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Daily Current Affairs
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by Dhananjay Gautam

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1 Preserving Urban Forests: A Lifeline for India's Sustainable Cities

Context: One of **Hyderabad's last green lungs**, Kancha Gachibowli Urban **Forest**, recently faced extinction when **400 acres were allocated for industrial use** by the Telangana government. This incident highlights the **pressing need to safeguard urban forests** in India's rapidly expanding cities.

Why Urban Forests Matter More Than Ever:

Urban forests are **not just patches of greenery**—they are vital ecosystems that enhance both **ecological balance and urban well-being**.

Combatting Climate Change:

- **Urban trees act as carbon sinks**, absorbing carbon dioxide and storing carbon, playing a direct role in **lowering greenhouse gas emissions**.

Purifying Urban Air:

- A single hectare of forest can eliminate **nearly one ton of air pollutants annually**, helping **combat dangerous particulate matter (PM 2.5 and PM 10)** that plagues Indian cities.

Cooling Cities:

- Forests help reduce the **Urban Heat Island effect**, naturally **lowering city temperatures**, making urban spaces more livable amid rising global temperatures.

Flood and Erosion Control:

- With their **natural stormwater absorption**, urban forests minimize urban flooding, promoting **climate-resilient infrastructure**.

Biodiversity Hotspots:

- These forests are **urban sanctuaries for birds, insects, and small mammals**, preserving **threatened and endemic species** in a concrete jungle.

Mental and Social Well-being:

- Green spaces improve **mental health**, offer venues for **community interaction**, and **preserve cultural practices**, fostering a **better quality of life**.

Landmark Judicial Support for Urban Forests:

T.N. Godavarman v. Union of India (1996):

- The Supreme Court broadened the definition of **'forest'**, ruling that **any land recorded as forest, regardless of ownership**, should be treated as such under the **Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980**.

Samatha v. State of Andhra Pradesh (1997):

- The Court barred the leasing of **forest lands in Scheduled Areas** to **non-tribals or private entities**, reinforcing **tribal land rights and ecological conservation**.

Government Measures Promoting Urban Greening:

Nagar Van Yojana (2020):

- Launched by the **Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change**, the scheme aims to **develop 1000 urban forests** by 2027.

- As per the **India State of Forest Report 2023**, it has added **over 1,445 sq. km** of green cover.

Other Key Programs:

- **National Forest Policy (1988)** and **National Mission for Green India (2014)** push for afforestation and sustainable forestry.

- Urban development initiatives like **Smart Cities Mission** and **AMRUT** include **ecological design mandates** for city planning.

Innovative Reforestation: The Miyawaki Model

- Developed by **Japanese botanist Akira Miyawaki**, this method creates **dense, self-sustaining native forests** in small urban spaces.

- These forests grow **10 times faster and are 30 times denser** than conventional plantations, requiring **low maintenance after 3 years**.

- Cities like **Mumbai, Pune, and Bengaluru** are already adopting this approach for rapid greening.

The Road Ahead: Protecting India's Urban Forests:

- **Integrate Green Norms in Urban Planning**: Urban forests must be embedded into **city master plans, land-use zoning, and construction regulations**.

- **Strengthen Legal Safeguards**: Enhance the **legal status of urban green zones** and impose stricter **penalties for deforestation**.

- **Empower Citizens and Communities**: Promote **community-led conservation**, urban gardening, and **forest stewardship** through education and campaigns.

- **Leverage Technology**: Use **satellite monitoring, GIS mapping, and digital forest inventories** to track and protect urban forests.

- **Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs)**: Encourage corporate participation through **CSR initiatives** focused on **urban greening and afforestation**.

Final Thoughts: The Fight for Urban Green Survival

India's iconic urban forests—**Aarey in Mumbai**, **Turahalli in Bengaluru**, **Ridge in Delhi**, and **Dol Ka Baadh in Jaipur**—are **essential ecosystems** threatened by unplanned expansion.

