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🎯 To The Point

by Dhananjay Gautam

15- 21 Dec 2024

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GS Paper 2 – Polity and Governance

eCourts Mission Mode Project: Revolutionizing India's Judiciary

Context: The **eCourts Mission Mode Project** is a transformative initiative announced by the **Minister of Law and Justice, Arjun Ram Meghwal**, to enhance the **Information and Communication Technology (ICT)** infrastructure of the Indian Judiciary.

Overview of the eCourts Project:

1. **Conceptualization**: Introduced in **2005** by the **eCommittee, Supreme Court of India**.
2. **Launch Year**: Officially launched in **2007** under the **Department of Justice, Ministry of Law and Justice**.
3. **Key Objectives**:
   o **Boost judicial productivity and efficiency**.
   o Ensure **predictable and reliable access to justice**.
   o **Automate judicial processes** for better accountability among stakeholders.
4. **Implementation Authority**: Managed by the **High Courts** within their respective jurisdictions.

Phases of Implementation:

Phase I (2007–2015): Foundational Phase

- Focused on **basic computerization** of courts.
- **Internet connectivity** was established across various courts.
- Introduction of **Case Information Systems (CIS)**.

Phase II (2015–2023): Advancing Technology

- Enabled ICT solutions for **district and subordinate courts**.
- Introduced **video conferencing facilities**.
- Rolled out **citizen-centric services**, such as:
   o **e-Payment gateways** for court fees and fines.
   o Access to **certified documents online**.

Phase III (2023–2027): Digital Transformation

- Focused on creating **digital and paperless courts**.
- **Digitization** of legacy records and pending cases.
- Expanded **video conferencing** to include **hospitals and jails**.
- Adoption of **cloud computing architecture** for seamless data management.

Potential Benefits of the eCourts Project

1. **Increased Efficiency**: **Streamlines court processes**, reduces delays, and improves case management.
2. **Enhanced Transparency**: **Public access to court information** promotes transparency and accountability.
3. **Improved Accessibility**: Ensures **justice for remote and underserved communities**, making the judiciary more inclusive.
4. **Cost Reduction**: Minimizes costs associated with **physical paperwork** and travel.
5. **Judicial Modernization**: Aligns the Indian Judiciary with **global best practices**, ensuring a modern, tech-driven approach.

Challenges in Implementation

1. **Digital Literacy**: Need for enhanced **digital literacy** among judges, lawyers, and court staff.
2. **Data Security Concerns**: Protecting sensitive judicial data from **cyber threats**.
3. **Infrastructure Deficits**: Bridging **infrastructure gaps**, particularly in **rural and remote areas**.

Conclusion:

The **eCourts Mission Mode Project** is a landmark step towards building a modern, efficient, and transparent judicial system in India. While the initiative holds immense promise, addressing challenges like **digital literacy**, **data security**, and **infrastructure development** will be pivotal to its success. Through sustained efforts, the project aims to transform the Indian judiciary into a global model of innovation and inclusivity.

Internal Policy Barriers to Unlocking the China-Plus-One Opportunity

Context: The **16th Finance Commission Chairman, Arvind Panagariya**, has emphasized the importance of **keeping India open to Chinese investments**, except in a few critical sectors, to maximize economic opportunities.

What is the China-Plus-One Strategy?

The **China-Plus-One strategy** involves companies diversifying their **manufacturing and sourcing operations** beyond China to reduce dependence and minimize risks.

Key Features:

- Focuses on reducing **over-reliance on China**.

- Promotes **market diversification** and increases **global supply chain participation**.

- Creates opportunities for countries like **India, Vietnam, Thailand, and Malaysia** to become manufacturing hubs.

Advantages of the Strategy:

- Encourages **technology transfer** and skill development.

- Enables **broader access to global markets**.

- Strengthens economic resilience through diversification.

Why Has India Struggled to Fully Leverage China-Plus-One?

1. **Complex Land Acquisition Processes**:

   o Lengthy and bureaucratic **land acquisition procedures** make it difficult for multinational companies to set up operations.

2. **Rigid Labour Laws**:

   o While there have been improvements, **labour law rigidity** continues to undermine **manufacturing scalability and competitiveness**.

3. **Regulatory Hurdles**:

   o Despite the introduction of **GST**, excessive **compliance requirements** and bureaucratic delays inflate operational costs for businesses.

4. **Limited Free Trade Agreements (FTAs)**:

   o India's **cautious stance on FTAs** limits its integration into global value chains.

   o In contrast, **Vietnam** has aggressively signed FTAs, making it an attractive destination for global investors.

Policy Recommendations to Seize the Opportunity:

1. **Expand Free Trade Agreements (FTAs)**:

   o India should prioritize signing **FTAs** to **reduce tariffs** and enable smoother integration into **global supply chains**.

2. **Leverage Chinese Investments**:

   o The **Economic Survey 2023-24** advocates welcoming **FDI from China**, particularly in non-sensitive sectors, to strengthen local manufacturing and boost exports.

3. **Streamline Land and Labour Reforms**:

   o Simplified **land acquisition processes** and **flexible labour laws** will attract companies seeking to relocate from China.

Conclusion:

Countries like **Vietnam and Thailand** have demonstrated how proactive reforms in **labour, taxation, and trade policies** can attract global investments under the China-Plus-One strategy.

For India, this moment presents a **crucial opportunity to become a manufacturing hub**. However, proactive reforms and **removal of internal barriers** will be vital to fully leverage this strategy and achieve global economic competitiveness.

Disaster Management (Amendment) Bill, 2024

Context: The **Lok Sabha recently passed the Disaster Management (Amendment) Bill, 2024**, which introduces significant changes to the **Disaster Management Act, 2005**, aiming to modernize and enhance disaster management in India.

Overview of the Disaster Management (Amendment) Bill, 2024:

The Bill amends the **Disaster Management Act, 2005**, which established:

- **National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA)**,
- **State Disaster Management Authority (SDMA)**, and
- **District Disaster Management Authority (DDMA)**.

These authorities manage disasters at the national, state, and district levels.

Key Provisions of the Bill:

1. **Preparation of Disaster Management Plans**: The responsibility of preparing disaster management plans now lies with the **NDMA** and **SDMA**, rather than the National and State Executive Committees.
2. **Enhanced Functions of NDMA and SDMA**

   The Bill assigns additional responsibilities, including:

   - **Assessing disaster risks periodically**, including risks from **extreme climate events**.
   - Providing **technical assistance** to subordinate authorities.
   - **Recommending guidelines** for minimum standards of relief.
   - Creating **national and state-level disaster databases**.

The NDMA is also empowered to frame regulations under the Act, with prior approval from the central government.

3. **Creation of Comprehensive Disaster Databases:** The Bill mandates the establishment of **detailed disaster databases** at both the **national and state levels** to improve disaster planning and response.
4. **Establishment of Urban Disaster Management Authorities:** State governments are now authorized to form **Urban Disaster Management Authorities** for state capitals and cities governed by municipal corporations.
5. **Formation of State Disaster Response Force (SDRF):** States are empowered to create their own **State Disaster Response Forces**, with the functions and service terms defined by the state government.
6. **Statutory Status for Key Committees:**
   - The Bill grants statutory recognition to:
     - **National Crisis Management Committee (NCMC)**: Acts as the nodal body for managing disasters with serious or national implications.
     - **High-Level Committee (HLC)**: Provides **financial assistance** to states during disasters.
7. **Appointments to NDMA:**
   - The NDMA can determine the **number and categories of officers and employees** required, with central government approval.
   - It can also hire **experts and consultants** as needed to enhance its operations.

Concerns Raised by the Opposition:

- **Centralization of Powers**: Critics argue the amendments could **reduce state autonomy** by centralizing decision-making powers with the central government.
- **Early Warning Systems and Prevention**: Calls were made to emphasize **early warning mechanisms**, **disaster prevention**, and enhanced **financial support** for disaster-affected regions.

Conclusion:

Despite opposition concerns, the **Disaster Management (Amendment) Bill, 2024** was passed by the Lok Sabha. It now awaits consideration in the **Rajya Sabha**, marking a step forward in modernizing India's disaster management framework to address emerging challenges effectively.

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No Indian City Meets WHO Air Quality Standards

Context: A **recent study published in** *Lancet Planet Health* has revealed that no part of India meets the **World Health Organization's (WHO)** recommended yearly air quality standards. This highlights the alarming extent of air pollution across the country.

WHO's Updated Air Quality Guidelines (2021):

In **September 2021**, the WHO updated its **Air Quality Guidelines (AQGs)** to address the significant health risks posed by air pollution.

Key Recommendations:

- **PM2.5**: Annual average should not exceed **5 μg/m³** (reduced from 10 μg/m³ in 2005).

- **PM10**: Annual average should not exceed **15 μg/m³**, with a daily mean limit of **45 μg/m³**.

- **NO2**: Annual average should not exceed **10 μg/m³**.

- **Ozone**: 8-hour mean during peak season should remain below **60 μg/m³**.

- **SO2**: Daily mean should not exceed **40 μg/m³**.

- **CO**: 24-hour mean should remain under **7 μg/m³**.

Nature of Guidelines:

- These guidelines are **non-binding** but serve as a benchmark for countries to establish air quality policies.

- They are grounded in **scientific evidence** from global studies to minimize health impacts.

India's National Ambient Air Quality Standards (NAAQS):

What is Ambient Air Quality?

Ambient air quality refers to the **condition of outdoor air** in a specific area.

India's Standards:

Under the **Air (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act, 1981**, the **Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB)** defines the NAAQS.

- The standards cover **12 pollutants**, including **PM10, PM2.5, SO2, NO2, Ozone**, and **CO**.

- The NAAQS sets the **PM2.5 limit** at **40 μg/m³**, significantly higher than WHO's guideline of 5 μg/m³.

Key Findings of the Lancet Study:

1. Alarming Air Pollution Levels

- **No Indian city** meets the WHO's annual air quality standard of **PM2.5 at 5 μg/m³**.

- A staggering **81.9% of India's population** lives in areas exceeding even the NAAQS limit of **40 μg/m³**.

2. Severe Health Impacts:

- **PM2.5 pollution** contributes to approximately **1.5 million deaths annually** in India.

- Prolonged exposure to polluted air is linked to:

  o **Respiratory diseases**, **strokes**, and **heart attacks**

- o **High blood pressure**
- o **Developmental delays in children**
- For every **10 μg/m³ increase in PM2.5**, the risk of death rises by **8.6%**.

3. Regional Disparities in Pollution:

- Pollution levels vary significantly across regions:
  - o **Arunachal Pradesh's Lower Subansiri district** (2019): **11.2 μg/m³** (lowest recorded).
  - o **Ghaziabad and Delhi** (2016): **119 μg/m³** (highest recorded).

4. Potential for Change:

- Meeting **NAAQS standards** could save **300,000 lives annually**.
- Achieving WHO guidelines would prevent even more fatalities.

Addressing the Air Pollution Crisis:

- Focus on **key sources** of pollution such as:
  - o **Vehicular emissions**
  - o **Construction activities**
  - o **Crop stubble burning**
- Strengthen regulatory frameworks and incentivize cleaner technologies.
- Public awareness campaigns and stricter enforcement of air quality standards are crucial for meaningful change.

Conclusion:

The **Lancet study** underscores the urgent need for India to prioritize air quality management. **Aligning with WHO standards** can significantly reduce health risks and save countless lives, offering a pathway to a cleaner and healthier future.

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GS Paper – Indian Heritage and Culture

Abathsahayeswarar Temple: A Cultural Heritage Marvel Honored by UNESCO

Context: The **1,300-year-old Abathsahayeswarar Temple**, located in Tamil Nadu, has been awarded the prestigious **UNESCO Asia-Pacific Award for Cultural Heritage Conservation**. This recognition highlights its **architectural grandeur** and the **meticulous restoration efforts** that preserved its legacy.

About Abathsahayeswarar Temple:

Location and Historical Significance

- Situated in **Thukkatchi**, Thanjavur district, Tamil Nadu.
- Built during the reign of **Chola kings Vikrama Chola** and **Kulothunga Chola**, showcasing the **architectural brilliance** of the **Chola dynasty**.
- Historically, the village was named **Vikrama Chozheeswaram** and **Kulothunga Chola Nallur**, in honor of these rulers.

Architectural and Spiritual Legacy:

- Houses the **idol of Aadhi Sarabeshwarar**, installed by **Kulothunga Chola**.
- Features numerous deities, including **Soundaryanayaki Ambal** and **Ashtabhuja Durga Parameshwari**.
- The temple consists of **five prakarams (enclosures)**, reflecting its **spiritual and architectural complexity**.

About UNESCO Asia-Pacific Awards for Cultural Heritage Conservation:

Purpose of the Awards

The UNESCO Asia-Pacific Awards recognize outstanding contributions to restoring, conserving, and rejuvenating structures of cultural significance in the region.

Key Highlights:

- Established in **2000**, the awards celebrate the efforts of **individuals, organizations**, and **public-private partnerships**.
- Aim to inspire others to **undertake heritage conservation projects**, breathe new life into historic properties, and ensure their preservation for future generations.

Why the Award Matters:

- Honors the **dedication and expertise** involved in conserving a **1,300-year-old cultural treasure**.
- Encourages a deeper appreciation of **India's rich heritage** and **global recognition** of its historical monuments.
- Sets an example for **community-driven conservation efforts** across the Asia-Pacific region.

Conclusion:

The **Abathsahayeswarar Temple** stands as a proud symbol of India's **cultural and historical richness**, enhanced by the **UNESCO recognition**. This award not only celebrates the temple's **legacy and preservation** but also serves as an inspiration for conserving heritage sites worldwide.

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Exercise Desert Knight: Strengthening Trilateral Defence Collaboration

Context: Exercise Desert Knight, a recently launched air combat exercise, unfolded over the **Arabian Sea** to **bolster military interoperability** and deepen **defence ties** among participating nations.

About Exercise Desert Knight

Trilateral Air Combat Drill

- This is a **trilateral military exercise** involving **India, France**, and the **UAE**.
- It builds upon the **trilateral framework established in 2022** by the foreign ministers of the three nations, focusing on **defence, technology, energy**, and **environmental cooperation**.

Location and Scope

- Conducted approximately **350-400 km southwest of Karachi**, over the **Arabian Sea**.
- A **"large force engagement"** featuring **intensive combat manoeuvres** and realistic combat scenarios.

