

OFFICERS'

Pulse

ISSUE NO. 35 | 3RD FEBRUARY TO 9TH FEBRUARY

Coverage.

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At a Glance & In Depth.

Polity and Social Issues
Economy
International Relations
Environment
Science and Tech
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CURRENT AFFAIRS WEEKLY



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

News @ a glance

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News @ a glance

Polity and social issues

Ladakh connected to National Grid

Why it is in news:

- The Prime Minister, Shri Narendra Modi dedicated the 220 kV Srinagar- Alusteng - Drass- Kargil – Leh Transmission System to the Nation recently, a step that would ensure quality power supply to Ladakh round the year.
- This would give huge boost to the tourism sector and enhance socio-economic development of Ladakh.

About Srinagar- Alusteng - Drass- Kargil - Leh Transmission Line:

- Built at a height of around 3000-4000 meters, this approx. 335 km long transmission line has been constructed by POWERGRID.
- In this project, the four new State-of-the-Art 220/66 kV Gas Insulated Sub-stations built at Drass, Kargil, Khaltsi and Leh will help to ensure 24x7 quality power in all weather conditions. Funding provisions have been in the ratio of 95:05 (**95% Govt. of India share and 5% J&K state share**).

Benefits to the region:

- The implementation of this project was aimed to supply power to the people of Ladakh in harsh winters and evacuation of surplus power of Kargil & Leh Hydel stations of NHPC in summers.
- It is a **flagship project of Government of India**, under PMRP scheme which was aimed to improve reliability & quality of power supply in Ladakh region of J&K by connecting with National Grid.
- This will not only help evacuate power in summers, but will also supply power to the region in winters when temperatures dip and hydro electricity generation do not match up. The project will meet the power demand of Ladakh region at economical rates.
- With quality electricity available at reasonable rates, hospitality industry in Ladakh will get a boost, as their reliance on diesel sets will reduce. This will also attract tourists looking for affordable stay in all weathers.

About POWERGRID:

- POWERGRID is one of the World's Largest Power Transmission Utility, and has a wide network of 150,874 circuit kilometers transmission lines, with 238 Sub-stations and transformation capacity of 351,106 MVA.
- A "Navaratna" Central Public Sector Enterprise.
- Central Transmission Utility (CTU) of India
- India's largest Electric Power Transmission Utility
- Listed Company since 2007

Digitalisation of Schools

Why it is in news?

- The Central Government has launched an Integrated Scheme for school education- **Samagra Shiksha**, which subsumes the three erstwhile Centrally Sponsored Schemes of Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA) and Teacher Education, from the year 2018-19.

About Samagra Shiksha:

- The new integrated scheme envisages school education as a continuum from pre-school to senior secondary level and aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education at all levels.
- The main objectives of the scheme are provision of quality education and enhancing learning outcomes of students, bridging social and gender gaps in school education, ensuring minimum standards in schooling provision, support to states in the implementation of RTE Act, 2009 and strengthening of teacher education institutions.
- The scheme also provides for support for upgradation of secondary schools to senior secondary level and addition of new streams in existing senior secondary schools.
- Under the Centrally Sponsored Scheme of Samagra Shiksha, Information & Communication Technology (ICT) component envisages covering all

Government and Government Aided schools from classes VI to XII digitally.

Progress made so far and steps taken by Government:

- **So far, about 1,79,498 upper primary, secondary & senior secondary schools have been approved for coverage under ICT component** of the respective schemes.
- Further, the Government has undertaken various initiatives for providing education through digital means such as:

ICT in Education Curriculum for School System

- ICT curriculum for teachers and students has been developed by NCERT. Students' curriculum was piloted in 588 Navodaya Vidyalayas for one year. 805 MRPs/ KRPs of thirty states were oriented on roll-out of ICT curriculum for students and teachers in the respective states.

e-pathshala – e-pathshala has been developed by NCERT (National Council for Educational Research and Training) for showcasing and disseminating all educational e-resources including textbooks, audio, video, periodicals and a variety of other print and non-print materials. So far, 3444 audios and videos, 698 e-books (e-pubs) and 504 flip books have been made available on the portal and mobile app.

- National Repository of Open Educational Resources (NROER) - The National Repository of Open Educational Resources (NROER) is an initiative to bring together all digital and digitisable resources across all stages of school education and teacher education. So far, 13635 files including 401 collections, 2722 documents, 565 interactive, 1664 audios, 2581 images and 6105 videos have been made available over the portal. States/ UTs are motivated to contribute resources on NROER and create OERs for their own State/ UT.
- SWAYAM:- The 'Study Webs of Active Learning for Young Aspiring Minds' (SWAYAM) is an integrated platform for online courses, using Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and covering school (9th to 12th) to Post Graduate Level. It offers online courses for students, teachers and teacher educators. It may be accessed on swayam.gov.in. National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS) is promoting education through e-learning methods by providing courses on Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) on the portal. There are 44 courses of NIOS offered on SWAYAM platform – 14 at

Officers IAS Academy, Chennai secondary level, 16 at senior secondary level, 4 vocational courses and 10 courses of Diploma in Elementary Education (D.El.Ed.). NCERT has so far developed 22 courses for classes XI-XII in different subject areas.

- SWAYAM PRABHA:- A programme for utilization of satellite communication technologies for transmission of educational e-contents through 32 National Channels i.e. SWAYAM PRABHA DTH-TV has been launched. CIET-NCERT is the national coordinator for one DTH TV channel i.e., Kishore Manch (#31) and has started feeding a 24x7 educational TV channel w.e.f. 09.07.2018. Everyday four hour fresh slot is telecast and repeated 5 more times in 24 hours to provide learning opportunities for the stake holders, as per their convenience. Besides, NIOS is running 5 channels for teachers, for secondary and senior secondary levels and for sign language.
- CBSE initiatives:- **SARANSH is a tool for comprehensive self review and analysis for CBSE affiliated schools and parents.** It enables them to analyse students' performance in order to take remedial measures. SARANSH brings schools, teachers and parents closer, so that they can monitor the progress of students and help them improve their performance. It helps schools to compare their performance vis-à-vis all CBSE schools at various levels and also helps parents to compare their ward's performance within school State, Region and National level. It is currently available for Standards IX – XII and provides a comprehensive overview of Standard X performance since 2007 and Standard XII performance since 2009, till the current academic session.
- KVS initiatives:- ICT Skills are imparted in all the Kendriya Vidyalayas to the students of classes III to XII. 12011 e-Classrooms (9711 e-Classrooms established and 2300 under process) have been established in Kendriya Vidyalayas throughout the country for facilitating effective learning through digital mode. Besides, 276 Digital Language Labs and 1137 Computer labs have been established in 276 KVs across the Country. Further, a pilot project e-Prajna has been started for providing tablets pre-loaded with e-content in Maths

and Science. 5076 Touch Tablets have been distributed among Class VIII Students and teachers for classroom transactions in Maths and Science.

Operation Digital Board:- An initiative has been taken by Government of India to provide interactive digital boards to nearly 15 lakh classrooms across the country for 9th standard to post graduate level, where they can receive lectures from best teachers/professors and access quality e-content, in order to enhance overall learning process and experience of the students.

Women Entrepreneurship

Why it is in News?

- Ministry of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSME) is empowering women entrepreneurs through its different schemes.
- 1.38 lakh projects have been set up by the women entrepreneurs under Prime Minister's Employment Generation Programme (PMEGP) Scheme since inception and upto 23.01.2019.
- The projects set up by women entrepreneurs are about 30% of total projects set up under PMEGP.

