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March 2020

**CURRENT AFFAIRS
MONTHLY**

THE **PULSE** OF UPSC AT
YOUR FINGER TIPS.



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SCHEMES

1. Janani Shishu Suraksha Karyakaram

About the scheme:

- Janani Shishu Suraksha Karyakaram (JSSK) was launched in 2011 by the **Ministry of Health and Family** with the objective to **eliminate out-of-pocket expenses** for **pregnant women** and **sick infants** accessing public health institutions for treatment.
- JSSK entitles all pregnant women delivering in public health institutions, to absolutely free delivery including Caesarean section, postnatal care and treatment of sick infants till one year of age.
- The entitlements include free drugs and consumables, free diet up to 3 days during normal delivery and up to 7 days for C-section, free diagnostics, and free blood wherever required.
- This initiative also provides for **free transport** from home to institution, between facilities in case of a referral and drop back home.
- The initiative was estimated to benefit more than 1 crore pregnant women access public health institutions every year in **both urban and rural areas**.
- Similar entitlements have been put in place for all sick newborns accessing public health institutions for treatment till 30 days after birth. This has now been expanded to cover sick infants till one year of age.

Why in News?

- Recently, the Minister of State (Health and Family Welfare) furnished details about Janani Shishu Suraksha Karyakaram in Lok Sabha.

2. Mahatma Gandhi Bunkar Bima Yojana

About the scheme

- Since 2005-06, the **Ministry of Textiles** is implementing the Mahatma Gandhi Bunkar Bima Yojana (MGBBY) for providing social security benefits like life, accidental & disability insurance coverage to **handloom weavers/workers** in the **age group of 18-59 years** across the country.
- The scheme is administered by the **Life Insurance Corporation of India (LIC)**.
- The annual premium of MGBBY is **Rs.470/-** which is shared as under:
 - Government of India Rs.290/-
 - Weaver Rs.80/-
 - Implementing Agency Rs.100/-

Eligibility Criteria

- For those who wish to be insured under this scheme, certain basic eligibility criterion has to be fulfilled to avail the benefits of the Scheme.
 - All weavers, whether male or female, between the age group of **18 and 59 years** are eligible to be covered under the scheme.
 - The weaver should be earning at least **50 % of his income from handloom weaving**.

What is the benefit?

- The basic objective of MGBBY is to provide **enhanced insurance coverage to the handloom weavers** in the case of natural as well as accidental death and also in case of total disability or partial disability.

- Besides this, **student's scholarship** is also provided to the children of enrolled weaver members.
- A scholarship of Rs. 600/- per six months per child (maximum two children) is paid to students studying in standard IX to XII for a maximum period of four years or till they complete XII standard under additional benefit of MGBBY i.e. **Siksha Sahayak Yojana**.

Why in News?

- The Minister of Textiles provided information about the MGBBY in the Parliament.

3. Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana

About the scheme

- To reduce the loss caused by the outbreak of Covid-19 in India, the Finance Minister launched the PM Garib Kalyan Package on March 26th 2020 for the BPL families.
- **Note:** Till 2017, a scheme under this name was in force. It was valid from December 16, 2016 to March 31, 2017 and provided an opportunity to declare the unaccounted wealth and black money in a confidential manner and avoid prosecution after paying a fine of 50% on the undisclosed income.

Components of the scheme

- Following are the components of the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Package:
 - **Insurance cover of Rs 50 Lakh** per health worker fighting COVID-19
 - 80 crore poor people to get **5 kg wheat or rice and 1 kg of preferred pulses** for free every month for the next three months

- 20 crore women Jan Dhan account holders to get **Rs 500 per month** for next three months
- Increase in **MNREGA wage** to Rs 202 a day from Rs 182 to benefit 13.62 crore families
- An **ex-gratia of Rs 1,000** to 3 crore poor senior citizen, poor widows and poor disabled
- The first instalment of Rs 2,000 due in 2020-21 will be front-loaded and paid in April 2020 itself under the **PM KISAN Yojana**.
- The Central Government has given orders to State Governments to use the **Building and Construction Workers Welfare Fund** to provide relief to Construction Workers.

What's in the news?

- The Union government has announced Rs 1.70 Lakh Crore relief package under Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana for the poor to help them fight the battle against Corona Virus.

4. Pradhan Mantri Kisan Sampada Yojana

About PMKSY

- The **Ministry of Food Processing Industries** is implementing the Pradhan Mantri Kisan Sampada Yojana (PMKSY) since 2017.
- PMKSY is a comprehensive package which aims to create modern infrastructure with efficient supply chain management from farm gate to retail outlet.
- It aims to provide a big boost to the growth of the **food processing sector** in the country and also help in providing better returns to farmers,

reducing wastage of agricultural produce, increasing the processing level and enhancing the export of the processed foods.

Objectives of PMKSY

- Creation of modern infrastructure for food processing **mega food parks/ clusters** and individual units
- To create effective backward and forward linkages - linking farmers, processors and markets
- To create robust supply chain infrastructure for perishables

Why in News?

- Recently, the Ministry of Food Processing Industries sanctioned 37 mega food parks and 298 integrated cold chain projects throughout the country under PMKSY to fill in the gaps across the value chain and establish the cold chain grid.

5. Prime Minister's Employment Generation Programme

About PMEGP

- Prime Minister's Employment Generation Programme (PMEGP) is a central sector scheme administered by the **Ministry of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises**.
- It is a major **credit-linked subsidy programme** aimed at generating self-employment opportunities through **establishment of micro-enterprises in the non-farm sector** by helping traditional artisans and unemployed youth.
- At the national level, the Scheme is being implemented by **Khadi and Village Industries Commission (KVIC)**, a statutory organization under the administrative control of the Ministry of MSME as the single nodal agency.

- At the State level, the Scheme will be implemented through State KVIC Directorates, State Khadi and Village Industries Boards (KVIBs) and District Industries Centres (DICs) and banks.
- Under the scheme, loans are being provided by all Public Sector Banks, selected Private Sector Banks and Co-operative Banks with margin money subsidy being given by the Ministry of MSME through KVIC.

Scope

- The scheme is applicable to all viable projects in **rural as well as urban areas**, under the Micro enterprises sector.
- The maximum cost of the project admissible under the manufacturing sector is **Rs.25 lakhs** and the business/services sector is **Rs.10 lakhs**.
- Only one person from a family is eligible for obtaining financial assistance under the scheme.
- Assistance under the Scheme is available **only for new projects**.

Eligible Entrepreneurs / Borrowers

- Any individual, above 18 years of age
- The beneficiaries should have passed at least VIII standard, for setting up of project costing above Rs.10 lacs in the Manufacturing Sector and above Rs. 5 lacs in the business /Service Sector,
- Self Help Groups
- Institutions registered under Societies Registration Act, 1860
- Production Co-operative Societies
- Charitable Trusts

Why in News?

- The government has asked banks to clear about 1.18 lakh pending loan applications under the Prime Minister Employment Generation Programme.

INITIATIVES

1. Solar Charkha Mission

About the Mission

- It is an enterprise driven scheme of the **Ministry of Micro Small & Medium Enterprises (MSME)** to ensure inclusive growth by generation of employment, especially for women and youth, and sustainable development through solar charkha clusters in rural areas.
- These solar charkhas are to be operated using **solar power** which will help in development of Green Economy and generate sustainable employment for the artisans.
- The scheme also aims to boost rural economy and help in **arresting migration** from rural to urban areas. It is envisaged to generate direct employment for nearly one lakh persons.
- The **Khadi and Village Industries Commission (KVIC)** is implementing the programme.



Why in News?

- Based on the success of a pilot project on Solar Charkha, set up at Khanwa village, Nawada District, Bihar in 2016, Government of India accorded approval to set up 50 such clusters.

About KVIC

- The Khadi & Village Industries Commission is a **statutory organization** established under the

Khadi and Village Industries Commission Act, 1956.

- It is engaged in promoting and developing khadi and village industries for providing employment opportunities in rural areas, thereby strengthening the rural economy.
- It functions under the **Ministry of Micro Small & Medium Enterprises**.

2. SAKSHAM portal

About the portal

- The SAKSHAM portal aims towards **empowerment of women in college campuses** through creating awareness on the existing opportunities and initiatives, support and redressal mechanism.
- Web resources such as government and United Nations policy documents are made available to women students and employees of Higher Education Institutions through the portal.
- It brings together information on all women-oriented initiatives.
- It also provides a platform for registering complaints related to violence and harassment through a National helpline number.
- It is developed by the **University Grants Commission (UGC)**.

Why in News?

- The Ministry of Human Resource Development has launched the SAKSHAM portal.

About UGC

- The UGC is a **statutory body** set up in accordance with the UGC Act 1956 under the **Ministry of Human Resource Development**.
- It is charged with coordination, determination and maintenance of standards of higher education.

- It provides recognition to universities in India, and disbursements of funds to such recognised universities and colleges.

3. Pradhan Mantri Bhartiya Janaushadhi Pariyojana

About PMBJP

- Pradhan Mantri Bhartiya Janaushadhi Pariyojana (PMBJP) is a campaign launched by the **Department of Pharmaceuticals** to provide **quality medicines at affordable prices** to the masses.
- In September 2015, an existing 'Jan Aushadhi Scheme' was revamped as 'Pradhan Mantri Jan Aushadhi Yojana' (PMJAY) and in November, 2016, to give further impetus to the scheme, it was again renamed as "Pradhan Mantri Bhartiya Janaushadhi Pariyojana".
- PMBJP stores have been set up to provide **generic drugs**, which are available at lesser prices but are equivalent in quality and efficacy as expensive branded drugs.
- **Bureau of Pharma PSUs of India (BPPI)** is the implementation agency for PMBJP.

Who can open a Jan Aushadhi store?

- State Governments or any organization / reputed NGOs / Trusts / Private hospitals / Charitable institutions / Doctors / Unemployed pharmacists/ individual entrepreneurs are eligible to apply for new Jan Aushadhi stores.
- The applicants shall have to employ one B Pharma / D Pharma degree holder as Pharmacist in their proposed store.

Why in News?

- Jan Aushadhi Diwas was celebrated on 7th march 2020.
- The Jan aushadhi Divas aims to provide further impetus and create awareness about the use of generic medicines.

What are generic drugs?

- A generic drug is a medication created to be the same as an existing approved brand-name drug in dosage form, safety, strength, route of administration, quality, and performance characteristics. It works in the same way and provides the **same clinical benefits** as its brand-name version.
- Generic medicines **tend to cost less** than their brand-name counterparts because they do not have to repeat animal and clinical (human) studies that were required of the brand-name medicines to demonstrate safety and effectiveness.
- In addition, multiple applications for generic drugs are often approved to market a single product; this creates competition in the marketplace, typically resulting in lower prices. Typically results in prices about 85% less than the brand-name.

About BPPI

- The Bureau of Pharma PSUs of India comprising all the Pharma central public sector undertakings (CPSUs) under the **Department of Pharmaceuticals** was established in 2008.
- It aims to bring about effective collaboration and cooperation in furthering the working and resources of these organizations.

4. YUva Vigyani KARYakram

About the programme

- The “Young Scientist Programme” also known as the “YUva Vigyani KAryakram (YuViKa)” was launched by the **Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO)** for School Children in 2019.
- The Program is primarily aimed at **imparting basic knowledge on Space Technology, Space Science and Space Applications to the younger ones** with the intent of arousing their interest in the emerging areas of Space activities.
- ISRO has chalked out this programme to “**Catch them young**”.
- The programme includes invited talks, experience sharing by the eminent scientists, facility and lab visits, exclusive sessions for discussions with experts, practical and feedback sessions.
 - 3 students from each State/ Union Territory will be selected to participate in this programme covering CBSE, ICSE and State syllabus.
 - 5 additional seats are reserved for Overseas Citizen of India (OCI) candidates across the country.
- The selection is based on the 8th Standard academic performance and extracurricular activities.

Why in News?

- ISRO has shortlisted 358 high school students from across the country to be part of the second annual YuViKa programme.