Aircraft and Capabilities

- Included advanced aircraft such as **Sukhoi-30MKIs**, **Rafales**, and **F-16s**.
- Demonstrated **high-level combat readiness** with the integration of multiple aircraft types from the participating air forces.

Strategic Importance

Enhancing Interoperability

- Strengthens the **combat synergy** among the air forces of **India, France,** and the **UAE**.
- Focuses on **joint operations in dynamic and realistic settings** to improve operational skills and coordination.

Broader Strategic Goals

- Aligns with efforts to deepen **defence cooperation** in strategically significant areas such as the **Indo-Pacific** and **Persian Gulf** regions.
- Reflects the growing importance of **like-minded nations working together** to counter **China's assertive actions** and expanding influence in these areas.

Significance of Exercise Desert Knight

- A testament to the increasing **focus on interoperability** among the three nations, ensuring a **united front** in regions of strategic interest.
- Reinforces **India's role** as a vital player in **trilateral defence initiatives** and highlights the **importance of military diplomacy** in global geopolitics.
- Strengthens security collaboration in the **Indo-Pacific** and **Persian Gulf**, both crucial regions amidst **evolving global tensions**.

Conclusion

Exercise Desert Knight represents a significant step forward in **trilateral military cooperation**, showcasing a shared commitment to **regional stability**, **strategic partnerships**, and **operational excellence**. As global challenges intensify, such collaborations underline the importance of **united efforts** among nations with shared values and interests.

Applicability of POSH Act to Political Parties: Legal Challenges and Insights

Context: The **Supreme Court** recently heard a PIL urging the application of the **Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition, and Redressal) Act, 2013** (commonly known as the POSH Act) to political parties.

- The petitioner highlighted the **lack of Internal Complaints Committees (ICCs)** in political parties for addressing sexual harassment complaints.
- The Court directed the petitioner to approach the **Election Commission of India (ECI)** as the appropriate authority to encourage political parties to establish mechanisms aligned with the POSH Act.
- This case has sparked debate over the **applicability of the POSH Act to political organisations**, which often have non-traditional workplace structures.

POSH Act, 2013: Safeguarding Women in Workplaces:

Background:

- Inspired by the **Vishakha Guidelines** issued by the Supreme Court in the landmark **Vishakha v. State of Rajasthan (1997)** case.
- Administered by the **Union Ministry of Women & Child Development (MoWCD)**, the Act aims to provide a robust redressal mechanism for workplace sexual harassment.

Objective:

- To **protect women's rights** at work and create safer workplaces.
- To function as a **preventive and redressal mechanism** for workplace grievances.

Challenges in Applying the POSH Act to Political Parties:

Legal Ambiguities:

- **Section 3(1) of the POSH Act** ensures protection against sexual harassment at workplaces and broadly defines a "workplace" to include **public and private organisations, sports venues, hospitals, homes,** and **locations visited during employment**.
- Despite this broad definition, its application to **political parties** remains unclear due to their **unique structures**.

Kerala HC Ruling:

- In the case of **Centre for Constitutional Rights Research and Advocacy v. State of Kerala (2022)**, the **Kerala High Court** ruled that:
  - Political parties lack a clear **employer-employee relationship** with their members.
  - They do not fit the definition of a **workplace** under the POSH Act.
  - Hence, political parties are not legally obligated to establish ICCs.

Structural Challenges:

1. **Undefined Workplaces**:
   - Party workers often operate in **temporary or field-based settings**, making it hard to identify a defined "workplace."
2. **Ambiguous Employer Roles**:
   - Political parties lack a clear hierarchy to identify the **"employer"** responsible for forming ICCs.

Expansive Definitions in POSH Act:

- The Act includes:
  - **Temporary or contractual workers**, potentially covering party workers.

o Locations visited during employment, which could apply to political activities.

- **Party constitutions** outlining organisational hierarchies may help identify employers responsible for ICCs.

Current Mechanisms in Political Parties:

- Political parties often rely on **internal disciplinary committees**, such as:
  o The **Congress' hierarchical committees**.
  o The **BJP's Disciplinary Action Committees**.
- However, these:
  o Address broader issues like **moral turpitude** but lack **specific provisions for sexual harassment.**
  o Do not include **women or external members**, as required by ICCs under the POSH Act.

ECI's Role in Ensuring Compliance:

Legal Authority:

- Under **Article 324 of the Constitution**, the ECI has the power to **supervise elections** for Parliament, state legislatures, and certain offices.
- The **Representation of People Act, 1951 (RP Act)** defines its authority.

Ambiguities in Enforcing Other Laws:

- While ECI's authority under the RP Act is clear, its role in enforcing laws like the **RTI Act, 2005**, or the POSH Act is less defined.
- Example: Despite a **2013 CIC ruling** declaring political parties as public authorities under the **RTI Act**, most parties have not complied.

Advisory Approach:

- The ECI often uses **advisories** to encourage compliance:
  o For instance, it directed parties not to involve children in campaigning, aligning with the **Child Labour Act, 1986**.

Promoting Transparency:

- The ECI regularly publishes party-related information, such as **financial contributions** and **annual audited accounts**, on its website.

Conclusion:

The question of applying the **POSH Act to political parties** highlights the need for greater **accountability and protection mechanisms** within political organisations.

- Addressing structural and legal ambiguities is essential to ensure political parties comply with **gender-sensitive workplace norms**.
- A proactive approach from **ECI**, combined with legal reforms, could pave the way for safer and more inclusive political environments.

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Sanganer Open Jail: A Model of Rehabilitation and the Legal Battle Over Land

Context: A **Supreme Court-appointed commissioner** will visit the **Sanganer open jail**, one of the largest in India, following a dispute over the **Rajasthan government's plan to construct a hospital** on the jail's land.

- The **Supreme Court**, during a November 25 hearing, instructed the commissioner to inspect the site and submit a report within four weeks.
- This has reignited discussions on the **importance of preserving open prisons** as spaces for rehabilitation.

Understanding Open Prisons in India:

Definition:

As per the **Model Prisons and Correctional Services Act, 2023**, open prisons are correctional institutions that offer **greater freedom to prisoners** to aid their **rehabilitation** and reintegration into society.

Features of Open Prisons

- **Minimal Security**: Inmates engage in activities like **agriculture** and other community jobs.
- **Rehabilitation-Oriented**: These facilities aim to reduce **overcrowding in traditional prisons** and prepare prisoners for life post-release.
- **Family Living Spaces**: Some allow prisoners to live with their families under certain restrictions.

State-Level Variations:

- Since **prisons are a state subject**, state governments define the rules for open prisons, including **eligibility criteria** based on crime severity, conduct, and sentence served.

History of Open Prisons in India:

Early Beginnings:

- The first open jail in independent India was set up in **Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, in 1949**, followed by other facilities in 1952.
- The **Hague Conference in 1952** proposed **open-air camps** to provide a near-community life for prisoners completing part of their sentence.

Justice Mulla Committee (1980-83):

The **All-India Committee on Jail Reform** highlighted:

- Lack of legal frameworks for open prisons in many states.
- Recommendations to:
  o Use land near closed prisons for open facilities.
  o Engage inmates in **productive activities** like **agriculture** and **construction projects**.
  o Ensure **uniform wages**, as pay varied across states.

Current Status:

According to **Prison Statistics of India 2022**:

- There are **91 open jails** across 17 states, with **4,473 inmates** against a capacity of **6,043**.
- **Rajasthan leads with 41 open jails**, followed by Maharashtra (19).

Sanganer Open Jail: A Model for Rehabilitation

Historical Significance:

- Established in **1963**, the **Sanganer open jail** (also known as **Sampurnanand Khula Bandi Shivir**) has set a benchmark for rehabilitation in India.
- Unlike other open jails, which faced closures due to challenges like **prison breaks**, Sanganer has operated continuously.

Unique Features:

1. **Family Integration**:
   - Inmates can live with their **spouses and children**, fostering a **family-like environment**.
2. **Self-Sufficiency**:
   - Prisoners manage their own homes, pay for utilities, and earn livelihoods through community jobs like running shops.
3. **Self-Governance**:
   - The jail has **bandi panchayats**, where inmates manage daily roll calls and oversee internal governance.
4. **Community Facilities**:
   - The jail includes a **primary school**, **anganwadis**, and a playground.
   - Inmates work in local jobs, promoting **financial independence**.

Selection Criteria:

- Unlike most open jails that admit inmates nearing the end of their sentences, Sanganer requires prisoners to have completed **6 years and 8 months** of their term with **good conduct**.

Legacy:

- The **Justice Mulla Committee** recommended Sanganer as the **"final stage in the open jail movement."**
- Its success has inspired many similar open-air camps in **Rajasthan**, making the state a leader in open prison initiatives.

The Legal Dispute Over Sanganer Jail Land:

Background: Supreme Court's Ruling on Open Jail Areas

- In **May 2024,** the Supreme Court ruled that the **areas designated for open jails must not be reduced**, emphasizing their role in **prisoner rehabilitation**.

Contempt Petition Filed:

- A **social worker** filed a contempt petition against the **Rajasthan government**, opposing its plan to allocate **21,948 square meters** of jail land for a hospital.
- The petition argues that such a move would **disrupt the unique rehabilitation model** of Sanganer.

State Government's Position:

- The Rajasthan government:
   - Denies plans to reduce the jail's area.
   - Claims some structures for prisoners were unauthorized and proposes relocating inmates to **new shelters**.

Supreme Court's Stance:

- The **Supreme Court emphasized** balancing the needs of the jail with the hospital's importance for the community.
- It appointed a **court commissioner** to inspect the site and prepare a report within four weeks.

Conclusion:

The **Sanganer open jail** represents a **progressive model of prisoner rehabilitation** that balances **freedom, responsibility, and integration into society**.

- Preserving such unique spaces is crucial to maintaining India's **prison reform initiatives**.
- As the legal battle unfolds, it underscores the need for **balanced development** that respects both **community needs** and **rehabilitation models**.

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1st India Maritime Heritage Conclave (IMHC), 2024

Context: The **Ministry of Ports, Shipping, and Waterways** organized the inaugural **India Maritime Heritage Conclave (IMHC), 2024**, showcasing India's illustrious maritime past and its vision to become a **global maritime leader**.

Key Highlights of the Conclave:

- **Showcasing Maritime Achievements**: India's historical maritime triumphs and its modern aspirations as a **maritime powerhouse** were prominently featured.

- **Developing Maritime Heritage**: The Ministry is constructing the **National Maritime Heritage Complex (NMHC)** at **Lothal, Gujarat**, under the **Sagarmala Programme**, aimed at creating the world's **largest maritime heritage complex**.

India's Rich Maritime Heritage:

Early Days (3000–2000 BC):

- The **Indus Valley Civilization (IVC)** had active **maritime trade links** with Mesopotamia, marking the beginnings of India's seafaring history.

Vedic Age (2000–500 BC):

- The **Rig Veda** contains the earliest references to **maritime activities**, hinting at the significance of waterways in ancient India.

Nandas and Mauryas (500–200 BC):

- The **Magadh Navy** is regarded as the **world's first recorded naval force**.

- **Chanakya's Arthashastra** mentions the **'Department of Waterways'**, underscoring the strategic importance of maritime infrastructure.

Satavahana Dynasty (200 BC–220 AD):

- The **Satavahanas** were the **first Indian rulers** to issue coins depicting **ships**, symbolizing their maritime prowess.

Gupta Dynasty (320–500 AD):

- This period saw the development of **ocean navigation** and flourishing **maritime trade**, as noted by travelers **Fa-Hein** and **Hiuen Tsang**.

Southern Dynasties:

- The **Cheras**, renowned for their prominent ports like:
  - **Tyndis** (modern-day Periyapattanum, near Kochi).
  - **Muziris** (modern-day Pattanam, also near Kochi).

The Marathas:

- Under **Shivaji**, the **Maratha navy** evolved into a formidable force, commanding a fleet of over **500 ships**.

Looking Ahead: India's Maritime Vision:

The **India Maritime Heritage Conclave** highlighted the nation's historical maritime achievements while laying the groundwork for its aspirations as a **global maritime powerhouse**. With projects like the **NMHC at Lothal**, India is not just preserving its rich maritime history but also positioning itself as a leader in global maritime affairs.

GS Paper 3 – Science and Technology
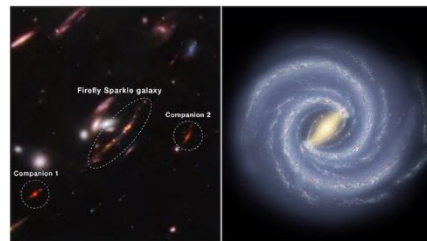
How a distant galaxy gave a glimpse of Milky Way in its infancy

Context: NASA's **James Webb Space Telescope (JWST)** has captured an extraordinary glimpse of a distant galaxy, **Firefly Sparkle**, located approximately **13 billion light-years away**.

- This **infant galaxy**, formed only a few hundred million years after the **Big Bang**, provides critical insights into what our **Milky Way** might have looked like during its early years.
- Named for its **star clusters**, resembling **bioluminescent fireflies**, Firefly Sparkle unveils the secrets of **galactic evolution**.

Why Firefly Sparkle Matters:

- **Time Capsule of the Early Universe**: Observed as it existed shortly after the **Big Bang (~13.8 billion years ago)**, this galaxy offers a snapshot of a universe still in its infancy.
- **Distant Witness**: Its light, traveling for **13 billion years**, allows us to study the conditions and processes of early galaxy formation.
- **A Galaxy in Assembly**: Still in its **formative stage**, Firefly Sparkle is actively undergoing **star formation**, providing a window into the early stages of galaxy building.

Key Features of Firefly Sparkle:

1. **Massive Yet Compact**:
   - The galaxy's mass is equivalent to **10 million stars** the size of our Sun.
   - Features **10 dense star clusters** spread across a **diffuse arc of stars**, spanning about **1,000 light-years**.
2. **Companion Galaxies**:
   - Accompanied by two smaller galaxies, aptly named **Firefly-Best Friend** and **Firefly-New Best Friend**, further evidence of its early formation phase.
3. **Cosmic Proportions**:
   - Compared to the present-day Milky Way, Firefly Sparkle has about **10,000 times less mass**, highlighting how galaxies grow and evolve over billions of years.