About Prime Minister Employment Generation Programmes:

- PMEGP, a major credit-linked subsidy scheme since 2008-09, **helps set up micro enterprises and to generate employment in rural and urban areas of the country. The maximum cost of the project under PMEGP scheme is Rs.25.00 lakhs for manufacturing sector units and Rs.10.00 lakhs for units under service sector.**
- Under the scheme, **women entrepreneurs are covered under Special Category and are entitled to 25% and 35% subsidies for the project set up in urban and rural areas respectively.**
- **For women beneficiaries, own contribution is only 5% of the project cost while for general category it is 10%.**
- **PMEGP is implemented through Khadi and Village Industries Commission (KVIC).**

Sentinelese Tribe

Why it is in News?

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- American fundamentalist Christian missionary John Allen Chau was killed in November by Sentinelese Tribe when he illegally went to the North Sentinel Island in the Andamans to convert them.
- US informed recently that they are not seeking action against Sentinelese tribe for killing missionary

About Sentinelese Tribe:

- The **Sentinelese**, also known as the **Sentineli** and the **North Sentinel Islanders**, are an indigenous people who inhabit North Sentinel Island in the Bay of Bengal in India and are considered one of the world's last uncontacted peoples.
- Designated a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group In 1956, the Government of India declared North Sentinel Island a tribal reserve and prohibited travel within 3 miles (4.8 km) of the island. Even photography is strictly prohibited.
- There is significant uncertainty as to the group's size, with estimates ranging between 15 and 500 individuals, with most estimates ranging between 50 and 200.

Shehri Samridhi Utsav

Why it is in news?

- The Union Ministry of Housing & Urban Affairs (MoHUA) in February 2019 launched the Shehri Samridhi Utsav, an initiative that aims to extend the outreach of Deendayal Antyodaya Mission – National Urban Livelihoods Mission (DAY-NULM) to the most vulnerable.
- The event will facilitate access of Self-Help Group (SHG) members to the other government schemes.

About Shehri Samridhi Scheme:

- The Day one of Shehri Samridhi Utsav began with a series of rallies led by women's' SHGs across the country. These rallies spread awareness about DAY-NULM in urban poor communities.
- Job melas and fairs were organised by many states to market the products made by women micro-entrepreneurs.
- Through Shehri Samridhi Utsav, the SHG members across cities are being linked to government schemes such as Swachhh Bharat Mission (Urban), Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (Urban), Ujjwala Yojana, Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana, Pradhan Mantri Suraksha Bima Yojana, Pradhan

Mantri Jeevan Jyoti Yojana and National Nutrition Mission.

- A major highlight of Shehri Samridhi Utsav is the National Exhibition cum sale of SHG products and National Street Food Festival that will be organised in New Delhi.
- Over 100 stalls are being set up in Central Delhi with various handlooms, handicrafts, snacks and other local products made by 200 Self Help Groups representing 23 states.

About Deen Dayal Antyodaya Yojana-National Urban Livelihood Mission:

- The Deen Dayal Antyodaya Yojana - National Urban Livelihoods Mission extends coverage to all the 4041 statutory cities and towns, thereby covering almost the entire urban population.
- The mission aims to provide the shelter equipped with essential services to the urban homeless in a phased manner to reduce poverty and vulnerability of the urban poor households.
- The scheme addresses the livelihood concern of the urban street vendors by facilitating with suitable space, institutional credit, and social security and skills to the urban street vendor for accessing emerging market opportunities.
- The core belief of National Urban Livelihoods Mission is that the poor are entrepreneurial and have innate desire to come out of poverty.
- The challenge is to unleash their capabilities to generate meaningful and sustainable livelihoods.
- NULM believes that any livelihood promotion programme can be scaled up in a time bound manner only if driven by the poor and their institutions.

Rashtriya Vayoshri Yojana

About Rashtriya Vayoshri Yojana:

- The Central Government launched new Central Sector Scheme to be put in place to provide Physical aids and Assisted Living Devices for such senior citizens suffering from age related disabilities/ infirmities, who belong to BPL category.
- The proposal for formulation of a Scheme for providing Physical Aids and Assisted-Living Devices for Senior Citizens belonging to BPL Category was announced in the Budget 2015-16.

- Pursuant to this, the **“Rashtriya Vayoshri Yojana”** has been formulated.
- The Scheme aims at providing Senior Citizens, belonging to BPL category and suffering from any of the age related disability/infirmity viz. Low vision, Hearing impairment, Loss of teeth and Locomotor disability, with such assisted-living devices which can restore near normalcy in their bodily functions, overcoming the disability/infirmity manifested.
- The assistive devices shall be of high quality and conforming to the standards laid down by the Bureau of Indian Standards, wherever applicable.
- This is a Central Sector Scheme, fully funded by the Central Government. The expenditure for implementation of the scheme will be met from the "Senior Citizens' Welfare Fund".
- Under the Scheme, the following Aids and Assisted-Living Devices will be provided to eligible elderly beneficiary senior citizens, depending upon their physical impairment :-
- Walking sticks, Elbow crutches, Walkers / Crutches, Tripods / Quadpods, Hearing Aids, Wheelchair, Artificial Dentures, Spectacles.

Salient features of the Scheme:

- Free of cost distribution of the devices, commensurate with the extent of disability/infirmity that is manifested among the eligible senior citizens.
- In case of multiple disabilities/infirmities manifested in the same person, the assistive devices will be given in respect of each disability/impairment.
- The devices will help the Senior Citizens to overcome their age related physical impairment and to lead a dignified and productive life with minimal dependence on care givers or other members of the family.
- The Scheme will be implemented through the sole implementing agency, 'Artificial Limbs Manufacturing Corporation (ALIMCO)', (a PSU under the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment).
- ALIMCO will undertake one year free maintenance of the aids & assisted living devices.
- Beneficiaries in each district will be identified by the State Governments/UT

Administrations through a Committee chaired by the Deputy Commissioner/District Collector.

- As far as possible, 30% of the beneficiaries in each district shall be women.
- The State Government/UT Administration/District Level Committee can also utilize the data of BPL beneficiaries receiving Old Age Pension under the NSAP or any other Scheme of the State/UT for identification of senior citizens belonging to BPL category.
- The devices will be distributed in Camp mode.

Rashtriya Kamdhenu Aayog

Why it is in news?

- The Union Cabinet chaired by the Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi has approved the proposal for establishment of **Rashtriya Kamdhenu Aayog** for Conservation protection and development of cows and their progeny.

About Rashtriya Kamdhenu Aayog:

- The setting up of Rashtriya Kamdhenu Aayog will lead to conservation, protection and development of cattle population in the country including development and conservation of indigenous breeds.
- It will result in increased growth of livestock sector which is more inclusive, benefitting women, and small and marginal farmers.
- The Rashtriya Kamdhenu Aayog will work in collaboration with Veterinary, Animal Sciences or Agriculture University or departments or organizations of the Central/State Government engaged in the task of research in the field of breeding and rearing of cow, organic manure, biogas etc.
- The creation of Rashtriya Kamdhenu Aayog for the conservation, protection and development of cows and their progeny **will provide the policy framework and direction to the cow conservation and development programmes in the country and for ensuring proper implementation of laws with respect to the welfare of cows.**

Film Piracy, Copyright infringement

Why it is in News?

