russia have begun joint drills in the Gulf of Oman, <u>their fifth common military exercise in recent years</u>. The drills come as a United States-led naval coalition has been operating in Red Sea waters since December 2023 trying to counter the Houthi attacks.

Indians Rescued From Cyber Fraud Centres Abroad

- Recently, the Ministry of External Affairs informed that approximately 250 Indians caught up in the Cambodia cyber scam have been rescued and repatriated.
- More than 5,000 Indians are reportedly being held against their will in Cambodia, where they are coerced into carrying out cyber frauds targeting people in India.
 - As per the Indian Cyber Crime Coordination Centre (I4C) and the MHA, about half of the calls received on the cybercrime helplines on an average day relate to such scams involving companies based in Cambodia and Myanmar, linked mainly to Chinese apps.
- These Indians had been lured there by cyber fraud and fake online recruitment scams.
- Steps Taken by India**
 - The MEA and the Indian Embassy have issued several advisories warning job-seekers against accepting such job offers. Police in several Indian States, including Odisha, Punjab, and Kerala, have made arrests in such cases.
 - Indian govt is working with Cambodian authorities and with agencies in India to crack down on those responsible for these fraudulent schemes.
 - Investigating agencies have launched a nationwide operation against agents — many of them believed to be linked to companies in China.



NIA Chief Appointed

- Senior IPS officer Sadanand Vasant Date, who played a pivotal role during the 26/11 Mumbai terror attacks, has taken over as Director-General of the National Investigating Agency (NIA).
- NIA is India's central counter-terrorism law enforcement agency. It was established in December 2008, and is headquartered in New Delhi. The NIA's parent agency is the Ministry of Home Affairs.

CBI, Europol Sign Working Arrangement For Cooperative Relations

- CBI and the European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation (Europol) has signed a Working Arrangement.
- It will promote *direct cooperation* between both organisations to build on their respective mandates, strategies and to explore the potential for synergies.
- The cooperation, in addition to exchange of information, may include the exchange of specialist knowledge, general situation reports etc.

India-led 'Group of Friends'

- Recently, at the **second meeting** of the **India-led Group of Friends (GOF)**, India launched a **new database** designed to record crimes against UN peacekeepers.
 - The database is like an online repository where the Secretariat, UN missions, and member countries can keep track of and deal with cases where peacekeepers are harmed on purpose.
 - This database, *sponsored by India*, is hosted on the **Unite Aware platform**.
 - Unite Aware is a technology platform created by India and UN to ensure the safety of peacekeepers around the world.
 - It is a situational awareness software program that helps countries torn by conflict establish conditions for lasting peace.
- The *India-led* Group of Friends for promoting accountability for crimes against Peacekeepers had conducted its first meeting in April 2023.
- The group comprises of 40 member states. India, Bangladesh, Egypt, France, Morocco and Nepal are co-chairs.
- The Group of Friends represents the strong support from member states, especially those who contribute troops and police, to make sure the rules of **U.N. Security Council resolution 2589 are followed**.
 - This resolution was passed in August 2021 when India was leading the Council.
 - It asked countries that host or have hosted UN peacekeeping missions to do everything they can to punish people who hurt or kill UN staff, including by arresting or capturing them.

ENVIRONMENT AND GEOGRAPHY

Star Rating System for SEIAA

The MoEFCC has informed the NGT that its plan to implement a *star-rating system for states* based on their promptness in awarding environmental clearances to industrial or infrastructure projects **has not yet been operationalised**. The Ministry told that it is still in the process of upgrading and operationalising the website that would facilitate this ranking of the **State Environment Impact Assessment Authorities (SEIAA)**.

Star Rating System for SEIAA

- The star-rating system was introduced in **2022** by MoEFCC, and is based on -
 - Pollution control measures,
 - Environmental management practices, and
 - Compliance with regulatory requirements.
- The rating, for which industries must apply every year, range from **one to five stars**, with five stars indicating the highest environmental compliance and performance level.
- The ratings are publicly **displayed on the SEIAA website**.
 - SEIAA is a regulatory body established by the MoEFCC under **the Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) Notification 2006**.
 - The SEIAAs grant clearances on the recommendations of the **Expert Appraisal Committees** which go through every project proposal that has the potential to have a substantial environmental impact.
- **As per the star-rating system, the SEIAA would get points on a scale of 0 to 7.**
 - SEIAAs will be graded between 0 and 1 on five parameters, and 0 and 2 on one (for granting EC).
 - A SEIAA would get two points for granting a clearance in less than 80 days, one point for clearing a project between 80 and 105 days and 0.5 points if the clearance was granted between 105 and 120 days.
 - Zero points would be given to a SEIAA if it takes more than 120 days for granting environmental clearance.
- The proposed star-rating system will be utilised to **“rank” and “incentivise” States on how “quickly” and “efficiently” they can accord environmental clearances.**
- The ranking system **aims to encourage efficiency in decision-making without compromising regulatory safeguards.**
- Industries with higher ratings will be eligible for various incentives and benefits and thus promotes **ease of doing business.**



Why Has There Been A Delay In Operationalising Star Rating System For SEIAA?

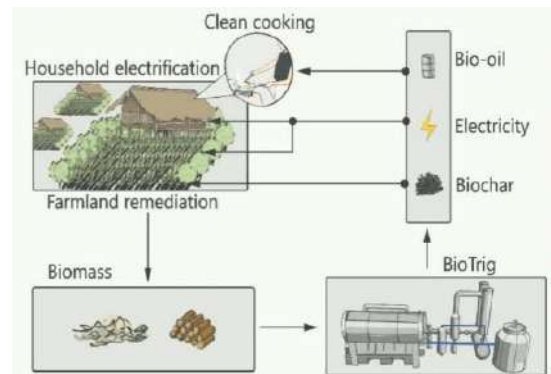
- The MoEFCC had introduced the star-rating system in 2022 but it was **challenged in the NGT by a Tamil Nadu-based organisation** working for the rights of fishermen.
- The petitioners argued that it was **arbitrary and would result in a dilution of scrutiny** during the environmental impact assessment (EIA) process.
- The petitioners also argued that the Ministry's order was **contrary to the EIA notification of 2006** which mandates detailed scrutiny of all the impact of all projects.
- However, the Ministry defended its decision and said that the **rating criteria does not seek to change any process or timelines** as provided in the EIA notification 2006.

BioTRIG

Newly conducted research unveils 'BioTRIG,' a waste management innovation made for implementation in rural regions of India.

About BioTRIG

- It is a new waste management technology that employs **pyrolysis** at a community level.
- Waste is sealed in an oxygen-free chamber and heated above 400 degrees Celsius.
- BioTRIG generates three major byproducts of pyrolysis — 1) bio-oil, 2) syngas and 3) biochar
 - ✓ Pyrolysis is a process that involves the decomposition of organic materials at high temperatures in the absence of oxygen.



Utilization of Byproducts	Benefits to Rural India
<p>1. Bio-oil: A liquid fuel that can be used for heating, cooking, or electricity generation.</p> <p>2. Syngas: A mixture of gases (mostly H₂ and CO) that can be used to fuel the pyrolysis process itself, making the system partially self-sustaining.</p> <p>3. Biochar: A charcoal-like substance that can be used as a soil amendment to improve fertility and store carbon.</p>	<p>1) Improved soil health</p> <p>2) Generation of clean power & reduced indoor air pollution</p> <p>3) Reduced greenhouse gas emissions</p>

Global Waste Management Outlook 2024

The Global Waste Management Outlook 2024, a report jointly launched by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) & International Solid Waste Association (ISWA) during the Sixth United Nations Environmental Assembly (UNEA-6) in Nairobi.