The survival of these green spaces demands **synergized judicial oversight, proactive policies, civic engagement, and ecological urban design**. As cities continue to grow vertically and horizontally, **urban forests must grow with them**, ensuring that our cities remain **breathable, biodiverse, and human-friendly** for generations to come.

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2 | Virtual Capacity Building Session on Digital Transformation in BRICS: India Takes the Lead

Context: India recently spearheaded a **Virtual Capacity Building Session** focused on **Digital Transformation** within the BRICS framework. The event brought together key representatives from the **BRICS nations — Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa**, along with newly inducted members like **Egypt, UAE, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Ethiopia** — to deliberate on collaborative approaches for digital innovation and inclusion.

Accelerating Digital Growth Across BRICS:

The **BRICS bloc**, comprising some of the world's fastest-growing economies, has made significant strides in building robust **digital economies**. With over **40% of global internet users**, BRICS countries contribute around **30% to global ICT goods** and **11% to digitally deliverable services**. Their collective influence has only grown following the group's **expansion in 2024**, enhancing their share of **global exports** and **digital consumers**.

Today, BRICS represents:

- **45.2% of the world's population**
- **36.7% of global GDP**
- **23.3% of global merchandise trade**

India's Digital Innovations: Leading by Example

India took center stage by showcasing several of its landmark **Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI)** initiatives:

- **Sanchar Saathi**: A user-centric platform designed to safeguard mobile users from **fraud**, promote **transparency**, and improve **accessibility** to mobile services.

- **AADHAAR**: The world's largest biometric ID system, highlighted as a cornerstone for **digital identity** and **inclusive public service delivery**.

- **Sangam Digital Twin Initiative**: A next-generation project harnessing **AI-native, federated digital platforms** for **smart infrastructure planning** and **real-time governance**.

India, alongside Brazil, also shared insights on **cyber resilience**, underscoring the importance of safeguarding digital assets in an increasingly interconnected world.

China's Technological Contributions:

China provided a comprehensive overview of its **digital infrastructure evolution**, emphasizing its progress with **Digital Twin technologies**, which simulate real-world environments to aid in planning, management, and optimization.

Digital Technologies for Sustainable Development:

The session reinforced BRICS's commitment to the **2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development**, emphasizing digital technology as a critical tool for:

- **Inclusive economic growth**
- **Improved governance through e-services**

- **Financial inclusion**

- **Global technological partnerships**

Emerging technologies such as **Artificial Intelligence (AI)**, **big data**, and **cloud computing** were identified as key drivers of innovation and progress.

Particular emphasis was placed on **agritech** and **digital agriculture** to:

- Enhance **agricultural productivity**

- Increase **farmers' income**

- Support **sustainable food systems**

Challenges in the Path of Digital Transformation:

Despite the progress, BRICS acknowledged several pressing challenges:

- The persistent **digital divide** among and within countries

- Growing **cybersecurity threats** and **data privacy concerns**

- Risks of **technology misuse**

- **Rotating leadership** and differing national priorities

- Occasional **internal disagreements** impacting decision-making

A Closer Look at BRICS:

- The term **BRIC** was coined by economist **Jim O'Neill** in 2001.

- The first **formal BRIC Summit** was held in **2009 in Yekaterinburg, Russia**.

- **South Africa** joined in **2010**, making it **BRICS**.

- In **2024**, **Iran, UAE, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Ethiopia** became new members.

- **Argentina** was initially invited but declined to join.

One of the major institutional successes of BRICS is the **New Development Bank (NDB)**, established in **2015**, with headquarters in **Shanghai**. The NDB finances **infrastructure** and **sustainable development** projects across BRICS and other emerging economies.

Conclusion: A Roadmap for a Digitally Empowered Future

This capacity-building session reaffirms the strategic importance of **digital cooperation** within BRICS. As these nations continue to leverage technology to achieve **sustainable growth**, the emphasis remains on building **inclusive**, **secure**, and **resilient digital ecosystems** that can serve as models for the **Global South**.