- The Union Cabinet has approved the proposal of Ministry of Information and

Officers IAS Academy, Chennai Broadcasting for introducing the Cinematograph Amendment Bill, 2019 to amend to the Cinematograph Act, 1952.

- The Bill aims to tackle Films piracy by including the penal provisions for unauthorized camcording and duplication of films.

About proposed Amendments:

- In order to tackle the menace of film piracy, the Amendments provide for:
- Insertion of new Section 6AA for prohibition of unauthorized recording
- *The following section shall be inserted after Section 6A of the Cinematograph Act, 1952.*
- *6AA: "Notwithstanding any law for the time being in force, no person shall without the written authorization of the author be permitted to use any audio visual recording device to knowingly make or transmit or attempt to make or transmit or abet the making or transmission of a copy of a film or a part thereof."*
- **The expression author shall have the same meaning as assigned to it in the clause (d) of section 2 of the Copyright act of 1957.*
- Amendment in Section 7 to introduce Penal Provisions for violating provisions of section 6AA: In section 7 of the principal act, after subsection 1 the following subsection (1A) shall be inserted:
- *"If any person contravenes the provisions of section 6AA, he shall be punishable with an imprisonment for a term which may extend to 3 years or with fine which may extend to 10 lakh rupees or with both."*
- The proposed amendments would increase Industry revenues, boost job creation, fulfil important objectives of India's National IP policy and will give relief against piracy and infringing content online.

Monitoring of quality of education

Why it is in news?

- The Minister of State (HRD), Dr. Satya Pal Singh in a written reply to a Rajya Sabha question in the Parliament Session.

Different Mechanisms for monitoring quality of education:

- The Central Government has developed the following mechanism for the monitoring of quality of education in Government schools:
- **A web portal called ShaGun**(from the words Shaala and Gunvatta) which has two

parts i.e., one is a Repository of good practices, photographs, videos, studies, newspaper articles etc on elementary education, State /UT wise has been developed. Its purpose is to showcase success stories and also to provide a platform for all stakeholders to learn from each other, and instill a positive competitive spirit among all the States and UTs.

- The second part is the online monitoring module of Shagun which measures state-level performance and progress against key educational indicators which enables the Government of India and the State and UT Departments of education to conduct real-time assessments which normal paper-based monitoring mechanisms did not allow. **Through Shagun, the data collection and reporting processes have been simplified; resulting in a totally transparent and efficient system.**
- In addition, **an online Project Monitoring System (PMS) has been developed to monitor physical and financial progress of implementation of various components under Samagra Shiksha including appraisal of Annual Plans and issuing of sanctions etc.**
- In order to increase focus on quality of elementary education, the Central rules to the RTE Act, 2009 have been amended on 20th February, 2017 to include reference on class-wise, subject-wise Learning Outcomes. The Learning Outcomes for each class in Languages (Hindi, English and Urdu), Mathematics, Environmental Studies, Science and Social Science up to the elementary stage have, accordingly, been finalized and shared with all States and UTs. Learning
- Outcomes have been translated in different languages and serve as a benchmark for student's capabilities to be achieved in each subject & class.
- **National Achievement Surveys are carried out by National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT) to assess learning achievement of children in Classes – III, V, VIII, and X.** The National Achievement Survey (NAS) 2017 was held on 13th November for assessing the competencies of children at the grade levels III, V and VIII covering 22

lakh students from 1.10 lakh schools in all 36 states and UTs.

- NAS (2017) was administered with districts as the unit of reporting in different subject areas such as languages, mathematics, EVS/Science and Social Sciences in the Government and Government aided schools. The competency based test was based on the Learning Outcomes which were recently incorporated in the Central Rules for RTE Act by the Government of India.
- The National Achievement Survey for students of Class X was similarly, held on 5th February 2018, with a district level sampling framework covering nearly 15.5 lakh students using multiple test booklets in Mathematics, Modern Indian Languages, English, Sciences and Social Sciences. NAS district report cards have been shared with the States and UTs to help in identifying gaps at the district level. Subsequently, a framework of intervention has been developed and shared with States to improve the quality of learning in the schools.
- Government of India has decided to participate in **the Programme for International Students Assessment (PISA) to be conducted by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in 2021.**
- **PISA is a competency based assessment which unlike content-based assessment, measures the extent to which students have** acquired key competencies that are essential for full participation in modern societies. Learnings from participation in PISA help to introduce competency based examination reforms in the school system and help move away from rote learning. The CBSE and NCERT are part of the process and activities leading to the actual test.
- Shaala Siddhi is a School Standards and Evaluation Framework, developed by the National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration (NIEPA), which enables the schools to self evaluate based on seven key domains.
- The NCERT has developed a framework for Performance Indicators for Elementary School Teachers (PINDICS) and shared with the states. PINDICS is a framework for assessing teacher performance and

providing constructive feedback for further improvement.

Further, Central Government has taken the following initiatives for improving quality of education:

(i) Section 23(2) of the RTE Act has been amended to extend the period for training of untrained in-service elementary teachers to 31st March, 2019. As per above amendment, all untrained in-service teachers working in Government, Government aided, and Private un-aided schools should acquire minimum qualification as laid down by an academic authority, authorized by the Central Government, by 31st March, 2019. The National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS) has been entrusted to conduct this training through ODL (Open Distance Learning) mode. The online D.El.Ed. course has started from 3rd October, 2017. More than 13 Lakh teachers have joined these courses.

(ii) The Department of School Education and Literacy has launched an Integrated Scheme for School Education-Samagra Shiksha, subsuming three erstwhile Centrally Sponsored Schemes of Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA) and Teacher Education (TE). With effect from 1st April, 2018. The new integrated scheme envisages school education as a continuum from pre-school to senior secondary level and aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education at all levels. The main objectives of the scheme are to provide quality education, enhancing learning outcomes of students, bridging social and gender gaps in school education, ensuring requisite infrastructure in schools, support to states in the implementation of RTE Act, 2009 and strengthening of teacher education institutions.

(iii) The Government has also launched Rashtriya Aavishkar Abhiyan (RAA) programme on 09.07.2015, to motivate and engage children of the age group from 6-18 years in Science, Mathematics and Technology through observation, experimentation, inference drawing, model building, etc. both through inside and outside classroom activities. The Central

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Government, supports States and UTs on early grade reading, writing & comprehension, and early Mathematics programmes through a sub-programme namely 'Padhe Bharat Badhe Bharat' (PBBB) in foundational years of schooling.

(iv) e PATHSHALA: a single point repository of e resources containing NCERT textbooks and various other learning resources has been developed for showcasing and disseminating all educational resources including textbooks, audio, video, periodicals, and a variety of other print and non-print materials.

(v) MHRD, has launched a Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) platform popularly known as SWAYAM (Study Webs of Active learning for Young Aspiring Minds) on 9th July, 2017. The portal is offering various online courses for school education and higher education. NCERT has been developing course modules for Massive Open and Online Course (MOOCs) for school education system in 12 subject areas (Accountancy, business studies, biology, chemistry, economic, history, geography, mathematics, physics, political science, psychology and sociology) for classes IX-XII. Twelve (12) courses and twenty one (21) courses have been completed in the first cycle and second cycle (completed on 30 Nov. 2018) on SWAYAM platform (<https://swayam.gov.in/>) respectively. Nearly 22,000 students and 30,000 students were registered in the first cycle and second cycle respectively.