- ✓ This report provides a comprehensive assessment of the global waste challenge.
- ✓ ISWA is a Non-profit NGO, the only worldwide association promoting sustainable and professional waste management. (Founded in 1970, headquartered in Rotterdam, Netherlands)

Key Findings Of The Report

- **Waste generation** is on the rise: global waste generation will increase from 2.3 billion tonnes in 2023 to 3.8 billion tonnes by 2050.
- **Waste collection:** over 1/3rd of the world's population, about 2.7 billion people, mainly in low- and middle-income countries (primarily in the Global South), lack access to waste collection services
- Waste management is expensive: the global cost of waste management is currently USD 371.6 billion per year. Without urgent action, this cost could almost double to USD 640.3 billion by 2050.
- Hurdles in Waste Management: Insufficient acknowledgment of urgency, data incompleteness, underestimation of climate impacts; Deficiencies in legislation, poor enforcement, and absence of supportive frameworks.

Extra Mile: UNEP & its Diverse Initiatives

- ⊙ Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) is an intergovernmental body established in 1988 by the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) and UNEP.
- ⊙ **Major reports by UNEP** are Emission Gap Report, Adaptation Gap Report, Global Environment Outlook, Frontiers, Invest into Healthy Planet.
- ⊙ **The UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration (2021-2030):** It aims to prevent, halt and reverse the degradation of ecosystems on every continent and in every ocean.
- ⊙ UN World Restoration Flagships: The UNEP has recognized 7 initiatives from regions spanning Africa, Latin America, the Mediterranean, and Southeast Asia as World Restoration Flagships.
- ⊙ UNEP-Convended Climate and Clean Air Coalition (CCAC) along with International Energy Agency (IEA) prepared the Report titled "Imperative of Cutting Methane from Fossil Fuels".
 - **UNEP-CCAC** is the only international body working to reduce powerful but short-lived climate pollutants (SLCPs) – methane, black carbon, hydrofluorocarbons (HFCs), and tropospheric ozone.
 - In 2019, India has formally joined CCAC
- ⊙ UNEP administers a global legally binding agreement named '**CITES**' (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora).
- ⊙ **World Environment Day** has been celebrated annually on 5 June since 1973. It is led by UNEP.
- ⊙ **International Day of Zero Waste on March 30** was established (In year 2022) by UNEP and UN Human Settlements Programme (UNHabitat) in response to the worsening impacts of waste on human health, the economy and the environment.
- ⊙ **Un-Plastic Collective (UPC)** was launched by the UNEP-India.

MethaneSAT

MethaneSAT was launched aboard a SpaceX Falcon9 rocket from California.

About MethaneSAT

- It is joint effort between the Environmental Defense Fund (EDF- a US-based nonprofit group) and the New Zealand Space Agency.
- **Cutting-edge Satellite Technology:** The world's most advanced methane-tracking satellite, designed to monitor (with High-precision measurements) and study global methane emissions in order to combat climate change.
- Essentially, MethaneSAT will orbit the Earth 15 times a day, monitoring the oil and gas sector.
- It will create a large amount of data, which will tell "how much methane is coming from where, who's responsible and are those emissions going up or down over time.
- **Open Access Data:** It will provide comprehensive coverage of methane emissions across the globe. The collected data will be analysed using cloud-computing and AI technology developed by Google (the company is a mission partner) and the data will be made public through Google's Earth Engine platform.
- **Spectrometer Utilization:** This Satellite uses its spectrometer to measure the amount of sunlight absorbed by methane in the atmosphere.

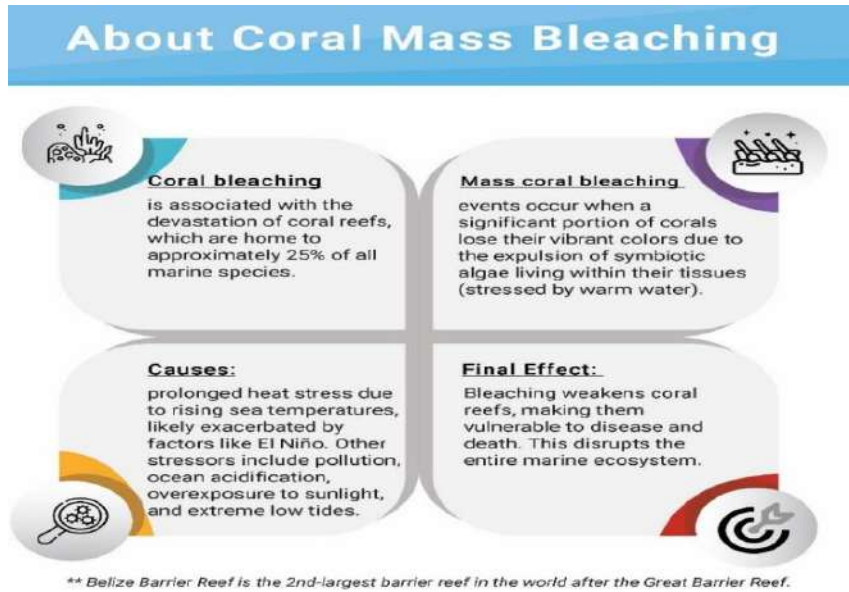
- It can track differences in methane concentrations as small as three parts per billion in the atmosphere, which enables it to pick up smaller emissions sources than the previous satellites.
- MethaneSAT also has a wide-camera view — of about 200 km by 200 km — allowing it to identify larger emitters so-called “super emitters”.

Note: Over 150 countries signed the **Global Methane Pledge** in 2021 to cut collective methane emissions by at least 30% from 2020 levels by 2030.

Fifth Mass Coral Bleaching Event

The World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF)-Australia is deeply concerned by the official declaration of 5th mass coral bleaching event *since 2016* on the Great Barrier Reef.

- ✓ Widespread mass bleaching of the Great Barrier Reef was first seen in 1998 and happened again in 2002, 2016, 2017, 2020, 2022 and now in 2024.
- ✓ It is based on data from the MUR SST (Multi-scale Ultra-high Resolution Sea Surface Temperature) project, an effort by NASA’s Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL).



Oran Sacred Grove

Communities in western Rajasthan are concerned about the state’s proposal to classify orans (sacred groves) as deemed forests.

About Oran (religious significance through well-defined social norms & practices)

- Oran often houses shrines dedicated to local deities. They function as crucial repositories of biodiversity. (Frequently found around Dense vegetation cover & natural water sources).
 - Orans also constitute the native environment for the Great Indian Bustard (GIB), India’s most critically endangered bird species.
 - ✓ GIBs are Protected under the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972 and recognized as the State bird of Rajasthan. (Project Godawan in Rajasthan is for conservation of GIB)
- ** Sacred Groves are also referred to as Kavu/SarpaKavu in Kerala, Devarakadu/Devkad in Karnataka, Deorai/Devrai in Maharashtra, Jahera/Thakuramma in Odisha, and so forth.**

Supreme Court (SC) Guidelines on Deemed Forest Areas

- **Classification of Deemed Forest Areas:** In accordance with directives from SC, lands recognized as Oran, Dev-vans, and Rundhs will be classified as Deemed forest lands.
 - ✓ Deemed forests refer to areas not formally classified as forests by central or state authorities in official records.
- **TN Godavarman Case of 1996:** In this landmark case, the SC mandated state governments to identify such lands, affirming that all ‘forest’, including those designated as **deemed forests**, fall under the purview of **Section 2** of the Forest (Conservation) Act (FCA), 1980.

- ✓ SC interpreted the FCA and the Forest (Conservation) Rules, 1981, in a manner that gave a broad interpretation to the powers of the central government to regulate forest resources.
- ✓ The court held that the FCA was enacted to conserve forests and protect wildlife, and any diversion of forest land for non-forest purposes must be done strictly in accordance with the law. The court also held that the power of the central government under the FCA was not limited to the declared “reserved forests” or “protected forests,” but extended to all forests in India, whether on public or private land.
- ✓ **Section 2** prohibits non-forestry activities such as mining, deforestation, quarrying, or the construction of infrastructure projects on designated forest lands without prior approval from the central government.