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3 Theatre Commands: Ushering a New Era in India's Defence Transformation

Context: India is on the cusp of a historic military overhaul as the **Chief of Defence Staff (CDS)** has reiterated the urgent need for establishing **Integrated Theatre Commands (ITCs)**. This transformative initiative aims to reshape the country's defence framework for better **jointness**, **efficiency**, and **operational agility**.

What are Integrated Theatre Commands?

Integrated Theatre Commands (ITCs) are unified command structures where units of the **Army, Navy, and Air Force** are brought together under a single commander to operate as a cohesive force. This concept, widely adopted by global military powers, enhances **joint operations**, ensures **resource optimization**, and enables **rapid response** to threats across multiple domains.

In the Indian context, ITCs are being designed to:

- Strengthen **border security** with **China and Pakistan**
- Bolster **maritime dominance** in the **Indo-Pacific**
- Streamline command structures and eliminate duplication

India's Current Military Command Setup:

Currently, India operates through **17 single-service commands**, each with its own command structure:

- **Indian Army**: 7 commands
- **Indian Air Force**: 7 commands
- **Indian Navy**: 3 commands

While effective individually, this arrangement often leads to **overlapping logistics**, **coordination delays**, and **fragmented operations**. Each command is led by a **four-star officer**, leading to turf issues and inefficiencies in integrated warfare scenarios.

A Shift Toward Integration: Theatre Commands in the Pipeline

The new model envisions **consolidating 17 commands into a smaller number of integrated commands**, each covering a specific theatre of operations. The proposed structures include:

- **Northern Theatre Command (Lucknow)**
  - Focus: **China border** (Ladakh, Sikkim, Arunachal Pradesh)
- **Western Theatre Command (Jaipur)**
  - Focus: **Pakistan front** (J&K, Punjab, Rajasthan)
- **Maritime Theatre Command (Thiruvananthapuram)**
  - Focus: **Indian Ocean Region (IOR)** and **Andaman Sea**

Existing Tri-Service Commands:

India already has two operational tri-service commands:

- **Strategic Forces Command (SFC)**: Manages India's **nuclear arsenal**

- **Andaman and Nicobar Command (ANC)**: Ensures security across the **Bay of Bengal** and **Southeast Asia**

Additionally, in **2024**, India inaugurated its **first tri-service logistics base in Mumbai**, a milestone in joint infrastructure development.

Why India Needs Theatre Commands:

1. **Enhanced Combat Efficiency**: A **single commander** across services allows faster decisions, unified strategies, and better battlefield coordination.

2. **Resource Optimization**: Shared infrastructure and logistics prevent **duplication of assets** and reduce costs.

3. **Seamless Interoperability**: ITCs promote **joint planning**, **communication**, and **execution**, which are crucial in modern multi-domain warfare.

4. **Preparedness for Hybrid Threats**: Future wars will involve **cyber, space, AI-based warfare**, and **electronic operations**, requiring integrated responses.

5. **Post-Kargil Imperative**: The **Kargil Review Committee** highlighted lack of inter-service coordination as a critical failure.

Challenges on the Road to Reform:

Despite its potential, several obstacles lie in the path of ITC implementation:

- **Inter-Service Differences**: Aligning the doctrines of the **Army**, **Navy**, and especially the **Indian Air Force**, which operates in a **centralized domain**, remains complex.

- **Command Hierarchy Issues**: Theatre commanders being of **equal rank** to service chiefs could create **authority overlaps** and disrupt the chain of command.

- **Limited Resources**: With **scarce air assets**, assigning resources across multiple theatres may strain capabilities.

- **Infrastructure Gaps**: Construction and readiness of new **theatre headquarters** is still underway.

- **Policy Delays**: Government approval is still pending; implementation has been slowed by the need for further **deliberations**, as highlighted by the **Parliamentary Standing Committee on Defence**.

Global Experience: Lessons from Other Nations:

- **United States**: Operates under **Unified Combatant Commands** that span the globe — e.g., **INDOPACOM**, **CENTCOM**, and **EUCOM** — integrating all service branches including the **Space Force**.