5. Bhoomi Rashi portal

About the portal

- Bhoomi Rashi portal was launched by the **Ministry of Road Transport and Highways** in 2018 to fully digitize and

automate the entire process of **land acquisition for highways**.

- The portal acts as a single point platform for online processing of land acquisition notifications to accelerate highway infrastructure development projects in India.
- The portal enhances the efficiency of the land acquisition process, ensures transparency and accountability, and results in e-transfer of benefits directly to the accounts of the beneficiaries.
- Bhoomi Rashi has also been integrated with the **Public Financial Management System** platform of the Ministry of Finance, for deposition of compensation in the account of affected/interested persons, on a real-time basis.

Why in News?

- In a recent statement, the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways said that the Bhoomi Rashi portal has significantly expedited error free and transparent land acquisition for National Highways.
- While the physical processing of the land acquisition cases usually took considerable time, ranging from weeks to even months, the processing time using this portal has been reduced to less than two weeks in a majority of cases.

About PFMS

- The Public Financial Management System (PFMS), earlier known as Central Plan Schemes Monitoring System (CPSMS), is a web-based online software application developed and implemented by the **Office of Controller General of Accounts (CGA)**, Ministry of Finance.
- The primary objective of PFMS is to facilitate a sound Public Financial

Management System for Government of India (GoI) by establishing an **efficient fund flow system as well as a payment cum accounting network.**

- The biggest strength of PFMS is its integration with the Core banking system in the Country. As a result, PFMS has the unique capability to push online payments to almost every beneficiary/vendor.

6. Modern Contraceptives

What is it?

- It is a device or drug serving to prevent pregnancy.

What's in the news?

- Measures taken by the Government to increase the availability, awareness and usage of modern contraceptives was recently provided by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare in the Parliament.

News in Detail:

- **Mission Parivar Vikas:** It was launched in 2016 for substantially increasing access to contraceptives and family planning services in 146 high fertility districts with Total Fertility Rate (TFR) of 3 and above in seven high focus states.
- **New contraceptives** viz. Injectable contraceptives (under the **Antara program**) and contraceptive pill, 'Chhaya' have been added to the existing basket of choices in 2015-16.
- **Family Planning Logistic Management and Information System (FP-LMIS):** A dedicated software launched in 2017, to ensure smooth forecasting, procurement and distribution of family planning commodities across all the levels of health facilities.

- Scheme for **Home delivery of contraceptives by ASHAs** at doorstep of beneficiaries.
- **Clinical Outreach Teams (COT) Scheme** has been launched in 146 Mission Parivar Vikas districts wef December 2017 for providing family planning services through mobile teams from accredited organizations in far-flung, underserved and geographically difficult areas.

7. Tech for Tribals

About the program

- The Tech For Tribals program aims to transform 5 crore Tribal Entrepreneurs by focusing on capacity building and imparting entrepreneurship skills to tribal forest produce gatherers enrolled under the **Pradhan Mantri Van Dhan Yojana.**
- The programme has been launched by **TRIFED** with support from the **Ministry of MSME.**
- The trainees will undergo a 30 days program over six weeks comprising 120 sessions. The programme partners will develop course contents relevant to Entrepreneurship in Value Addition and Processing of Forest Produces.

Why in News?

- TRIFED has launched a new program called "Tech For Tribals" to develop **Tribal entrepreneurship.**

About Van Dhan Yojana

- Pradhan Mantri Van Dhan Yojana is an initiative of the **Ministry of Tribal Affairs and TRIFED.**
- It seeks to improve tribal incomes through value addition of tribal products.
- The scheme aims at economic development of tribals involved in the collection of Minor Food Produces

(MFPs) by helping them in optimum utilization of natural resources and providing them a sustainable livelihood.

TRIFED

- It is a national-level apex organization functioning under the administrative control of the **Ministry of Tribal Affairs** and it came into existence in 1987.
- TRIFED works with the main objective of promoting tribal art and craft for

the benefit of tribal artisans of the country, under the scheme “**Institutional Support for Development & Marketing of tribal products**” of the Ministry of Tribal Affairs.

- TRIFED is engaged in procurement and marketing of tribal art and craft items through its chain of 40 retail outlets called **TRIBES INDIA** which offers a range of tribal products.

ENVIRONMENT

1. Black carbon

What is a Black Carbon?

- Black carbon is the sooty black material produced both naturally and by human activities as a result of the **incomplete combustion of fossil fuels, biofuels, and biomass**.
- Primary sources include emissions from diesel engines, cook stoves, wood burning and forest fires.
- It comprises a significant portion of **particulate matter or PM**, which is an air pollutant.
- Black carbon is a **short-lived climate pollutant** with a lifetime of only days to weeks after release in the atmosphere. During this short period of time, black carbon can have significant direct and indirect impacts on the climate, glacial regions, agriculture and human health.
- Inhalation of black carbon is associated with health problems including respiratory and cardiovascular disease, cancer, and even birth defects.
- When suspended in the atmosphere, black carbon **contributes to warming** by converting incoming solar radiation to heat. It also influences cloud formation and impacts regional circulation and rainfall patterns.

Why in News?

- A recent study conducted near Gangotri Glacier found that black carbon concentration in the region of the glacier increases 400 times during summer, most likely due to agricultural burning and forest fires.
- This increased concentration can trigger glacial melt because of the light absorbing nature of black carbon.

2. E-Waste

What is E-waste?

- Electronic waste (e-waste) is generated when electronic and electrical equipment become unfit for their originally intended use or has crossed the expiry date.
- Computer monitors, motherboards, mobile phones and chargers, compact discs, headphones, television sets, air conditioners and refrigerators are some examples of e-waste (when unfit for use).

E-waste Management Rules, 2016

- E-waste (Management) Rules, 2016 was enacted on October 1, 2017. It superseded the e-waste (Management & Handling) Rules, 2011.
- The rules extended its purview to components or consumables or parts or spares of **Electrical and Electronic Equipment (EEE)**, along with their products.
- The EWM Rules, 2016 strengthened the **Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR)**, which is the global best practice to ensure the take-back of the end-of-life products.
- The EPR requires producers to set up e-waste exchange facilities to facilitate collection and recycling, and assigning specific responsibility to bulk consumers of electronic products for safe disposal.
- A new arrangement called **Producer Responsibility Organisation (PRO)** was introduced to strengthen EPR further. PRO, a professional organisation, would be authorised or financed collectively or individually by producers, to share the responsibility for collection and channelisation of e-waste generated from the 'end-of-life'

products to ensure environmentally sound management of such e-waste.

- The **urban local bodies** have been assigned the responsibility of collecting back the e-waste arising from the orphan products and channelizing it to authorized dismantlers or recyclers.
- The producers have to meet targets, which should be 20 percent of the waste generated by their sales. This will increase by 10 per cent annually for the next five years.

E-waste (Management) Amendment Rules, 2018

- The E-Waste (Management) Amendment Rules, 2018 of the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change amended the E-Waste Management Rules, 2016.
- It revised the collection targets under the provision of EPR and introduced targets for new producers who have started their sales operations recently.
- Under the amended Rules, PROs are now required to apply to the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) for registration to undertake their activities.

Why in News?

- According to the latest government data, E-waste recycling has doubled in India in 2018-19 over 2017-18.

3. Sukhna Lake

About the lake

- Sukhna lake is a manmade lake constructed in 1958.
- It is a rain-fed lake, located within **Chandigarh** and its catchment area falls both in Punjab and Haryana.

Why in News?

- The Punjab and Haryana High Court declared the Sukhna lake as a **legal person** for preservation with

corresponding rights, duties and liabilities of a living person by invoking the *parens patriae* doctrine.

- The court also imposed a fine of Rs 100 crore each on Punjab and Haryana governments for permitting the construction activities in the catchment area of the Lake and ordered demolition of all kinds of construction carried out in its catchment area.

Parens patriae jurisdiction

- The doctrine of Parens Patriae (father of the country) had originated in British law as early as the 13th century. It implies that the King is the father of the country and is under obligation to look after the interest of those who are unable to look after themselves.
- The idea behind Parens Patriae is that if a citizen is in need of someone who can act as a parent who can make decisions and take some other action, sometimes the State is best qualified to take on this role.

4. BS-IV

What are Bharat Stage norms?

- The Bharat Stage norms are standards instituted by the government to regulate the emission of air pollutants from motor vehicles.
- As the stage goes up, the control on emissions becomes **stricter**. Thus Bharat Stage VI norms are two stages ahead of the present Bharat Stage IV norms in regulating emissions.
- These norms are **based on similar norms in Europe** called Euro 4 and Euro 6.

How is BS6 different from BS4?

- A vital difference between BS6 and the BS4 fuel is that the BS6 fuel contains 5 times fewer **sulphur** traces (10 parts

per million) compared to BS4 (50 ppm).

- NO_x (**Nitrogen Oxide**) level will be brought down by a staggering 70% for Diesel engine and 25% for Petrol Engines.
- The BS6 brings along a plethora of changes, most significant being the mandatory OBD (**Onboard Diagnostics**) for all vehicles. OBD device informs the vehicle owner or the repair technician how efficient the systems in the vehicle are.
- **RDE (Real Driving Emission)** will be introduced for the first time that will measure the vehicle's emission in real-world conditions against simulated conditions.
- Introduction of **DPF (Diesel Particulate Filter)** and **SCR (Selective Catalytic Reduction)** for Diesel engines.
- So a transition from BS4 to BS6 requires modification both in the **fuel** and in the **vehicle engine**.

Why in News?

- In a relief to automobile dealers, the Supreme Court has extended the March 31, 2020 deadline for the sale and registration of BS-IV vehicles because of the extraordinary situation arising out of the COVID-19 lockdown.
- The apex court allowed sale of 10% of the unsold stock of BS IV vehicles within 10 days of the end of the lockdown, except in Delhi and the National Capital Region.

- Dealers in Delhi-NCR have been denied the relief owing to the high levels of the pollution in the national capital.

5. Earth Hour

What is Earth Hour?

- Earth Hour, organized by the **World Wide Fund for Nature**, is a global grassroots movement uniting people to take action on environmental issues and protect the planet.
- Earth Hour initiative began in 2007 and encourages people to switch off the lights from 8.30 pm to 9.30 pm as per their local time. The idea is to refrain from the use of non-essential lighting to save energy in a symbolic call for environmental protection.
- It is observed annually on the last Saturday of March.

Why in News?

- Earth Hour was observed recently.

World Wide Fund for Nature

- The World Wide Fund for Nature is an **international non-governmental organization** founded in 1961.
- The organization works towards reducing the degradation of Earth's natural environment and building a future in which humans live in harmony with nature.

6. Project Tiger

Project Tiger



- Project Tiger is a **Centrally Sponsored Scheme** of Government of India which was launched in 1973 for in-situ conservation of wild tigers in designated tiger reserves.
- Broadly, the strategy involves exclusive tiger agenda in the **core/critical tiger habitat**, inclusive people-wildlife agenda in the **outer buffer**, besides fostering the latter agenda in the corridors.
- This strategy is reflected in a tiger reserve specific **Tiger Conservation**

Plan for each reserve prepared under the **Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972**.

- The initiative is administered under the Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change (MoEFCC). **National Tiger Conservation Authority**, a statutory body under MoEFCC, is the immediate supervising agency.
- It was launched from the **Jim Corbett National Park** of Uttarakhand.

- At present, there are a total of 50 Tiger Reserves in India governed by Project Tiger.

Why in News?

- The Male Mahadeshwara Wildlife Sanctuary (MMWS) is expected to be declared a tiger reserve soon.

About MMWS

- The Male Mahadeshwara Wildlife Sanctuary is located in the Chamarajanagar district of **Karnataka**.
- By becoming a connecting link between the wildlife sanctuaries and the tiger reserves of Sathyamangalam, Bandipur, Nagarhole, BR Hills, Cauvery, Mudumalai, Wayanad and Bannerghatta, MMWS is expected to contribute substantially to safeguarding tigers in the region.

