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TOGETHER WE SCALE HEIGHTS

Daily Current Affairs

🎯 To The Point

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1 | Is the Caste Census a Necessary Tool for India?

Context: The idea of a **caste census** has reignited debates across India, with supporters advocating it as a way to allocate resources, reservations, and policy benefits equitably. However, **historical records** and the **complex realities** of caste dynamics in modern India pose significant challenges to its feasibility and utility.

Historical Background of Caste Census in India:

Colonial Beginnings:

- **1871-72 Census**: Marked the first caste census, exposing **arbitrary and inconsistent classifications**.
- **1931 Census**: Identified **4,147 castes** but underscored **inaccuracies** as communities often claimed **different caste identities** across regions.

Post-Independence Complexities: The **Socio-Economic and Caste Census (SECC) 2011** revealed **46.7 lakh caste categories**, riddled with **8.2 crore errors**, highlighting the **complexities of caste classifications**.

Challenges in Conducting a Caste Census:

1. **Caste Mobility and Misclassification**
   - **Upward Mobility**: Communities may claim **higher caste affiliations** for social prestige.
   - **Downward Mobility**: Some opt for **lower caste identities** to benefit from **reservations**.
   - **Similar-Sounding Castes**: Confusion arises due to **identical surnames**, e.g., 'Dhanak,' 'Dhanuk,' and 'Dhanka' in Rajasthan.
2. **Enumerator Bias**: Enumerators often rely on **assumptions based on surnames** rather than directly asking sensitive caste-related questions.
3. **Data Accuracy**: Even recent efforts, such as the **Bihar Caste Census 2022**, exposed **inconsistencies**, undermining the reliability of the data collected.

Proportional Representation: Is It Practical?

The Idea of Proportional Representation:

- Reserved seats are distributed based on caste populations (e.g., **27% reservation for OBCs**).
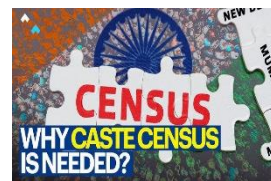
Why It's Impractical:

- India's **1.4 billion population** includes over **6,000 castes**, with an average caste size of **2.3 lakh**.
- Smaller castes, e.g., those with only **10,000 members**, would require **1.4 lakh vacancies** to ensure representation—**unfeasible** in recruitment systems like UPSC.

Impacts of a Caste Census:

1. **Policy Implementation**: While intended to promote **equitable distribution of resources**, complexities in caste data could deepen **social divisions**.
2. **Marginalization of Smaller Castes:** Minor castes may face **exclusion**, as their smaller populations might not justify meaningful representation.
3. **Administrative and Financial Strain:** Conducting a caste census would require **significant logistical resources**, potentially diverting attention from **key developmental priorities**.

Conclusion:

The **caste census** stems from a desire to ensure **equity**, but its **execution challenges**, **data reliability issues**, and **risk of social fragmentation** raise questions about its practicality. Rather than relying solely on caste data, **alternative approaches** focusing on **socio-economic upliftment** and **inclusive development** may offer more sustainable solutions for India's diverse population.

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2 Understanding the Akal Takht's Role and Its Ties with the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD)

Context: Recently, **Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) President Sukhbir Singh Badal** was attacked near the **Golden Temple**, though he remained unharmed. Badal, already recovering from a fractured foot, was also handed a **religious punishment** by the **Akal Takht** for alleged misconduct during the SAD government (2007-2017). Several former cabinet members are similarly serving atonement by performing tasks like cleaning utensils and bathrooms.

What is the Akal Takht?

Establishment of the Akal Takht:

The **Akal Takht** was founded in **1606** by the sixth Sikh Guru, **Guru Hargobind**, following the martyrdom of his father, **Guru Arjan Dev**, at the hands of the Mughals.

- It is located directly opposite the **Harmandir Sahib (Golden Temple)**.
- The Guru issued the first **Hukamnama (edict)** from this platform, urging Sikhs to contribute **horses and weapons** for the community's defense.