(vi) A programme for utilization of satellite communication technologies for transmission of educational e-contents through 32 National Channels i.e. SWAYAM PRABHA DTH-TV has been launched. Central Institute of Educational Technology (CIET)-NCERT is the national coordinator for one DTH TV channel i.e., Kishore Manch (#31) and has started feeding a 24x7 educational TV channel w.e.f. 09 July, 2018. Besides, NIOS is running 5 channels for teachers, for Secondary and Sr. Secondary levels and for sign language.

(vii) Performance Grading Index (PGI) - In order to objectively evaluate the performance of the school education system in the States/UTs, MHRD has

designed a 70 indicators based matrix to grade the States/UTs. The indicators have been chosen after detailed stakeholder consultation and the information on these indicators is drawn from the inputs provided by the respective States/UTs. This grading system will assist the States and UTs to identify the gap and design appropriate interventions to bridge them.

(viii) **Unified District Information System for Education Plus (UDISE +)** - Timely and accurate data is the basis of sound and effective planning and decision making. Towards this end, the establishment of a well-functioning and sustainable Educational Management Information System is of utmost importance today. Therefore from 2018-19, it has been decided to launch the UDISE+ application, so that it becomes an effective tool for decision making. The entire system will be online and will gradually move towards collecting real time data.

(ix) In order to provide supplementary learning material for students and for upgrading the skills of teachers, MHRD has **developed a dedicated Digital Infrastructure for Knowledge Sharing (DIKSHA) platform**. The high quality e-learning material both for students and teachers are being uploaded by Ministry and States/UTs on this portal. This is expected to substantially augment the knowledge base of the students and technical skills of teachers at no additional cost.

Seaplane Services

Why it is in News?

- Under government's flagship **regional connectivity scheme (UDAN)**, **seaplane and helicopter services would be started at six water aerodromes**, Minister of State for Shipping, Pon Radhakrishnan responded to a question in Lok Sabha in the Parliament Session.

Proposed sites:

- The proposed water aerodrome sites are at **Guwahati riverfront, Nagarjuna Sagar, Sabarmati riverfront, Shatrunjay Dam, Statue of Unity (Sardar Sarovar Dam) and Umrangso Reservoir.**

- The minister also clarified that there is no proposal so far to start seaplane and helicopter operations on 1,680 km length of Ganga river for passenger transport.

'Teli' Caste in ST list

Why it is in News?

- The State Government of Jharkhand has sent a proposal to Centre for inclusion of Teli Caste in Scheduled Tribes.
- However, **The Government of India on 15.6.1999 (further amended on 25.6.2002) has laid down the modalities for deciding the claims for inclusion in, exclusion from and other modifications in Orders specifying Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes lists.**
- As per the modalities, only those proposals which have been recommended and justified by the concerned State Government / UT Administration and concurred with by Registrar General of India (RGI) and National Commission for Scheduled Tribes (NCST) are to be considered and legislation amended.
- Government of Jharkhand has sent the proposal for inclusion of Kolh (Teli) community in Scheduled Tribes list of Jharkhand.
- However, the ethnographic report in support of the proposal was not sent by Government of Jharkhand.**
- As per extant modalities, recommendation of State Government with ethnographic report in support of the proposal is prerequisite.
- In absence of ethnographic report inclusion in ST list is put on hold.

About Teli Caste:

- Teli is a caste traditionally occupied in the pressing of oil in India, Nepal and Pakistan. Members may be either Hindu or Muslim; Muslim Teli are called Roshandaar or Teli Malik.
- The Jewish community of Maharashtra (called Bene Israel) was also known to be a sub-group in the Teli caste called Shanivar Teli meaning Saturday oil pressers for their Jewish custom of abstention from work on Shabbat.

Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups

Why it is in News?

- Minister Shri Jaswantsinh Bhabhor, Minister of State for Tribal Affairs responded on written question of Social Security Benefits in Rajya Sabha.

Social Security Benefits to Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups

- A separate scheme namely **“Development of Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs)”** is being administered by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs for their welfare.
- The scheme is flexible as it enables **the States to focus on areas that they consider is relevant to PVTGs and their socio-cultural environment.**
- **It includes sectors such as education, housing, land distribution, land development, agricultural development, animal husbandry, construction of link roads, installation of non-conventional sources of energy for lighting purpose, social security or any other innovative activity meant for the comprehensive socio-economic development of PVTG’s.**
- The funds are released to States/UT in accordance with the annual programme proposed for a particular financial year.
- The funds are sanctioned to the State Government on submitting their annual Conservation-cum-Development (CCD) Plan which is considered for appraisal and approval by a Project Appraisal Committee (PAC) in the Ministry.
- **The implementation of the scheme is done by the respective State Governments .**

Kashmiri Outfit Banned

Why it is in News?

- The Ministry of Home Affairs extended by **five more years the ban on the Students Islamic Movement of India (SIMI) and banned another Kashmiri Outfit.**
- **The Union Home Ministry has also banned the Tehreek-ul-Mujahideen (TuM), a Jammu and Kashmir based terrorist outfit that is involved in a series of terror acts.**
- The home ministry in a notification said that the central government believes that the TuM is involved in terrorism as it has committed and participated in various terror acts in India and its members are

Officers IAS Academy, Chennai receiving financial as well as logistic support from their handlers based abroad.

- The notification reportedly said that the TuM, which came into existence in 1990 with the aim of “liberation of Kashmir”, is actively pursuing the same by ways of acts of terror.
- In a notification issued , the Ministry also said the SIMI was declared an “unlawful association” under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967.
- It said that if the unlawful activities of the SIMI were not curbed and controlled immediately, it would take the opportunity to “continue its subversive activities and re-organise its activists who are still absconding; disrupt the secular fabric of the country by polluting the minds of the people by creating communal disharmony; propagate anti-national sentiments; escalate secessionism by supporting militancy; and undertake activities prejudicial to the integrity and security of the country.”
- The notification said it was necessary to declare the SIMI an unlawful association with immediate effect in exercise of the powers from sub-sections (1) and (3) of Section 3 of the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act.
- SIMI was first banned in 2001.

About SIMI:

- The Students' Islamic Movement of India (abbreviated SIMI) is a banned Islamist organisation that was formed in Aligarh, Uttar Pradesh, in April 1977.
- The stated mission of SIMI is the "liberation of India" from Western materialistic cultural influence and to convert its Muslim society to live according to the Muslim code of conduct.
- The Indian government describes it as a terrorist organisation, and banned it in 2001, shortly after the 9/11 attacks.
- The ban was lifted in August 2008 by a special tribunal, but was reinstated by K.G. Balakrishnan, then Chief Justice, on 6 August 2008 on national security grounds.

Kerala – 1st State to set up Drug Price Monitor

Why it is in News?

- Kerala has become the first State to set up a **Price Monitoring and Research Unit (PMRU)** to track violation of prices of essential drugs

and medical devices under the Drugs Price Control Order (DPCO).

Composition

- PMRU will be registered as a society with following composition:
- State Health Secretary (Chairman)
- Drugs Controller (Member secretary)
- State government representative (Member)
- Representatives of private pharmaceutical companies (Members)
- Representative from consumer rights protection fora (Member)
- The society would also have an executive committee headed by the Drugs Controller.

Background

- This comes more than five years after the National Pharmaceutical Pricing Authority (NPPA) proposed such a system for the States and the Union Territories.
- The suggestion to set up PMRUs was made against the backdrop of the lack of a field-level link between the NPPA and the State Drugs Controllers and State Drug Inspectors to monitor drug prices.