Pandavula Gutta & Ramgarh Crater- Geoheritage Sites

Pandavula Gutta has been officially recognized as the sole **Geo-heritage site** in Telangana. Also, Ramgarh Crater in Rajasthan has been designated as a geo-heritage site.

About Geoheritage sites

- These are Geological features which are inherently or culturally significant offering insight into earth’s evolution or history to earth science or that can be utilized for education.
- Those sites are designated By the **Geological Survey of India (GSI)**. India is a member of the UNESCO Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage.
- ✓ (GSI-under Ministry of Mines) was founded in 1851 with Headquartered at Kolkata.

About Pandavula Gutta (at Jayashankar Bhupalpally district, Telangana)

- Rich in prehistoric habitation sites with evidence from Mesolithic to medieval periods.
- Paleolithic cave paintings have been found at Pandavula Gutta (Regondamandal). (depicting geometric designs, animals, and tools)
- It has Ancient geological marvel, **predating** the Himalayas

About Ramgarh Crater (3.5-kilometer diameter crater in Rajasthan)

- Ramgarh Crater was formed 165 million years ago by a meteor impact. It was first discovered by GSI in 1869.
- It's also known as Ramgarh structure, Ramgarh Dome, and Ramgarh astrobleme. The crater is located in the Kota plateau of Vindhya range.
- It's also the country's third crater, following Lunar crater in Maharashtra and Dhala crater in Madhya Pradesh.
- The Ramgarh crater has been recognised as the 200th crater of the World Geo-Heritage.

Ethanol 100

The Ministry of Petroleum has launched ‘ETHANOL 100’, a groundbreaking automotive fuel.

About Ethanol 100 (anhydrous or pure ethanol- Colorless, flammable with a distinctive odor)

- It is a type of alcohol fuel containing 100% ethanol by volume with no gasoline/additives.
 - It is primarily derived from the fermentation and distillation of plant-based materials, such as corn, sugarcane, wheat, barley, switchgrass, or other biomass sources.
- ** In August 2023, Union Minister of Road Transport and Highways unveiled the prototype of the world’s first Bharat Stage (BS)-VI-compliant electrified flex-fuel car, developed by Toyota Kirloskar Motor.
- **The car, which runs on 100 per cent ethanol (E100), can cover 40 per cent of its distance on ethanol and the remaining 60 per cent on electric, with the petrol engine shut off.

Advantages	Limitations
1) High octane rating (around 108-112) compared to gasoline (typically 87-93). 2) lower greenhouse gas emissions compared to gasoline, and 3) potential for reducing dependence on fossil fuels	1) Lower energy density (energy per unit volume). 2) Pure ethanol can be corrosive to some engine components

Reports In The News

Report	Key Findings
Global Methane Tracker 2024 report by The International Energy Agency (IEA)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Record-high emissions: methane emissions from fossil fuel use in 2023 were close to the highest ever recorded, reaching around 120 million Tonnes. Major emitters: United States leading in oil and gas emissions, followed by Russia. (China was the top emitter from coal operations) Paris Agreement target: IEA estimates a drastic reduction of 75% in methane emissions from fossil fuels by 2030 is essential.
State of the Global Climate report, 2023 by World Meteorological Organization (WMO)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Record High Temperature: Global average <i>near-surface temperature</i> surged to at least 1.45°C above pre-industrial levels. Threshold levels of Greenhouse gas levels, surface temperatures, ocean heat and acidification, sea level rise, Antarctic Sea ice cover, and glacier retreat have been achieved. Reported High cost of climate inaction and the need for a swift transition to renewable energy.

Plastic Waste Management (PWM-Amendment) Rules 2024

The Ministry of Environment Forest and climate change (MoEF&CC) has amended the PWM Rules 2016 to Plastic Waste Management (Amendment) Rules 2024.

About Amendments

Revised Definitions Of "Importer", "Manufacturer", And "Producer"
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expanded Definition of "Importer": Term "importer" now includes imports of any plastic packaging/commodity with plastic packaging/carry bags/plastic sheets/plastic raw material. Comprehensive Definition of "Manufacturer": Term "manufacturer" now includes a person engaged in the production of plastic raw material/compostable plastics/biodegradable plastics. Extended Scope of "Producer": The term "producer" now also includes persons engaged in manufacturing of intermediate material used for manufacturing plastic packaging. <i>Only the producers registered under these rules can get raw materials from the manufacturer.</i> A new definition of "seller" has been inserted, which means any person who sells plastic raw material for producing plastic packaging is a seller. <p>Highlights of the Plastic Waste Management (Amendment) Rules 2024:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> It defines biodegradable plastics as not only capable of degradation by <i>biological processes</i> in specific environments such as soil, landfill, <i>but also as materials that do not leave any microplastics.</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> However, the caveat about microplastics in the updated rules as it does not specify - <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Which chemical tests can be used to establish the absence of microplastics, or To what extent microplastics must be reduced in a sample in order to consider them eliminated. The amendment provides that the manufacture of carry bags and commodities shall be permitted to be made from compostable plastics or biodegradable plastics.

- This is **subject to mandatory marking and labelling** laid down under the rules and the regulations of the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) for food contact applications.
- The rules require the manufacturers of compostable plastic or biodegradable plastic carry bags or commodities **to obtain a certificate from the CPCB before marketing or selling.**
- Every manufacturer of commodities made from plastic shall -
 - **Ensure processing of the pre-consumer plastic waste** generated in the form of reject or discard material at the stage of manufacturing and
 - Report to the State Pollution Control Board or Pollution Control Committee concerned.

Gibraltar Arc

A modelling study suggests a slumbering (dormant) subduction zone below the Gibraltar Strait is active and could break into the Atlantic Ocean in 20 million years' time, giving birth to an Atlantic "Ring of Fire."

About GIBALTAR ARC

- A geological region consisting of a curved mountain range (orogen) surrounding the Alboran Sea, located between the Iberian Peninsula (Spain) and Africa (Morocco)
- Gibraltar Arc is a product of the ongoing convergence of the Eurasian & African tectonic plates. The collision and convergence of these two tectonic plates have led to the formation of the Betic-Rif mountain range.
- The collision zone between these plates is what pushes up mountain ranges. The Gibraltar Arc began forming millions of years ago during the Oligocene epoch (34 million to 23 million years ago) and is still geologically active today.

Subduction Zones

- Subduction occurs when one tectonic plate slides beneath another, leading to seismic activity, volcanic eruptions, and the formation of mountain ranges.
- Other Subduction Zones in the Atlantic region are the Lesser Antilles Arc in the Caribbean and Scotia Arc near Antarctica.

Global E Waste Monitor Report

Recently, the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR) has released the Global E-waste Monitor 2024.

Key Takeaways

- **Rapid Growth:** E-waste generation is rising at an alarming rate, five times faster than documented e-waste recycling.
- **Global Figures:** In 2022, the world produced a staggering 62 million tonnes (Up 82% from 2010) of e-waste. By 2030, this is projected to reach a whopping 82 Million Tonnes (On track to rise another 32% by 2030)
- **Recycling Gap:** Only a fraction, roughly 13.8 Million Tonnes of the 2022 e-waste was formally collected and recycled in an environmentally sound manner.
- **Resource Potential:** E-waste contains valuable resources like precious metals, plastics, and glass.
- The report underlines that if countries could bring the e-waste collection and recycling rates to 60% by 2030, the benefits – including through minimizing human health risks – would exceed costs by more than US \$38 billion.

Magnetic Fossils

Scientists have discovered a 50,000-year-old sediment — a giant magneto fossil and one of the youngest to be found yet in Bay of Bengal.