- **China**: Established **five theatre commands** in 2016, such as the **Western Theatre Command** focused on India, demonstrating a swift, decisive military reform model.

- **Russia**: Uses **four military districts** functioning as theatre commands, integrating land, air, and naval forces.

- **United Kingdom**: Operates a **Joint Forces Command** managing cyber, logistics, and intelligence.

- **France**: Integrates **special forces** under **Commandement des Opérations Spéciales** for swift overseas operations.

Looking Ahead: The Road to Strategic Transformation

The establishment of **Integrated Theatre Commands** is not just a bureaucratic or structural reform — it represents a **fundamental shift in India's military doctrine**. As warfare evolves into **multi-domain, tech-driven**, and **network-centric** combat, India must adapt with **visionary reforms** that promote **jointness, agility**, and **strategic coherence**.

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GS Paper 1 – Geography

4 **Australia in the Headlines: Devastating Floods and Strategic Significance**

Context: Australia, with its capital at **Canberra**, is currently grappling with a **"once-in-a-century" flood crisis** that has left over **50,000 people stranded**. This extreme weather event has caused widespread disruption, highlighting the growing frequency of **climate-related disasters** in the region. Emergency services are on high alert as large parts of the country battle **inundation**, **power outages**, and **mass evacuations**.

Australia: A Geopolitical and Environmental Overview

Geographical Location and Position:

Located between the **Indian and Pacific Oceans**, **Australia** is both the **smallest continent** and the **sixth-largest country** in the world. It occupies a strategic maritime position in the **Southern Hemisphere**, acting as a vital player in **Indo-Pacific geopolitics**.

- To the **northwest**, it is separated from **Indonesia** by the **Timor Sea** and the **Arafura Sea**.

- To the **northeast**, it borders **Papua New Guinea** across the **Coral Sea** and **Torres Strait**.

Australia's **exclusive economic zone (EEZ)** is one of the largest globally, giving it significant maritime influence.

Political Structure: A Blend of Tradition and Federalism

Australia operates under a **federal parliamentary democracy** with a **constitutional monarchy**. It is a **Commonwealth realm**, meaning its **head of state** is the **British monarch**, represented locally by the **Governor-General**.

- The government is divided between the **federal** and **state/territory** levels.

- The **Prime Minister** is the head of government, while the **Parliament** is bicameral — comprising the **House of Representatives** and the **Senate**.

This system offers a unique combination of **British constitutional legacy** and **modern federal governance**.

Physical Geography: Land of Extremes

Australia's landscape is incredibly diverse and often extreme:

- Over **one-third** of the country is covered by **deserts**, forming part of the vast **Outback**.

- The **Great Dividing Range**, running along the eastern coast, is the most significant mountain system.

- Other notable ranges include the **Macdonnell Ranges** in central Australia.

Key **rivers** that support agriculture and ecology include:

- **Murray-Darling River System** — Australia's most important agricultural basin

- **Murrumbidgee River** and **Lachlan River**

Natural Wonders: Australia's Global Treasures:

Australia is home to one of the world's greatest ecological marvels — the **Great Barrier Reef**. Located off the coast of **Queensland**, it is:

- The **largest coral reef system** in the world

- A **UNESCO World Heritage Site**

- Host to thousands of marine species, making it a hub of **biodiversity**

However, this natural wonder is under increasing threat from **climate change**, **coral bleaching**, and **pollution**.

Additional Insight: Australia's Role in Global Affairs

- **Economic Strength**: A member of the **G20** and **OECD**, Australia has a high-income economy driven by sectors like **mining**, **agriculture**, and **services**.

- **Defence and Diplomacy**: Australia is a key member of alliances like **QUAD (with India, Japan, USA)** and **AUKUS (with UK, USA)**, reinforcing its central role in Indo-Pacific security.

- **Climate Challenges**: From **bushfires** to **floods**, Australia is increasingly vulnerable to **extreme weather events**, pushing the nation to reassess its environmental and disaster management strategies.