Objective

- The PMRU will work to develop synergy between the central and state authorities.
- It will provide technical help to the State Drug Controllers and the NPPA to monitor notified prices of medicines.
- Detect violation of the provisions of the DPCO.
- Look at price compliance.
- To collect test samples of medicines, and collect and compile market-based data of scheduled as well as non-scheduled formulations.

About National Pharmaceuticals Pricing Authority:

- NPPA is an organization under Department of Pharmaceuticals, Ministry of Chemicals and Fertilizers which was set up in 1997 to revise the prices of controlled bulk drugs and formulations and to enforce prices and availability of the medicines in the country, under the Drugs (Prices Control) Order (DPCO), 1995.
- The prices are now fixed/ revised under Drugs (Prices Control) Order (DPCO), 2013.
- It also monitors the prices of decontrolled drugs in order to keep them at reasonable levels.

PM Kisan scheme

Why it is in News?

- Centre has made it mandatory for Farmers who wish to avail themselves of benefits under PM-KISAN, the new income support scheme announced in the Union Budget,

Officers IAS Academy, Chennai must have Aadhaar identification to get the money from the second instalment, which would be paid by July 2019.

- However, this would not be compulsory for the first instalment expected to be disbursed by March 31.

About PM KISAN Scheme:

- Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi is an initiative by Government of India in which 120 million small and marginal Indian farmers who have less than 2 hectares (4.9 acres) of landholding will get upto ₹6,000 (US\$83) per year as minimum income support.
- The scheme was announced during the 2019 Interim Union Budget of India on 1 February 2019. The scheme will cost ₹75,000 crore (US\$10 billion) per annum and will come in effect from December 2018.
- **INR 6,000 per year will be paid to each eligible farmer in three instalments and will be deposited directly to their bank accounts.**

Only 50% of PAN linked to Aadhaar

Why it is in News?

- Supreme Court ruled that the linking of PAN with Aadhaar is mandatory to file income tax returns from April 1, 2019 onward, it is mandatory for even those who do not need to file returns.
- It is found that as of now only 50% of PAN is linked to Aadhar.
- According to Section 139AA of the Income Tax Act, not only is PAN mandatory for filing income tax returns but it is also mandatory to link Aadhaar while applying for PAN card.
- In case of failure to link the Aadhaar number, the permanent account number shall be deemed to be invalid.
- The reason behind mandatory provision is to avoid tax evasion because number of PAN card holders far exceeds the number of people filing income tax returns. Income tax returns filed stands at just about 16% of the total number of PANs allotted.
- One major problem arising out of the mandatory linking of the two IDs is that many people in South India have name mismatch. Many people have abbreviations in their names in Aadhaar, whereas the PAN does not allow abbreviations.

Economy

International Financial Services Centres Authority Bill, 2019

Why in news?

- The Union Cabinet chaired by the Prime Minister Narendra Modi has approved the establishment of a unified authority for regulating all financial services in International Financial Services Centres (IFSCs) in India through International Financial Services Centres Authority Bill, 2019.

Main features of the Bill:

- Management of the Authority: The Authority shall consist of a Chairperson, one Member each to be nominated by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), the Securities Exchange Board of India (SEBI), the Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority of India (IRDAI) and the Pension Fund Regulatory and Development Authority (PFRDA), two members to be dominated by the Central Government and two other whole-time or full-time or part-time members.

Functions of the Authority:

- Regulate all such financial services, financial products and FIs in an IFSC which has already been permitted by the Financial Sector Regulators for IFSCs.
- Regulate such other financial products, financial services or FIs as may be notified by the Central Government from time to time.
- Recommend to the Central Government such other financial products, financial services and financial institutions which may be permitted in the IFSCs.
- Powers of the Authority: All powers exercisable by the respective financial sector regulatory (viz. RBI, SEBI, IRDAI, and PFRDA etc.) under the respective Acts shall be solely exercised by the Authority in the IFSCs in so far as the regulation of financial products, financial services and FIs that are permitted in the IFSC are concerned.

What is an IFSC?

- An IFSC enables bringing back the financial services and transactions that are currently carried out in offshore financial centers by Indian corporate entities and overseas branches / subsidiaries of financial institutions (FIs) to India by offering

business and regulatory environment that is comparable to other leading international financial centers in the world like London and Singapore.

- It would provide Indian corporates easier access to global financial markets. IFSC would also compliment and promote further development of financial markets in India.

Draft National Logistics Policy

Why in news?

- Logistics Division in the Department of Commerce, Ministry of Commerce and Industry has invited comments and suggestions on the Draft National Logistics Policy from the stakeholders in the logistics sector and from the public on various aspects of the policy.

Vision of the draft:

- The Centre has come up with a draft national logistics policy to create a national logistics e-marketplace as a one-stop marketplace for exporters and importers, set up a separate fund for start-ups in the logistics sector, and to double employment in the sector.
- The commerce ministry has proposed several measures such as setting up a separate fund, single-window e-marketplace and law to define the role of various stakeholders, as part of the draft national logistics policy was released.
- The policy aimed at integrating and optimising various elements of a logistics value chain, to ensure seamless, multi-modal growth of an efficient logistics sector in the country. The ministry has sought views of stakeholders by February 19.

Sale of Damaged Grains

FCI

- The Nodal Agency in Food Management is Food Corporation of India.
- It is the authority which is responsible to procure, store and distribute the food grains.
- FCI is a statutory body established through Food Corporation Act 1964.
- It also helps in maintaining satisfactory level of buffer stocks of food grains to ensure National Food Security.

Damaged grains

- Usually the grains collected are stored in covered godowns by FCI.
- The food grains thus stored are damaged due to various natural and artificial reasons.
- Damaged food grains available with FCI are sold through Tender Sale/Auction to only “Registered Parties” registered with FCI.
- The purchased damaged food grains must be only used for the purpose of manufacturing feed stocks.

Why in news?

- The above information was given by the Minister of State for Consumer Affairs, Food & Public Distribution, Shri C.R. Chaudhary in Lok Sabha.

Land Pooling

Overview

- Under land pooling system, group of land-owners pool their land and hand it over to government agency for development of infrastructure projects.
- After the development of land, the agency redistributes the land after deducting some portion as compensation towards infrastructure costs.
- This is done to develop potential infrastructure to reduce the load on the existing congested areas.

Delhi model

- Delhi has its own land pooling project called as Delhi Land Pooling (DLP) policy by Delhi Development Authority (DDA).
- The system will replace the process of land acquisition, wherein the government acquired land by giving a fixed compensation.
- With complaints of low compensation and forceful acquisition, land acquisition became unpopular.
- Parts of Developed land will be sold by the government to recover the cost of developing infrastructure and public spaces.
- The entire land pooling process will be done through single window clearance system by using web portal.

Why in news?

- Ministry of Housing and Urban Poverty Alleviation launched DDA Web Portal for Land Pooling Policy in Delhi.

Banning of Unregulated Deposit Schemes Bill, 2018

About

- The proposed Bill aims to provide a comprehensive legislation to tackle illicit deposit schemes by completely prohibiting such activities.
- Nine regulators including the RBI, SEBI, the Ministry of Corporate Affairs, and the State governments regulate financial activities.
- The amendments introduced based on the recommendations of the Standing Committee on Finance strengthen its objective to effectively tackle the illegal deposit-taking activities in the country.
- The worst victims of these schemes are the poor and the financially illiterate, and the operations of such schemes are often spread over many States.