About Magnetic Fossils

- **Formation:** Fossilized remains of magnetic particles created by magnetotactic bacteria which are microorganisms that biomineralized magnetic minerals such as magnetite (Fe₃O₄).
- **Preservation:** When these magnetotactic bacteria die, their magnetic minerals can be preserved in sediments or rocks.
- **Identification:** Magnetic fossils are identified through various techniques such as rock magnetism, electron microscopy, and paleomagnetic analysis.
- **Applications:** By analyzing the magnetic properties of sedimentary rocks containing magnetic fossils, researchers can reconstruct past variations in the Earth's magnetic field and infer changes in the climate, ocean circulation, and tectonic processes.
- **Significance:** Magneto fossils Can provide evidence for the presence of ancient life in rocks and sediments (the evolution of magnetosomes), even when other fossils are absent.

Afanasy Nikitin (AN) Seamount

India applied to the International Seabed Authority (ISA) for rights to explore **cobalt-rich crust** long known as the Afanasy Nikitin Seamount (AN Seamount) in the Indian Ocean seabed that aren't part of its jurisdiction.



**A seamount is an underwater mountain, usually of volcanic origin, that rises sharply from the ocean floor but does not reach the water's surface.



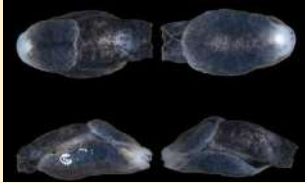


**ISA is established under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and headquartered in Kingston, Jamaica.



About AN Seamount (Rich in deposits of cobalt, nickel, manganese and copper.)

- A structural feature (400 km-long and 150 km-wide) in the Central Indian Ocean Basin (CIOB), located about 3,000 km away from India's coast.
- Lies entirely within an area submitted to the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf by Sri Lanka. (Have a Geopolitical concerns about China's dominance in processing these minerals).

Species In News

Species Name	Key Features
Indian Gharial (critically endangered) 	<p>The Indian Gharial (fish-eating crocodile or gavial) has been sighted in the Greater Kaziranga landscape for the third consecutive year.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Gharial has a uniquely long and thin snout, with a large bulb at the tip called the "ghara".• India has three species of Crocodylians namely:<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Gharial: IUCN Red List- Critically Endangered2. Mugger crocodile: IUCN- Vulnerable.3. Saltwater crocodile: IUCN- Least Concern.
Baleen Whales 	<p>The Scientists discovered the anatomy behind the songs of Baleen Whales that use a larynx, or voice box, anatomically modified to enable underwater vocalisation. (marine mammals known for their haunting songs)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• They have Unique feeding mechanism involving baleen plates, a large rack of fine, hair-like keratin used to filter out small krill from the water.

	(species such as the blue whale, humpback, North Atlantic right whales, bowhead whales)
<p>Green Anaconda (Least Concern)</p> 	<p>Recent study revealed that the green anaconda, formerly believed to be a single species, is actually two genetically distinct species.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • World’s heaviest snakes (weigh more than 250 kilograms) • Predominantly found in rivers and wetlands in South America. • First is the known species, <i>Eunectes murinus</i>, second, newly identified species is <i>Eunectes akayima</i> or “northern green anaconda”, which is found in Ecuador, Colombia, Venezuela, Trinidad, Guyana, Suriname and French Guiana.
<p>Hawksbill Turtle (Critically Endangered)</p> 	<p>The 14th Conference of the Parties to the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS COP14) adopted the Single Species Action Plan for conservation of the Hawksbill Turtle.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Only species of sea turtle that can survive on a diet consisting mainly of sponges. (named for their narrow, pointed beak) • They inhabit the tropical and sub-tropical waters of all of the world’s major oceans.
<p>Melanochlamys Droupadi</p> 	<p>The Zoological Survey of India named a new marine species of head-shield sea slug after President of India Droupadi Murmu.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sea slugs are hermaphroditic, meaning they possess both male and female reproductive organs. • Belonging to <i>Melanochlamys</i> genus was discovered from Digha of West Bengal coast and Udaipur of Odisha coast. • Live primarily in marine habitats and are slug-like
<p>Hangul (Critically Endangered)</p> 	<p>The experts suggested that the number of Hanguls in Kashmir will cross 300, the first time in more than three decades.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Distribution: Dachigam National Park and its nearby areas; Rajparian Wildlife Sanctuary, Overa Aru, Sind Valley, and the forests of Kishtwar and Bhaderwah in Jammu and Kashmir. • State Animal of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) • Project Hangul was started to address the decreasing population of the Hangul by J & K Govt in collaboration with the IUCN and WWF.
<p>Cycas circinalis</p> 	<p>It is facing extinction in northern Kerala due to an unknown and fast-spreading plant disease. (Known for their medicinal & nutritional properties, are dying out without a focused research & action plan)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is an evergreen shrub that can grow up to 6 meters tall and can tolerate full sun or shade. • It is found in dense, dry, scrubby woodlands in hilly areas in the states of Kerala, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, and the south of Maharashtra

<p>Golden Langur</p> 	<p>Recent Survey revealed that There are an estimated 7,396 golden langurs in India. (IUCN Red List: Endangered, CITES: Appendix I)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Native to Assam, India and Bhutan (both folivores and frugivores) • Golden langurs occupy moist evergreen and tropical deciduous forests as well as some riverine areas and savannas. • It has been noted that their fur changes colors according to the seasons
<p>Parasitoid Wasp</p> 	<p>Entomologists from the Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment (ATREE) have discovered a new species of parasitoid wasp in the Western Ghats region of Karnataka.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parasitoid wasps are a group of insects that lay their eggs inside other insects to complete their life cycle. • They are important biological control methods for gardeners. They are useful in controlling both native pests and invasive species. • They feed on the eggs, larvae, and sometimes pupae of many insects, including aphids, caterpillars, and other honeydew-producing sucking insects.

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Large Language Models (LLMs)

In the age of sophisticated artificial intelligence (AI), the advent of Large Language Models (LLMs) has transformed the manner in which computers engage with humans and understand language.

About LLMs

- LLMs are large general-purpose language models (type of AI) that can be pre-trained and then fine-tuned for specific purposes. In simple words, these models are trained to solve common language problems such as text classification, question answering, text generation across industries, document summarisation, etc.
 - ✓ The ability of Generative AI models to “converse” with humans and predict the next word or sentence is due to LLM.
 - ✓ LLMs use complex neural network architectures, similar to the structure of the human brain, to process information and generate text.
 - ✓ It creates different creative text formats, such as poems, code, scripts, musical pieces, email, letters, etc.
- LLMs can also be tailored to solve specific problems in a variety of domains such as finance, retail, entertainment, etc., using a relatively small size of field datasets.
- Example: Open AI’s ChatGPT, Google’s Gemini (Earlier Bard) uses LLMs

How do LLMs work?

- At the core of it is a technique known as “deep learning”. It involves the training of artificial neural networks, which are mathematical models inspired by the structure and functions of the human brain.
- Once trained, an LLM can predict the most likely next word or sequence of words based on inputs also known as prompts.

Applications

- Chatbots and virtual assistants: It can power chatbots that can hold conversations with users, answer questions, and complete tasks.
- Machine translation: translate text from one language to another, with greater accuracy and fluency compared to traditional machine translation methods.
- Search & Information retrieval:

Limitations:

- Bias and discrimination (perpetuating biases from training data)
- Lack of interpretability (difficulty understanding their reasoning)
- Ethical considerations (job displacement, privacy violations, potential misuse)

Extra Mile

Inflection: AI launched its latest LLM Inflection 2.5, which powers its friendly chatbot Pi personal assistant.

Pi chatbot and Inflection 2.5: Pi stands for personal intelligence. An AI chatbot with which one can have deep and meaningful conversations

- Inflection-2.5 is an “upgraded model that is competitive with all the world’s leading LLMs like GPT-4 & Gemini.