7. National Chambal Sanctuary

About National Chambal Sanctuary

- The National Chambal Sanctuary is located on the **tri-junction of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh**.
- More than 75 per cent of the **critically endangered Gharial** population is based in the sanctuary.

- The sanctuary also harbours freshwater gangetic dolphins, nine species of freshwater turtles and more than 180 species of migratory birds.

Why in News?

- National Chambal sanctuary has been declared as an **eco-sensitive zone** by the central government.
- The decision to declare the area as an eco-sensitive zone will prohibit the construction of hotels or resorts within an area of zero to two kilometres from the sanctuary.

What are eco-sensitive zones?

- Ecologically Sensitive Zones (ESZs) have been identified and notified by the **Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change** since 1989.
- Notifications declaring areas as ESZs are issued under the **Environment (Protection) Act 1986**.
- The objective of notifying ESZs is to **create a buffer** as further protection around Protected Areas such as National Parks and Wildlife sanctuaries. ESZs act as **shock absorbers or transition zones** for Protected Areas.

ORGANISATIONS

1. Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights

About OHCHR

- The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) is the **leading UN entity on human rights**, headquartered in Geneva, Switzerland.
- The office was established by the UN General Assembly in 1993 in the wake of the **1993 World Conference on Human Rights**.
- OHCHR is led by the **High Commissioner for Human Rights**, the principal human rights official of the UN.
- The General Assembly of the UN entrusted the OHCHR with a **unique mandate to promote and protect all human rights** established in the UN Charter and in international human rights laws and treaties.

Why in News?

- The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights announced that it plans to file an application in the Indian Supreme Court, urging to make the UN body a third party in the petitions challenging the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA), 2019.
- *(Refer Pulse December edition for details on CAA 2019)*

India's response

- The Ministry of External Affairs said the CAA is an internal matter of India and the OHCHR had no right to file such a petition.

2. IMF

About International Monetary Fund (IMF)

- The IMF was conceived in 1944 at the **United Nations Bretton Woods**

Conference in New Hampshire, United States.

- The IMF and the World Bank are called **Bretton Woods twins**.
- The IMF is a **permanent observer at the UN**.
- It is an organization of 189 countries (including **India**).
- The mandate of the IMF as follows:
 - To promote international monetary cooperation;
 - To facilitate the expansion and balanced growth of international trade;
 - To promote exchange stability;
 - To assist member countries in correcting maladjustments in their balance of payments without resorting to measures destructive of national or international prosperity;
 - To assist in the elimination of foreign exchange restrictions which hamper the growth of world trade;

Why in News?

- Recently, the IMF rejected Venezuela's request for a \$5 billion loan to help it cope with the COVID-19 pandemic.

3. SAARC

About SAARC

- The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was established in 1985 with 7 founding members.
- SAARC now comprises **eight Member States**: Afghanistan (joined in 2007), Bangladesh, Bhutan, **India**, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.
- There are nine observer countries namely Australia, China, European Union, Iran, Japan, Mauritius,

Myanmar, South Korea, and the United States.

- The Secretariat of the Association is located in **Kathmandu, Nepal**.

Why in News?

- Maldives pledged \$200,000 contribution to the SAARC Corona Emergency Fund.
- Nepal and Bhutan also pledged nearly \$1 million and \$100,000 respectively to the Emergency Fund.

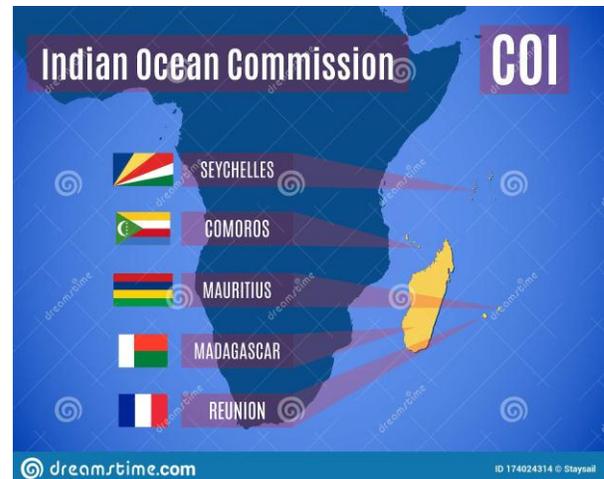
Coronavirus Emergency Fund

- Recently, Prime Minister Narendra Modi invited members of the SAARC to create a fund to fight the threat of COVID-19.
- Mr. Modi extended \$10 million as India's contribution to the fund.

4. Indian Ocean Commission

About IOC

- The Indian Ocean Commission (IOC) is an intergovernmental body created in 1984 that coordinates maritime governance in the south-western Indian Ocean.
- It consists of **five Member States**: The Union of the Comoros, France Reunion Island, Madagascar, Mauritius and the Seychelles.
- The IOC is the only regional organisation in Africa to represent a group of islands.
- The IOC's mission is to unite Member States' forces and pool their resources, raise awareness of the special challenges that developing islands face and promote Indianoceanica as a region of unique human, cultural and natural diversity.



Why in News?

- Recently, India has been accepted as an **observer** of the Indian Ocean Commission.
- Till now, the Commission has four observers — China, EU, Malta and International Organisation of La Francophonie (OIF).

Significance

- India's observer status will boost the country's engagement with islands in this part of the Indian Ocean.
- These island nations are increasingly important for India's strategic outreach as part of its Indo-Pacific policy.
- It lends depth to India's **SAGAR (security and growth for all in the region) policy** unveiled by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2015

5. Marine Products Export Development Authority

About MPEDA

- The Marine Products Export Development Authority (MPEDA) was set up in 1972 as a **statutory body** under the **Ministry of Commerce & Industry**.
- MPEDA is the **nodal agency** for promotion of export of marine products from India.

- MPEDA has presence in all the maritime states and is implementing its developmental schemes for export promotion / aquaculture production through its field offices.

Why in News?

- The Marine Products Export Development Authority has decided to take up the upgradation and modernisation of 25 fishing harbours in the country at a proposed outlay of Rs 2500 crore.

6. BIRAC

About BIRAC

- The Biotechnology Industry Research Assistance Council (BIRAC) is a **not-for-profit Public Sector Enterprise** that is established by the **Department of Biotechnology (DBT)**.
- The organization assists and empowers emerging Biotech enterprises to undertake strategic research and innovation, addressing nationally relevant product development requirements.

Important initiatives of BIRAC

Bio-NEST

- It was launched by BIRAC with a vision that focused on fostering the biotech innovation ecosystem in the country.
- The program provides support to establish bio-incubators either as a standalone entity or as a part of academia.

Biotechnology Ignition Grant Scheme (BIG)

- BIG is a flagship programme of BIRAC, which provides support to young startups and entrepreneurial individuals.
- BIG is the largest early stage biotech funding programme in India.

Intensifying the Impact of Industrial Innovation (i4)

- The programme has been initiated to support biotechnological product/technology development by strengthening R&D capabilities of start-ups/companies/LLPs.
- The programme is operated through two schemes: Small Business Innovation Research Initiative (SBIRI) and Biotechnology Industry Partnership Programme (BIPP).

SPARSH

- SPARSH (Social Innovation programme for Products: Affordable & Relevant to Societal Health) is a programme that is initiated by BIRAC, aims at promoting the development of innovative solutions to society's most pressing social problems.
- The scheme intends to create a pool of social innovators in the biotech arena who will identify the specific needs and gaps in healthcare.

Sustainable Entrepreneurship And Enterprise Development Fund (SEED)

- The basic idea of SEED Fund is providing Capital assistance to startups with new and meritorious ideas, innovations and technologies.
- This would enable some of these startups to graduate to a level where they will be able to raise investments from angel/Venture capitalist or they will reach a position to seek loans from commercial banks/financial institutions.

Why in News?

- The Department of Biotechnology and Biotechnology Industry Research Assistance Council had invited applications on COVID-19 Research Consortium.

FLORA & FAUNA

1. Red Panda

About Red Panda



- The Red Panda is a mammal native to the **eastern Himalayas and southwestern China**.
- About 5,000-6,000 red pandas are estimated to be present in four Indian states – Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Sikkim and West Bengal. This is the second-largest population after China.
- It is listed as '**endangered**' on the IUCN Red List of threatened species.

Why in the news?

- A report titled "Assessment of illegal trade-related threats to Red Panda in India and selected neighbouring range countries" has been released recently by **TRAFFIC**.
- The report says that neither India nor Bhutan had reported any incidences of poaching or illegal trade in Red Pandas in the study period (July 2010 to June 2019).
- It indicates the success of awareness campaigns undertaken in these areas.

TRAFFIC

- **TRAFFIC**, the **wildlife trade monitoring network**, is a leading **non-governmental organisation** working to ensure that trade in wild plants and animals is not a threat to the conservation of nature.

- It is a joint program of the **World Wildlife Fund (WWF)** and the **International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN)**.
- Founded in 1979, **TRAFFIC** is headquartered in Cambridge, United Kingdom.
- **TRAFFIC** works in support of the **Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES)**.

2. Olive Ridley turtles

About olive ridley turtles

- The olive ridley turtle is considered the most abundant sea turtle in the world.
- Olive ridleys are found **only in warmer waters**, including the southern Atlantic, Pacific and Indian Oceans.
- They are listed as **vulnerable** in the IUCN Red list.

Mass nesting

- The Olive Ridley Turtles come to the beaches of Odisha coast annually between November and December and stay on until April and May for nesting.
- While states like Maharashtra, Goa, and the offshore Andaman islands witness sporadic nesting of olive ridley turtles, Odisha is the only state in India that sees mass nesting of olive ridley turtles.
- **Rushikulya** and **Gahirmatha** are the two principal mass nesting sites in Odisha.



Threats

- The Olive Ridley's face serious threats across their migratory route, habitat and nesting beaches, due to human activities such as turtle unfriendly fishing practices, development and exploitation of nesting beaches for ports, and tourist centers.

- Though international trade in these turtles and their products is banned, they are still extensively poached for their meat, shell and leather.
- All the five species of sea turtles occurring in India, including the Olive Ridley turtles, are legally protected under **Schedule I** of the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972 and **Appendix I** of the CITES Convention which prohibits trade in turtle products.
- As the nesting period stretches over six months, the Indian Coast Guard undertakes the Olive Ridley Turtle protection program under the code name '**Operation Olivia**' every year.

Why in News?

- Mass nesting of olive ridleys started at Odisha's Rushikulya coast.

ECONOMY

1. Public sector bank mergers

Details on the merger

- The central government had announced the mega merger in August last year.
- The consolidation of 10 PSBs into four includes the **merger** of Oriental Bank of Commerce and United Bank of India into Punjab National Bank, the **amalgamation** of Syndicate Bank into Canara Bank, the merger of Andhra Bank and Corporation Bank into Union Bank of India, and the amalgamation of Allahabad Bank into Indian Bank.
- **Amalgamation** is the consolidation or combination of two or more companies known as the amalgamating companies, whereas **merger** refers to the consolidation of two or more business entities to form one single joint entity with the new management structure and new business ownership

Advantages of Bank consolidation

- The Mega consolidation would help create banks with scale comparable to global banks and capable of competing effectively in India and globally.
- In addition, consolidation would also provide impetus to amalgamated entities by **increasing their ability to support larger ticket-size lending** and have competitive operations by virtue of **greater financial capacity**.
- For existing customers of all the amalgamating banks, the process will **increase access to banking services** by about 3,000 branches or more.
- The **adoption of best practices** across amalgamating entities would enable the banks to improve their cost efficiency and risk management, and

also boost the goal of financial inclusion through wider reach.

- Further, with the adoption of technologies across the amalgamating banks, access to a wider talent pool and a larger database, PSBs would be in a position to gain competitive advantage by leveraging analytics in a rapidly digitalising banking landscape.