Insights into the Milky Way's Beginnings:

- **Formation Timeline**: Astronomers estimate that the **Milky Way** began forming around the same period as Firefly Sparkle.
- **Evolution Over Billions of Years**: From an infant galaxy with less mass, the Milky Way grew through **galactic mergers** and sustained **star formation**, eventually evolving into its current structure.
- **A Glimpse into the Past**: Firefly Sparkle offers a unique opportunity to study the conditions that might have shaped the Milky Way during its infancy.

Gravitational Lensing: The Cosmic Magnifying Glass:

Firefly Sparkle's incredible distance and small size made it nearly impossible to observe directly. However, **gravitational lensing** changed the game:

- **How It Works**: A massive **galaxy cluster** between JWST and Firefly Sparkle bent and magnified the light coming from the distant galaxy, making it observable.
- **Amplification Power**: The lensing effect magnified Firefly Sparkle's light **16–26 times**, enabling astronomers to study its structure in unparalleled detail.
- **The Science of Spacetime**: Gravitational lensing, caused by the warping of **spacetime**, acts like a natural telescope, offering a rare glimpse into the farthest reaches of the universe.

What We've Learned:

The study of Firefly Sparkle is not just about one distant galaxy—it's a journey into understanding how galaxies like the **Milky Way** formed and evolved. By combining the power of **JWST** and the phenomenon of **gravitational lensing**, astronomers are piecing together the story of our cosmic origins.

2024 Arctic Report Card Reveals Troubling Climate Trends

Context: The **2024 Arctic Report Card**, released by the **National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA)**, highlights alarming shifts in the Arctic environment. Once a **major carbon sink**, the Arctic is now turning into a **carbon source**, driven by the accelerating impacts of **climate change**.

About NOAA: This U.S. federal agency focuses on understanding and predicting environmental changes, managing coastal and marine ecosystems, and supporting informed policy decisions.

Since its launch in **2006**, the **Arctic Report Card** has provided annual updates on the **Arctic's environmental state**, comparing current conditions to historical data.

Key Highlights of the Report:

1. Accelerated Warming in the Arctic:

- **Unprecedented Heat**: The Arctic is warming at an extraordinary pace.
  o **2024** was the **second-warmest year** since record-keeping began in **1900**.
  o This year's Arctic **summer** was the **third warmest**, with extreme **heat waves** recorded in Alaska and Canada.

2. The Arctic Tundra Becomes a Carbon Source:

- **Permafrost Thaw**: Thawing permafrost is releasing vast amounts of **carbon dioxide** and **methane**, fueling global warming.
- **Wildfires on the Rise**:
  o **Frequency and Intensity** of wildfires are increasing, releasing more **carbon emissions**.
  o **Extended Wildfire Season**: The Arctic is now experiencing longer wildfire seasons.

3. Decline in Sea Ice:

- **Reduced Ice Extent**: The **extent and thickness** of Arctic sea ice have diminished drastically over the past few decades.
- **Heat Absorption**: Less sea ice exposes more **dark ocean surfaces**, which absorb heat and contribute further to warming.
- **Melting Glaciers**:
  o Arctic glaciers and the **Greenland Ice Sheet** are losing mass, contributing significantly to **global sea-level rise**.

4. Impact on Wildlife and Communities:

- **Decline in Reindeer and Caribou**: Climate change is disrupting ecosystems, leading to population declines of **reindeer**, affecting **Indigenous communities** dependent on them for food and culture.
- **Indigenous Challenges**: Rapid environmental changes pose significant threats to traditional livelihoods and practices.

Global Implications of Arctic Changes:

- **Coastal Flooding and Extreme Weather**: Melting ice and rising sea levels intensify **coastal flooding** and **extreme weather events** worldwide.
- **Carbon Storage Loss**: The Arctic's dwindling capacity to store carbon emphasizes the urgency of **reducing greenhouse gas emissions** to prevent further warming.

The Arctic: A Unique and Vital Region:

What is the Arctic?

- The **Arctic** encompasses the **northernmost polar region** of Earth, including the **Arctic Ocean**, surrounding seas, and parts of eight countries:

  Alaska (U.S.), Canada, Finland, Greenland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, and Sweden.

- Known for its **cold climate**, the Arctic's temperatures frequently drop below freezing, creating a fragile ecosystem highly vulnerable to climate change.

Geopolitical Importance of the Arctic:

- The region is rich in **natural resources**, such as **oil**, **natural gas**, and **minerals**, attracting international interest and sparking geopolitical competition for control.

India's Role in the Arctic:

- **Historic Engagement**:
  - Signed the **Svalbard Treaty** in **1920**, allowing access to Arctic territories for scientific and economic purposes.
  - Began its **Arctic research program** in **2007**, followed by the establishment of the **Himadri research base** in Svalbard, Norway, in **2008**.

- **Observer Status in the Arctic Council**: India has been an **observer** in the **Arctic Council** since **2013**.

- **Arctic Policy 2022**: India announced a focused policy to engage in **climate research**, with the **National Centre for Polar and Ocean Research** serving as the nodal agency.

Call for Action:

The **2024 Arctic Report Card** serves as a stark reminder of the urgent need to combat **climate change**. As the Arctic transitions from a **carbon sink** to a **carbon source**, global efforts to reduce **greenhouse gas emissions** are critical to safeguard the planet's future.

Switzerland Suspends India's Most Favoured Nation (MFN) Clause

Context: Switzerland recently announced its decision to **suspend the most favoured nation (MFN)** clause in its **Double Taxation Avoidance Agreement (DTAA)** with India, effective from **January 1, 2025**.

Understanding the Most Favoured Nation (MFN) Clause:

What is the MFN Clause?

The **Most Favoured Nation (MFN)** clause is a fundamental principle in international agreements, including tax treaties, ensuring **equal treatment** for all parties.

- **Equal Treatment**: If one country offers favorable **tax rates** or conditions to another, it must extend those same benefits to all other countries covered by the treaty.

- **No Favouritism**: The clause is designed to prevent any country from being treated less favorably than any other in trade or taxation matters.

WTO MFN:

- **Applicable**: The MFN principle applies to **World Trade Organization (WTO)** agreements, including the **General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT)**, **General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS)** (Article 2), and the **Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS)**.

- **Exceptions**: While countries can set up **free trade agreements** and offer special access to developing countries, they can also impose barriers against unfairly traded products from specific countries, especially in services.

India-Switzerland MFN:

- **Recognized by Switzerland**: Switzerland had previously recognized **MFN status** for **India** under its DTAA.

- **DTAA Between India and Switzerland**: The **Double Tax Avoidance Agreement** was signed in **1995** and amended in **December 2011**.

What is Withholding Tax (WHT)?

- **Definition**: **Withholding Tax (WHT)**, or retention tax, requires an individual, whether resident or non-resident, to withhold tax when making certain payments such as rent, commission, or salary.

- **Application**: The applicable withholding tax rate is determined by the **Income Tax Act, 1961** or the relevant DTAA, whichever is lower.

- **Non-Resident Taxation**: Non-residents are liable to pay taxes in India on source income, including interest, royalties, fees for technical services, and income arising from business connections or properties in India.

- **WHT Rate**: A person benefiting from a perquisite or benefit arising from a business or profession in India can withhold tax at a rate of **10%** of the value of such benefit.

Why Has Switzerland Suspended the MFN Clause?

Recent Legal Dispute - The Nestlé Case (2023):

- **Nestlé's Claim**: The Swiss company Nestlé sought a refund of withholding tax paid on dividends, invoking the MFN clause under the India-Switzerland tax treaty.

- **OECD Provision**: The case involved applying lower tax rates on dividends to countries like Colombia and Lithuania, which negotiated new tax terms after joining the OECD.

- **Supreme Court Ruling**: The Supreme Court ruled that such automatic adjustments require a formal notification under Indian law, not just a blanket application.

- **Swiss Reaction**: As a result of this ruling, Switzerland decided to **suspend the MFN clause** under the India-Switzerland tax treaty.

Impacts of MFN Suspension:

- **Higher Tax Liabilities for Indian Companies**:

  o Indian companies receiving dividends from Switzerland will face an **increased tax burden**, with the **withholding tax** on those dividends rising to **10%** from **5%**.

- **Effects on Swiss Investments in India**:

  o Swiss companies receiving dividends from Indian subsidiaries will continue to face the **10% withholding tax**, as this rate is already applicable under the India-Switzerland DTAA.

- **EFTA Investments Unaffected**:

  o The suspension is unlikely to impact investments into India from the **European Free Trade Association (EFTA)**, as these are already subject to the **10% withholding tax**.

- **No Change for Other DTAA Benefits**:

  o Indian companies operating in Switzerland can still avail themselves of other benefits provided under the India-Switzerland DTAA, such as tax relief on royalties and fees for technical services.

- **Re-evaluation of MFN Clauses by Other Countries**:

  o This move could prompt other nations to reconsider how the MFN clause is applied in their own tax treaties with India, especially if similar legal rulings arise elsewhere.

What Lies Ahead?

To maintain **predictability**, **equity**, and **stability** in the international tax framework, there is a need to align treaty partners on the interpretation and application of tax treaty clauses.

- **Proactive Negotiations**: Clarifying and harmonizing interpretations of treaty provisions are essential to safeguard the interests of **Indian firms** operating abroad.

Public Distribution System (PDS) in India: Enhancing Food Security for the Vulnerable

Context: The **Comptroller and Auditor General of India (CAG)** recently released a report on the **Performance Audit of the Supply Chain Management of Public Distribution** in Karnataka, highlighting key inefficiencies in the state's **Public Distribution System (PDS)**.

Key Findings from the Audit:

1. **Use of Unauthorized Vehicles**: Passenger and light goods vehicles, instead of authorized ones, were used to transport food grains, violating established protocols.

2. **Wholesale Depot (WSD) Mismanagement**: Poor maintenance of WSDs led to risks of **contamination** and **pest infestation**, degrading the quality of food grains.

Understanding the Public Distribution System (PDS):

What is PDS?

The **Public Distribution System** is a **government-led initiative** aimed at providing essential commodities like rice, wheat, sugar, and kerosene to economically weaker sections at **subsidized rates**.

Objectives of PDS:

- **Food Security**: Ensure availability of basic food items for vulnerable populations.
- **Poverty Alleviation**: Reduce financial burdens on low-income households through subsidies.
- **Price Stabilization**: Regulate prices of essential goods to ensure affordability.

Evolution of the Public Distribution System:

1. **1940s–1950s**: Introduced during **wartime and famines**, PDS addressed food shortages.

2. **1960s–1970s**: With the **Green Revolution**, PDS expanded to reach more people.

3. **1980s**: The **Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS)** in 1997 aimed to better direct food assistance to the poor.

4. **2000s**: Adoption of **digital technologies** and electronic ration cards for transparency.

5. **2010s and Beyond**:

   o The **National Food Security Act (NFSA), 2013**: Enacted to provide legal entitlement to subsidized food, covering over **80 crore people**.

   o Emphasized **nutritional security** along with food security.

Features of PDS in India:

Targeted Distribution:

- **NFSA Coverage**: Covers **75% of rural** and **50% of urban populations** under:

   o **Antyodaya Anna Yojana (AAY)**: Poorest households entitled to **35 kg of food grains per family per month**.

   o **Priority Households**: Entitled to **5 kg per person per month**.

Role of the Government:

- **Central Government**: Handles **procurement, storage, transportation**, and bulk allocation through the **Food Corporation of India (FCI)**.
- **State Governments**: Distribute food grains via a network of **Fair Price Shops (FPS)** to eligible families.

Challenges in the Public Distribution System:

1. **Leakages and Diversion**: Significant quantities of food grains are diverted to the open market, depriving intended beneficiaries.
2. **Exclusion Errors**: Many of the poorest households are **left out** due to flaws in the identification process.
3. **Quality Issues**: Poor-quality food grains reduce the system's effectiveness.
4. **Corruption and Fraud**: Practices like **overpricing** and diversion by FPS owners persist.
5. **Storage and Transportation**: Transporting food grains to **remote areas** remains a major challenge.
6. **Digitization Hurdles**:Despite improvements, **technical glitches** and **data inaccuracies** hinder efficiency.

Reforms and Modernization Efforts:

1. **National Food Security Act, 2013**: Provides **legal entitlement** to subsidized food grains for two-thirds of India's population.
2. **Digital Ration Cards**: Aadhaar-based biometric authentication to eliminate **fake and duplicate cards**.
3. **Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT)**: In some areas, subsidies are provided directly to beneficiaries' bank accounts.
4. **End-to-End Computerization**: Full digitization aims to enhance transparency and minimize leakages.
5. **Food Quality Monitoring**: Measures to ensure better quality food grains for beneficiaries.

Way Forward:

1. **Strengthen Accountability**: Conduct **social audits** and establish **grievance redressal mechanisms** to tackle corruption and leakages.
2. **Community Participation**: Involve **local communities** in monitoring PDS operations to ensure efficiency and fairness.
3. **Enhance Nutritional Offerings**: Expand PDS to include items like **pulses, oils, and fortified grains** for better nutritional outcomes.
4. **Raise Public Awareness**: Educate beneficiaries about their **rights and entitlements** under the PDS.

By addressing these challenges and implementing necessary reforms, the PDS can continue to play a crucial role in ensuring **food security** and reducing **poverty** in India.

Sri Lankan President Dissanayake Meets PM Modi to Strengthen Bilateral Ties

Context: Sri Lankan President **Anura Kumara Dissanayake**, during his maiden bilateral visit to India, assured **Prime Minister Narendra Modi** that Sri Lanka would ensure its territory is not used in ways that could harm Indian interests. Both leaders reiterated their commitment to **strengthen cooperation** in **defence, economic growth**, and **regional security**, marking a new chapter in **India-Sri Lanka relations**.

Overview of India-Sri Lanka Relations:

Historical Connections:

The ties between India and Sri Lanka date back centuries, rooted in **shared cultural and religious traditions**, particularly through **Buddhism**. Many Sri Lankans trace their **ancestry** to India, reflecting the deep historical connections.