Blanets

These are hypothetical class of exoplanets, first proposed in 2019, that orbit supermassive black holes directly

Formation

- Unlike planets that form from the swirling dust and gas around young stars, blanets are theorized to form from clouds of dust and debris in the **accretion disk**, a massive swirling disk of material surrounding **supermassive black holes**.
- The intense gravitational pull of the black hole is thought to prevent these particles from collapsing into stars, but they are still able to clump together to form planetary bodies.

Characteristics

- Expected to be much larger than typical planets, reaching sizes up to 10 times the mass of Earth.
- This is due to the abundance of material in the accretion disk compared to the protoplanetary disks around young stars.
- They likely experience extreme environments due to their proximity to the black hole, potentially facing intense radiation and tidal forces.
- While the exact composition of blanets is unknown, they are expected to be predominantly ice and rock due to the conditions in the accretion disk.

Evidences

- a. Microlensing observations: Detecting the gravitational influence of a planet passing in front of a distant star.
- b. Direct imaging: Using powerful telescopes to search for faint objects around black holes.
- c. Transiting exoplanet surveys: Looking for dips in the brightness of stars as planets pass in front of them, although this method is less effective for blanets due to their large orbital distances from the black hole.

Garbhini-GA2

Researchers have recently created Garbhini-GA2, a specialized AI model designed for India, aimed at accurately determining the gestational age (GA) of a fetus.

- ✓ Garbhini (Started in 2014 under Department of Biotechnology (DBT)) stands for Interdisciplinary Group for Advanced Research in Birth outcomes, INdia Initiative.

Key Features of Garbhini-GA2

- **Developed by:** Researchers at the IIT Madras & the Translational Health Science and Technology Institute (THSTI), Faridabad (Haryana).
 - ✓ THSTI is an institute (Set up in 2009) under the Biotechnology Research and Innovation Council (BRIC), (DBT-Ministry of Science and Technology).
 - ✓ The GA model-building research was funded by the Grand Challenges India program of the Biotechnology Industry Research Assistance Council (BIRAC), DBT.
- **Developed for the Indian population:** Unlike existing GA models often based on data from other populations, Garbhini-GA2 uses data specific to the Indian population, making it more accurate
 - ✓ It demonstrated its superior accuracy compared to older formulas such as Hadlock and INTERGROWTH.
- **Focus on late trimesters:** While many existing models focus on early pregnancy, Garbhini-GA2 specifically addresses the second and third trimesters.
 - ✓ Ultrasound dating in early pregnancy is the standard of care for determining GA. However, dating based on formulae developed with Western data, particularly in the second & third trimesters, tends to be less accurate in the Indian population due to the variations in foetal growth.
- **Non-invasive approach:** The model utilizes readily available parameters like maternal weight, fundal height (distance from the pubic bone to the top of the uterus), and fetal biometry (ultrasound measurements of the fetus).

Homosep Atom

The technology called Homosep Atom is developed by the startup incubated in the Department of Science and Technology (DST)-Technology Business Incubator (TBI) of IIT Madras.

About It

- **Cost-effective:** The Homosep Atom is a cost-effective solution for cleaning septic tanks, as it can help to reduce the need for manual labor and frequent cleaning.
- **Homogenizes hard sludge:** The robot can break down and homogenize hard sludge into a slurry, making it easier to pump out.
- **Removes solid waste:** The robot has a grabber attachment that can remove solid waste, such as plastics, from the septic tank.
- **Improves worker safety:** By eliminating the need for human entry into septic tanks.
- The Homosep Atom has been deployed in 16 cities, employing AI for the inspection and management of confined spaces.

Obelisks

Scientists have identified a new form of life lying between viruses and viroids known as 'obelisks'.

About it

- First described in a 2024 by scientists at Stanford University.
- They are made of RNA and proteins which facilitates *self-replication within bacterial cells*. Obelisks rely on **microbial host cells**, possibly bacteria or fungi, for replication.
- Obelisk genes perform identical functions across diverse bacterial strains.
- They are capable of **vertically propagating** from parent to offspring cells.
- These are Circular RNA molecules with around 1,000 base pairs, forming rod-like structures.
- Larger and more complex than viroid genomes.
- May play a role in human health and disease, although research is ongoing.

Viroids

- Discovered in the 1971: First discovered infectious agent consisting solely of naked, single-stranded RNA.
- Simplest known infectious agents; smaller and simpler than obelisks.
- Genome: Small, circular RNA molecules, typically 200-400 nucleotides long.
- Do not code for proteins and rely on their host's machinery for replication.
- Can cause diseases in plants and some animals.

New Space Facilities of ISRO

The Prime Minister dedicated the PSLV Integration Facility (Sriharikota), the Semi-cryogenic Integrated Engine & Stage Test facility (Mahendra Giri), and the Trisonic Wind Tunnel (Thiruvananthapuram) to the nation.

About New Facilities of ISRO

PSLV Integration Facility (PIF- at the Satish Dhawan Space Centre (SDSC) in Sriharikota)

- Objective of Increasing the launch frequency of the Polar Satellite Launch Vehicle (PSLV) from 6 to 15 launches per year.
- Designed to accommodate the integration and launch of other *small launch vehicles*, including the SSLV (Small Satellite Launch Vehicle) and future rockets designed by private space companies.

Semi-cryogenics Integrated Engine and Stage Test facility:

- This facility at IPRC (*ISRO Propulsion Complex*) Mahendragiri will enable development of semi cryogenic engines and stages which will increase the payload capability of the present launch vehicles.
- Equipped with liquid Oxygen & kerosene supply systems to test engines up to 200 tons of thrust.

Trisonic Wind Tunnel at VSSC:

- Wind tunnels are essential for aerodynamic testing for characterisation of rockets and aircraft during flight in the atmospheric regime.
- A Trisonic Wind Tunnel (TWT) is a wind tunnel so named because it is capable of testing in three speed regimes – *subsonic, transonic, and supersonic*.
- Plays a crucial role in overseeing launches, and conducting system checks remotely for optimal mission performance.

Penicillin G

The production of Penicillin will be restarted by mid-2024 by Hyderabad-based Aurobindo pharma. It will be three decades after the country's last plant shut down

About Penicillin G (also known as benzylpenicillin)

Discovery and History	Discovered in 1928 by Alexander Fleming who observed that the fungus <i>Penicillium chrysogenum</i> produced a substance that inhibited the growth of bacteria, leading to the discovery of penicillin.
Mechanism of Action	It does not affect other healthy human cells, making penicillin G selectively toxic to bacteria. (Primarily active against gram-positive bacteria; not against gram-negative.)
Spectrum of Activity	Effective against a wide range of organisms, including <i>Streptococcus</i> , <i>Staphylococcus</i> , <i>Pneumonia</i> , <i>Syphilis</i> , <i>Gonorrhea</i> , <i>Meningitis</i> & some strains of <i>Clostridium</i>
Today's Role	Despite its declining use due to resistance and the availability of other antibiotics, penicillin G remains an essential antibiotic in certain situations.

Frontier Technology Labs (FTLs)

Atal Innovation Mission (AIM), NITI Aayog and Meta have announced the launch of Frontier Technology Labs (FTLs) to democratize future technologies and empower youth to innovate.

- ✓ Frontier technology refers to cutting-edge or emerging technologies that are at the forefront of innovation and have the potential to significantly impact various aspects of society and industry.

About FTLs (funded by Meta and Atal Innovation Mission will be the knowledge partner)

- An advanced version of Atal Tinkering Labs (ATLs) will provide state-of-the-art infrastructure for students to engage with technologies like AI, Augmented & Virtual Reality, Blockchain, Cybersecurity, Robotics, 3D Printing, and the Internet of Things.
 - ✓ The objective of ATLs is to foster curiosity, creativity, and imagination in young minds; and inculcate skills such as design mindset, computational thinking, physical computing etc.
- The FTLs are a part of Meta's Education to Entrepreneurship initiative, launched in September 2023, to seamlessly connect students, youth, workforce, and micro-entrepreneurs with futuristic technologies, taking digital skilling to the grassroots.
- These labs will be managed by Meta's partner 1M1B (One Million for One Billion).