Bill

- According to the Bill, all deposit-taking schemes are required to be registered with the relevant regulator, failing which the “Deposit Takers” will be considered “unregulated” and hence be banned
- A ‘Competent Authority’ will be appointed which has the powers similar to a civil court, including powers to attach properties of the deposit takers
- It also empowers police to search and seize any property believed to be connected with an offence under the Bill, with or without a warrant
- The Bill enables the creation of an online central database, for collection and sharing of information on deposit-taking activities in the country
- “Deposit Takers” include all possible entities (including individuals) receiving deposits, except specific entities such as those incorporated by legislation.
- “Deposit” is defined in such a manner that deposit takers are restricted from hiding public deposits as receipts, and at the same time not to curb or hinder acceptance of money by an establishment in the ordinary course of its business.

Why in news?

- Cabinet approves Proposal for Official Amendments to the Banning of Unregulated Deposit Schemes Bill, 2018.

RBI cuts repo rate

About MPC

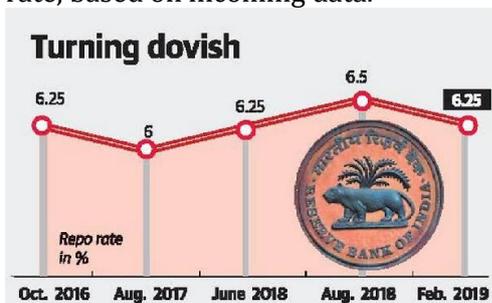
- The Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) is a committee of the RBI, headed by its Governor, which is entrusted with the task of fixing the benchmark policy interest rate (repo rate) to contain inflation within the specified target level.
- The MPC has six members
 - RBI Governor (Chairperson), RBI Deputy Governor in charge of monetary policy, one official nominated by the RBI Board and remaining 3 members would represent the Government.
- The MPC takes decisions based on majority vote. In case of a tie, the RBI governor will have the second or casting vote. The decision of the Committee would be binding on the RBI.

What is Repo rate?

- Repo rate is the rate of interest which is applied by RBI to commercial banks when the latter borrows from RBI.
- Repo rate is used to control inflation. In the event of raising inflation, RBI increase repo rate which will act as a disincentive for banks to borrow from the central bank. This ultimately reduces the money supply in the economy and thus helps in arresting inflation.
- Similarly, if it wants to make it cheaper for banks to borrow money it reduces the repo rate.

Why in News?

- The MPC cut the policy repo rate by 25 bps (100 bps=1%) to 6.25% in a bid to revive economic growth as it projected retail inflation to remain below its target of 4% for the next 12 months. The rate reduction was the first since August 2017.
- The RBI also changed the policy stance to 'neutral' from 'calibrated tightening,' which indicates that the central bank remains ready to increase or decrease the policy rate, based on incoming data.



Das to meet bank CEOs to discuss passing on rate cut to customers

Officers IAS Academy, Chennai

- The RBI Governor Shaktikanta Das will soon meet chief executives of public sector banks to discuss, among other things, the issue of monetary policy transmission.
- Banks have always been reluctant to reduce lending rates whenever there is a rate cut by the RBI. Banks have been increasing lending rates since March 2018.
- While the RBI has proposed that banks should move to an external benchmark (such as repo rate, the 91-day T-bill yield; the 182-day T-bill yield) for loan pricing from April 1, lenders have been opposing the move.

'Members' fiduciary responsibility with RBI'

About Central Board of RBI

- RBI's business is overseen by the Central Board of Directors. It delegates the functions to its committees and sub-committees. Central Board of Directors holds minimum 6 meetings every year. Out of which, at least 1 meeting every quarter is held.
- The RBI board is not involved in monetary policy making or any particular policy-related issues, but provides a broader vision to the central bank.
- At present, the RBI has 18 board members including the governor and the four deputy governors.
- There are 11 members, who are experts in their field, nominated by the government, besides two government officials — the Secretary of Economic Affairs and Secretary of Financial Services.

Why in News?

- The RBI Governor Shaktikanta Das said that even if the government has nominated members to the central board, the members' fiduciary responsibility lies with the central bank.
- Mr. Das, who took charge in December, had made the remark while interacting with other board members during the farewell of his predecessor Urjit Patel.
- The governor's comment assumes significance as Dr. Patel resigned after reportedly having differences with the government over various issues.

Kisan Credit Cards

About KCC

- Kisan Credit Card (KCC) is a credit scheme to enable farmers in having quick and timely access to affordable credit.
- The scheme was launched by the NABARD and Reserve Bank of India.
- The scheme aims to reduce farmers' dependency on informal banks for credit, which is often lucrative yet very expensive. The card is offered by cooperative banks, regional rural banks, and public sector banks.

Why in News?

- The Government of India has decided to launch a campaign with immediate effect and accorded the highest priority to saturate farmers for financial inclusion under KCC.
- Currently, there are around 6.95 crore active KCCs. However, there are still a large number of farmers who do not have access to institutional credit either because they have not been issued a KCC or the KCC issued earlier inactive due to various reasons.
- The reasons for this gap in coverage include levy of various charges related to processing/ documentation, cumbersome procedure adopted by certain banks for sanctioning the credit limits and perceived difficulty in completing the required documentation.
- The new campaign is targeted to address these issues.

Shekatkar Committee Report

What's in the news?

- The Committee of Experts (CoE) constituted by the Ministry of Defence under the chairmanship of Lt. Gen (Retd) DB Shekatkar to recommend measures to enhance combat capability and rebalance defence expenditure of the armed forces, submitted its report in December 2016.
- Union Minister of State, Ministry of Defence, Subhash Bhamre has informed that the report was taken up by the Ministry to frame key action points and roadmap for implementation. Measures as recommended by the Committee and taken up for implementation include:
 - Restructuring of repair echelons in the Army to include Base Workshops, Advance Base Workshops and Static / Station Workshops in the field Army.

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- Better utilization of Supply and Transportation echelons and Animal Transport units.
- Closure of Military Farms and Army Postal Establishments in peace locations.
- Enhancement in standards for recruitment of clerical staff and drivers in the Army.
- Improving the efficiency of the National Cadet Corps.

Promoting IPR in Defence

What's in the news?

- In Order to create a structured mechanism to facilitate and encourage innovative activities with a primary objective to Boost Intellectual Property culture, an **Intellectual Property Rights Facilitation (IPF) Cell** has been established under the Department of Defence Production in 2018.
- As part of this initiative, Department of Defence Production has launched the "**Mission Raksha Gyan Shakti**" in November, 2018 to encourage Defence Public Sector Undertakings (DPSUs) and Ordnance Factory Board to boost "IPR culture" in their respective organization to promote self-reliance in defence sector.
- These initiatives undertaken by DPSUs and Ordnance Factory Board are helping in indigenization of existing system to bring down import contents thereby resulting in cost savings.

Fiscal deficit target breached

What's in the news?

- According to the latest data from the Controller General of Accounts (CGA), the fiscal deficit for the period April-December 2018 has touched 112.4% (Rs 7.01 lakh crore) of the budget target of Rs 6.24 lakh crore for the financial year 2018-19.

(Fiscal deficit = Total Expenditure – Total Receipts except borrowings)

- The government's revenue receipts stood at Rs 10.84 lakh crore in the April-December period, which works out to 62.8% of the Rs 17.25 lakh crore budgeted for the year.
- On the expenditure side, data shows that the total expenditure of the government at the end of December stood at Rs 18.32 lakh crore.

crore, which is 75% of the budget estimate and 74.5% of the revised estimate.