Conclusion: Australia at a Crossroads

As Australia navigates the aftermath of a devastating flood, the nation finds itself at a critical juncture — balancing **environmental resilience**, **geopolitical responsibilities**, and **sustainable development**. From its rich biodiversity to its strategic maritime position, Australia continues to play a pivotal role on the world stage.

5 Keoladeo National Park: A Haven for Birds, Turtles, and Biodiversity

Context: Keoladeo National Park, renowned as the **"Paradise of Birds"**, is now gaining recognition for another ecological marvel — it has become a thriving **sanctuary for turtles**. The park now shelters **8 out of the 10 turtle species** found in **Rajasthan**, adding to its growing significance as a **multi-species conservation hub**.

Overview: Jewel of Bharatpur, Rajasthan

Situated in **Bharatpur**, **Rajasthan**, **Keoladeo National Park** was originally established in the **late 19th century** as a **royal hunting ground** by **Maharaja Suraj Mal**. It was officially declared a **bird sanctuary in 1956**, and later designated a **national park in 1981**. The park takes its name from an **ancient temple dedicated to Lord Shiva**, located within its premises.

- **Area**: Covers approximately **29 square kilometers**
- **Landscape**: A rich mix of **woodlands**, **wetlands**, **marshes**, and **grasslands**
- **Ecological Status**:
  - Recognized as a **Ramsar Wetland Site** (since 1981)
  - Declared a **UNESCO World Heritage Site** in **1985**

Strategic Location: A Migratory Marvel

Keoladeo is situated along the **Central Asian Flyway**, a critical migratory route for **migratory waterfowl** and other bird species. Each year, from **October to March**, it becomes a temporary home for **birds from as far as Siberia, China, Turkmenistan, and Afghanistan**.

- Hosts over **360 species** of **resident and migratory birds**
- Notable migratory visitors include:
  - **Siberian crane** (critically endangered)
  - **White spoonbills**
  - **Gadwalls**
  - **Pintails**
  - **Asian open-billed storks**
  - **Oriental ibises**
  - **Common teals, shovellers, tufted ducks**

Flora: Dry Deciduous Diversity

The park features a **dry deciduous forest ecosystem**, interspersed with wetland vegetation. **Medium-sized trees and shrubs** dominate the forested areas.

- Common Trees:
  - **Kadam**
  - **Jamun**
  - **Babul**
  - **Kandi**

- o **Ber**
- o **Kair**
- o **Piloo**

These trees support nesting and roosting for various bird species, especially during the breeding season.

Fauna: Beyond the Birds

While it is a birdwatcher's paradise, Keoladeo is also a **thriving ecosystem** for a wide range of **mammals and reptiles**:

- **Reptiles**: **Pythons**, **monitor lizards**, **various snake species**, and now prominently, **turtles**
- **Mammals**:
  - o **Sambars**
  - o **Chitals (spotted deer)**
  - o **Blackbucks**
  - o **Jackals**
  - o **Fishing cats**

This diverse presence makes the park an excellent example of **wetland and terrestrial ecosystem integration**.

Conservation Legacy and Ecotourism Potential:

Keoladeo stands as a model for **wetland restoration and biodiversity conservation**. Formerly a man-made wetland created through the construction of **Ajan Bund**, the park is a remarkable example of how artificial interventions can support natural ecosystems when managed sustainably.

- **Ecotourism** and **bird photography** are major attractions.
- It supports **local livelihoods** through guided tours, birdwatching, and conservation education.

Conclusion: A Dynamic Biodiversity Hotspot

From being a royal hunting ground to becoming a **UNESCO World Heritage Site**, **Keoladeo National Park** has evolved into a beacon of **conservation excellence**. Its growing role in protecting not just birds but also **turtles and other species** underscores its value as a **multifaceted wildlife reserve**. As climate change and habitat loss threaten global biodiversity, Keoladeo remains a **critical sanctuary** offering hope, resilience, and ecological inspiration.