Key Areas of Cooperation:
1. **Trade and Economy**:
   o India is Sri Lanka's **third-largest export market**, with over **60% of exports** benefiting from the **India-Sri Lanka Free Trade Agreement (ISFTA)**.
   o Indian **FDI in Sri Lanka** has totaled **USD 1.7 billion** from 2005-2019.
2. **Energy Collaboration**: A **multi-product petroleum pipeline** is being developed to provide Sri Lanka with **affordable energy supplies**.
3. **Defence and Security**:
   o Regular joint military (**Mitra Shakti**) and naval (**SLINEX**) exercises enhance defence cooperation.
   o Both nations are active in **regional groupings** like **BIMSTEC** and **SAARC**, where India plays a significant role.
4. **People-to-People Ties**:
   o India was the **largest source of tourists** to Sri Lanka in 2022, contributing over **100,000 visitors**.
   o Initiatives like **digital payment platforms** aim to boost tourism and business exchanges.

Geopolitical Significance:

Sri Lanka's **strategic location** in the Indian Ocean makes it critical for India's trade and maritime security, aligning with India's vision for regional economic integration.

Challenges in Relations:
1. **Fisheries Disputes**: Frequent clashes over **Indian fishermen entering Sri Lankan waters** create tensions.
2. **Katchatheevu Island Dispute**: Differences persist over fishing rights near the island.
3. **Tamil Minority Concerns**: India continues to advocate for the rights of Sri Lanka's **Tamil minority**, emphasizing reconciliation.
4. **China's Growing Influence**: Increased Chinese investments, like at **Hambantota Port**, raise concerns about Sri Lanka's tilt toward China.

Key Highlights of Sri Lankan President's Visit:

Strengthening Security Cooperation:
- **Mutual Security Assurances**: President Dissanayake committed to ensuring that Sri Lanka's territory will not be used against **India's strategic interests**.
- **Defence Collaboration**:
   o Finalizing a **Defence Cooperation Agreement**.
   o Enhancing **maritime surveillance**, conducting joint exercises, and advancing defence training.

o   Strengthening the **Colombo Security Conclave** for tackling maritime and cyber security threats.

Addressing Tamil Minority Issues:

Prime Minister Modi urged for **reconciliation and reconstruction** to address the grievances of Sri Lanka's **Tamil minorities**.

- He expressed hope for the implementation of the **13th Amendment** and the **holding of provincial council elections**.
- President Dissanayake emphasized **social protection** and **unity** as priorities for development.

Resolving Fishermen Disputes:

Both nations addressed the **livelihood challenges of fishermen**, agreeing to:

- Adopt a **humanitarian approach** to disputes.
- Avoid confrontations and focus on a **long-term solution**.
- Maintain **dialogue** for resolving issues.

Expanding Economic and Energy Ties:

- **Investment-Led Development**: Prime Minister Modi proposed a **futuristic vision** for economic growth through **enhanced connectivity** in physical, digital, and energy sectors.
- **Key Initiatives**:
  o   Supporting Sri Lanka during its **economic crisis** with a **USD 5 billion package**.
  o   Advancing energy cooperation through:
    ▪ **Electricity grid connectivity**.
    ▪ **Multi-product petroleum pipelines**.
    ▪ **Solar projects in Sampur**.
    ▪ **LNG supply** for Sri Lankan power plants.
- **Digital Transformation**:
  o   Accelerating the **Sri Lanka Unique Digital Identity (SLUDI)** project.
  o   Integrating platforms like **UPI**, **Aadhaar**, and **DigiLocker**.
- **Tourism and Connectivity**:
  o   Launching a **ferry service** between **Rameshwaram (India)** and **Talaimannar (Sri Lanka)**.
  o   Promoting **Buddhist** and **Ramayana tourism circuits**.
- **Capacity Building**: India announced scholarships and training programs for Sri Lankan students and civil servants.

Diplomatic Agreements:

Both nations signed pacts on:

- **Avoidance of Double Taxation**.
- Capacity-building initiatives and civil service training.

President Dissanayake extended an invitation to **PM Modi** for a bilateral visit to Sri Lanka.

Conclusion:

President Dissanayake's visit reaffirms the **robust relationship** between India and Sri Lanka, underpinned by shared goals in **security**, **economic cooperation**, and **regional development**.

While addressing key challenges like **fisheries disputes** and **ethnic concerns**, both leaders emphasized a **shared vision** for peace, prosperity, and inclusive growth. This renewed partnership aims to unlock the potential for a brighter future for both nations.

PM Modi Champions UCC, Echoes Ambedkar & KM Munshi's Vision from 1948

Context: Prime Minister **Narendra Modi** has reiterated his strong support for implementing a **Uniform Civil Code (UCC)**, citing the visionary debates of **Dr. B.R. Ambedkar** and **K.M. Munshi** in the Constituent Assembly.

During a special session in the Lok Sabha to reflect on the **75-year journey of the Constitution**, PM Modi highlighted the **drafters' aspirations** for a UCC to unify the nation under a common legal framework. He emphasized that the government is fully committed to establishing a **"secular civil code"** for all citizens, fulfilling the intent of the Constitution's framers.

Understanding Uniform Civil Code (UCC):

What is UCC?

- The **Uniform Civil Code** proposes **one set of laws** for all citizens of India, regardless of their religion, governing personal matters like **marriage, divorce, inheritance**, and **adoption**.

- It aims to replace the **personal laws** based on religious scriptures and customs with a **common legal framework** for every individual.

Constitutional Foundation:

- **Article 44** of the Indian Constitution, under the **Directive Principles of State Policy (DPSP)**, mandates that the **State shall strive to secure a UCC** for all citizens.

- While DPSPs are not enforceable in a court of law, they serve as guiding principles for governance and lawmaking.

The UCC Debate in the Constituent Assembly:

- On **November 23, 1948**, the Constituent Assembly debated the draft **Article 35** (now Article 44), which proposed a UCC as part of the **Directive Principles of State Policy**.

- While many members supported the idea, concerns arose about its potential impact on religious communities, leading to its inclusion as a **non-binding directive** rather than enforceable law.

Opposition to UCC:

1. **Mohammad Ismail Sahib** (Indian Union Muslim League): Argued that imposing a UCC could disrupt harmony and interfere with personal laws.

2. **Naziruddin Ahmad**: Highlighted that personal laws are deeply intertwined with religious beliefs and should remain untouched.

KM Munshi's Advocacy for UCC:

A Strong Defender of UCC:

- **K.M. Munshi**, a key member of the Assembly, passionately argued in favor of the UCC, countering claims that it would infringe upon minority rights.

- He pointed out that even **progressive Muslim countries** had modernized personal laws to embrace civil codes.

Championing Gender Equality:

- Munshi emphasized that without a UCC, achieving **gender equality** would remain a distant dream.

- He cited the **discrimination against women** in Hindu personal laws as a compelling reason for adopting a uniform legal framework.

National Unity Through UCC:

- Munshi linked the UCC to **national integration**, urging communities to adopt a progressive approach.

- He argued that religion should remain confined to its **spiritual domain**, while **social and civil matters** must be regulated by a unified code to build a stronger nation.

Ambedkar's Perspective on UCC:

Support for Article 44:

- **Dr. B.R. Ambedkar**, while not delving into the immediate merits or demerits of the UCC, staunchly defended its inclusion in the **Directive Principles of State Policy**.

Existing Uniformity in Laws:

- Ambedkar refuted claims that a UCC was impractical in a diverse country, highlighting the existing **uniform legal systems** in **criminal law** through the **Indian Penal Code (IPC)** and **Criminal Procedure Code (CrPC)**.

Challenging Uniformity in Muslim Personal Law:

- He contested the notion of uniformity in **Muslim personal laws**, citing examples where **Hindu laws** governed certain areas like succession in the **North-West Frontier Province** and other regions.

Reforming India's Social Fabric:

- Ambedkar argued against giving religion **vast jurisdiction** over personal and civil matters. He stressed that India's **social system**, marred by **inequalities and discrimination**, needed transformative reforms.

Legislative Power, Not Immediate Enforcement:

- To address concerns of abrupt implementation, Ambedkar reassured members that the UCC would be legislated gradually, respecting the sentiments of diverse communities.

Outcome of the 1948 Debate:

- After extensive deliberations, **Article 35** was adopted and later renumbered as **Article 44** in the Constitution.

- Notably, **Article 44** uses the phrase "**the State shall endeavour**," which is less forceful compared to other Directive Principles that use terms like "**shall in particular direct its policy**."

- This phrasing reflects a relatively lower emphasis on the UCC's implementation compared to other constitutional directives.

Conclusion:

The **Uniform Civil Code**, rooted in the vision of India's constitutional drafters, remains a cornerstone for achieving **gender justice**, **social equality**, and **national integration**.
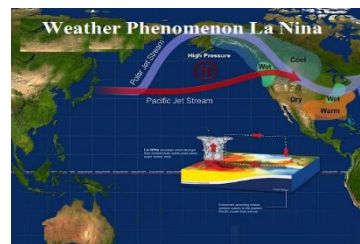
As PM Modi champions the UCC, quoting stalwarts like **Ambedkar and Munshi**, the debate resurfaces with renewed vigor. While challenges persist, the UCC stands as a powerful symbol of India's commitment to secularism, modernization, and justice for all.

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Impact of La Niña on India's Climate

Context: La Niña is a phase of the **El Niño-Southern Oscillation (ENSO)** characterized by **cooler-than-average sea surface temperatures** in the central and eastern Pacific Ocean.

It is the **counterpart of El Niño**, which brings warming to the same region. Both phenomena significantly influence **global weather systems** and climate patterns.

How Does La Niña Influence Global Weather?

1. **India**: Results in **above-average monsoon rainfall**, boosting agricultural productivity.
2. **Africa**: Often causes **drought-like conditions** in some regions.
3. **Atlantic Ocean**: **Hurricane activity** intensifies during La Niña years.
4. **United States**: Leads to **increased rainfall** in southern states.

La Niña's Impact on India:

Winters in India:

- **Colder Nights**: La Niña winters tend to bring **chillier nights** across northern India, although daytime temperatures may be slightly higher.
- **Pollution Dispersal**:
  o **Higher wind speeds** improve air quality by dispersing pollutants.
  o However, a **lower Planetary Boundary Layer Height (PBLH)** may trap pollution closer to the ground, worsening air quality.

Monsoons and Summers:

- **Enhanced Monsoons**: La Niña years, such as **2020–2022**, have delivered **normal to above-normal rainfall**, benefiting agriculture and water resources.
- **Heatwave Relief**: Summers during La Niña tend to be **less intense**, offering relief from heatwaves typical of El Niño years.

Contrast with El Niño:

- **El Niño Years**: Often associated with **weaker monsoons**, drought conditions, and **higher summer temperatures**. For instance, **2023**—an El Niño year—saw **below-normal rainfall** and harsher heatwaves.

Why is La Niña Delayed in 2024?

Typically, **La Niña develops during the pre-monsoon or monsoon season**, but in 2024, its onset has been unusually delayed.

- The **Oceanic Niño Index (ONI)** currently hovers around **-0.3°C**, just above the threshold for La Niña (**-0.5°C or lower**).
- If La Niña materializes later this year, it could lead to:
  o **Cooler winters** in northern India.
  o **Stronger monsoons** in 2025, crucial for agriculture and water security.

Meteorological Indicators of La Niña:

Meteorologists use several tools to declare a La Niña event, including:

1. **Oceanic Niño Index (ONI)**: Tracks anomalies in sea surface temperatures.
2. **Persistence Rule**: La Niña is confirmed when sea surface temperatures remain **below -0.5°C** for five consecutive readings.

Climate Change and ENSO Events:

- **Climate change** is expected to intensify **ENSO events** (both La Niña and El Niño) due to rising oceanic and atmospheric temperatures.
- **Extreme La Niña events** may cause harsher winters, intense rainfall, and other amplified impacts on India's climate.

Importance of La Niña for India:

1. **Agriculture**: La Niña years ensure **bountiful monsoons**, boosting **crop yields** and supporting rural livelihoods.
2. **Water Resources**: Increased rainfall replenishes **reservoirs**, alleviating **water stress** in drought-prone areas.
3. **Energy Sector**: Ample rainfall improves **hydropower generation**, contributing to renewable energy goals.
4. **Heatwave Mitigation**: Summers during La Niña are **milder**, reducing the intensity of heatwaves.

Conclusion:

The delayed arrival of **La Niña in 2024** has raised questions about its potential impact on **India's winters and upcoming monsoons**.

If La Niña develops by early 2025, it could herald a **strong monsoon season**, vital for the nation's **agriculture, water resources, and energy production**.

Careful monitoring of **ENSO patterns** is essential for mitigating risks and maximizing the benefits of these climate events.

GS Paper3 – Science and Technology

India's First Diabetes Biobank: A Milestone in Research

Context: India's **first diabetes biobank** is a cutting-edge repository of biological samples, created to support **scientific research and advancements in diabetes care**.

Key Features of the Biobank:

- Collects, processes, stores, and distributes **biospecimens** for research purposes.
- Focuses on blood samples for various types of diabetes, including:
  o **Type 1 Diabetes**
  o **Type 2 Diabetes**
  o **Gestational Diabetes (GDM)**

This initiative provides a platform to facilitate **current and future studies** aimed at understanding diabetes better and developing innovative treatments.

Understanding Diabetes:

Diabetes is a **chronic health condition** that occurs when the **pancreas fails to produce insulin** or when the **body cannot utilize insulin effectively**.

What is Insulin?

- A hormone responsible for regulating **blood glucose levels**.
- When insulin production or usage is impaired, it leads to **hyperglycemia** (high blood sugar levels).

Hyperglycemia, over time, can cause severe damage to organs and tissues, resulting in:

- **Blindness**
- **Kidney failure**
- **Heart attacks**
- **Stroke**
- **Lower limb amputations**

Epidemiological Insights on Diabetes in India

A comprehensive study conducted between **2008 and 2020** analyzed **1.2 lakh individuals** across urban and rural India.

- Urban participants: **33,537**
- Rural participants: **79,506**
- Covered **31 states and Union Territories**.

The findings highlight the widespread prevalence of diabetes and underline the urgency for robust research and treatment strategies.

Types of Diabetes:

1. Type 1 Diabetes

- **What is it?** : An **autoimmune condition** where the body's immune system destroys insulin-producing beta cells in the pancreas.
- **Characteristics:**
  o The body produces **little or no insulin**.

o Requires **daily insulin injections** for glucose control.