Challenges of Bank consolidation

- Merger of PSBs would not be possible without **significant support from the government**. This would be critical to shore up buffers of the acquiring bank till the merger process is complete.
- Merger of banks might result in closure of many branches, administrative offices, ATMs, processing centers, etc. It **affects the idea of decentralization** as many banks have a regional audience to cater to and customers often respond very emotionally to a bank acquisition.
- Larger banks are **more vulnerable to global economic crises**.
- PSB consolidation attempts typically face **resistance from employee unions and employees** who might be adversely impacted by job losses.
- Acquiring banks have to handle the burden of weaker banks.

What's in the news?

- The Union Cabinet has approved the consolidation of 10 public sector banks (PSBs) into four 'mega banks'.
- At present, India has 18 state-owned banks compared with 27 in 2017. After the merger, the number will further come down to 12.

2. Dollar sell-buy swap window

What is it?

- In order to stabilize the rupee exchange rate, the RBI has announced that it would open a **six-month dollar sell-buy swap window**.
- Under this window, RBI will provide \$2 billion to the banks that need it through a swap. The central bank will give dollars and the buyer will give rupees and the transaction will be reversed 6 months later.
- This is expected to reduce the exchange rate volatility as the swap window will replenish the dollars in the market.

Why such intervention is needed?

- India's exchange rate policy has evolved over time in line with the gradual opening up of the economy as part of the broader strategy of macroeconomic reforms and liberalization since the early 1990s.
- At present, India has been operating on a **managed floating exchange rate regime**.
- Under this system, the exchange rate is basically determined in the foreign exchange market through the operation of **market forces**.
- But during extreme fluctuations, the **RBI intervenes** in the foreign exchange market to minimise the fluctuation in the exchange rate of the rupee.

Why in News?

- The RBI announced a Dollar sell-buy swap window to restrict the exchange rate volatility caused by huge outflows of dollars from Indian banks.

3. Long Term Repo Operations

What is it?

- It is new **liquidity facility** known as Long Term Repo Operations (LTRO) announced by the RBI to inject

liquidity in the banking system and boost credit growth.

- Under this facility, the RBI will give out Rs.1,00,000 crores as loans to banks through auctions at the **repo rate** of 5.15%.
- These loans will have **long term maturity periods** of 1 year and 3 years.

Rationale of the move

- While the RBI's current windows of liquidity adjustment facility (LAF) and marginal standing facility (MSF) offer banks money for their immediate needs ranging from 1-28 days, the LTRO supplies them with liquidity for their 1- to 3-year needs.
- Loans with a longer-term maturity (say 1 year) usually have higher interest rates. But, under LTRO, the RBI will give out loans of long term maturity at the repo rate.
- Thus, **LTROs will enable banks to borrow longer-term loans at a cheaper rate**. This would reduce the cost of funds for banks and boost lending in the economy.

4. MSME

What is the definition of MSME?

- The Government enacted the **Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises Development (MSMED) Act, 2006** in terms of which the definition of micro, small and medium enterprises is as under:
- Enterprises engaged in the **manufacture or production, processing or preservation of goods** as specified below:
 - A **micro enterprise** is an enterprise where investment in plant and machinery does not exceed Rs. 25 lakh;

- A **small enterprise** is an enterprise where the investment in plant and machinery is more than Rs. 25 lakh but does not exceed Rs. 5 crore;
- A **medium enterprise** is an enterprise where the investment in plant and machinery is more than Rs.5 crore but does not exceed Rs.10 crore.
- Enterprises engaged in providing or rendering of **services** are specified below.
 - A **micro enterprise** is an enterprise where the investment in equipment does not exceed Rs. 10 lakh;
 - A **small enterprise** is an enterprise where the investment in equipment is more than Rs.10 lakh but does not exceed Rs. 2 crore;
 - A **medium enterprise** is an enterprise where the investment in equipment is more than Rs. 2 crore but does not exceed Rs. 5 crore.

MSME's contribution to economy

- In India, the MSME sector currently contributes **24% of the GDP growth** and **48% of exports**, with an annual turnover of Rs. 1 lakh crore.
- A target of Rs.5 lakh crore in five years had been set by the government.

Why in News?

- The government announced that it would soon come out with a new definition of MSMEs, which are currently defined on the **basis of investment** in plant and machinery.
- Member of Parliament Jairam Ramesh suggested that MSME units should be defined on the **basis of turnover** as it

would increase compatibility with the Goods and Services Tax (GST) system.

5. RRBs

About RRBs

- Regional Rural Banks (RRBs) were formed under the **RRB Act, 1976** with an objective to provide credit and other facilities, especially to the small and marginal farmers, agricultural labourers, artisans and small entrepreneurs in rural areas for development of agriculture, trade, commerce, industry and other productive activities.
- They are jointly owned by the **Government of India, the concerned State Government and Sponsor Banks** with the issued capital shared in the proportion of **50%, 15% and 35%** respectively.
- The Act was amended in 2015 whereby such banks were permitted to raise capital from sources other than the Centre, states and sponsor banks.
- RRBs are required to provide **75% of their total credit as priority sector lending** with primary focus on agricultural credit, including small and marginal farmers, as well as micro entrepreneurs and rural artisans.
- **NABARD** is responsible for regulating and supervising the functions of RRBs.

Why in News?

- The Centre has approved a Rs. 1,340-crore recapitalisation plan for RRBs to improve their **capital-to-risk weighted assets ratio**.
- At a time of lockdown due to the COVID-19 crisis, financially stronger rural banks could also be crucial to ensuring liquidity in rural areas.

Capital to Risk-weighted Assets Ratio (CRAR)

- CRAR, also known as **Capital Adequacy Ratio (CAR)**, is the capital needed for a bank measured in terms of the assets or loans disbursed by the banks.
- It measures capital adequacy in terms of riskiness of the assets or loans given.
- According to the RBI's capital adequacy norms, scheduled commercial banks (including RRBs) are required to maintain CRAR at **9%**.

6. Liquidity adjustment

What is it?

- The central bank is entrusted with many tasks which include controlling the liquidity in the system, the extent of money in circulation, the operation of banks and the currency exchange ratio.
- Certain instruments, like CRR, SLR, Repo rate, Reverse repo rate, Marginal standing facility are used by RBI to manipulate liquidity in the system.

Cash Reserve Ratio (CRR) and Statutory Liquidity Ratio (SLR)

- CRR is a portion of the banks' net demand and time liabilities (NDTL) or deposits that need to be kept in their specified current accounts maintained with RBI.
- SLR is a portion of the banks' NDTL that is required to invest in assets specified by RBI, including gold, and government bonds and securities.
- The important difference between CRR and SLR is that CRR has to be maintained in **cash** while SLR can be maintained **either in cash or in assets that RBI suggests**.

- Banks **don't earn any returns** from the money parked in the form of CRR. However, banks can earn returns from SLR as most of the banks will be keeping their SLR in the form of government securities as it will earn them an interest income.

Marginal Standing Facility (MSF)

- MSF is the rate at which the banks are able to borrow overnight funds from RBI against the approved government securities.
- The scheme has been introduced by RBI with the main aim of **reducing volatility in the overnight lending rates** in the inter-bank market and to enable **smooth monetary transmission** in the financial system.

Repo Rate & Reverse Repo Rate

- Repo rate is the rate of interest which is applied by RBI to commercial banks when the latter borrows from RBI. Reverse Repo rate is the rate at which RBI borrows money from commercial banks by mortgaging its dated government securities.
- Both the Repo rate and Reverse Repo rate are used to **control inflation and money supply in the economy**.

Why in News?

- In a move to infuse sufficient liquidity into the banking system amid COVID-19 outbreak, the RBI has announced several measures.

Key announcements

- The Central Bank has reduced the CRR requirement by 100 bps from 4% to 3%.
- The RBI has also increased the cap for liquidity available under the marginal standing facility, from 2% of the statutory liquidity ratio to 3% with immediate effect.
- Another significant measure is that the RBI reduced the repo rate sharply

by 75 bps to 4.4% while the reverse repo rate was cut by 90 bps to 4%.

- The higher reduction in the reverse repo rate was aimed at prompting banks to lend more rather than keeping their excess liquidity with the RBI.

7. National Investment and Infrastructure Fund

About NIIF

- National Investment and Infrastructure Fund (NIIF), is an Indian-government backed entity established in 2016 to provide long-term capital to the country's infrastructure sector.
- The Indian government has **49 per cent** stake in NIIF with the rest held by foreign and domestic investors. NIIF is India's **only sovereign wealth fund**.
- NIIF got registered with SEBI as a **Category II Alternative Investment Fund (AIF)**.
- *AIFs are private funds which are otherwise not coming under the jurisdiction of any regulatory agency in India. In India, AIFs are regulated by the Securities and Exchange Board of India (Alternative Investment Funds) Regulations, 2012.*
- NIIF currently manages three funds each with its distinctive investment mandate.
 - **Master Fund**
 - A fund focused on creating scalable sectoral platforms in core infrastructure and in collaboration with strong and reputed operating and financial partners.
 - **Fund of Funds**

- A fund focused on anchoring and investing in credible and reputed third party managers with a strong track record across diversified sectors within infrastructure services and allied sectors.

- **Strategic Fund**

- A fund focused on investing in strategic assets and projects with a longer term horizon across various stages of development.

Why in News?

- Asian Development Bank (ADB) has decided to invest \$100 million into the NIIF's Fund of Funds.
- With ADB's investment into the NIIF platform, the Fund of Funds has now secured \$700 million in commitments.

About ADB

- The Asian Development Bank was founded in 1966 with the primary mission of fostering growth and cooperation among countries in the Asia-Pacific Region.
- It is headquartered in **Manila**, Philippines.
- At present, ADB comprises 68 members (including **India**)- of which 49 are from within Asia and the Pacific and 19 outside.
- The ADB was **modeled closely on the World Bank**, and has a similar weighted voting system where votes are distributed in proportion with members' capital subscriptions.
- The two largest shareholders of the ADB are the **US and Japan**.
- ADB is an official United Nations Observer.

8. Inverted duty structure

What is Inverted duty structure?

- Inverted duty structure is a situation where **import duty on finished goods is low compared to the import duty on raw materials** that are used in the production of such finished goods.
- For example, suppose the tariff on the import of tyres is 10% and the tariff on the imports of natural rubber which is used in the production of tyres is 20%; this is a case of inverted duty structure.
- When the import duty on raw materials is high, it will be more difficult to produce the concerned goods domestically at a competitive price. Several industries depend on imported raw materials and components.
- High tax on the raw materials compels them to raise prices. On the other hand, foreign finished goods will be coming at a reduced price because of low tax advantage. In conclusion, **manufactured goods by the domestic industry become uncompetitive against imported finished goods.**
- The disadvantage of the inverted duty structure increases with the increased use of imported raw materials. An inverted duty structure **discourages domestic value addition.**

Why in News?

- West Bengal finance minister Amit Mitra asked Union finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman to correct the inverted duty structure in many sectors during the next GST Council meet.

9. Basel III norms

About Basel III norms

- Basel III is the latest comprehensive set of reform measures, developed by the **Basel Committee on Banking Supervision**, to strengthen the regulation, supervision and risk management of the banking sector.
- It was introduced in 2009 in response to the financial crisis of 2007-09.
- These measures aim to improve the banking sector's ability to absorb shocks arising from financial and economic stress.

Recommendations

- Under Basel III, a Bank's tier 1 and tier 2 capital must be **at least 8%** of its risk-weighted assets.
- Tier 1 capital is the core capital of a bank, which includes equity capital and disclosed reserves. This type of capital absorbs losses without requiring the bank to cease its operations; tier 2 capital is used to absorb losses in the event of liquidation.
- The **minimum capital adequacy ratio, including the capital conservation** buffer, is **10.5%**.
- The capital conservation buffer recommendation is designed to build up banks' capital, which they could use in periods of stress.

Why in News?

- The Basel Committee announced that, in view of the coronavirus pandemic, the implementation of Basel-III norms will be deferred by a year to January 1, 2023.
- It will free up operational capacity for banks and supervisors as they respond to the economic impact of Covid-19.

About BCBS

- The Basel Committee on Banking Supervision (BCBS) is an international

committee formed to develop standards for banking regulation.