The Dual Significance: Miri and Piri:

- Guru Hargobind introduced two swords symbolizing **Miri (temporal power)** and **Piri (spiritual authority)**.
- The slightly shorter sword for **Miri** represented the **primacy of spiritual over temporal power**.

A Symbol of Defiance:

- The **12-foot-high platform** of the Akal Takht stood as a direct challenge to Mughal Emperor Jahangir's **11-foot-high throne**, symbolizing Sikh defiance against oppression.

Evolution of the Akal Takht After Guru Gobind Singh:

- During periods of persecution, the Akal Takht became a **rallying point for Sikhs**, especially after the execution of **Banda Singh Bahadur** in 1716.
- **Sarbat Khalsa gatherings** were held here during **Baisakhi** and **Diwali** to make critical decisions for the community.
- The tradition of the Sarbat Khalsa continued into the **19th century**, with **Maharaja Ranjit Singh** holding one of the last assemblies in 1805.

Appointment of the Akal Takht Jathedar:

Early Practices:

Initially, the **Sarbat Khalsa** appointed the Jathedar during annual gatherings.

Changes During British Rule:

Under colonial rule, the appointment process was influenced by **pro-British leaders** through the **Darbar Sahib committee**.

Role of the SGPC:

- With the passage of the **Sikh Gurdwaras Act, 1925**, the responsibility shifted to the **Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC)**.
- Today, the SGPC oversees gurdwaras across **Punjab, Himachal Pradesh, and Chandigarh**.

The Role and Authority of the Akal Takht Jathedar:

Supreme Religious Authority:

The **Jathedar of the Akal Takht** is the **highest temporal and spiritual authority** in Sikhism, responsible for guiding the community on key matters.

Power and Jurisdiction:

- The Jathedar can **summon any Sikh** for trial and issue **religious punishments (tankhah)** to instill humility and remove ego.
- The position demands a person who is **baptized**, knowledgeable in **Sikh history**, and free of moral shortcomings.

Historical Demonstration of Authority:

The Akal Takht's directives have never been openly defied. Notably, **Maharaja Ranjit Singh** accepted public punishment at the Akal Takht for moral transgressions.

The Relationship Between SAD and SGPC:

Shared Roots:

- Both the SGPC and SAD originated during the **Gurdwara Reform Movement of 1920**.
- The **SGPC** was established to manage Sikh shrines, while the **SAD** acted as its enforcement arm, combating corrupt priests and British interference.

Three Pillars of Sikh Politics:

- The **Akal Takht**, **SGPC**, and **SAD** form the **three pillars of Sikh politics**.
- Controlling the SGPC, which appoints the Akal Takht Jathedar, provides the SAD with significant influence.

Akali Influence Over SGPC:

- The SAD dominated the SGPC during the **1960s and 1970s** and maintained control even during Punjab's period of unrest in the **1980s**.
- Critics argue that the absence of SGPC elections since **2011** has helped the SAD retain its dominance.

SAD's Influence on Jathedar Decisions:

The **SAD's control over the SGPC** has often led to allegations of **political interference** in the decisions of the Akal Takht Jathedar.

Conclusion:

The **Akal Takht** remains central to **Sikh governance and spirituality**, symbolizing defiance and moral authority. However, its relationship with the **SGPC and SAD** highlights the intersection of religion and politics, raising questions about the independence of Sikh institutions.

3 India's Trade Potential in a Changing Global Landscape

Context: India's trade dynamics are at a critical juncture as **global disruptions** and **geopolitical shifts** reshape the international economic order. The **NITI Aayog's Trade Watch Report** offers valuable insights into India's trade prospects, hurdles, and areas of untapped potential, especially in the context of the **US-China trade tensions** and the evolving **China Plus One strategy**.

Key Insights from NITI Aayog's Trade Watch Report:

Challenges in Leveraging the 'China Plus One' Strategy:

- India has achieved **limited success** in attracting multinational corporations looking to reduce their reliance on China.
- **Southeast Asian nations** like Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia, and Cambodia outperformed India due to:
  - **Cheaper labor costs**
  - **Simplified tax regimes**
  - **Lower tariffs**
  - Proactive engagement in **Free Trade Agreements (FTAs)**

Global Trade Fragmentation:

- The **US export restrictions** on Chinese goods have intensified trade fragmentation.
- India faces stiff competition from **Thailand and Malaysia** in sectors like **electrical machinery**.