- **Who does it affect?**: Commonly diagnosed in **children and young adults**, previously referred to as **juvenile diabetes**.
- **Symptoms:**
  o Excessive urination (**polyuria**)
  o Extreme thirst (**polydipsia**)
  o Constant hunger
  o Unexplained weight loss
  o Vision changes
  o Fatigue

2. Type 2 Diabetes:

- **What is it?**: A condition where the body produces insulin but **fails to use it effectively**.
- **Prevalence:** Accounts for **95% of global diabetes cases**.
- **Causes:**
  o **Excess body weight**
  o **Lack of physical activity**
- **Symptoms:** Often **less severe** than Type 1, leading to **delayed diagnosis and treatment**.

3. Gestational Diabetes (GDM):

- **What is it?**: A temporary condition characterized by **high blood glucose levels during pregnancy**.
- **Implications:**
  o Can lead to complications for both the **mother and the child**.
  o Increases the risk of developing **Type 2 diabetes** later in life for both mother and child.
- **Prognosis:** Usually disappears after childbirth but requires close monitoring.

Conclusion:

The establishment of **India's first diabetes biobank** is a crucial step towards understanding the complexities of diabetes and developing better treatment protocols.

With a repository of diverse biological samples, this initiative has the potential to drive **groundbreaking research** that could improve the lives of millions living with this chronic condition.

This biobank not only reflects India's commitment to advancing medical research but also underscores the importance of addressing the **growing diabetes burden** on the nation.

GS Paper 3 – Economic Development

Credit Guarantee Scheme for e-NWR based pledge Financing

Context: The **Credit Guarantee Scheme for e-NWR Based Pledge Financing** is a transformative initiative aimed at empowering farmers and stakeholders in the agricultural value chain.

Objective of the Scheme:

This scheme is designed to **support small farmers** by providing them with access to credit, thereby preventing **distress selling** of their produce after harvest.

Key Features of the Scheme

1. Financial Corpus:

- A **Rs. 1,000-crore fund** has been established to facilitate post-harvest financing.
- Farmers can avail loans by pledging **electronic Negotiable Warehouse Receipts (e-NWRs)** after depositing their produce in warehouses accredited by the **Warehousing Development and Regulatory Authority (WDRA)**.

2. Loan Coverage:

- **Agricultural Loans:** Up to **Rs. 75 lakhs**.
- **Non-Agricultural Loans:** Up to **Rs. 200 lakhs**.

3. Eligible Institutions:

- **Scheduled Banks** and **Cooperative Banks** are eligible to participate in this scheme.

4. Eligible Beneficiaries:

The scheme is targeted at:

- **Small and Marginal Farmers (SMFs)**
- **Women Farmers**
- Farmers from **SC/ST/PwD** communities
- **Other Farmers**
- **Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs)**
- **Traders**, **Farmer Producer Organizations (FPOs)**, and **Farmer Cooperatives**

5. Risk Coverage:

- Covers **credit risk** and **warehouseman risk**, ensuring secure transactions for both lenders and borrowers.

6. Guarantee Coverage:

- **85% guarantee** for loans up to **Rs. 3 lakhs** for small and marginal farmers, women, and SC/ST/PwD beneficiaries.
- **80% guarantee** for loans between **Rs. 3 to Rs. 75 lakhs** for the same category of borrowers.
- **75% guarantee** for other borrowers.

Benefits of the Scheme:

1. **Boosts Financial Accessibility:** The scheme aims to improve **access to credit** for farmers and other stakeholders, ensuring they can secure financing without excessive risk.
2. **Enhances Farmer Income:** By increasing **post-harvest lending** against e-NWRs, the scheme provides farmers with better financial stability, reducing the need to sell their produce at unprofitable rates.
3. **Economic Growth Catalyst:** This initiative is expected to contribute significantly to **economic development** by supporting targeted beneficiaries like farmers, MSMEs, and FPOs.

Conclusion

The **Credit Guarantee Scheme for e-NWR Based Pledge Financing** is a vital step towards strengthening the **agricultural ecosystem** in India. By enhancing post-harvest financing and supporting small and marginalized farmers, it has the potential to **transform rural economies** and contribute to **sustainable economic growth**.

One Candidate, Multiple Constituencies: A Democratic Dilemma

Context: Amid the heated debates surrounding Indian politics, one critical issue often goes unnoticed: the practice of **One Candidate Contesting from Multiple Constituencies (OCMC)** for the same office. This longstanding tradition raises significant questions about its implications for democracy, taxpayers, and political fairness.

Background:

The Indian Constitution entrusts **Parliament** with the responsibility of regulating elections. The **Representation of the People Act (RPA), 1951**, governs electoral practices and has evolved over time:

- **Pre-1996:** Candidates could contest from any number of constituencies.
- **Post-1996 Amendment:** The law was revised to limit candidates to a maximum of **two constituencies** per election.

Despite these changes, OCMC remains prevalent, especially in **State Legislative Assembly elections**. For instance, November 2024 saw **44 by-elections** due to legislators vacating seats after winning in multiple constituencies.

Arguments Against OCMC:

1. **Increased Burden on Taxpayers:** The administrative cost of elections is significant, and **by-elections** triggered by seat vacancies add unnecessary expenses, ultimately borne by the **taxpayers**.
2. **Advantage for the Ruling Party:** By-elections held within six months often favor the ruling party, which can leverage **state machinery**, resources, and patronage, creating an uneven playing field for the opposition.
3. **Financial Strain on Opponents:** By-elections compel defeated candidates and their parties to spend additional resources on repeated contests, intensifying their financial strain.
4. **Erosion of Democratic Values:** OCMC allows leaders to hedge their bets, prioritizing **political gains** over genuine public service, undermining the essence of democratic representation.
5. **Voter Discontent:** Winning candidates vacating seats disrupt voter expectations of representation, causing **dissatisfaction** and eroding trust in the electoral process.
6. **Constitutional Concerns:** A petition in **Ashwini Kumar Upadhyay vs Union of India (2023)** argued that vacating a seat after winning violates voters' trust and contradicts the **fundamental right to freedom of speech and expression** under **Article 19(1)(a)**.

Arguments in Favor of OCMC:

1. **Safety Net for Candidates:** In closely contested elections, OCMC provides candidates with a **backup option**, reducing the risks associated with uncertain outcomes.
2. **International Precedents:** Countries like **Pakistan** and **Bangladesh** permit candidates to contest multiple constituencies, albeit with the condition of relinquishing all but one seat after the election.

Proposed Reforms by the Election Commission of India (ECI):

1. **Ban OCMC:** Amend **Section 33(7)** of the RPA, 1951, to prohibit candidates from contesting multiple constituencies.
   - This recommendation aligns with the **255th Law Commission Report (2015)**.
2. **Recover By-Election Costs:** Hold candidates who vacate seats responsible for the **entire cost** of conducting by-elections.

Conclusion:

The practice of OCMC imposes **financial and administrative burdens** that could be better utilized for developmental priorities. Adopting the principle of **One Candidate, One Constituency (OCOC)** aligns with the democratic ideals of **"one person, one vote."** However, its successful implementation demands **political consensus** and active support from major political parties.

Addressing this issue is essential for strengthening **democratic accountability** and ensuring fairer electoral practices in India.

India-Iran-Armenia Trilateral Consultations: Strengthening Regional Ties

Context: The **second India-Iran-Armenia Trilateral Consultations** were successfully conducted in **New Delhi**, showcasing the growing partnership between the three nations.

Key Highlights of the Discussions:

1. **Boosting Connectivity:**
   - The discussions emphasized the critical role of **connectivity initiatives**, particularly through the **International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC)**.
   - The importance of **Chabahar Port** in advancing regional connectivity and trade was underscored.

2. **Strengthening Multilateral Engagement:**
   - The three nations deliberated on enhancing their **collective influence** in global multilateral platforms by fostering deeper collaboration.

3. **Addressing Regional Developments:**
   - The consultations focused on promoting **peace and stability** across the region, emphasizing the significance of joint efforts in mitigating regional challenges.

4. **Expanding Trade, Tourism, and Cultural Exchange:**
   - Strategies to strengthen **trade**, **tourism**, and **cultural exchanges** were explored, with an aim to foster **people-to-people connections**.

5. **Armenia's Connectivity Vision:**
   - **Armenia** presented its initiative, **"The Crossroads of Peace,"** aimed at enhancing transportation links to connect the **Caspian Sea** with the **Mediterranean Sea** and the **Persian Gulf** with the **Black Sea**, promoting efficient regional connectivity.

Did You Know?
   - The **International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC)** is a **7,200-km-long multi-modal transportation network** connecting India, Iran, Afghanistan, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Russia, Central Asia, and Europe for seamless freight movement.
   - The **Chabahar Port**, located in Iran's **Sistan-Balochistan province**, is being jointly developed by India and Iran. It plays a pivotal role in enhancing **regional trade**, particularly facilitating India's connectivity with **Afghanistan**.

Importance of the Trilateral Meeting:

The **second India-Iran-Armenia consultations** underline the growing commitment to fostering **regional cooperation and development**. By focusing on shared goals, these discussions pave the way for enhanced collaboration in various fields, contributing to **regional stability** and **economic prosperity**.

Looking Ahead
   - The three nations reaffirmed their dedication to continued cooperation under this **trilateral framework**.
   - It was agreed that the **next round of consultations** would be hosted by **Iran** at a mutually convenient date, further strengthening the alliance.

This meeting highlights the shared vision of India, Iran, and Armenia in driving growth, stability, and connectivity across the region, setting a strong foundation for future collaboration.

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Minority Rights in India: A Pillar of Democracy

Context: Minority rights are vital for preserving cultural, linguistic, and religious diversity in any democracy. The **Indian Constitution**, along with global frameworks like the **United Nations' 1992 Declaration on Minority Rights**, underscores the need to protect minority communities.

Franklin Roosevelt once remarked, **"No democracy can long survive which does not accept as fundamental to its very existence the recognition of the rights of minorities."**

Historical Context:

The idea of **minority rights** emerged from 19th-century European constitutional reforms:

- **Austria (1867):** Recognized the rights of ethnic minorities to preserve their languages and identities.
- **Hungary (1868):** Enacted similar protections.
- **Post-World War I Treaties:** Nations like Poland and Czechoslovakia included minority protections in their agreements.

India's Constitution drew inspiration from these principles, emphasizing inclusivity and diversity.

Constitutional Provisions for Minorities:

Article 29: Right to Cultural Preservation:

- Empowers citizens to protect their **culture, language, and script**.
- Ensures **equality and dignity** for all cultural identities.

Article 30: Right to Educational Institutions:

- Allows **religious and linguistic minorities** to establish and manage their own institutions.
- **Judicial View:** The **Supreme Court** sees this as crucial for equality and non-discrimination.
    - Recent Verdict: **Aligarh Muslim University (2024)** upheld the institution's minority character.

Article 350 A: Ensures **primary education** in one's mother tongue.

Article 350 B: Provides for a **Special Officer** to address linguistic minorities' concerns.

The Constitution also accommodates **personal laws**, such as the **customary laws of the Nagas**, promoting legal diversity.

Understanding 'Minority'

The term **'minority'** isn't explicitly defined in the Constitution. However:

- **Judicial Clarifications:** The Supreme Court, in cases like **TMA Pai Foundation (2002)**, defined minorities at the **state level** (e.g., Hindus are minorities in Punjab and northeastern states).
- **Criteria for Minority Institutions:**
    - **Founder's Intent**: The institution must primarily serve minority communities.
    - **Operational Factors**: Includes funding sources, administration, and objectives.

Judicial Safeguards for Minority Institutions:

Though autonomous, minority institutions are subject to:

- **Regulation:** Governments can intervene to prevent **maladministration** and ensure quality.
- **Fair Aid: Article 30(2)** prohibits discrimination in granting aid to minority institutions.

Why Are Minority Rights Essential?

Preservation of Diversity:

Minority rights ensure that cultural identities flourish within a supportive environment.

Balancing Individual and Group Rights

- While **individual equality** (Articles 14-18, 19, 25) is critical, it must be complemented by **group rights** for minorities.
- **Judicial Insight:** Courts emphasize that **special protections** are necessary for substantive equality.

Relevance in Contemporary India:

- **Legacy of Pluralism:** Articles 25-30 highlight India's commitment to its **multicultural fabric**.
- **Global Standards:** Aligns with international benchmarks like the **Universal Declaration of Human Rights**.

Conclusion:

India's Constitution strikes a fine balance between **individual equality** and **group recognition**, making **minority rights** a cornerstone of its democratic ethos.
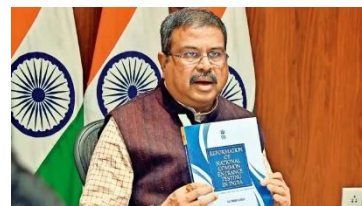
As socio-political landscapes evolve, it's imperative to remain vigilant and adapt policies to protect the rights of minorities. In doing so, India reaffirms its vision of an **inclusive and harmonious society**.

Reforming National Entrance Exams: Towards Transparency and Efficiency

Context: A high-level committee, chaired by former ISRO chief **K. Radhakrishnan**, has proposed transformative reforms to enhance transparency and efficiency in national entrance examinations like **NEET, CUET**, and **UGC-NET**.

Drawing inspiration from the **election framework**, these reforms aim to fortify the integrity of the examination system and eliminate malpractices.

What is the National Testing Agency (NTA)?

Overview:

The **NTA** was established in **2017** as an autonomous and self-sustaining body under the **Ministry of Education**.

- Registered under the **Societies Registration Act, 1860**.
- Functions under the **Right to Information (RTI) Act**.
- Led by a Director General and a governing body appointed by the Union Government.

Background:

- In **2010**, a committee comprising IIT directors recommended creating a transparent, autonomous agency modeled after the **Educational Testing Service (ETS)** of the USA.
- Before the NTA's inception, various entities like **CBSE, UGC**, and universities conducted their own entrance tests.

Objectives:

The NTA aims to:

- Conduct **transparent, efficient, and globally standardized** tests for admissions and recruitment.
- Undertake research on educational and testing systems to address **knowledge gaps**.
- Identify experts and institutions for setting exam papers.
- Disseminate research on education standards and professional development.

Key Exams Conducted by the NTA:

- **JEE (Main)**, **NEET-UG**, **UGC-NET**, **CMAT**, **GPAT**, etc.
- The **National Education Policy 2020** envisions a broader role for the NTA to conduct entrance tests for all universities across India.

Challenges Faced by the NTA:

1. Accountability Issues:

- While **computer-based tests** ensure efficiency, outsourcing to third-party technical partners reduces government accountability.
- This reliance on external agencies creates **vulnerabilities** in the system.