Pine Needles-Based Fuel Making Technology

An MoU was signed between CSIR-Indian Institute of Petroleum, Dehradun and UCOST for deploying the technology of making fuel from pine needles Under the aegis of the Adarsh Champawat mission.

- ✓ The Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) is India's largest research and development (R&D) organization, with over 38 laboratories throughout the nation.
- ✓ UCOSOT stands for Uttarakhand State Council for Science & Technology.

About Technology

- It Involves, Briquetting (compaction/ densification of Pine Needles) or the process of converting biomass residues into a fuel.
 - ✓ The Centre has come up with a unique machine that can produce briquettes and pellets from pine needles as the pine needles are harmful (due to Forest Fire) to the ecology, diversity, and economy in the Himalayan region.
 - ✓ The briquetting unit will have a capacity of producing 50 kilograms per hour using Pine Needles as raw material.

Application of This Technology

- The biomass cookstove works with Pine Needles briquettes at an energy efficiency of 35% and reduces household pollution by 70%.
- The Pine Needle briquettes and pellets can replace coal and protect the environment.
- The briquettes can be used for domestic cooking and as direct or co-firing fuel in brick kilns and thermal power plants.

About Pine Trees (native primarily to northern temperate regions)

- Pine trees are evergreen coniferous trees which are the most widely distributed tree species globally and are known for their distinct needle-like leaves, conical shape, and resinous wood.
- They are particularly abundant in North America, Europe, Asia, and parts of Africa.
- Different species of pine trees (grow up to 260 feet tall) have adapted to various climatic conditions, including cold winters and dry summers.

IndiaAI Mission

Union Cabinet approved the IndiaAI Mission with an outlay of Rs 10,372 crore for the next five years.

About IndiaAI Mission

- The PM of India at the Global Partnership on Artificial Intelligence (GPAI) Summit 2023 (New Delhi) announced that India will launch AI mission.
- The IndiaAI mission will establish a comprehensive ecosystem catalyzing AI innovation through strategic programs and partnerships across the public and private sectors.
- The Mission will be implemented by 'IndiaAI' Independent Business Division (IBD) under Digital India Corporation (DIC), Meity
- **AI Curation Units (ACUs)** will also be developed in 50-line ministries and **AI marketplace** will be designed to offer **AI as a service** and **pre-trained models** to those working on AI applications.
- The implementation of this AI compute infrastructure will be done through a public-private partnership (PPP) model with 50% viability gap funding.
- Of the total outlay (of Rs 10,372 crore), Rs 4,564 crore has been earmarked for building computing infrastructure.
- IndiaAI Mission will help India demonstrate to the world how this transformative technology can be used for social good and enhance its global competitiveness.

7 Components of IndiaAI Mission

- **IndiaAI Compute Capacity:** The ecosystem will comprise *AI compute infrastructure of 10,000 or more Graphics Processing Units (GPUs)*, built through PPP. It will act as a one-stop solution for resources critical for AI innovation.
- **IndiaAI Innovation Centre (IAIC):** It will undertake the deployment of indigenous Large Multimodal Models (LMMs) and domain-specific foundational models in critical sectors.

- **IndiaAI Datasets Platform:** This unified data Platform will streamline access to quality *non-personal datasets* for AI Innovation to Indian Startups and Researchers.
- **IndiaAI Application Development Initiative:** This will promote AI applications in critical sectors for the problem statements sourced from Central Ministries, State Departments, and other institutions for catalyzing large scale socio-economic transformation.
- **IndiaAI Future Skills:** It is conceptualized to *mitigate barriers to entry* into AI programs and will increase **AI courses** in undergraduate, masters-level, and Ph.D. programs. Further, Data and AI Labs will be set-up in Tier 2 and Tier 3 cities across India to impart foundational level courses.
- **IndiaAI Startup Financing:** This pillar is conceptualized to support and accelerate deep-tech AI startups and provide them streamlined access to funding to enable futuristic AI Projects.
- **Safe & Trusted AI:** This pillar will enable the implementation of responsible AI projects including the development of *indigenous* tools and frameworks.

Aligned with the broader vision of the IndiaAI Mission, these initiatives aim to bolster India’s global leadership in AI, foster technological self-reliance, ensure ethical and responsible AI deployment, and democratize the benefits of AI across all strata of society.

IP/MPLS (Multiprotocol Label Switching)

India’s fastest and indigenously designed IP/MPLS (Internet Protocol - Multiprotocol Label Switching) router was launched recently. It is a networking technology that optimizes data traffic routing across networks.

What is MPLS?

- It is a data forwarding technique (optimizes data traffic) used in telecommunications networks to efficiently direct data packets along predetermined paths.
- It is widely deployed in large-scale networks, such as those operated by internet service providers (ISPs) and large enterprises, to improve performance, reliability, and manageability.
- **Applications:** VPNs (Virtual Private Networks); Traffic Engineering; Cloud Networking and Multiprotocol Support.

	Traditional Routing	MPLS
Forwarding Mechanism	based on the destination IP address of packets	based on labels attached to packets rather than examining the entire packet header
Efficiency	can result in slower forwarding decisions	offers faster forwarding
Traffic Engineering	provide limited capabilities for traffic engineering	enables sophisticated traffic engineering

Atmospheric Research Testbed in Central India (ART-CI)

The first phase of the Atmospheric Research Testbed in Central India (ART-CI) was inaugurated by Ministry of Earth Sciences (MoES) in Silkheda (Sehore district of Madhya Pradesh).

About (ART-CI) (In Charge: The Indian Institute of Tropical Meteorology (IITM), Pune)

- The ART is an open-field, focused observational and analytical research programme
- The facility aims to conduct ground-based observations of weather parameters like temperature, wind speeds, etc.
- It will also observe in-situ (on-site) transient synoptic systems – like low-pressure areas & depressions that form in the Bay of Bengal – during the southwest monsoon season from June to September. (particularly over the Monsoon Core Zone (MCZ))

- The setup at ART will also be used for calibrating and validating various satellite-based observations, part of weather predictions and forecasting.

Lyme Disease

Lyme disease a tick-borne disease was detected in man from Ernakulam(Kerala).

- ✓ Recently Lyme disease has caused a significant increase in the US to rise by almost 70%.

About Lyme Disease

Caused By	Borreliaburgdorferi bacteria
Transmission	Spread by ticks of the Ixodes genus (Ixodesscapularis-blacklegged tick) in the US
Symptoms	bull's-eye rash, Fever, chills, headache, fatigue Muscle and joint aches & Swollen lymph nodes
Diagnosis	Laboratory tests such as ELISA and Western blot assays can be conducted to confirm the presence of antibodies against Borreliaburgdorferi in the blood.
Prevention	Wear clothing that covers your arms and legs,
Treatment	1) Antibiotics like doxycycline, cefuroxime or amoxicillin in the early stages. 2) Intravenous antibiotics may be required in later stages.

Indian Network for Fishery and Animal Antimicrobial Resistance (INFAAR)

Food & Agricultural Organization (FAO) published an analytical report on the *Indian Network for Fishery and Animal Antimicrobial Resistance (INFAAR)* for 2019-22.

About INFAAR (Set up in August 2018 & Led by Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR))

- INFAAR is a network of laboratories across India, including ICAR research institutes, agricultural universities, and state veterinary universities.
- Supported by FAO and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID)
- Its objective is to generate comprehensive national data on AMR (Anti-Microbial Resistance) trends in fisheries and animal agriculture.
 - ✓ Anti-Microbial Resistance (AMR) refers to the ability of microorganisms (such as bacteria, viruses, fungi, and parasites) to resist the effects of antimicrobial drugs.