- Formed without a founding treaty, the BCBS is **not a multilateral organization**. Instead, it seeks to provide a forum in which banking regulatory and supervisory authorities can cooperate to enhance the quality of banking supervision around the world, and improve understanding of important issues in the banking supervisory sphere.
- BCBS consists of representatives from central banks and regulatory authorities of 28 countries (including **India**).
- Its secretariat is located at the Bank of International Settlements (BIS) headquartered in the city of Basel in Switzerland.

10. Essential Commodities Act

About ECA

- The Essential Commodities Act (ECA) was enacted by the Central Government in 1955 to control and regulate trade and prices of commodities declared essential under the Act.
- The Act empowers the **Central and state governments** concurrently to control production, supply and distribution of certain commodities in view of rising prices and to prevent Black marketing.
- The measures that can be taken under the provisions of the Act include **licensing, distribution and imposing stock limits**. The governments also have the power to **fix price limits**, and selling the particular commodities above the limit will attract penalties.
- Most of the powers under the Act have been delegated by the Central

Government to the State Governments with the direction that they shall exercise these powers.

- Some of the major commodities that are covered under the act:
 - Petroleum and its products
 - Food stuff, including edible oil and seeds, vanaspati, pulses, sugarcane
 - Raw Jute and jute textiles
 - Seeds of food crops, fruits and vegetables, cattle fodder, Jute seeds and Cotton seeds
 - Drugs- prices of essential drugs
 - Fertilisers

Why is it important?

- The ECA gives consumers protection against irrational spikes in prices of essential commodities. The Government has invoked the Act umpteen times to ensure adequate supplies.
- It cracks down on hoarders and black-marketers of such commodities.

Why in News?

- The government has declared face masks and hand sanitizers as essential commodities under the Essential Commodities Act, 1955.
- The move is aimed at stepping up efforts to boost supply and prevent hoarding of these items to check the spread of coronavirus disease.

11. Direct Tax Vivad se Vishwas Bill

Highlights of the Bill

- The Direct Tax 'Vivad Se Vishwas' (dispute to trust) Bill is intended for reducing litigation and for settling matters that have been pending for several years.
- It provides a **one-time opportunity to end disputes related to personal income tax and corporate tax**.

- The bill waives off interest and penalty on pending tax if paid by March 31. For payments made after March 31 and till June 30, a 10% penalty would be charged.
- The bill, however, **excludes litigations above Rs 5 crore** to check large cases of evasion.

Why in News?

- The Parliament has passed the Direct Tax Vivad se Vishwas Bill, 2020.

12. Electronics manufacturing

What's in the news?

- In a bid to boost large-scale electronics manufacturing in India, the Union Cabinet approved three schemes with a total outlay of almost Rs 48,000 crore.
- The three schemes together will enable large-scale electronics manufacturing, a domestic supply chain ecosystem of components and a state-of-the-art infrastructure and common facilities for large anchor units and their supply chain partners.
- The schemes are expected to generate more than five lakh direct and 15 lakh indirect jobs.

News in Detail

- The **'Production-linked incentive scheme'** aims to attract large investments in mobile phone manufacturing and specified electronic components. The scheme will offer an incentive of 4-6% on incremental sales of goods manufactured in India and is expected to create a total of 8 lakh jobs.
- The **'Scheme for Promotion of Manufacturing of Electronics Components and Semiconductors'** will give a financial incentive of 25% on capital expenditure for the identified list of electronic goods.

- The third scheme, **'Electronics Manufacturing Clusters (EMC) 2.0'**, aims at creating quality infrastructure with a minimum area of 200 acres along with industry-specific facilities such as common facility centres, ready-built factory sheds/ plug-and-play facilities.

13. Co-operative banks

About Co-operative banks

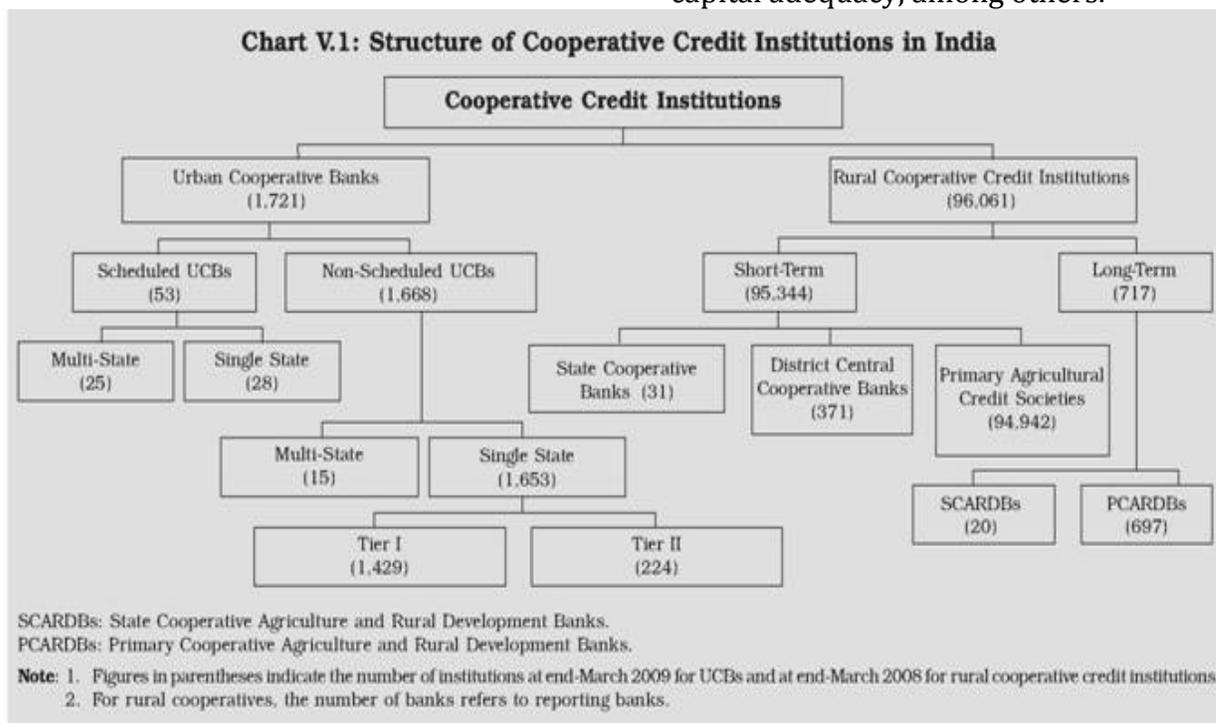
- Co-operative banks are financial entities established on a co-operative basis and belonging to their members. This means that the customers of a co-operative bank are also its owners.
- These banks provide a wide range of regular banking and financial services.

Structure of co-operative banks in India

- Broadly, co-operative banks in India are divided into two categories - **urban and rural**.
- Rural cooperative credit institutions could either be short-term or long-term in nature. Further, **short-term** cooperative credit institutions are further sub-divided into State Co-operative Banks, District Central Co-operative Banks, Primary Agricultural Credit Societies.
- Meanwhile, the **long-term** institutions are either State Cooperative Agriculture and Rural Development Banks (SCARDBs) or Primary Cooperative Agriculture and Rural Development Banks (PCARDBs).
- On the other hand, Urban Co-operative Banks (UBBs) are either **scheduled or non-scheduled**. Scheduled and non-scheduled UCBs are again of two kinds- **multi-state** and those operating in a **single state**.

Who oversees these banks?

- In India, co-operative banks are registered under the **States Cooperative Societies Act**.
- Cooperative banks are currently under the **dual control** of the Registrar of Cooperative Societies and RBI.
- While the role of registrar of cooperative societies includes incorporation, registration, management, audit, supersession of board and liquidation, RBI is responsible for regulatory functions such as maintaining cash reserve and capital adequacy, among others.



Why in News?

- The Union cabinet has approved changes to the Banking Regulation Act to give the RBI wider powers to regulate cooperative banks and prevent frauds.

Proposed amendments

- Once the amendment is cleared by Parliament, cooperative banks will be **audited** according to RBI's norms and the **central bank can supersede the**

board, in consultation with the state government, if any cooperative bank is under stress.

- **Appointments of chief executives** will also require permission from the RBI, as is the case for commercial banks.
- The **administrative role** will continue to be done by the Registrar of Cooperative Societies.

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

1. Colistin-resistant bacteria

What is Colistin?

- Colistin is an **antibiotic** used as a **last-resort for multidrug-resistant bacterial infections** including pneumonia.
- According to the WHO, Colistin is a “**reserve**” antibiotic, which means it is supposed to be considered a last-resort option in treatment and used only in the most severe circumstances, when all other alternatives have failed.

Colistin resistance

- However, this strong antibiotic has been highly misused in India’s livestock industry to prevent diseases and to promote growth of livestock.
- This indiscriminate use of colistin was one of the reasons for **rise in antibiotic resistance** in the country which posed a serious challenge in clinical practice with major public-health implications.
- (*Refer Pulse June edition for details on Antibiotic resistance and initiatives to contain it*)
- To address these issues, in 2019, the Union health ministry **banned** the manufacture, sale and distribution of Colistin and its formulations for food producing animals, poultry, aqua farming and animal feed supplements, under the provisions of the Drugs and Cosmetics Act, 1940.

Why in News?

- Recently, in a study conducted in Chennai, it was found that 51% of the patients harbour colistin-resistant bacteria in the gut.

2. Ban on virtual currencies

Background

- In a circular in 2018, the RBI had banned banks from dealing with **virtual currency** exchanges and individual holders on the grounds that these currencies had no underlying fiat and that it was necessary in the larger public interest to stop banks from providing any services related to these.

What are virtual currencies? Are they different from cryptocurrencies?

- Virtual currency is the larger umbrella term for **all forms of non-fiat currency** being traded online. Virtual currencies are mostly created, distributed and accepted in local virtual networks.
- *Fiat currency refers to any currency lacking intrinsic value that is declared legal tender by a government.*
- Cryptocurrencies, on the other hand, have an **extra layer of security**, in the form of **encryption algorithms**. Cryptographic methods are used to make the currency as well as the network on which they are being traded, secure.
- Most cryptocurrencies now operate on the **blockchain or distributed ledger technology**, which allows everyone on the network to keep track of the transactions occurring globally.

Why did the RBI ban virtual currencies?

- Owing to the lack of any underlying fiat, episodes of excessive volatility in their value, and their anonymous nature which goes against global money-laundering rules, the RBI initially flagged its concerns on trade and use of the currency.
- Risks and concerns about data security and consumer protection on

the one hand, and far-reaching potential impact on the effectiveness of monetary policy itself on the other hand, also had the RBI worried about virtual currencies.

Why in News?

- The Supreme Court has set aside a ban by the RBI on banks and financial institutions from dealing with virtual currency holders and exchanges.
- The court held that the ban **did not pass the “proportionality” test**. It held that the test of proportionality of any action by the government must pass the test of **Article 19(1)(g)**, which states that all citizens of the country will have the right to practice any profession, or carry on any occupation or trade and business.

3. Kyasanur Forest Disease

About KFD

- Kyasanur Forest Disease (KFD) is a **zoonotic** disease endemic in **Karnataka**. It is associated with sudden onset of high grade fever, prostration, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea and occasionally neurological & haemorrhagic manifestations.
- It is caused by **Kyasanur Forest disease virus (KFDV)**, a member of the virus family **Flaviviridae**. KFD is also known as “**monkey disease/monkey fever**” because of its association with monkey deaths.
- KFDV was identified in 1957 when it was isolated from a sick monkey from the Kyasanur Forest in Karnataka.
- KFDV is transmitted by the bite of the tick *Haemaphysalis spinigera*, a tick often found at the forest margins. Rodents, shrews, monkeys and birds upon tick bite become a reservoir for this virus.

- The vaccine for KFD consists of an **inactivated KFD virus** that is produced in tissue-culture and preserved in formalin.

Why in News?

- Karnataka government announced that it will set up a KFD research centre in Shivamogga, Karnataka.

4. Bird Flu

What is bird flu?