2. Manpower Shortages: The NTA operates with only **25 permanent staff**, relying heavily on outsourced functions.

3. Weak Security Mechanisms:

- Large-scale pen-and-paper exams require robust measures to secure:
    - Question paper preparation and encryption.
    - Printing, transportation, and storage processes.
    - Exam center operations and answer sheet collection.

4. Incidents of Irregularities:

- **NEET-UG:** Alleged question paper leaks compromised the exam's credibility.
- **UGC-NET:** Reports of integrity breaches led to exam cancellations.

Recommendations by the High-Level Committee:

1. **Election-Style Framework:**

    - **State Collaboration:** States to assist in administering exams, akin to the **general election model**.
    - **Presiding Officers:** Each exam center to have an NTA-appointed officer overseeing operations.

2. **Sealing and Securing Centers:** Exam centers to be sealed before the tests and unsealed in the presence of **district administration** and **NTA officials**.

3. **State and District Committees:**

    - **State-Level Committees:** Led by a nodal officer appointed by the Chief Secretary, with representatives from **state police, NTA, IB**, and **NIC**.
    - **District-Level Committees:** Headed by district magistrates to identify secure exam centers and manage question paper transportation.

4. **Background Checks for Centers:** Vet exam centers based on ownership, past records, and intelligence inputs to mitigate security risks.

5. **Reduced Dependency on Private Agencies:** Gradually replace private test delivery agencies with **Kendriya Vidyalayas** and **Navodaya Vidyalayas**, which will develop digital infrastructure.

6. **Technology Integration:**

    - **Digi-Exam System:** Inspired by **DigiYatra**, this system will use biometric data for candidate verification.
    - **CCTV Monitoring:** Continuous surveillance of candidates during exams with district-level monitoring centers.

7. **Role Redefinition for NTA:** Focus solely on **entrance exams** for higher education, leaving recruitment exams to other entities.

8. **Flexibility in Exam Modes:** The decision on whether **NEET** will be computer-based or pen-and-paper rests with the **Health Ministry**, while the NTA serves as the service provider.

Conclusion:

The proposed reforms signify a paradigm shift in managing **national entrance exams**, emphasizing fairness, efficiency, and security.

By adopting an **election-style approach** and leveraging advanced technology, these measures aim to rebuild trust in the system, ensuring that examinations are conducted with integrity and transparency.

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Moldova Joins the International Solar Alliance (ISA): A Step Toward Renewable Energy

Context: Moldova has recently signed the **International Solar Alliance (ISA) Framework Agreement**, marking a significant step in its journey toward embracing **renewable energy solutions** and combating climate change.

About the International Solar Alliance (ISA):

Background:

- The **ISA Framework Agreement** came into force in **2017**, opening membership to all **United Nations member states** following its amendment in **2020**.

- Headquartered in **Gurugram, India**, the ISA was launched during **COP21 in Paris, 2015**, as a joint initiative by **India and France**.

- The ISA's mission centers on uniting global efforts to address **climate change** by advancing solar energy solutions.

Mission and Goals:

The ISA's strategy, known as **'Towards 1000,'** focuses on three ambitious goals:

1. **Mobilizing USD 1,000 billion** in investments for solar energy by 2030.

2. Ensuring **energy access for 1,000 million people** worldwide.

3. Facilitating the installation of **1,000 GW of solar energy capacity** globally.

Governance:

- The **ISA Assembly** serves as the apex decision-making body, shaping policies and overseeing the implementation of the Framework Agreement.

- As of now, the ISA has a membership base of **104 countries** with **16 signatory nations**.

Key Initiatives of the International Solar Alliance (ISA):

1. Scaling Solar Applications for Agricultural Use (SSAAU):

- This initiative focuses on meeting the rising demand for **solar-powered water pumps** to enhance agricultural productivity and sustainability.

2. ISA CARES:

- Aims to provide **innovative solar energy solutions** for **healthcare systems** in low- and middle-income nations, strengthening medical infrastructure.

3. Solarizing Heating and Cooling Systems:

- Addresses the growing need for sustainable **heating and cooling** solutions across **residential, commercial, and industrial sectors** by promoting solar technologies.

4. Global Solar Facility:

- Launched during **COP27**, this initiative is dedicated to **boosting solar investments** in underserved regions, particularly in **Africa** and other vulnerable geographies.

Significance of Moldova's Membership:

Moldova's decision to join the ISA highlights its dedication to expanding **renewable energy adoption**, reducing dependence on fossil fuels, and contributing to global efforts against **climate change**.

By signing the ISA Framework Agreement, Moldova stands to benefit from:

- Access to **advanced solar technologies**.

- Opportunities for **collaborative projects** with member nations.

- Support in achieving its **sustainability goals** and fostering **energy security**.

Conclusion:

Moldova's alignment with the **International Solar Alliance** not only reinforces its commitment to a greener future but also strengthens global cooperation in harnessing **solar energy** for sustainable development.

The ISA continues to lead the charge in transforming the world's energy landscape, paving the way for a **renewable energy revolution**.

BJP Seeks Return of Jawaharlal Nehru's Historic Letters as National Heritage

Context: The **Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)** has demanded the return of a valuable collection of letters written by **Jawaharlal Nehru**, India's first Prime Minister. These letters, which hold immense historical significance, were reportedly relocated to the residence of **former Congress president Sonia Gandhi** in 2008. Originally part of the **Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (NMML)**, now renamed the **Prime Ministers' Museum and Library (PMML)**, these documents are deemed an integral part of India's **national heritage**.

Background:

- **Significance of the Letters:** These documents, penned by **Jawaharlal Nehru**, were addressed to prominent personalities like **Lady Edwina Mountbatten**, **Babu Jagjivan Ram**, and **Jayaprakash Narayan**, offering insights into the socio-political landscape of his time.

- **Historical Context:**
  o The letters were donated to the **Nehru Memorial Museum and Library** in **1971**.
  o In **2008**, 51 cartons of these letters were reportedly moved to Sonia Gandhi's residence with the approval of the then NMML director.

- **Communication of the Era:** These letters reflect the **traditional correspondence practices** that were vital in shaping India's post-independence era.

BJP's Allegations:

- **Ownership and Access:** The BJP argues that these letters are **not personal property** but part of India's **national historical record**, emphasizing the need for **public access**.

- **Suppression Concerns:** A planned **digitization project** in **2010** was halted due to the relocation of the documents, raising fears of potential attempts to conceal their content.

Prime Ministers' Museum and Library (PMML):

- **History:** Formerly known as the **Nehru Memorial Museum and Library**, the institution was established in **1966** to honor Jawaharlal Nehru. It is located at the historic **Teen Murti House**, Nehru's official residence.

- **Renaming:** In **2023**, the institution was renamed to reflect a broader focus, honoring all of India's Prime Ministers.

- **Key Components:**
  o **Memorial Museum:** Showcases Nehru's life and contributions.
  o **Modern India Library:** Houses an extensive collection of historical resources.
  o **Centre for Contemporary Studies:** Facilitates research on current issues.
  o **Nehru Planetarium:** Promotes scientific knowledge and curiosity.

- **Digitization Initiatives:** Efforts to make archival content accessible globally for researchers and historians.

Jawaharlal Nehru: A Visionary Leader:
- **Early Life:** Born on **November 14, 1889**, in **Allahabad**, Uttar Pradesh, he was the son of **Motilal Nehru**, a prominent Congress leader, and **Swaroop Rani**.

- **Education:** Studied at **Harrow School**, **Trinity College, Cambridge**, and the **Inner Temple, London**.

- **Role in Freedom Movement:** Inspired by **Mahatma Gandhi**, Nehru joined the struggle for India's independence, participating in movements like the **Non-Cooperation Movement** and the **Quit India Movement**.

- **Prime Minister:** Served as India's first Prime Minister from **1947 to 1964**, steering the nation through its formative years.

  o **Economic Policies:** Advocated a **mixed economy** and initiated the **Five-Year Plans**, focusing on agriculture and industry.

  o **Foreign Relations:**

    ▪ Co-founded the **Non-Aligned Movement (NAM)** with leaders from Egypt and Yugoslavia.

    ▪ Promoted **Panchsheel**, the five principles of peaceful coexistence, with China.

  o **Education and Science:** Established institutions like **IITs**, **AIIMS**, and **ISRO**, cementing India's focus on education and research.

Significance of Nehru's Letters:

These letters are not just personal correspondences but a **window into India's history**, providing valuable insights into its political, social, and cultural evolution. Their preservation as **public heritage** is essential for understanding the legacy of one of India's most influential leaders.

Conclusion:

The BJP's demand for the return of Jawaharlal Nehru's letters underscores the broader need to preserve and make accessible India's **historical artifacts**. Safeguarding such documents ensures that future generations can learn from the legacy of the nation's founding leaders, fostering a deeper connection to India's rich history.

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India's Treatment of Rohingya Detainees: A Human Rights Concern

Context: A recent report has highlighted **serious violations of constitutional and human rights** regarding the treatment of **Rohingya refugees detained in India**. This raises concerns about India's adherence to its **international human rights obligations**.

Who are the Rohingya?

- The **Rohingya** are a predominantly **Muslim ethnic group** originating from **Rakhine State in Myanmar**.
- They speak a **Bengali dialect** rather than Myanmar's primary language, **Burmese**.
- Despite living in Myanmar for generations, the government classifies them as **"resident foreigners"** or **"associate citizens"**, denying them full citizenship rights.
- The Rohingya have faced decades of **systemic discrimination, violence, and persecution** in Myanmar, forcing many to flee to neighboring countries, including India.

India's Refugee Policy: Key Features:

- **No Refugee Convention:** India is **not a signatory** to the **1951 UN Refugee Convention** or its **1967 Protocol** and lacks a formal **refugee law**.
- **Classification as Illegal Immigrants:** The Indian government often labels groups like the **Rohingya** as **illegal immigrants**, even when verified as refugees by the **United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)**.
- **Legal Frameworks:** Undocumented foreign nationals in India are governed under laws such as:
  - **The Foreigners Act, 1946**
  - **The Registration of Foreigners Act, 1939**
  - **The Passport (Entry into India) Act, 1920**
  - **The Citizenship Act, 1955**

Why India Maintains Its Current Refugee Policy:

1. **Strain on Resources:** Refugees place a significant burden on **limited resources**, particularly in regions with **scarce infrastructure**.
2. **Social Tensions:** Large refugee influxes often lead to **conflicts with local communities** over access to jobs, housing, and resources.
3. **Security Risks:** Concerns about **extremist infiltration** and managing **movements across porous borders** are key factors.
4. **Diplomatic Relations:** Refugee policies can complicate relations with neighboring countries, especially during **geopolitical disputes**.
5. **Economic Competition:** Refugees often compete for **low-skilled jobs**, impacting the **local workforce** and economic stability.

Path Forward: Addressing the Refugee Challenge:

1. **Enact a National Refugee Law:** Establishing a dedicated **refugee law** would ensure legal protection for refugees, guaranteeing their **rights to basic services** like healthcare, education, and employment.
2. **Strengthen International Collaboration:** India should actively engage with organizations like the **UNHCR** to develop policies aligned with **global human rights standards**.
3. **Promote Diplomatic Efforts:** Working with neighboring nations, India can address the **root causes** of crises, such as the persecution of Rohingya in Myanmar, through **regional cooperation** and **diplomatic dialogue**.

Conclusion:

India's approach to the **Rohingya crisis** reflects broader challenges in balancing **security, resource management, and human rights commitments**. Adopting a **comprehensive refugee policy** will not only safeguard human dignity but also enhance India's reputation as a **responsible global actor** in addressing humanitarian crises.

India Tags Ganges River Dolphin for the First Time

Context: For the first time in India, a **Ganges River Dolphin** has been successfully tagged with a satellite device by a team of wildlife conservationists. This marks a milestone in understanding and conserving this endangered species.

About the Ganges River Dolphin:

India's National Aquatic Animal:

Declared as **India's National Aquatic Animal** in 2009, the Ganges River Dolphin is an **endangered freshwater species** found primarily in the **Ganges, Brahmaputra, and Meghna river systems**.

Key Features:

- **Scientific Name:** *Platanista gangetica gangetica*
- **Physical Traits:** Nearly **blind**, it relies on **echolocation** for navigation and hunting.
- **Habitat:** Prefers **slow-moving, deep waters** with an abundance of prey.
- **Diet:** Primarily **carnivorous**, feeding on fish and invertebrates.

Geographical Range:

- Distributed across the **Ganga, Brahmaputra-Meghna**, and **Karnaphuli-Sangu river systems** in **India, Nepal, and Bangladesh**.
- Historically widespread, the population is now **fragmented** due to human-induced pressures.

Ecological Importance:

- Acts as a **keystone species**, crucial for maintaining the **riverine ecosystem balance**.
- Serves as an **indicator species**, reflecting the health of freshwater ecosystems.

Conservation Status:

- **IUCN Red List:** Endangered
- **CITES Listing:** Appendix I
- **Indian Wildlife Protection Act, 1972:** Schedule I

Major Threats to the Ganges River Dolphin:

1. **Habitat Degradation:**
   o Pollution from **industries, agriculture, and urban runoff**.
   o **Dams and barrages** disrupt connectivity between dolphin habitats.
2. **Bycatch and Hunting:**
   o Dolphins get **accidentally caught in fishing nets**.
   o Targeted for their **oil and meat** in some regions.
3. **Water Abstraction:**

o   Excessive **water withdrawal** for agriculture and industries reduces river flow.

4. **Riverbed Alteration:**

o   **Sand mining** and dredging activities destroy dolphin habitats.

Government's Conservation Efforts:

1. **Project Dolphin (2020):** Launched by **Prime Minister Narendra Modi** to protect both **river and marine dolphins**.
2. **Protected Areas:** Sanctuaries like the **Vikramshila Gangetic Dolphin Sanctuary** in Bihar.
3. **Community Awareness:** Programs to educate locals about **sustainable fishing** and the importance of conservation.
4. **Technological Interventions:** Use of **satellite tagging** to study dolphin behaviour and habitat requirements.
5. **Legislative Actions:** Strict enforcement of the **Wildlife Protection Act, 1972**, and bans on destructive practices like **sand mining**.

News Highlights:

First Satellite Tagging of Ganges River Dolphin in Assam:

*   **Executed by:** The **Wildlife Institute of India (WII)** under the Ministry of Environment, Forest, and Climate Change (MoEFCC).

