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GS Paper 2 – Polity and Governance

1 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.

GS Paper 3 – Environment and Biodiversity

2 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:**
    - Pollution from **industries, agriculture, and urban runoff**.
    - **Dams and barrages** disrupt connectivity between dolphin habitats.
2. **Bycatch and Hunting:**
    - Dolphins get **accidentally caught in fishing nets**.
    - Targeted for their **oil and meat** in some regions.
3. **Water Abstraction:** Excessive **water withdrawal** for agriculture and industries reduces river flow.

4. **Riverbed Alteration:**
    - **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:**
    - To study the **habitat needs, migration patterns, and range** of the species.
    - 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.

GS Paper 3– Economic Development

3 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.

GS Paper 2 – Science & Technology, Agriculture , Environment

4 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**
    - The kit includes a **trouser, pullover, and face cover**, all crafted from a special fabric called **'oxime fabric.'**
    - The fabric is designed to chemically **break down common pesticides**, preventing their absorption into the skin.
2. **Innovative Working Mechanism**
    - Utilizes **nucleophilic-mediated hydrolysis** to deactivate pesticides on contact.
    - Effectively neutralizes toxic chemicals, reducing risks of **pesticide-induced toxicity** and **fatalities.**
3. **Durability and Versatility**
    - Remains effective across a **wide temperature range** and under **UV-light exposure**.
    - 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.

GS Paper 2 – International Relations

5 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.

GS Paper 3 – Science and Technology

6 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**:
    - **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.
    - **Kessler Syndrome**: The uncontrolled growth of debris can lead to a **self-sustained cascading series of collisions**, creating a chain reaction.
    - **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.