Govt may miss revenue receipts target

- The situation, however, is marginally better than last year, where the fiscal deficit at the end of December 2017 was 113.6% of that year's budget estimate. The fiscal deficit came in at 3.5% for 2017-18 against a target of 3.2%.
- In the Interim Budget, the government said it would be missing its fiscal deficit target of 3.3% for this year as well. The fiscal deficit is expected to come in at 3.4%.
- Economists said that the pressure is more visible on the revenue side rather than on the expenditure side. In order to meet the revised target for FY19, monthly revenue receipts in the last three months of the financial year would have to be 1.8 times the average monthly collections in the first nine months, which appear difficult to achieve.

Govt. subsidy spend on the rise

What's in the news?

- Rising LPG prices and higher subscribers have resulted in the government's subsidy expenditure over the last two years reversing a declining trend established in the previous six years.
- According to the Budget estimate for 2019-20, the government's total expenditure on subsidies is expected to make up 9.83% of its total expenditure overall in 2019-20, up from the 9.65% in the revised estimate for 2018-19.
- It is in contrast with the consistent annual fall from 18.2% in 2012-13 to 8.15% in 2017-18.

Why this rise?

- The reason for this reversal is the sharp rise in food and petroleum subsidies over the last two budgets of 2018-19 and 2019-20. Food subsidies increased to Rs 1,71,298 crore in 2018-19, up a whopping 70.8% over its allocation in the previous year.

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Similarly, petroleum subsidies have been budgeted to increase a significant 50.9% in 2019-20 to Rs 37,478 crore.

- While the increase in the food subsidy allocation is a reflection of the increase in the MSP hiked across the board, the reason behind the increase in the petroleum subsidy has to do in particular with the government's focus on LPG as a source of cleaner cooking fuel.
- The government has two major schemes in the LPG sector. **PAHAL scheme**, the first, involves direct cash transfers to LPG consumers for 12 numbers of 14.2 kg cylinders per year. The second scheme, the **Ujjwala Yojana**, seeks to give free LPG connections to poor households.
- Economists warned that if the trend of rising subsidy prices continues into the future, then it could certainly be a matter of concern when it comes to the government's fiscal consolidation plans.

Panel on regional transport planes

What's in the news?

- The government has set up a committee for the development of regional transport aircraft for commercial use in the country. This is part of the road map being prepared by the government for domestic manufacturing of aircraft.
- Currently, **Hindustan Aeronautics Limited** is the only entity that produces aircraft and helicopters for military and non-military purposes.
- The panel is tasked with the creation of a special purpose vehicle for the development of regional transport aircraft. A separate committee of experts has also been formed to explore manufacturing of aircraft, helicopters and associated equipment within the country.
- The fleet size of domestic airlines is set to increase twofold to 1,100 planes by 2027. This is further expected to increase to 2,359 planes by 2040.

International Relations

Indian Students Arrested in USA

Why it is in news?

- Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency of U.S detained 129 Indian students in visa fraud case in University of Farmington.
- Along with students, 8 Indians recruiters has also been arrested for recruiting foreign students to enroll in a fake university to illegally stay in the US
- Enforcement agency claims that the foreign students intention was merely to “pay to stay” and gain access to employment.
- As part of the scheme, the defendants and recruiters assisted foreign citizen students in fraudulently obtaining immigration documents from the school and facilitated the creation of false student records, including transcripts, for the purpose of deceiving immigration authorities
- Student were also aware that the university’s program was not approved by the Department of Homeland Security and was illegal.
- This is the second such case when Department of Homeland Security has used a fake university to unearth a fake student visa racket.

About Immigration and Customs Enforcement

- The ICE is a law enforcement agency of the federal government of the US tasked to enforce the immigration laws of the United States and to investigate criminal and terrorist activity of foreign nationals residing in America.

Types of student Visa

- F1 Student Visa** – Students applying for a program which requires more than 18 hours of study in a week require an F1 visa. This includes all undergraduate programs as well as graduate programs like MS, MBA, etc.
- M-1 Vocational/ Non-Academic Student Visa** – The M1 visa is a type of student visa reserved for vocational and technical schools.

Mallya Extradition

Extradition

- Extradition is a process which involves one governmental authority formally turning over an alleged criminal to another

governmental authority for prosecution for a criminal charge.

- Every state does not have any obligation to surrender an alleged criminal to a foreign state, because one principle of sovereignty is that every state has legal authority over the people within its borders.
- Thus, to ensure extradition, extradition treaties exists between nations.
- India has extradition treaty with various nations around the world.

Vijay Mallya Case

- Vijay Mallya was declared as the Fugitive Economic Offender under the following provisions.
- According to the Fugitive Economic Offenders Act, 2018 a fugitive economic offender is a person against whom an arrest warrant has been issued for his or her involvement in economic offences involving at least Rs. 100 crore or more and has left India to avoid prosecution.
- The UK home secretary has ordered the extradition of Vijay Mallya over allegations of £1bn fraud.
- The UK home secretary noted that Vijay Mallya, the first to be declared Fugitive Economic Offender is accused in India of conspiracy of money laundering offences.
- The Indian investigation agencies allege that Mallya has misled Indian Banks about the fortunes of his failing Kingfisher airline, before laundering the cash to fund his Formula One team and other projects.
- Vijaya mallya has decided to go for appeal against the judgement.

Why in news?

- British Home Secretary Sajid Javid has signed the order for the extradition of Vijay Mallya to India.

String of Pearls

Overview

- A geopolitical theory on the potential intentions of China in the Indian Ocean Region is called as the String of Pearls.
- It refers to the network of Chinese commercial facilities, military facilities and relationships along sea lines.
- It passes through many major maritime points like the Lombok Strait, the Strait of Hormuz, the Malacca Strait and the Strait of Mandeb.
- It was seeking to encircle India by setting up new strategic ports, airfields in Pakistan (Gwadar), Sri Lanka (Hambantota) and Bangladesh (Chittagong).

- This indicates China's expanding geopolitical influence through concerted efforts to increase access to airfields and ports, modernize and expand the military forces, and promote better and stronger diplomatic relationships with the trading partners.

Under String of pearls

- Sittwe: Naval base.
- Chittagong: Port at Bangladesh with container shipping facility.
- Hambantota: Port being developed in Sri Lanka.
- Maldives: Port of Marao
- Gwadar: Port of Pakistan with Navy base.
- Coco Islands: A runway and other infrastructure is being developed
- Seychelles Islands: Naval base
- Madagascar: Various infrastructure projects.
- Tanzania: For development of port of Bagamoyo



Impact on India

- The presence of Chinese ports and ships in Indian Ocean affects India's trade in particular with Africa which is more accessible to India.
- India sees the presence of China in Indian Ocean as an intrusion into its sphere of influence.
- The Chinese investments could be followed by increased frequency of Chinese navy ships and submarines in Indian Ocean.

Steps taken by India

- India has launched Project Mausam. It is soft power diplomacy by India. The project is under Ministry of Culture and its purpose is to reconnect and re-establish communication links between countries of Indian Ocean and enhancing their cultural values.
- India is seeking to develop naval base in Assumption Island and has also developed a port in Chahabar, Iran.
- India has agreement with countries to use ports like Duqm in Oman, Changi in Singapore etc.