GS Paper 3 – Economy

6 | **Bitcoin Soars Past $110K Amid Hype Over GENIUS Act: Crypto Gets a Regulatory Boost**

Context: Bitcoin has crossed the $110,000 milestone for the first time in its history, fueled by **growing investor confidence** following progress on a landmark crypto regulation bill in the **U.S. Senate** — the **GENIUS Act** (*Guiding and Establishing National Innovation for US Stablecoins*).

This bipartisan legislation, once contested by several lawmakers, has now **garnered cross-party support**, sparking enthusiasm among crypto advocates and institutional investors. The bill is viewed as a major step toward formalizing **stablecoin regulation**, and its progress has helped reinforce **market optimism**.

However, the bill hasn't escaped controversy, especially due to **alleged conflicts of interest** tied to former President **Donald Trump** and **Melania Trump**, both of whom are **active participants in crypto ventures**, including **meme coin promotions**.

What Is the GENIUS Act? A Framework for Stablecoin Oversight

The **GENIUS Act** proposes a federal framework to regulate **stablecoins**, which are cryptocurrencies pegged to stable assets like the **U.S. dollar**, and are widely used for digital payments and trading.

This act aims to ensure **transparency**, **accountability**, and **financial integrity**, while also opening the doors for **tech giants** to issue their own **stablecoins** — a major policy shift in the digital finance landscape.

Key Provisions of the GENIUS Act:

- **Mandatory Compliance**: Issuers must follow **anti-money laundering (AML)** and **counter-terrorism** rules under existing financial laws.

- **100% Reserve Backing**: Stablecoins must be backed **1:1 by fiat currency or equivalent high-quality liquid assets**.

- **Separation of Reserves**: Issuers are required to keep **reserve funds distinct** from operational or corporate funds.

- **Transparency & Audit Mechanism**: Periodic **independent audits** and **public disclosure of reserves** will be mandatory.

These rules aim to reduce systemic risks and **legitimize the role of stablecoins** in the financial ecosystem.

Controversies and Criticisms Surrounding the Bill:

While the GENIUS Act has won praise for its effort to regulate a rapidly evolving sector, it has also drawn sharp criticism from economists, lawmakers, and consumer rights advocates.

1. **Insufficient Consumer Safeguards:** Experts argue the bill does **not ensure consumer protections** comparable to those offered by traditional financial systems like credit cards or banks. Concerns persist over **user recourse mechanisms** in cases of fraud or technical failures.

2. **Threat of Illicit Transactions:** Stablecoins currently account for **over 60% of illegal crypto-related activity**. Without more robust provisions, critics warn the GENIUS Act may unintentionally fuel **money laundering, tax evasion**, and **black-market trade**.

3. **Political Conflict of Interest:** Allegations have emerged about the **Trump family's crypto involvement**, including the **promotion of meme coins**, creating potential for **personal financial gain** from regulatory changes. Critics suggest this raises questions of **political ethics** and **favoritism**.

4. **Big Tech Entry and Market Risks:** The bill permits **Big Tech firms** to enter the stablecoin space, prompting fears of **financial monopolies**, **data misuse**, and **privacy erosion**. Analysts also warn that the bill contains **regulatory gaps**, potentially allowing large corporations to bypass essential financial checks.

Global Implications and Long-Term Outlook:

The GENIUS Act could mark a **turning point in U.S. digital finance policy**, potentially setting the tone for other nations grappling with how to manage **stablecoins** and **blockchain assets**. The regulatory clarity it offers could lead to:

- **Increased institutional investment** in crypto

- Greater **integration of digital assets** into the financial mainstream

- **Stricter compliance expectations** for global crypto firms

The bill also comes at a time when countries like **Japan**, **Switzerland**, and the **EU** are actively developing their own **centralized digital currency frameworks** and stablecoin rules, making the U.S. move even more consequential.

Conclusion: A Turning Point for Crypto Regulation

With the GENIUS Act advancing through Congress and **Bitcoin hitting all-time highs**, the U.S. appears to be entering a **new era of digital finance governance**. While the bill promises to **legitimize stablecoins** and boost investor confidence, it also raises **critical ethical, financial, and regulatory questions** that will shape the crypto landscape for years to come.