- Bird flu, also called **avian influenza**, is a **viral infection** that spreads from bird to bird. These viruses occur naturally among wild aquatic birds worldwide and can infect domestic poultry and other bird and animal species.
- Currently, a particularly deadly strain of bird flu -- **H5N1** -- continues to spread among poultry in Egypt and in certain parts of Asia. The H5N1 virus can cause severe flu with a high mortality rate.
- Avian influenza viruses **do not normally infect humans**. However, there have been instances of certain highly pathogenic strains causing severe respiratory disease in humans.
- In most cases, the people infected had been in close contact with infected poultry or with objects contaminated by their faeces.
- WHO had expressed concern that the virus could mutate to become more easily transmissible between humans, raising the possibility of an influenza pandemic.

Why in News?

- Two new cases of bird flu have been reported from two poultry farms in Kozhikode district of Kerala.

5. Sahyadri Megha

What is it?

- It is a new red variety of paddy that is **resistant to blast disease** and rich in nutrients.

What is Blast disease?

- Rice blast is considered as the most important disease that attacks rice worldwide because of its extensive distribution and destructiveness under favourable conditions.
- It is caused by **fungus Magnaporthe oryzae**.

Why in the news?

- University of Agricultural and Horticultural Sciences (UAHS), Shivamogga, Karnataka, has developed a new red variety of paddy 'Sahyadri Megha'.

6. WASP-76b

What's in the news?

- Scientists have discovered an ultra-hot giant exoplanet- **WASP-76b**- where they suspect it rains iron.
- *An exoplanet or extrasolar planet is a planet that orbits a star other than the Sun.*

Why does it rain iron on WASP-76b?

- WASP-76b is 640 light-years distant in the constellation of **Pisces**.
- It is **tidally locked** to its host star, showing it only one side—exactly as the moon does to Earth—which means only one side ever gets illuminated.
- On the day side it receives a lot of radiation from its star, rising temperatures above 2400 degrees Celsius, which is high enough to evaporate metals—creating iron vapour. It's around 1000 degrees Celsius cooler on the planet's night side. The **massive difference in temperature** between the two sides of WASP-76b causes strong winds,

which carry that iron vapor from the day to the night side.

- In the cooler conditions there, the iron vapor condenses into iron droplets.

Significance

- The latest findings may lead to better ways of studying the climate of the most extreme planets outside the Solar System.
- The astronomers made this first-of-its-kind discovery using the European Southern Observatory's (ESO) high resolution spectrograph, **ESPRESSO**, in the Chilean Atacama Desert.
- ESPRESSO was originally designed to hunt for Earth-like planets around Sun-like stars. The extreme stability of ESPRESSO made it a prime machine to study exoplanet atmospheres.

7. Herd immunity

What does herd immunity mean?

- Herd immunity refers to preventing an infectious disease from spreading by immunising a certain percentage of the population.
- While the concept is most commonly used in the context of vaccination, herd immunity can also be achieved after enough people have become immune after being infected.
- The premise is that if a certain percentage of the population is immune, members of that group can no longer infect another person. This breaks the chain of infection through the community ("herd"), and prevents it from reaching those who are the most vulnerable.

When do we know that a population has achieved herd immunity?

- It depends on multiple factors: how effective the vaccine for a given disease is, how long-lasting immunity is from both vaccination and infection,

and which populations form critical links in transmission of the disease.

- Mathematically, it is defined on the basis of a number called “**herd immunity threshold**”, which is the number of immune individuals above which a disease may no longer circulate.
- Polio has a threshold of 80% to 85%, while measles has 95%. With the current data for COVID-19, experts

have estimated a threshold of over 60%. That means more than 60% of the population needs to develop immunity to reach the stage of herd immunity.

Why in News?

- Economist Swaminathan Aiyar has said that India will have to achieve herd immunity to be able to fully counter coronavirus.

REPORTS & INDICES

1. A Future for the World's Children report

About the report

- It was released by the **World Health Organization, UNICEF** and **The Lancet medical journal**.
- The report noted that the health and future of every child and adolescent worldwide is under immediate threat from ecological degradation, climate change and exploitative marketing practices that push heavily processed fast food, sugary drinks, alcohol and tobacco at children.
- The report came out with two indices - **Sustainability Index** and **Flourishing Index** - which assessed the capacity of 180 countries to ensure that their youngsters can survive and thrive.
- The Sustainability Index ranks countries by taking into account per capita carbon emissions and ability of children in a nation to live healthy lives.
- The Flourishing Index measured the best chance at survival and well-being for children.
- **India** ranked 77th on the Sustainability Index and 131 on the Flourishing Index.
- The only countries on track to beat CO2 emission per capita targets by 2030, while also performing fairly (within the top 70) on child flourishing measures are: Albania, Armenia, Grenada, Jordan, Moldova, Sri Lanka, Tunisia, Uruguay and Viet Nam.

What's in the news?

- The World Health Organization, UNICEF and The Lancet medical

journal released a new report titled "A Future for the World's Children?"

2. World Happiness Report 2020

About the Report

- The World Happiness Report is a survey of the state of global happiness that ranks 156 countries by how happy their citizens perceive themselves to be.
- The happiest countries are those where people feel a sense of belonging, where they trust and enjoy each other and their shared institutions.
- It is released by the **Sustainable Development Solutions Network** for the United Nations.
- The report ranks countries on **six key variables** that support well-being:
 - income,
 - freedom,
 - trust,
 - healthy life expectancy,
 - social support and
 - generosity.

Why in News?

- Recently, the World Happiness Report 2020 was released.

Highlights of the Report

- The overall world happiness has fallen over the past few years.
- Finland has been ranked as the happiest country in the world for the second year in succession.
- **India is ranked 144**, way lower than its neighbours. Nepal is ranked 15, Pakistan is at 29, Bangladesh at 107 and Sri Lanka at 130.
- The countries at the bottom of the list were those affected by violence and extreme poverty. Zimbabwe, South Sudan, and Afghanistan were among

those classified as the least happy countries.

About SDSN

- The Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) was launched in 2012 by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon to mobilize global scientific and technological expertise to promote practical problem solving for sustainable development and implement the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
- SDSN's mission is to promote integrated approaches to implement the SDGs and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, through education, research, policy analysis, and global cooperation.
- SDSN works closely with United Nations agencies, multilateral financing institutions, the private sector, and civil society.

3. Gender Social Norms Index

About the Index

- Gender Social Norms Index is designed to measure how social beliefs obstruct gender equality in areas like politics, work, and education.
- The Index contains data from 75 countries, covering over 80 percent of the world's population.
- It is released by the **U.N. Development Programme (UNDP)**.

Why in News?

- UNDP has released the new Gender Social Norms Index.

Highlights of the Report

- The report maintained that "there is no country in the world with gender equality."

- Nine in 10 people are prejudiced against women, such as thinking university education is more important for men or that men deserve jobs more if work is scarce.
- Almost a third of respondents felt that it was acceptable for men to hit their partners.
- Only 24% of parliamentary seats worldwide are held by women, and only 10 out of a possible 193 female heads of government.
- Parity has been achieved in primary school enrollment and maternal mortality has been reduced by 45% since 1990.
- The report added that deeply-held biases could be addressed through education, raised awareness and incentives such as tax structures that encourage equally shared childcare or by encouraging women to enter male-dominated job sectors.

About UNDP

- The United Nations Development Programme is the UN's global development network formed in 1965, helping countries to achieve the eradication of poverty, and the reduction of inequalities and exclusion.
- UNDP is central to the **United Nations Sustainable Development Group (UNSDG)**, a network that spans 165 countries and unites the 40 UN funds, programmes, specialized agencies and other bodies working to advance the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.
- UNDP is the **largest UN development assistance program** and it is headquartered in New York City, the U.S.

POLITY

1. National Human Rights Commission

About NHRC

- The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) is a **statutory organisation** established in 1993 under the Protection of Human Rights Act (PHRA), 1993.
- The Act also created Human Rights Commissions at the levels of the various States.
- NHRC was established in conformity with the **Paris Principles**, adopted at the first international workshop on national institutions for the promotion and protection of human rights held in Paris in 1991, and endorsed by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1993.

Functions of NHRC

- The NHRC enquires into complaints of violation of human rights or negligence in the prevention of such violation by a public servant, studies treaties and international instruments on human rights and makes recommendations for their effective implementation to the Government.
- It is responsible for spreading human rights awareness amongst the masses.
- As per the Protection of Human Rights Act, the NHRC **can only recommend the government but the recommendations are non-binding.**
- While inquiring into complaints under the Act, the Commission shall have all the powers of a **civil court.**
- NHRC cannot inquire in any case, if the complaint is made after **one year** of the incident.

Composition of NHRC

- According to the **Protection of Human Rights (Amendment) Act, 2019**, the NHRC consists of
 - A **Chairperson**, who has been a Chief Justice of India or a Judge of the Supreme Court
 - One member who is, or has been, a Judge of the Supreme Court of India
 - One member who is, or has been, the Chief Justice of a High Court
 - Three Members, out of which at least one shall be a woman to be appointed from amongst persons having knowledge of, or practical experience in, matters relating to human rights
 - In addition, the Chairpersons of National Commissions viz., National Commission for Scheduled Castes, National Commission for Scheduled Tribes, National Commission for Women, National Commission for Minorities, National Commission for Backward Classes, National Commission for Protection of Child Rights; and the Chief Commissioner for Persons with Disabilities serve as **ex officio members.**
 - The term of the Chairperson and Members of the Commission is **three years** and shall be **eligible for re-appointment.**
- #### Why in News?
- The National Human Rights Commission directed the Centre to ensure that persons suffering from mental ailments are provided with

food, shelter and proper counselling during the nationwide lockdown.

2. Article 142

Article 142 of the Constitution

- Article 142 states that “the Supreme Court in the exercise of its jurisdiction may pass such decree or make such order as is necessary for doing **complete justice** in any cause or matter pending before it...”
- The provision that vests sweeping powers in the Supreme Court for the purpose of ensuring complete justice has been used generally in cases that involve **human rights and environmental protection**.

Previous instances

- The Supreme Court had used Article 142 in 1989 to provide relief to the thousands of people affected by the **Bhopal gas tragedy**. Applying the provision in the Union Carbide case, the court had awarded compensation of \$470 million to the victims, observing that to do complete justice, **it could even override parliamentary laws**.
- The court had also used Article 142 in its December 2016 judgment banning the **sale of alcohol** within a distance of 500 metres on national and state highways across the country.
- Thus, prohibitions or limitations or provisions contained in ordinary laws cannot act as prohibitions or limitations on the constitutional powers under Article 142.

Why in News?

- The Supreme Court invoked its plenary powers under Article 142 to extend the limitation period of appeals from high courts or tribunals on account of the coronavirus pandemic.

- The Supreme Court also decided to further restrict its functioning to the digital mode to maintain social distancing and prevent spread of infection.

3. NGOs Foreign Funding

Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act, 2010

- The Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act, (FCRA), 2010 and rules framed under it regulate foreign contribution provided by certain individuals or associations to NGOs and others within India.
- The objective is to prevent use of foreign contribution or foreign hospitality for any activity detrimental to the national interest.
- Under the Act, all societies, companies, associations and NGOs have to fulfil definite criteria to be eligible for foreign funds.
- Section 5 of the FCRA gives the Union government powers to declare an organisation as being one of **political nature** and **deny it access to funds from sources abroad**.

Why in News?

- Recently, the Supreme Court delivered a judgment in a petition challenging certain provisions of the FCRA 2011 and its rules.
- The apex court held that an organisation which supports public cause without a political goal, via legitimate means of dissent like agitations, cannot be prevented from receiving foreign funds by declaring it as an outfit of political nature.

4. Assisted Reproductive Technology Regulation Bill

What are Assisted Reproductive Technologies?

- Assisted reproductive technology (ART) is used to treat infertility.
- ART comprises procedures such as in-vitro fertilisation (IVF), intra-uterine insemination (IUI), oocyte and sperm donation, cryopreservation and includes surrogacy as well.
- The In Vitro Fertilization is the most common form of ART.