Pushpak

ISRO has successfully conducted the Pushpak Reusable Landing Vehicle (RLV) LEX 02 landing experiment at the Aeronautical Test Range (ATR) in Chitra Durga, Karnataka and brought significant breakthrough in RLV-TD technology.

- ✓ RLV-TD (technology demonstrator) is one of the most challenging endeavours of the Indian space agency towards developing essential technologies for a **fully reusable launch vehicle** to enable low-cost access to space.
- ✓ The configuration of RLV-TD is similar to that of an aircraft and combines the complexity of both launch vehicles and aircraft.

About Pushpak (RLV-LEX or Reusable Launch Vehicle – Landing EXperiment)

- ISRO conducted the first landing experiment, RLV-LEX-01, with a scaled down version of the RLV technology demonstrator (RLV-TD) in 2023 on a Chinook Helicopter of the Indian Air Force. This mission focused on validating the autonomous landing capability of the RLV
- The second mission involved releasing the Pushpak RLV from a higher altitude and greater distance from the runway, simulating a more challenging re-entry scenario.

Design and Features of Pushpak RLV

1. Pushpak RLV is a delta-winged vehicle with a length of about 6.5 meters and a wingspan of around 3.2 meters.
2. It features deployable landing gear and utilizes a parafoil deceleration system for landing .
3. The vehicle is launched from a helicopter at high altitude and then performs a guided descent and lands on a runway, simulating the return of a reusable spacecraft from space.

ANAGRANINF: Antibiotic Development Project

The Technology Development Board (TDB) of the Department of Science & Technology has supported the project "ANAGRANINF – Development of a Novel Class of Antibiotics Against Gram-Negative Bacterial-Infections." Through grant.

About ANAGRANINF

- **Aim:** To Develop a new class of antibiotics specifically designed to combat infections & resistance mechanisms caused by gram-negative bacteria.
 - ✓ **Gram-Negative Bacteria** are notorious for their ability to develop resistance to existing antibiotics. They have an outer membrane that makes it difficult for antibiotics to penetrate and kill them.
- The project aims to produce a series of compounds that not only exhibit enhanced efficacy but also align with the rigorous criteria laid out by the World Health Organization (WHO) for tackling Antimicrobial Resistance (AMR) infections.
- The project could involve identifying and optimizing lead compounds with potent activity against these bacteria.

Application Programming Interface (API)

CERT-In, along with CSIRT-Fin, issued a whitepaper on Application Programming Interface (API) security

About API

- A set of rules and protocols that allow software applications to talk to each other and exchange data, functionalities, and features.
- APIs define the methods and data formats that developers can use to request and exchange information between different systems or components.
- **Types:** Web APIs, RESTful APIs, SOAP APIs, GraphQL APIs
- **Real world examples:** Weather App, Social Media Logins, Online Payments

Benefits of APIs

1. **Faster development:** Developers can leverage existing functionalities offered by APIs instead of building everything from scratch.
2. **Increased innovation:** APIs open doors for creative integration of features and data across different applications. APIs promote interoperability and integration between disparate systems.
3. **Improved user experiences:** By combining functionalities, APIs can create more seamless and powerful user experiences.

Statio Shiv Shakti

The International Astronomical Union (IAU) working group for Planetary System Nomenclature has approved the name 'Statio Shiv Shakti' for the landing site of Chandrayaan-3's Vikram lander.

**IAU was established in 1919 with headquarters in Paris (France).

- The name reflects the duality of nature in Indian mythology, representing both masculine (Shiva) and feminine (Shakti) aspects.

- It Aligns with IAU's guidelines, which prohibit names with political, military, or religious significance.

MeerKAT Telescope

Astronomers using the MeerKAT radio telescope, made a discovery by identifying 49 previously unknown galaxies

About Telescope (in the Northern Cape region of South Africa launched in 2018)

- The MeerKAT telescope holds significance among the key telescopes in the southern hemisphere, akin to the Giant Magellan telescope in Chile and the James Webb Space Telescope.
- MeerKAT consists of 64 individual radio dishes. The telescope operates in the frequency range of 580 MHz to 14.7 GHz, covering both the lower-frequency radio waves and the higher-frequency microwave bands.
- MeerKAT is also helpful to study hydrogen activity and pulsars, and deepen an understanding of how the universe formed.

START Programme

ISRO has started the Space science and Technology Awareness Training (START) 2024 programme.

About Programme (Free online introductory-level awareness program)

- Objectives: To introduce participants to various aspects of space science and technology, including: Astronomy & Astrophysics, Heliophysics & Sun-Earth interaction, Instrumentation
- Target Audience: Postgraduate & final year undergraduate students in physical sciences & technology in India

Mohiniyattam

- In a historic move, the Kerala Kalamandalam, a deemed university for arts and culture, has lifted gender restrictions, by allowing boys to learn Mohiniyattam.
- Mohiniyattam is one of the eight **Indian classical dance form** originating from the state of **Kerala**.
- The term Mohiniyattam comes from the words **mohini** meaning a woman who enchants onlookers and **aattam** meaning graceful and sensuous body movements. Thus, the word Mohiniyattam literally means - dance of the enchantress.
- Another origin of the name is a legend from the Hindu mythology, in which Mohini - the female enchantress avatar of Lord Vishnu, helps the devas prevail over the asuras using her feminine charm.
- Mohiniyattam's roots, like all classical Indian dances, are in the **Natya Shastra** – the ancient Hindu Sanskrit text on performance arts.
- However, it follows the **Lasya style** described in Natya Shastra, that is a dance which is delicate and feminine.
- It also has elements of other performing art forms of Kerala viz. **Koothu and Kutiyattam** in it.
- It has love and devotion to God as its major themes, with usually Lord Vishnu or his incarnation Lord Krishna as the lead character. It comprises about 40 different basic movements called **adavukal**.
- It follows the sign language (mudra) as described in the ancient treatise on **Hastha Lakshanadeepika** to convey the story.
- The musical accompaniment of Mohiniyattam dance is known as **chollu**. The lyrics are in **Manipravalam**, which is a mixture of Sanskrit and Malayalam.
- The attire for Mohiniyattam consists of white sari, bordered with broad golden brocade (called **kasavu** in Malayalam).

Chausath Khamba

- Located near the Nizammuddin dargah in Delhi, Chausath Khamba is a tomb built in **1623-24**.
- Marked by marble pillars & elegant lattice work, Chausath Khamba **literally translates to 64 pillars**.
- The structure houses the **tomb of Mirza Aziz Koka**, foster brother of Mughal Emperor Akbar. It was built by his (Mirza Aziz Koka's) son, **Mirza Aziz Kokaltash**, governor of several provinces under Akbar.
- The mausoleum is unique as it is built entirely of marble, with 25 marble domes supporting the flat roof of the structure.
- The plan for Chausath Khamba could have been inspired from the wooden garden pavilions from Persia — such as the **Chihil Sutun (forty columns)**.
- In turn, the Chausath Khamba seems to have inspired the architectural design for Emperor Shahjahan's **Diwan-i-Aam, Hall of Audience**.
- In 2011-2014, the Aga Khan Trust for Culture along with the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) undertook the conservation of Chausath Khamba. The project was **co-funded** by the **Federal Republic of Germany**.
- According to historian Sam Dalrymple, the structure is a piece of Gujarat in Delhi. He also points to the fact how regional architecture travelled across India centuries ago.
- The structure also finds mention in Sir Gordon Risle Hearn's book The Seven Cities of Delhi.

Petroglyphs and Geoglyphs

The Bombay High Court recently issued a notice to the Union Government and the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) for the protection and preservation of ancient rock art petroglyphs or geoglyphs in the Konkan region.