*   **Objective:**

    o   To study the **habitat needs, migration patterns, and range** of the species.

    o   To create a detailed **conservation action plan** for protecting this apex predator.

Technological Innovations: Use of **lightweight satellite tags** compatible with Argos systems, ensuring minimal disturbance to the dolphins.

Broader Implications of This Initiative:

*   **Strengthening Conservation Efforts:** Provides critical data for developing **targeted strategies** to protect endangered species.

*   **Advancing Technology in Wildlife Research:** Showcases India's ability to integrate **cutting-edge technology** with conservation science.

*   **Global Benchmark:** Reflects India's commitment to **aquatic biodiversity** and sets a global example for sustainable practices.

Conclusion:

The first-ever tagging of the **Ganges River Dolphin** is a pivotal step toward conserving **India's aquatic heritage**. By integrating **science, technology, and community involvement**, this initiative underscores the importance of **safeguarding endangered species** for the health of our ecosystems and future generations.

Why India Might Discontinue the Sovereign Gold Bond Scheme: Key Takeaways

Context: The Indian government is **reassessing the future** of the **Sovereign Gold Bond Scheme (SGB)** amidst growing concerns about its effectiveness and cost. Introduced as a way to reduce dependence on physical gold, the scheme now faces scrutiny over its utility and fiscal implications.

What is the Sovereign Gold Bond Scheme?

Overview:
- Launched in **2015** under the **Gold Monetization Scheme**, SGBs are **government-backed securities** issued by the **Reserve Bank of India (RBI)**.
- Each bond is **linked to the value of gold**, offering an **alternative to physical gold investments**.
- Investors pay for the bonds in cash, and the bonds are **redeemed in cash** upon maturity.

Key Features:
- Each unit of the bond represents **one gram of gold**.
- Offers a **fixed interest rate of 2.5% per annum**, paid **semi-annually**.
- **Tradable in secondary markets** and redeemable in Indian Rupees based on the gold price of 999 purity.

Benefits of SGBs:
- **Hedge Against Price Volatility:** Protection from market price fluctuations of gold.
- **Flexibility in Redemption:** Early redemption allowed after five years, with a total tenure of eight years.
- **Cost-Effective:** Lower risks and expenses compared to storing physical gold.

Why is the SGB Scheme Under Review?

1. High Costs of Financing the Fiscal Deficit:
- The **government incurs significant costs** in issuing SGBs, with **limited returns** in terms of actual gold collection.
- **Issuance frequency** has been scaled back from 10 tranches per year to just two, signaling a reduced focus on the scheme.

2. Impact of Lowered Customs Duty on Gold:
- In **July 2024**, the government reduced **customs duty on gold** from **15% to 6%**, leading to a **drop in gold prices** and a **spike in demand**.
- This move aligns with the government's aim to **stimulate gold demand**, reducing the relevance of SGBs as an investment tool.

3. Decline in SGB Issuances and Borrowing Targets:
- The **gross issuance target** for FY 2024-25 was slashed to **18,500 crore**, down from **29,638 crore** in the interim budget.
- **Net borrowing** was also cut to **15,000 crore**, compared to the earlier target of **26,138 crore**.
- Notably, **no new SGB issuances** have been announced so far in FY 2024-25.

4. Performance of SGB Redemptions:
- **SGB Series I (2016-17):** Matured in **August 2024**, yielding over **120% returns**, with redemption prices rising from 3,119 to 6,938 per unit.
- **SGB Series II (2016-17):** Redeemed in **March 2024**, delivering **126.4% returns** on initial investment (excluding interest).
- **Premature Redemptions:** Scheduled for bonds issued between May 2017 and March 2020, from **October 2024 to March 2025**.

Conclusion: Is the End Near for SGBs?

While the **Sovereign Gold Bond Scheme** has provided **attractive returns** for investors, its **high financing costs** and **limited utility** in curbing physical gold demand have raised concerns. The government is now **reevaluating the scheme's future**, with a possibility of discontinuation if deemed financially unsustainable.

This reassessment reflects India's broader strategy to **streamline fiscal measures** and **optimize gold-related policies** for better economic outcomes.

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GS Paper 2 – Science & Technology, Agriculture , Environment

Kisan Kavach: A Game-Changing Shield Against Pesticide Exposure for Farmers

Context: The Union Minister of State for Science and Technology recently introduced **Kisan Kavach**, an innovative solution to protect farmers from harmful pesticide exposure. This **anti-pesticide bodysuit** aims to safeguard the health of farmers and farm workers during pesticide spraying operations.

What is Kisan Kavach?

Kisan Kavach is India's **first-ever anti-pesticide bodysuit**, specifically designed to mitigate the **toxic effects of pesticide exposure** on farmers. It addresses a critical health hazard posed by pesticides, many of which are **neurotoxic and harmful to human health**.

Development:

- Created by the **Biotechnology Research and Innovation Council (BRIC-inStem), Bangalore**, in partnership with **Sepio Health Pvt. Ltd.**
- Aimed at preventing farmers from absorbing harmful chemicals through their skin during pesticide application.

Unique Features of Kisan Kavach:

1. **Comprehensive Protection**
   o The kit includes a **trouser, pullover, and face cover**, all crafted from a special fabric called **'oxime fabric.'**
   o The fabric is designed to chemically **break down common pesticides**, preventing their absorption into the skin.
2. **Innovative Working Mechanism**
   o Utilizes **nucleophilic-mediated hydrolysis** to deactivate pesticides on contact.
   o Effectively neutralizes toxic chemicals, reducing risks of **pesticide-induced toxicity** and **fatalities.**
3. **Durability and Versatility**
   o Remains effective across a **wide temperature range** and under **UV-light exposure**.
   o Retains its protective properties even after **150 washes.**
4. **Affordability:** Priced at **4,000 per kit**, offering a cost-effective solution for farmers.

Significance:

- **Health Protection:** Shields farmers from the harmful impacts of prolonged pesticide exposure.
- **Enhanced Safety:** Reduces the risk of chronic illnesses and neurotoxicity caused by pesticide absorption.
- **Sustainable Usage:** The long-lasting fabric ensures farmers receive enduring protection without frequent replacements.

Conclusion:

The **Kisan Kavach** marks a revolutionary step in improving the **occupational safety of Indian farmers**. By combining cutting-edge science with practical design, it provides a **comprehensive shield against pesticide exposure**. This innovative bodysuit reflects India's commitment to **empowering farmers with health-focused solutions** while promoting sustainable agricultural practices.

Myanmar Rebels Reclaim Historic Stronghold After 30 Years

Context: The **Karen National Union (KNU)**, an ethnic rebel group in Myanmar, has successfully **recaptured its former headquarters, Manerplaw**, from the Myanmar military junta. This victory comes nearly three decades after the group lost control of the area.

About Manerplaw:

- **Manerplaw** is a village located in **Kayin State**, Myanmar, situated along the **Moei River**.
- It was once envisioned as the **capital of an independent Karen state**, locally referred to as **Kawthoolei**.

Historical Significance of Manerplaw:

1. **Resistance Symbol**:
   - The base served as the **stronghold** and **headquarters** of the KNU, symbolizing their long-standing struggle against Myanmar's military regime.
   - It was the strategic hub for coordinating the Karen people's fight for **autonomy and minority rights**.

2. **Fall of Manerplaw in 1995**:
   - Internal divisions within the **Christian-majority KNU** led to the Myanmar junta, supported by a breakaway **Buddhist faction**, capturing the base.
   - Following its fall, the **KNU retreated to Thailand**, and the junta renamed the area under its control as **Kayin State**.
   - The **Democratic Kayin Buddhist Organization**, a military ally of the junta, subsequently took over the region.

The Karen People:

Who are the Karen?

- The **Karen people**, also known as **Kayin, Kariang**, or **Kawthoolese**, are an **ethnolinguistic group** that speaks Tibeto-Burman languages.
- They predominantly reside in the **Kayin State** of southern and southeastern Myanmar.

Population and Cultural Diversity:

- The Karen make up around **69% of Myanmar's population**, comprising both **Christian** and **Buddhist communities**.
- They have historically advocated for **autonomy**, driven by their unique cultural and linguistic identity.

Significance of the Victory:

The **recapture of Manerplaw** represents a symbolic and strategic milestone for the KNU, reigniting hope for the Karen people's long-standing quest for **self-determination**. This development also underscores the continued resistance against Myanmar's military rule, highlighting the resilience of ethnic minority groups in the region.

Japan, India Collaborate on Laser-Equipped Satellite to Tackle Space Debris

Context: Japan's **Orbital Lasers** and India's **InspeCity** have announced a collaborative study to develop a **laser-equipped satellite** aimed at tackling **space debris**. This initiative will explore opportunities for services such as **de-orbiting defunct satellites** and **extending the life of operational spacecraft**.

About Space Debris:

- **Definition**: **Space debris** consists of all non-functional, artificial objects—including fragments and elements—orbiting Earth or re-entering its atmosphere.

- **Statistics**: Of the 35,150 tracked objects in orbit, only about **25% are working satellites**.

- **Concerns**:

    o **Threat to Space Exploration**: Collisions with debris can disable operational spacecraft and damage vital components like **optics** and **solar panels**. For instance, a collision with a 10-cm object can cause catastrophic fragmentation of a satellite.

    o **Kessler Syndrome**: The uncontrolled growth of debris can lead to a **self-sustained cascading series of collisions**, creating a chain reaction.

    o **Risk to Life on Earth**: Large debris reentering the atmosphere in an uncontrolled manner can pose risks to populations on the ground.

Initiatives to Address Space Debris:

Global Efforts:

1. **RemoveDEBRIS Mission**: Demonstrates **active debris removal (ADR)** technologies.

2. **LignoSat**: A unique initiative featuring a **wooden satellite** crafted from magnolia wood to combat space debris.

3. **UN Liability Convention (Convention on International Liability for Damage Caused by Space Object), 1972**

4. **UN Registration Convention (Convention on Registration of Objects Launched into Outer Space), 1976**

India's Role:

1. **Project NETRA (Network for Space Objects Tracking and Analysis)**

2. **Debris-Free Space Missions**: Aiming for cleaner space operations by 2030 through initiatives by Indian space actors.
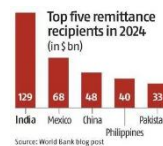
Japan and India's Collaboration:

The **partnership** between **Orbital Lasers** and **InspeCity** signifies a significant step towards **innovative solutions** for managing space debris. The laser technology under development will **vaporize** debris, thereby **stopping its rotation** and making it easier for servicing spacecraft to perform orbital maneuvers. This collaborative effort is crucial for **ensuring the sustainability of space activities** and protecting our future in space exploration.

India: Leading the World in Remittances in 2024

Context: India has retained its position as the **largest recipient of remittances** globally in 2024, with an estimated inflow of **$129 billion**. Other top recipients include **Mexico**, **China**, **Philippines**, and **Pakistan**.

Top five remittance recipients in 2024 (in $ bn)
129 India, 68 Mexico, 48 China, 40 Philippines, 33 Pakistan
Source: World Bank blog post

What Are Remittances?

- **Definition**: **Remittances** refer to the funds transferred by individuals working abroad back to their families or communities in their home countries.

- **Channels**: These funds are sent through **banks**, **online platforms**, or **money transfer services** and play a critical role in supporting household incomes.

Rising Trends in Remittances:

- **Growth Rate**: The growth of remittances in 2024 is estimated at **5.8%**, a significant jump from **1.2%** in 2023.

- **Global Impact**: Official remittances to **low- and middle-income countries (LMICs)** are projected to reach **$685 billion** in 2024.

- **Regional Highlight**: **South Asia** is witnessing the highest increase in remittances (**11.8%**), driven by robust inflows to **India**, **Pakistan**, and **Bangladesh**.

Key Driver:

The **recovery of job markets** in high-income **OECD countries**, particularly the **United States**, has fueled remittance growth. Employment among foreign-born workers has surged **11% above pre-pandemic levels**, boosting remittance inflows to regions like **Latin America and the Caribbean**.

Why Remittances Are Crucial:

1. **Economic Stabilization**: Remittances contribute significantly to the **GDP** of developing nations, offering foreign currency that stabilizes **economies** and **balances payments**.

2. **Poverty Alleviation**: They provide a reliable source of income, enabling families to afford **education**, **healthcare**, and **daily necessities**.

3. **Development and Investment**: These funds support **small businesses**, **agriculture**, and **infrastructure projects**, fostering **local economic growth**.

4. **Cultural Connections**: Migrants maintain ties with their home countries, encouraging **cultural exchange** and strengthening **diaspora relations**.

Challenges in Remittances:

- **High Transaction Costs**: Despite advancements in technology, remittance costs remain high in certain regions, reducing the actual amount received by families.

- **Dependence on External Funds**: An over-reliance on remittances may hinder the development of sustainable local economies, creating vulnerabilities.

- **Regulatory Hurdles**: Stringent financial regulations and anti-money laundering policies often slow down and complicate remittance processes.

The Road Ahead:

Remittances are a lifeline for millions and a critical driver of **global economic stability**. To maximize their potential:

- **Reduce Transaction Costs**: Leveraging **financial technology** can enhance efficiency and lower costs.

- **Foster Financial Inclusion**: Remittances should be utilized to promote access to **healthcare**, **education**, and **capital markets**.

- **Prepare for Future Trends**: Demographic shifts, income disparities, and climate change will continue to influence **migration** and **remittance growth**.

By aligning policies and innovations, countries can harness the full potential of remittances to drive **poverty reduction** and support **sustainable development**.

Supreme Court Declares Coconut Oil as Edible Oil: Simplifies Tax Structure

Context: After years of ambiguity, the **Supreme Court of India** has resolved the taxation dispute surrounding **coconut oil**, classifying it as an **edible oil**. This landmark ruling ensures that coconut oil is taxed at a lower **GST rate of 5%**, instead of the 18% applicable to haircare products.

The Taxation Dilemma: Coconut Oil in India:

Historical Taxation Under the CET Act, 1985:

- **Before GST**: Coconut oil was taxed under the **Central Excise Tariff Act (CET Act)**, 1985.
- **Classification**:
  - **Animal or Vegetable Fats and Oils**: Taxed at **8% excise duty**.
  - **Haircare Products**: Taxed at **16% excise duty**.
- These classifications adhered to international norms set by the **Harmonised System of Nomenclature (HSN)** established by the **World Customs Organisation (1988)**.