Why in News?

- The Union Cabinet has approved the Assisted Reproductive Technology Regulation Bill, 2020 to monitor medical procedures used to assist people to achieve pregnancy.

Need for the Bill

- India has one of the highest growths in the number of ART centres and ART cycles performed every year.
- India has become one of the major centres of this global fertility industry, with reproductive medical tourism becoming a significant activity. This has also introduced a plethora of legal,

ethical and social issues; yet, there is no standardisation of protocols and reporting is still very inadequate.

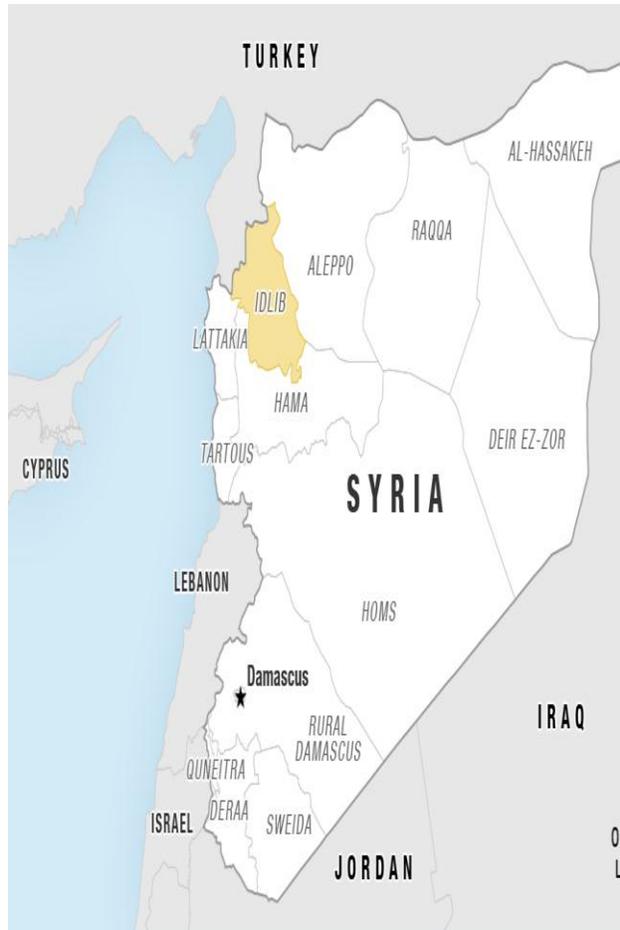
Key Provisions of the Bill

- The Bill provides for a **National Board** which will lay down a code of conduct to be observed by those operating clinics.
- It will also formulate **minimum standards** for laboratory and diagnostic equipment and practices to be followed by human resources employed by clinics and banks.
- Under the proposed law, a **national registry and registration authority** will maintain a database to assist the national Board to perform its functions.
- The Bill also proposes stringent punishment for those who practice sex selection, indulge in sale of human embryos or gametes and those who operate rackets.

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

1. Idlib

About Idlib



- Idlib is a province in the northwestern part of **Syria**.
- Idlib is at the focus of the nine-year-old war in Syria with rapidly escalating tensions between Syrian government forces and the Turkish military to capture the region.
- Idlib, along with parts of neighbouring **Hama, Latakia and Aleppo**, are the last remaining strongholds of the rebel opposition.
- Idlib's **proximity to the Turkish border** makes it not only important for the Syrian government, but also a cause of concern for Turkey.
- For Turkey, which is presently hosting some 36 lakh refugees, more conflict

in Idlib would only serve to displace more people, pushing them towards the Turkish border.

Why in News?

- In Moscow, Russian President Vladimir Putin and his Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdogan agreed on a ceasefire deal to de-escalate the situation in Syria.

2. Two-state solution

What is it?

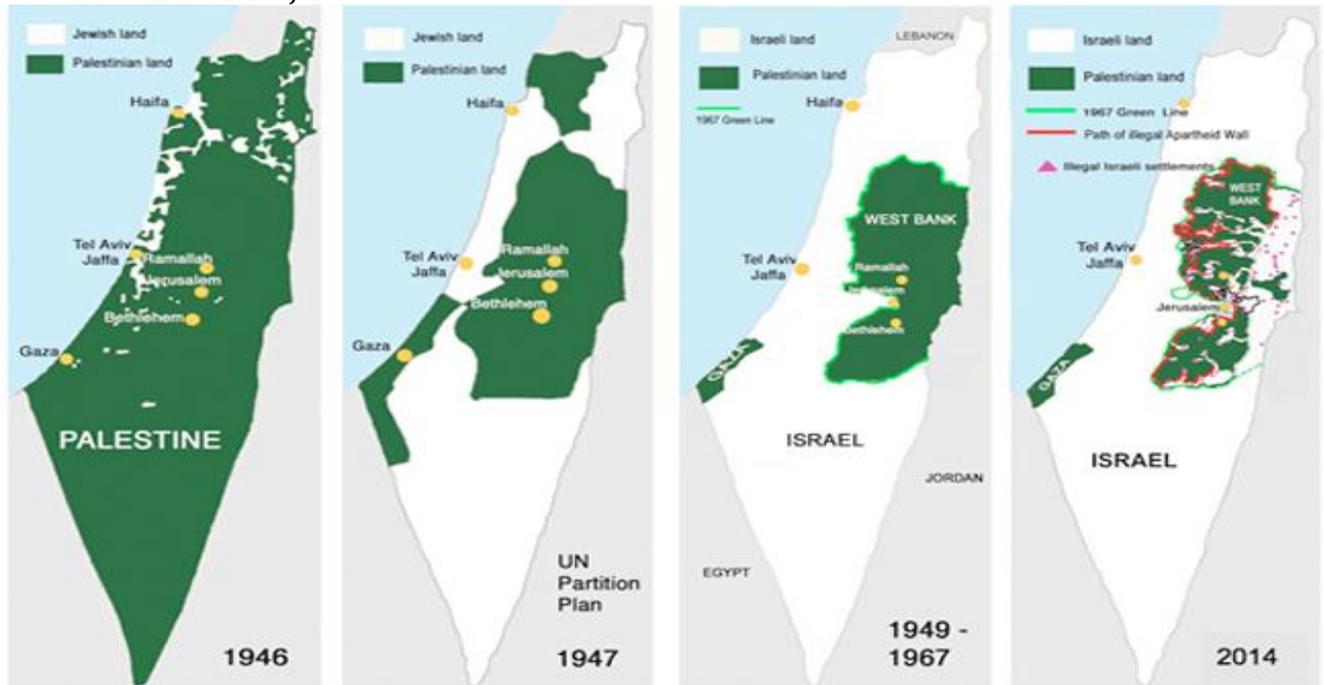
- It is a proposed solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict.
- Its basis is two separate states, Israel and Palestine, living peacefully side by side on the land between the western bank of the Jordan river and the Mediterranean Sea.
- This territory would be divided broadly along the **pre-1967 armistice line or "green line"**
- **Jerusalem**, which both sides want as their capital, would be shared.
- Past negotiations have failed to make progress and there are currently no fresh talks in prospect.

About Israel-Palestine conflict

- Jerusalem lies in the heart of the Israel-Palestine conflict. The tussle is over who gets to control the ancient city that is sacred to Jews, Muslims and Christians.
- After the end of the **First Arab-Israel War in 1948**, Jerusalem was partitioned into West and East, under Israeli and Palestinian control respectively.
- But in 1967, during the **Six-Day Arab-Israel War**, Israel occupied East Jerusalem from Jordanian forces, and Israel's Parliament declared the territory had been annexed to Israel.

- This marginalised the Palestinians, who wanted East Jerusalem to be their

capital under the “two-state solution”.



Oslo Accords & India’s position

- Despite Israel’s hold over the Jerusalem, in 2016, the UN reaffirmed that Jerusalem’s Palestinian territories were under “hostile occupation”.
- Undeterred by the refusal of the international community to endorse the annexation, Israel further expanded settlements in the territories of East Jerusalem.
- Under the **Oslo Accords** of the 1990s, both Israel and the Palestinians agreed that the status of settlements would be decided by negotiations. But the negotiations process has been stalled for several years now.
- India has **traditionally backed a two-state solution** to resolve the Israel-Palestine conflict.

Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People

- The Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People (CEIRPP) was established by

the **UN General Assembly (UNGA)** in 1975.

- UNGA requested the CEIRPP to recommend a programme of implementation to enable the Palestinian people to exercise their inalienable rights to self-determination and to return to their homes and property from which they had been displaced.

Why in News?

- In a recent discussion with the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable rights of the Palestinian People, Indian government reiterated its traditional stand in support of a two-state solution on the Israel-Palestine issue.

3. U.S.-Taliban peace agreement Key elements of the deal

- The US-Taliban agreement calls for a **phased withdrawal of American and coalition forces** and also requires the Taliban to initiate a

formal dialogue with the Afghan government and other political and civil society groups on a permanent nationwide ceasefire and power-sharing in post-war Afghanistan.

- A full withdrawal of all US and coalition forces would occur **within 14 months** of this deal getting signed, if Taliban fulfil their end of the deal.
- The United States will work with the UN Security Council to remove Taliban members from sanctions by May 2020.

What's in the news?

- The U.S. signed a peace deal with the Taliban which represents a step towards ending the 18-year-war in Afghanistan.
- The deal was signed in the Qatari capital **Doha**, which is the Taliban's political headquarters.

India's stand

- India has welcomed the agreement between the U.S. and the Taliban.
- Indian government said that it would support all opportunities that could bring peace, security and stability in Afghanistan.

4. Sir Creek dispute

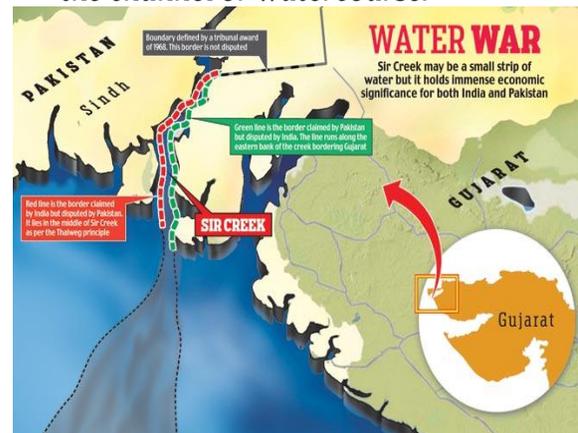
What is Sir Creek?

- Sir Creek is a 96-km strip of water **disputed between India and Pakistan** in the **Rann of Kutch marshlands**.
- The Creek opens up in the Arabian Sea and roughly divides the Kutch region of Gujarat from the Sindh Province of Pakistan.

What's the dispute?

- The dispute lies in the interpretation of the maritime boundary line between Kutch and Sindh.

- The dispute goes back to 1908 between the ruler of Kutch and the British authorities in Sindh.
- In 1914, the government of Bombay province took up the resolution of the dispute and gave an award where on the map attached they indicated that the boundary lay along the eastern bank of the creek, called the **Green Line**, now claimed by Pakistan.
- But the actual text of the decision seemed to suggest that the boundary was through the middle of the creek, as per the international law's '**Thalweg principle**'.
- *The Thalweg principle defines the border between two states separated by a watercourse or flowing body of water as lying along the thalweg, which is the line of greatest depth of the channel or watercourse.*



War in 1965 and tribunal

- After Pakistan's and India's independence in 1947, the creek was physically noted as the border between India and Pakistan but no formal resolution of the 1914 map's ambiguity was determined.
- The war of 1965 between India and Pakistan over various territorial differences also involved the Kutch region. Subsequently, both countries agreed to take the matter to the **International Court of Justice**, which

issued a ruling in 1968 favoring 90 percent of India's claim to the salt marsh (i.e., the Rann of Kutch) but excluded a mention of Sir Creek itself, thus leading to an uncertain outcome regarding its status.

- Since 1969, 12 rounds of talks have been held over the issue of Sir Creek, but both sides have denied reaching any solution.

What's the importance of Sir Creek?