Geopolitical Realignments and India's Opportunities:

US-China Trade War: A Mixed Opportunity:

- The escalating trade conflict between the US and China offers **potential benefits** for India, particularly in:
  - High-tech materials
  - Alternative supply chains
- **US Restrictions**: Targeted export controls on cutting-edge materials to China.
- **China's Retaliation**: Imposed bans on critical raw materials like **gallium** and **germanium**.

India's current share in 70% of global trade is **less than 1%**, showcasing significant **untapped potential**.

Strengthening India-US Trade Relations:

The **US remains India's largest trading partner**, presenting ample opportunities to expand in **goods** and **services sectors**.

Sectoral Challenges and Policy Recommendations:

Iron and Steel Industry Under Pressure:

- A **33% decline** in India's **iron and steel exports** during Q1 FY25 was driven by weak domestic demand and oversupply in China.
- **EU's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM)**:
  - Tariffs of **20–35%** could reduce India's export competitiveness.
  - **Compliance costs** related to emissions reporting may further strain exporters.

Balancing Tariff Policies:

- The government's proposed **25% hike on steel import duties** has raised concerns about reduced competition and higher costs for domestic consumers.
- Policymakers must balance **pragmatic protectionism** with **free trade principles**, especially when dealing with opaque practices in global markets.

Recent Policy Initiatives to Boost Trade:

Schemes Supporting Exporters:

1. **Interest Equalisation Scheme**: Offers cheaper rupee credit to MSME exporters for pre-shipment and post-shipment activities.

2. **Remission of Duties and Taxes on Exported Products (RoDTEP)**: Ensures exporters are reimbursed for unrefunded duties and taxes on exported goods.

3. **Export Promotion Capital Goods (EPCG)**: Facilitates **duty-free imports** of capital goods to enhance domestic production capacity.

Advances in Trade Facilitation:

- India achieved a **93.55% score** in the 2023 UNESCAP Global Survey on **Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation**, surpassing several developed nations like France and Germany.

Collaborative Platforms and International Engagement:

- **Trade Connect e-Platform**: A digital one-stop solution for MSME exporters offering real-time updates and access to global markets.
- **ASEAN-India Trade Talks**: Addressed issues like market access, rules of origin, and trade remedies.

Future Pathways for Growth:

Impact of US Trade Policies:

- General US tariffs (e.g., **10%**) are unlikely to harm India significantly.
- High tariffs on Chinese goods (up to **60%**) could create opportunities for Indian exporters to capture new markets.

Diversifying Markets and Products:

India needs to explore **new regions** and **innovative products** to enhance its share in global trade. Proactive **policy measures** and **infrastructure reforms** could position India as a neutral and competitive economy amid global tensions.

Conclusion:

India's trade potential lies at the intersection of **challenges and opportunities**. While competitors like Vietnam have benefited more from the **China Plus One strategy**, India's strategic advantages remain underutilized in many sectors.

To capitalize on the current disruptions in global trade, India must adopt:

- **Dynamic policies** to attract foreign investments.
- **Robust trade facilitation mechanisms** to support exporters.
- **Diversified trade partnerships** to mitigate geopolitical risks.

With the right reforms, India can rise as a **global trade leader** amidst the evolving economic landscape.

4 South Africa Takes the Helm of G20 and B20

Context: South Africa has officially assumed the **Presidency of the G20** and is now leading the **Business 20 (B20)**, the G20's designated platform for private sector engagement.

Theme for South Africa's Leadership:

The theme for South Africa's presidency is **"Solidarity, Equality, and Sustainability."**

This theme emphasizes:

- **Inclusive economic growth**
- **Sustainable global trade practices**
- Addressing **climate challenges**
- Fostering **equality in agricultural development**

About G20

What is the G20?