The 2009 Circular and Controversy:

- **2009 Circular**: The **Central Board of Excise and Customs (CBEC)** classified coconut oil in containers below **200 ml** as **hair oil** and taxed it at **16%**.
- **Reversal in 2015**: Following court rulings, the circular was withdrawn, emphasizing that **packaging size** does not solely define the product's purpose.

GST Regime (2017 Onwards):

- Coconut oil was categorized under **edible oils**, attracting a **5% GST**.
- Haircare products were taxed at **18%** under the category "Preparations for use on the hair."

Timeline of Tax Disputes:

2007: Show-Cause Notices: Authorities issued **notices** to **Madhan Agro Industries** and others, proposing higher taxes by categorizing coconut oil as a **haircare product**.

CESTAT's Ruling:

- The **Customs Excise and Service Tax Appellate Tribunal (CESTAT)** ruled that coconut oil is primarily an **edible oil**, regardless of its **packaging size**, aligning with the **2005 CET Act amendment**.

Appeals to the Supreme Court: Multiple similar cases were escalated to the **Supreme Court**, challenging CESTAT rulings.

Supreme Court's Verdict: Clarity at Last

2018 Split Verdict:

- **Justice Ranjan Gogoi**: Coconut oil is **edible oil**, irrespective of container size.
- **Justice R Banumathi**: Applied the **Common Parlance Test**, suggesting small packages are perceived as **hair oil**.

2024 Final Ruling:

A three-judge bench led by **Chief Justice of India Sanjiv Khanna** addressed the issue decisively:

1. **Rejection of the Common Parlance Test**: The test is not applicable when the product is clearly defined under **legal norms** and **HSN classifications**.
2. **Legal and International Norms Take Precedence**: Coconut oil's ability to serve as a hair product does not exclude it from being classified as **edible oil**.
3. **Container Size Is Irrelevant**: Packaging size is common for both edible and cosmetic products and is not a valid classification criterion.

Significance of the Ruling:

The court's decision ensures that:

- **Taxation aligns with usage**: Recognizing coconut oil as predominantly **edible oil** simplifies its classification.
- **Uniformity in Application**: Adheres to **HSN norms**, rejecting subjective market perceptions and arbitrary distinctions.
- **Relief to Manufacturers and Consumers**: A **lower GST rate** benefits both producers and consumers of coconut oil.

Conclusion: The Supreme Court's decision resolves a long-standing taxation dispute, affirming coconut oil's **primary use as edible oil** and ensuring fairness in taxation. This clarity paves the way for consistent classification and simplifies the tax structure, benefiting businesses and consumers alike.

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Russia's Breakthrough: Personalized mRNA Cancer Vaccine Set for 2025

Context: Russia has unveiled a groundbreaking development in cancer treatment: a personalized **mRNA-based cancer vaccine**. The vaccine is slated for **free distribution** to patients starting early **2025**, marking a significant milestone in cancer therapy.

Key Highlights of the Vaccine:

Personalized Approach:

- Unlike traditional vaccines, this **mRNA cancer vaccine** is customized for each patient.
- It is designed to **treat existing cancers** rather than prevent them.

How It Works:

- **Tailored Genetic Material**: The vaccine incorporates genetic material from a patient's tumor.
- **Immune System Activation**: It produces specific **antigens**, prompting the immune system to identify and attack cancer cells.
- **Preclinical Success**: Studies show potential to suppress **tumor growth** and prevent **metastasis**.

Development:

- Created by the **Gamaleya National Research Centre for Epidemiology and Microbiology**, the same institute that developed Russia's **Sputnik V COVID-19 vaccine**.
- Aligns with global efforts leveraging **mRNA technology** for cancer therapy.

Accessibility:

- Russia's plan to make the vaccine **free of charge** aims to enhance accessibility and improve patient outcomes.

What is mRNA?

Understanding mRNA:

- **Messenger RNA (mRNA)** is a single-stranded RNA crucial for **protein synthesis**.
- Synthesized from **DNA** during the transcription process.

Function of mRNA:

- Transports genetic instructions from **DNA** in the nucleus to the cytoplasm.
- Directs the cell's machinery to produce **proteins** by decoding **codons** (three-base sequences).
- Acts as a bridge between the DNA code and the **protein synthesis** mechanisms of the cell.

How Do mRNA Vaccines Work?

The Vaccine Mechanism:

1. **Introduction of mRNA**: The vaccine delivers a specific segment of **mRNA** coding for a viral or tumor-related protein.

2. **Protein Production**: Cells use the mRNA blueprint to create the target protein.

3. **Immune Response**: The immune system recognizes the protein as foreign and generates **antibodies**.

4. **Long-Term Protection**: These antibodies remain in the body to provide lasting immunity or aid in targeting cancer cells.

Key Features:

- Contains **no live virus**, eliminating the risk of infection.

- Relies on the body's natural mechanisms to stimulate an immune response.

How mRNA Vaccines Are Made:

1. **Identify Target Protein**: Scientists pinpoint a specific viral or cancer-related protein that elicits an immune response.

2. **Synthesize mRNA**: Using the DNA sequence of the target protein, scientists create a complementary mRNA strand.

3. **Purification**: The mRNA is purified, ensuring it's free from residual DNA or contaminants.

A New Era in Cancer Treatment:

Russia's personalized **mRNA cancer vaccine** represents a monumental step forward in oncology. By harnessing cutting-edge **mRNA technology**, this initiative could redefine how cancers are treated globally. The decision to offer the vaccine **free of charge** underscores Russia's commitment to advancing healthcare accessibility and patient outcomes.

This innovation also highlights the growing potential of **mRNA-based therapies**, not just for infectious diseases but also for complex conditions like cancer. The world will closely watch as this vaccine moves from development to implementation in 2025.

What is a Vaccine?

- **Purpose**: To prepare the body's immune system to fight off specific diseases.

- **How It Works**:

  o Introduces a harmless piece or imitation of the pathogen (e.g., a weakened or inactivated microbe, a part of the microbe, or genetic material).

  o Trains the immune system to recognize and remember the pathogen.

  o Helps the body quickly neutralize the real pathogen if exposed in the future.

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Supreme Court Expands NIA's Investigative Powers

Context: The **Supreme Court of India** has broadened the scope of powers vested in the **National Investigation Agency (NIA)**, enabling it to tackle a wider range of crimes beyond its traditional mandate.

Supreme Court's Landmark Ruling:

A Bench comprising **Justices B.V. Nagarathna** and **N. Kotiswar Singh** interpreted **Section 8 of the NIA Act, 2008**, to extend the NIA's investigative jurisdiction:

- The agency's powers now cover **non-scheduled offences**, provided they are **connected to scheduled offences** under the Act.
- This expansion allows the NIA to delve into **interlinked criminal activities**, bolstering its capacity to counter threats to national security.

About the National Investigation Agency (NIA):

- **Established**: 2009, post-enactment of the **NIA Act, 2008**.
- **Primary Role**: India's **Central Counter-Terrorism Law Enforcement Agency**, operating under the **Ministry of Home Affairs**.
- **Headquarters**: **New Delhi**.
- **Focus Areas**: Investigating offences related to **terrorism**, **arms smuggling**, and other crimes threatening **national security**.

Key Provisions of the NIA Act:

Jurisdiction and Powers:

- The NIA investigates **scheduled offences** across India, ensuring a unified approach to addressing national security threats.
- The **NIA (Amendment) Act, 2019**:
  - Extended its jurisdiction to crimes committed **outside India** involving Indian citizens or interests.
  - Allowed the NIA to probe cases of **human trafficking**, **cyber terrorism**, and violations of the **Explosive Substances Act**.

Special Courts:

- The Act mandates the creation of **Special Courts** for handling scheduled offences, ensuring **swift trials** and **effective justice delivery**.

Categories of Offences Under the NIA Act:

Scheduled Offences:

These are severe crimes directly threatening **national security** and **sovereignty**, investigated by the NIA. Examples include:

1. **Terrorism** under the **Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA)**.
2. Offences under the **Atomic Energy Act, 1962**.
3. Anti-hijacking laws and maritime safety violations.
4. Cyberterrorism under the **IT Act, 2000**.
5. Suppression of crimes under international treaties such as the **SAARC Convention (1993)**.

Non-Scheduled Offences:

While not explicitly listed under the NIA Act, these include crimes such as violations of the **NDPS Act**. With the recent ruling, the NIA can investigate these if connected to a scheduled offence.

Implications of the Supreme Court's Decision:

1. **Enhanced Investigative Authority:** The NIA's scope now extends to **non-scheduled offences**, enabling a **holistic approach** to dismantling complex criminal and terrorist networks.
2. **Strengthened National Security:** By targeting **interlinked criminal activities**, the ruling empowers the NIA to combat **organized crime** and **terrorism** more effectively.
3. **Legal Certainty:** The decision clarifies the **interpretation of NIA's powers**, reducing ambiguity and improving the efficiency of **investigations** and **prosecutions**.

Conclusion:

The Supreme Court's ruling marks a pivotal shift in India's counter-terrorism framework. By allowing the NIA to investigate **non-scheduled offences** linked to its core mandate, the decision strengthens the agency's ability to address evolving **national security challenges**. This expanded authority ensures a more robust, unified response to organized crime and terrorism, safeguarding India's security interests.

SC Puts Kerala HC's Jumbo Parade Directives on Hold

Context: The **Supreme Court of India** has stepped into a dispute concerning the famous **Thrissur Pooram festival**, intervening in the directives issued by the **Kerala High Court** regarding elephant management during the event.

About the Case:

In **November 2024**, the Kerala High Court introduced specific rules for the management of elephants during the **Thrissur Pooram procession**, which included:

- A mandate requiring elephants to maintain a **minimum distance of three meters** from each other during the parade.

Contention by the Devaswoms:

The **Thiruvambady** and **Paramekkavu devaswoms**, key organizers of the festival, raised objections, arguing that:

- The High Court's directives went **beyond its jurisdiction** and exceeded the provisions outlined in the **Captive Elephants (Management and Maintenance) Rules, 2012**, established by the Kerala Government.
- The distance rule was **impractical**, as maintaining such spacing is nearly impossible during a grand procession.

Supreme Court's Stand:

The Supreme Court issued a **stay** on the Kerala High Court's directives, emphasizing that:

- The rules lacked **feasibility** and could disrupt the traditional conduct of the festival.
- Matters such as these should adhere to established guidelines and avoid over-regulation.

Thrissur Pooram: Kerala's Iconic Festival

About the Festival:

Thrissur Pooram is one of Kerala's grandest temple festivals, celebrated with vibrant pageantry, cultural events, and a display of tradition. Key features include:

- A magnificent **elephant procession** adorned with decorative caparisons.
- Traditional **percussions and music**, such as the renowned **Melam**.
- Thousands of devotees from across Kerala and beyond.

Historical Significance:

- First celebrated in **1798**, the festival was initiated by **Raja Rama Varma**, famously known as **Sakthan Thampuran**, the Maharaja of Cochin.
- It was conceived to bring together two rival temples, **Paramekkavu** and **Thiruvambadi**, fostering unity through a grand celebration.

When and Where:

- Held annually in the **Malayalam month of Medam** (April-May).
- The celebrations take place in **Thrissur**, often referred to as Kerala's cultural capital.
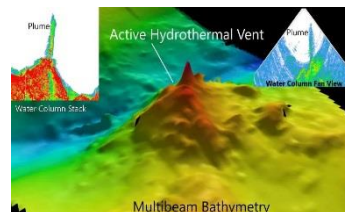
Key Takeaways:

The Supreme Court's intervention ensures that the festival's **traditional essence** remains intact while balancing regulatory oversight. The **Thrissur Pooram**, a symbol of Kerala's rich culture and heritage, continues to captivate millions, upholding its legacy as a **unifying celebration** of faith and tradition.

GS Paper 3 – Science and Technology

Indian Oceanographers Capture First-Ever Image of Active Hydrothermal Vent

Context: In a groundbreaking discovery, Indian oceanographers have successfully captured the **first image of an active hydrothermal vent** in the Indian Ocean.

Active Hydrothermal Vent
Plume
Water Column Stack
Water Column Fan View
Multibeam Bathymetry

Key Highlights:
- The discovery is the result of the **Hydrothermal Exploration Programme**, jointly conducted by the **National Centre for Polar and Ocean Research (NCPOR)** and the **National Institute of Ocean Technology (NIOT)**.
- The vent is located at a depth of **4,500 metres** below the ocean's surface.
- This site holds significant promise for **mineral exploration**, as part of India's **Deep Ocean Mission**.

What Are Hydrothermal Vents?

Hydrothermal vents are **underwater springs** found in tectonically active regions, primarily in the **global mid-ocean ridge system**.

Formation Process:
1. **Cold seawater** seeps through cracks and fissures in the ocean crust.
2. The water encounters **magma** deep beneath the surface, causing it to heat up.
3. As the heated water dissolves surrounding minerals, it rises and emerges as plumes rich in **trace metals**, **gases**, and **minerals**.

Ecological Significance:
- Hydrothermal vents sustain **diverse ecosystems** and unique **microbial communities**.
- These ecosystems form the base of the **food web** in deep-sea environments, thriving in conditions where sunlight is absent.

About the Deep Ocean Mission:

India's **Deep Ocean Mission**, launched in **2021**, is a comprehensive initiative aimed at unlocking the potential of the deep sea.

Key Facts:
- Approved with an estimated budget of **4,077 crore** over five years.
- Implemented under the guidance of the **Ministry of Earth Sciences**.

Major Components:
1. **Development of Deep-Sea Mining Technologies** and a **Manned Submersible**.
2. Creation of an **Ocean Climate Change Advisory Service**.
3. Innovations for exploring and conserving **deep-sea biodiversity**.
4. **Deep Ocean Survey and Exploration** programs.
5. Harnessing **energy and freshwater** from the ocean.
6. Establishment of an **Advanced Marine Station for Ocean Biology**.

Significance of the Discovery:
- Marks a significant leap in **understanding deep-sea ecosystems** and mineral-rich hydrothermal systems.
- Paves the way for **sustainable exploration** of deep-ocean resources.
- Supports India's **scientific and strategic goals** under the Deep Ocean Mission.

This discovery not only contributes to the global knowledge of deep-sea ecosystems but also positions India at the forefront of **deep-ocean exploration and technology development**.