- Apart from strategic location, Sir Creek's core importance is **fishing resources**. Sir Creek is considered to be among the largest fishing grounds in Asia.
- It is also significant for the possible presence of **oil and gas concentration** under the sea.

Why in News?

- Recently, a former Pakistan Foreign Minister mentioned the Sir Creek dispute in a summit hosted by an International news channel.

5. Military Cooperation Group dialogue

About MCG

- The India-U.S. Military Cooperation Group (MCG) is a forum to review the progress of defence cooperation between **India's Integrated Defence Staff** and **the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM)** at the strategic and operational levels.
- MCG acts as the senior-most military dialogue to plan forward-looking cooperative activities.
- The Integrated Defence Staff was responsible for coordination among the armed forces before the appointment of the Chief of Defence Staff.

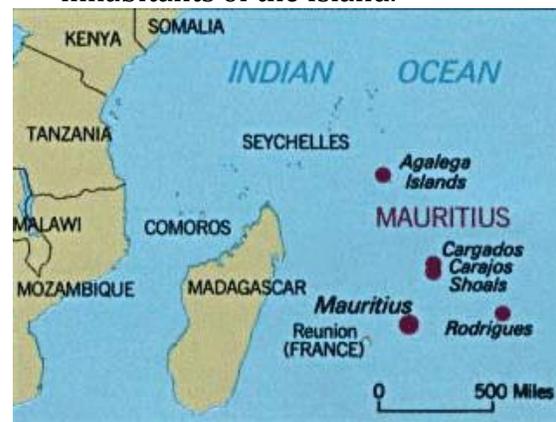
Why in News?

- The India-U.S. Military Cooperation Group dialogue, scheduled to take place in March 2020, has been cancelled in view of the COVID-9 outbreak.

6. Reunion island

About Reunion Island

- Reunion Island is a small **French overseas territory** in the Indian Ocean.
- Since the 19th century, the French brought a large number of Indians as indentured labourers to this Island.
- It is estimated that people of Indian origin constitute over one-third of the inhabitants of the Island.



Why in News?

- Recently, India and France conducted joint patrols from Reunion Island for the first time.

Significance

- India has so far carried out coordinated patrols only with maritime neighbours and had rejected a similar offer by the U.S.
- France has steadily emerged as a major strategic partner for India with big-ticket defence deals and increased military-to-military engagement.
- The Indian Navy is currently inducting **French Scorpene conventional submarines**, being built in India under technology transfer, and the

Indian Air Force will soon get the first batch of its **36 Rafale fighter jets**.

- France is also the first country to deploy a liaison officer at the **Indian Navy's Information Fusion Centre (IFC-IOR)** as part of efforts to improve maritime domain awareness.

About IFC-IOR

- The Information Fusion Centre – Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) was inaugurated in 2018 within the premises of Indian Navy's **Information Management and Analysis Centre (IMAC)** in Gurugram, Haryana.
- The IMAC is the single point centre **linking all the coastal radar chains** to generate a seamless real-time picture of nearly 7,500-km coastline and of some neighbouring countries.

7. Biological Weapons Convention

About the convention

- The Biological Weapons Convention (BWC)/Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BTWC) is an international treaty that bans the use of biological weapons in war and prohibits all development, production, acquisition, stockpiling, or transfer of such weapons.
- It was the **first multilateral treaty** banning the production of the entire range of biological and chemical weapons. The convention entered into force in 1975.
- There are 183 countries in the world, which are signatories to this convention (including **India**).

Why in News?

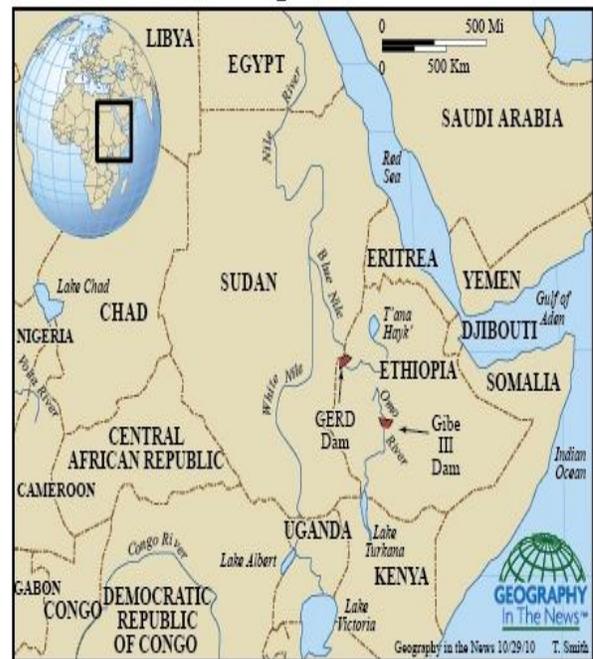
- On 26 March 2020, the BWC/BTWC completed 45 years of its existence.

8. Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam

About the Dam

- Ethiopia began the construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam in 2011. When complete, it will be Africa's biggest hydroelectric power plant.
- However, the mega dam has caused a row between **Egypt and Ethiopia**, with **Sudan** caught in between. At the centre of the dispute is that Egypt fears the project will allow Ethiopia to control the flow of the River Nile.

Damming the Blue Nile



- Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan — which lies between the two countries — conducting talks to resolve the dispute over the dam.

9. Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure

About CDRI

- The Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI) was launched by Prime Minister Narendra Modi

during the **UN Climate Action Summit 2019** in New York.

- The CDRI is a **voluntary international grouping**, linking governments, UN agencies, banks, private sector groups, and academia to **develop the resilience of infrastructure systems to climate and disaster risks**.
- The Coalition's secretariat is supported by the UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR) and will be based in **Delhi**.
- CDRI will provide member countries technical support and capacity development, research and knowledge management, and advocacy and partnerships to facilitate and encourage investment in disaster resilient infrastructure systems.

Why in News?

- The UK has been confirmed as the first co-chair of the Governing Council on the India-led global Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure.
- The Governing Council is the highest policy-making body of the CDRI, **co-chaired by India** and a representative of another national government nominated by rotation every two years.

10. Multi-party Interim Appeal Arbitration Arrangement

Dispute resolution mechanism of the WTO

- According to the procedure established by the WTO, the first step to resolve a trade dispute is engaging in the **consultation process**.
- If two trading partners having a dispute could not resolve at that level, one of them can ask for a settlement of

the **Dispute Settlement Body (DSB)** for hearing.

- The DSB's ruling can be challenged at the **appellate body**, the highest court for global trade disputes.

WTO's Appellate Body

- The Appellate Body is a standing committee of **seven members** that presides over appeals against judgments passed in trade-related disputes brought by WTO members.
- Members of the Appellate Body have four-year terms.
- In the selection process, WTO members follow the **consensus principle**, which means that the nomination of the Appellate Body members can only proceed smoothly with the agreement of all 164 members of the WTO.
- The Appellate Body **must have at least three sitting members** to hear an appeal.
- Last year, the Appellate Body became dysfunctional because of the United States' refusal to approve the appointment of new members to the body.
- Consequently, the Appellate Body is left with only one member, who will not be able to deliver any rulings on pending trade disputes as a minimum of three members is required to adjudicate any dispute.

Why in News?

- The European Union, China and 18 other countries launched an interim mechanism for appeals to resolve trade disputes as the WTO dispute settlement mechanism becomes defunct.
- It will be known as the Multi-party Interim Appeal Arbitration Arrangement (MPIA). The new arrangement will be temporary, and

based on **Article 25 of the WTO Dispute Settlement Understanding (DSU)**. It mirrors the main features of the WTO appeal system.

- The new arrangement offers arbitration outside the Appellate Body contingent upon mutual agreement of the parties.
- **The US and India are not part of the MPIA.**

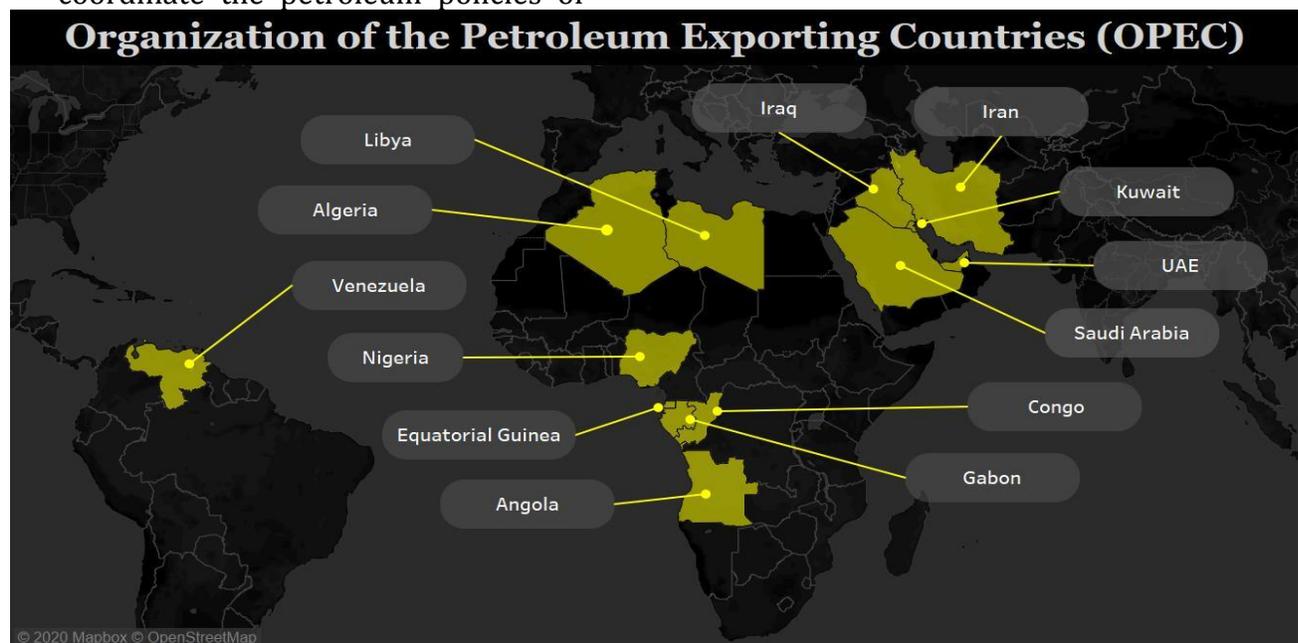
11. Oil prices

OPEC & OPEC+ arrangement

- The Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) is a group consisting of **13 of the world's major oil-exporting nations**.
- OPEC was founded in 1960 to coordinate the petroleum policies of

its members and to provide member states with technical and economic aid.

- OPEC is used to work as a cartel and fix prices in a favourable band. It could bring down prices by increasing oil production and raise prices by cutting production.
- The 2014 oil crisis, which was accentuated by oversupply of crude, brought down prices below \$30 a barrel. Since then, OPEC has been working with countries like Russia to fix the global prices and supply.
- Known as the **“OPEC Plus” arrangement** (Russia is not a member of the OPEC), this alliance kept production lower and pumped up the prices.



Why in News?

- OPEC+ countries finalized a historic agreement to cut production by 9.7 million barrels per day, amounting to around 10% of global oil supply, after a slump in demand caused by coronavirus lockdowns.

- It is the single largest output cut in history.
- Oil prices slumped in March to an 18-year-low after OPEC+ failed to agree to production cuts.

ART & CULTURE

1. Chapchar Kut

About the festival

- Chapchar Kut is considered as the biggest festival of **Mizos in Mizoram**.
- It is held during the period when they cut bamboo trees and are left to dry so that they can be burnt for **Jhum cultivation** (*slash and burn agriculture*).
- All the people gather for a huge community fest to sing and dance to the tune of flute, cymbals, drums and gongs.
- One of the greatest highlights of Chapchar Kut is the popular bamboo dance called **Cheraw**, which features men tapping the bamboo sticks

according to the rhythm of the dance and women adjust their dance moves with moving sticks.



Why in News?

- Chapchar Kut was celebrated recently in Mizoram.