The **G20** is an informal assembly of **19 countries** and two regional bodies:

- **African Union**
- **European Union**

Key Statistics

- Represents **two-thirds** of the global population
- Accounts for:
  - **85% of global GDP**
  - **80% of global investment**
  - Over **75% of global trade**

G20 Member Nations:

- **Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, France, Germany, India, Indonesia, Italy, Japan, Republic of Korea, Mexico, Russia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, Turkey, United Kingdom, and the United States.**

Structure and Presidency Rotation:

- The G20 has **no permanent secretariat or headquarters**.
- The presidency **rotates annually**, ensuring **regional balance** over time.
- The 19 member countries are divided into **five groups**, each with a maximum of four countries.
- The presidency rotates among these groups, with a new country taking charge each year.

Troika System:

The **Troika** ensures continuity and consistency in the G20's agenda.

- The **current presidency** collaborates with the **previous and next presidencies.**

About B20

What is B20?

The **Business 20 (B20)** serves as the official platform for engaging the private sector within the G20 framework.

- **Established**: 2010
- **Participants**: Companies and business organizations

Core Focus Areas:

The B20 develops policy recommendations on:

- **Trade and innovation**
- **Sustainable development**
- **Digital transformation**
- **Climate change**

These recommendations are submitted to **G20 leaders** during their summits, influencing the global economic agenda.

B20 Leadership:
- Each year, the G20 Presidency appoints:
  o A **B20 Chair**
  o A **B20 Sherpa**
  o A **B20 Secretariat** to support coordination and execution.

South Africa's Role in Global Leadership:

South Africa's leadership in the G20 and B20 marks a critical opportunity to:
- Champion **solidarity and sustainability** on a global scale.
- Bridge the gap between **developing and developed economies.**
- Drive actionable policies to tackle climate challenges and promote inclusive growth.

By steering these influential platforms, South Africa is positioned to shape the future of **global economic governance** and **sustainable trade practices**.

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GS Paper 3 – Environment and Ecology

5 | Saudi Arabia's Ambitious Quest to Green Its Deserts

Context: Saudi Arabia is embarking on a bold mission to combat **drought**, **desertification**, and the growing environmental challenges of its arid landscape. Through substantial investments in **green technology** and regional collaboration, the kingdom aims to transform its deserts into flourishing ecosystems. Saudi Arabia is also set to host the **United Nations COP16 conference**, spotlighting its efforts to address climate and environmental issues. However, concerns over **greenwashing** cast a shadow on the kingdom's initiatives.

Understanding Greenwashing:
What is Greenwashing?
Greenwashing refers to actions by organizations, governments, or companies that create the **illusion of environmental sustainability** without delivering real, impactful changes.
- Often a **marketing tactic**, it portrays projects as eco-friendly, masking continued practices that harm the environment.
- Examples include vague claims like "eco-friendly" or "sustainable" products without transparent certifications or evidence.

Why Critics are Concerned:
Saudi Arabia's green initiatives face scrutiny for focusing on high-profile projects that critics argue may lack sufficient depth or scale to meaningfully counterbalance the nation's continued dependence on **oil-based revenues**.

The Middle East Green Initiative (MGI):
What is MGI?
The **Middle East Green Initiative (MGI)** is Saudi Arabia's flagship regional effort to combat **climate change** and promote sustainability across the Middle East.

Key Goals:
- **Planting 10 billion trees** to combat desertification and enhance carbon capture.
- **Rehabilitating 74 million hectares** of degraded land, restoring ecosystems to support biodiversity.
- Building regional collaboration to align with **global climate targets**.

Saudi Arabia's Commitments:
To ensure success, the kingdom has:
- Announced the establishment of a **dedicated MGI Secretariat** to oversee and accelerate projects.
- Pledged **$2.5 billion** to fund MGI initiatives and improve governance.

Can Saudi Arabia Lead a Green Revolution?
Opportunities:
- Hosting **COP16** highlights Saudi Arabia's desire to be at the forefront of climate action.
- Investments in **tree planting, land rehabilitation**, and **green technology** have the potential to address desertification and improve regional climate resilience.