Petroglyphs	Geoglyphs
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A petroglyph is an <u>image created by removing part of a rock surface by incising, picking, carving, or abrading, as a form of rock art.</u> • The word is derived from Greek - <i>petra</i> meaning stone and <i>glyphein</i> meaning to carve. • Painted or drawn images on rocks are not classified as petroglyphs, instead, they are defined as pictographs. • Often associated with prehistoric people, petroglyphs have been found in all parts of the globe except Antarctica, with highest concentrations in parts of Africa, Scandinavia and Siberia. • Estimated to be 20,000 years old they are classified as protected monuments and have been added to the tentative list of UNESCO's World Heritage Sites. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A geoglyph is a large design or motif – generally longer than 4 metres – produced on the ground by durable elements of the landscape, such as stones, stone fragments, gravel, or earth. • Geoglyphs are generally a type of land art, and sometimes rock art. It is <u>created by arranging or moving objects within a landscape.</u> • A positive geoglyph is formed by the arrangement and alignment of materials on the ground in a manner similar to petroforms. • A negative geoglyph is formed by removing part of the natural ground surface to create differently coloured or textured ground in a manner similar to petroglyphs.

Lahore Resolution

- Pakistan held its National Day celebrations in New Delhi again this year, after a four-year gap caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and the deteriorating ties between the two countries.
- Pakistan National Day is observed on March 23, the day the Lahore Resolution was adopted in 1940 by the Muslim League.
- In India, Pakistan National Day is celebrated at the Pakistan’s embassy complex in New Delhi.

Background

- Till the early 1930s, many Muslims had been agitating for better representation and safeguarding of their rights within the Indian Union. The separate electorate granted to them in the Government of India Act, 1935, was a step towards that.
- However, with time, the demands of a total break from India got stronger. The Lahore Resolution was an outcome of this, bringing the Muslim League to a point from which it never turned back.
- The Muslim League session was held days after the **Khaksar tragedy**, when members of a Muslim group called the Khaksars, fighting for India’s independence, were shot at by the British on March 19, 1940, in Lahore, killing many.

Lahore Resolution

- The Lahore Resolution, commonly known as the **Pakistan Resolution** was adopted by the **All-India Muslim League** during its **general session in Lahore** from March 22 to March 24, 1940.
- The resolution was presented at **Minto Park** (now renamed **Iqbal Park**), in Lahore. It was written and prepared by Muhammad Zafarullah Khan and was presented by A. K. Fazlul Huq, the first Prime Minister of Bengal during the British Raj.
- It **formally called for an independent state for India’s Muslims**. While the resolution does not include the word ‘Pakistan’ anywhere, there have been debates if its text calls for one separate nation or two. Pakistan celebrates it as its National Day.
- The Lahore Resolution was **criticised by many Indian Muslims**, like Abul Kalam Azad and the Deoband ulema led by Husain Ahmad Madani, who advocated for a united India.

- In 1956, on the same day, the country officially adopted its first Constitution, which transformed the Dominion of Pakistan to the Islamic Republic of Pakistan.
- Between 1960 and 1968, the **Minar-e-Pakistan** was built at the site where the resolution was adopted. The text of the resolution is inscribed at the base of the tower.

Key Points of Lahore Resolution

- The resolution declared that “geographically contiguous units are demarcated into regions which should be constituted with such territorial readjustments as may be necessary”
- “The areas in which the Muslims are numerically in a majority as in the *North-Western and Eastern Zones of India*, should be grouped to constitute *Independent States* in which the constituent units shall be autonomous and sovereign.”
 - It is this wording — North-Western and Eastern Zones of India and Independent States — that led many, specially Bengali leaders, to debate if the resolution actually called for two different states, to the east and west of India.
 - However, after its adoption, the Muslim League and its leader, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, clearly maintained that the Lahore Resolution was about two countries, one for Hindus and one for Muslims.
- The resolution also demanded that “in other parts of India where the Mussalmans are in a minority, mandatory safeguards shall be specially provided in the constitution for them and other minorities.”
- “This will be for the protection of their religious, cultural, economic, political, administrative and other rights and interests in consultation with them.”

Geographical Indication Tags

Several products like the Majuli mask, Majuli manuscript painting and Rupa Tarakasi were recently given Geographical Indication (GI) tags.

Majuli Mask

- Majuli, the largest river island in the world and the seat of Assam’s neo-Vaishnavite tradition, has been home to the art of mask-making since the 16th century.
- The handmade masks are traditionally used to depict characters in **bhaonas, or theatrical performances** with devotional messages under the neo-Vaishnavite tradition, introduced by the 15th-16th century reformer saint **Srimanta Sankardeva**.
- Srimanta Sankardeva established this art of masks through a play called **Chinha Jatra**. The word means explaining through images.
- The masks can depict gods, goddesses, demons, animals and birds — Ravana, Garuda, Narasimha, Hanuman, Varaha Surpanakha all feature among the masks.
- They can range in size from those covering just the face (mukh mukha), to those covering the whole head and body of the performer (cho mukha).
- The masks are made of bamboo, clay, dung, cloth, cotton, wood and other materials available in the riverine surroundings of the makers.
- Sattras are monastic institutions established by Srimanta Sankardev and his disciples as centres of religious, social and cultural reform.
- Today, they are also centres of traditional performing arts such as borgeet (songs), xattriya (dance) and bhaona (theatre), which are an integral part of the Sankardev tradition.
- Majuli has 22 sattras, and the patent application states that the mask-making tradition is by and large concentrated in four of them — Samaguri Sattras, Natun Samaguri Sattras, Bihimpur Sattras and Alengi Narasimha Sattras.
- The Samaguri Sattras had been practising mask-making since its establishment in 1663.

Majuli Manuscript Painting

- It is a form of painting — also originating in the 16th century — done on **sanchi pat**, or manuscripts made of the bark of the sanchi or agar tree, using homemade ink.
- The earliest example of an illustrated manuscript is said to be a rendering of the **Adya Dasama of the Bhagwat Purana in Assamese** by Srimanta Sankardev.
- This art was patronised by the **Ahom kings**. It continues to be practised in every sattra in Majuli.

Rupa Tarakasi

- Odisha's Cuttack is known for its **silver filigree work**, of intricate design and fine craftsmanship.
- In Odia, "**tara**" means **wire** and "**kasi**" means **to design**. Thus, as part of Rupa Tarakasi, silver bricks are transformed into thin fine wires or foils and used to create jewellery or showpieces.
- While the exact origin of the filigree art in Cuttack is not clear, it is known to have existed as far back as the **12th century**. The art form received considerable **patronage under the Mughals**.
- The silver filigree work of Cuttack is identical in character with that of Arabia, Malta, Genoa, Norway, Sweden and Denmark.
- Popular product categories found in Cuttack are jewellery, decorative artifacts, accessories, home décor and religious/cultural pieces.

AWARDS / PERSONALITIES IN NEWS

Pritzker Architecture Prize

- Japanese architect **Riken Yamamoto** was recently declared winner of the 2024 Pritzker Architecture Prize.
- The highest international award in the field, it is sometimes referred to as the “*Architecture Nobel*”.
- The prize has been awarded every year since its **founding in 1979**. It was instituted by **Jay A Pritzker**, and his wife **Cindy**, to honour a living architect whose built work demonstrates talent, vision and commitment.
- The award comes with a prize of \$100,000, a citation, and a bronze medallion based on designs by **Louis Sullivan**, the Chicago architect known as the **father of the skyscraper**.
- Architects from Japan have won the largest number of Pritzkers, Yamamoto is the ninth laureate from Japan. The only Indian laureate is the late **Balkrishna Doshi (2018)**.

Sheetal Devi

- Election Commission has announced Para Archer and Arjuna Awardee, Sheetal Devi as its National Persons with Disabilities (PWD) icon.
- Sheetal Devi claimed a silver medal in the open women’s compound archery event at the World Archery Para Championships 2023 in the Czech Republic.
- She was the first female armless archer to win a medal at the Para World Championships.
- Later, at the Asian Para Games 2023, she won gold medals in the individual compound and mixed team events apart from winning the silver medal in the women’s doubles competition.