Challenges:
- **Greenwashing Concerns**: Critics argue that many projects prioritize optics over meaningful environmental impact.
- **Dependence on Oil**: Saudi Arabia remains one of the largest oil exporters globally, creating a contradiction in its green efforts.
- **Scale and Feasibility**: Transforming desert landscapes requires massive investments, long-term commitment, and global collaboration, all of which are daunting challenges.

Conclusion:
Saudi Arabia's ambition to green its deserts reflects a desire to lead the fight against **climate change** while redefining its environmental image.
However, for the efforts to gain credibility, the kingdom must ensure that its **initiatives deliver measurable results** beyond symbolic actions. By addressing **greenwashing concerns** and reducing its reliance on oil, Saudi Arabia could set a **global example** of how to balance economic growth with environmental sustainability.

6 **Supreme Court Directs Uniform Compliance of the POSH Act**

Context: The **Supreme Court of India** has issued **directions** to all **States** and **Union Territories** for the **effective implementation** of the **Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013** (POSH Act). These directions aim to ensure **uniformity** and **accountability** in the implementation of the law across the country.

Key Directions Issued by the Supreme Court:

1. **Notification of District Officers**: The **Appropriate Government** is instructed to **notify District Officers** for each district, who will be responsible for overseeing the **implementation** of the POSH **Act. Their key duties include:**
   o Ensuring the **constitution of Internal Complaints Committees (ICCs)** in all organizations within the district.
   o The **Internal Complaints Committee** (under **Section 4 of the POSH Act**) must be set up by every employer. This committee is tasked with receiving complaints, conducting inquiries, and recommending actions.

2. **Constitution of Local Committees**: Under **Section 6 of the POSH Act**, every district must establish a **Local Committee** to address complaints of sexual harassment, particularly in cases where:
   o An organization has fewer than **10 workers** and is unable to form an Internal Complaints Committee.
   o The **complaint is against the employer**.

3. **Designation of Nodal Officers**: Each **Block**, **Taluka**, or **Tehsil** in rural or tribal areas, and **municipalities** in urban areas must appoint a **Nodal Officer**. The Nodal Officer will be responsible for ensuring that the POSH Act is being effectively implemented at the grassroots level.

4. **Jurisdiction of the Local Committee**: The **Local Committee's jurisdiction** will cover the area of the concerned district, ensuring that complaints are dealt with at the local level.

5. **Introduction of SHeBox**: Every state is encouraged to consider establishing a **SHeBox**, an **electronic platform** for the registration of sexual harassment complaints. The **Sexual Harassment electronic Box (SHe-Box)** will provide a **single-window** access for women to register their complaints of sexual harassment, ensuring **ease of access** and **confidentiality**.

Key Provisions of the POSH Act, 2013:

- **Definition of Sexual Harassment**: The POSH Act defines sexual harassment broadly to include all forms of harassment, such as:
  o **Physical contact**
  o **Demands for sexual favours**
  o **Sexually coloured remarks**
  o **Displaying pornography**
  o **Any other unwelcome physical, verbal, or non-verbal sexual conduct**
- **Applicability**: The POSH Act applies to all workplaces, covering:
  o **Government and private sector organizations**
  o **Hospitals**
  o **Non-governmental organizations**

- o **Employer-provided transport**
- o **Residential spaces** visited during employment
- **Complaint Committees**: The Act mandates the establishment of two types of committees:
  - o **Internal Complaints Committees (ICCs)** in organizations.
  - o **Local Committees** for cases where ICCs are not constituted or when complaints are against the employer.

Conclusion:

The **Supreme Court's directions** serve as a reminder of the importance of **preventing sexual harassment** in workplaces and ensuring a **safe environment** for women. By mandating the constitution of **Internal and Local Committees**, **designating Nodal Officers**, and encouraging the use of the **SHeBox**, the Court has strengthened the framework for **complaint redressal**. This marks a critical step toward enforcing **gender equality** and protecting the rights of women in India.