- India is rapidly increasing the capacity of Navy and Coast guard

Why in news?

- Minister of State for External Affairs V.K. Singh said that it is not encirclement of china as relationship between two countries are steadily increasing after wuhan summit.

India Bangladesh Ties

Overview

- India and Bangladesh, two South Asian democracies, neighbours have the longest common border of over 4,000 km with each other.
- India was the first country to recognise Bangladesh as a separate and independent state and established diplomatic relations with the country immediately after its independence in December 1971.
- India's connections with Bangladesh are cultural, social, civilizational and economic.
- India's 'neighbourhood policy' has focussed on Bangladesh, which has emerged as a key interlocutor in India's 'Act East Policy' and sub-regional groupings like BIMSTEC and the BBIN Initiative.

Trade Relations

- Waterways are also being revived to reduce the cost of trade.
- India has also become a partner in Bangladesh's nuclear power programme, with the beginning of construction at the Rooppur nuclear power plant.
- To enable more Bangladeshi exports to flow into India, duty free entry was granted in 2011 under the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA).
- A Special economic zone (SEZ) in Bangladesh for Indian manufacturing companies has been created.

Issues

- The Rohingya issue has imposed a huge economic and security burden on Bangladesh.
- India has published the draft National Register of Citizens in Assam to account genuine Indian citizens residing in Assam and to curb the flow of illegal migrants.
- Thus, the illegal migrant's issue, along with sharing of river waters, will require deft handling of bilateral ties between the two countries.

Why in news?

- Bangladesh Foreign Minister Abdul Momen visited India and had talks with Prime Minister Narendra Modi

Science & Technology

'Inkjet' solar panels

Perovskite solar cell:

- Calcium titanium oxide (CaTiO₃) is also known as Perovskite.
- Perovskite solar cell is a type of solar cell that contains perovskite structure compounds i.e. those having the same structure as that of a perovskite mineral.
- The most commonly used perovskite mineral for solar cell is a hybrid organic-inorganic lead or tin halide-based material.
- Perovskites minerals display a number of interesting properties such as Superconductivity, Magnetoresistance, and Ferroelectricity which makes them well suited to many technological applications, including solar cells.

Perovskites solar cells are more efficient in comparison to conventional silicon solar cells due to following reasons:

- Efficiency of a solar cell depends upon the mobility of atoms and molecules within the material used for its construction. A perovskite mineral have high mobility and respond to light within trillionths of a second, which is much faster than that by a silicon wafer. This property makes Perovskites solar cells highly efficient in converting light energy to electricity.
- Perovskite thin films are also lightweight and flexible in comparison to silicon solar cells.
- Further, unlike silicon solar cells, Perovskites solar cells are environment friendly (manufacturing and disposal process), cheap, and easy to install.

What is inkjet printing?

- Inkjet printing is a type of computer printing that recreates a digital image by propelling droplets of ink onto paper, plastic, or other substrates.

Why in news?

- Scientists has developed a novel inkjet processing method for perovskites a new generation of cheaper solar cells that makes it possible to produce solar panels under lower temperatures, thus sharply reducing costs.

About the research:

- Scientists has developed a novel inkjet processing method for perovskites a new generation of cheaper solar cells that

makes it possible to produce solar panels under lower temperatures, thus sharply reducing costs.

- Solar panels coated with the mineral are light, flexible, efficient, inexpensive and come in varying hues and degrees of transparency.
- They can easily be fixed to almost any surface be it laptop, car, drone, spacecraft or building to produce electricity, including in the shade or indoors
- In the following decades, synthesising the atomic structure of perovskite became easier. But it was not until 2009 that Japanese researcher Tsutomu Miyasaka discovered that perovskites can be used to form photovoltaic solar cells.
- Initially the process was complicated and required ultra high temperatures, so only materials that could withstand extreme heat like glass could be coated with perovskite cells.
- In 2013, while still a Ph.D student at the University of Valencia in Spain, Ms. Malinkiewicz figured out a way to coat flexible foil with perovskites using an evaporation method.
- Later, she developed an inkjet printing procedure that lowered production costs enough to make mass production economically feasible. "That was a bull's eye. Now high temperatures are no longer required to coat things with a photovoltaic layer," she said.

Nilavembu kudineer

Why in news?

- The Tamil Nadu government has distributed nilavembu kudineer (a Siddha medicine) to treat people infected with dengue during the outbreak.

About Nilavembu kudineer:

- *Andrographis paniculata*(nilavembu) is an annual herbaceous plant in the family Acanthaceae, native to India and Sri Lanka.
- It is widely cultivated in Southern and Southeastern Asia, where it has been traditionally used to treat infections and some diseases.
- Mostly the leaves and roots were used for medicinal purposes. The whole plant is also used in some cases.

- Under in vitro conditions, nilavembu kudineer (a Siddha medicine) was found to provide protection against chikungunya virus while it was effective as a treatment during acute phase of dengue infection.

Significance of nilavembu:

- Dengue subtype-2, which is the most prevalent subtype in India, was used for testing the formulation. There was significant antiviral activity of the formulation at 3% of human dose onwards.
- To study the antiviral activity, the researchers tested the formulation on monocytes (type of WBC) and macrophages (mobile WBC) in the case of dengue and epithelial kidney cells for chikungunya virus.
- The monocytes and macrophages are the primary sites of infection in the case of dengue. And kidney is the secondary site of infection by chikungunya virus.
- Based on the results of research studies, it is seen that the formulation working well for dengue and chikungunya infections especially during outbreak conditions.

WHO report on cancer

Why in news?

- The figures regarding cancer was released by the WHO Southeast Asia, on World Cancer Day (Feb 4).

About World Cancer Day:

- World Cancer Day is an international day marked on February 4 to raise awareness of cancer and to encourage its prevention, detection, and treatment.
- World Cancer Day was founded by the Union for International Cancer Control (UICC) to support the goals of the World Cancer Declaration, written in 2008.
- The primary goal of World Cancer Day is to significantly reduce illness and death caused by cancer and is an opportunity to rally the international community to end the injustice of preventable suffering from cancer.
- The theme of this year's World Cancer Day 'I am and I will' — emphasises that each of us can be a changemaker.

What is cancer?

- **Cancer** is a group of diseases involving abnormal cell growth with the potential to invade or spread to other parts of the body.
- These contrast with benign tumours, which do not spread to other parts of the body.

- Possible signs and symptoms include a lump, abnormal bleeding, prolonged cough, unexplained weight loss and a change in bowel movements.

WHO SE Asia cancer report:

- In 2018, 18.1 million new cases of cancer developed worldwide; 9.6 million people died from the disease; 70% of the deaths occurred in low and middle-income countries, including those of the World Health Organisation (WHO) Southeast Asia region; and 67% of the region's cancer patients died before the age of 70.
- In 2017, just 30% of low-income countries reported having cancer treatment services available.
- Just 26% of low-income countries meanwhile reported having pathology (study of disease) services generally available in the public sector, leading to late diagnosis and a lower chance of successful treatment.
- Stressing the need to integrate national cancer control programmes into health systems at every level, the danger of cancer can be reduced.

GSAT-31

Why in news?

- Indian Space and Research Organisation (ISRO) has launched GSAT-31 onboard Ariane 5 rocket from French Guiana in South America.

About GSAT-31:

- GSAT-31 is India's 40th communication satellite
- Payload: Ku-Band Transponders
- Coverage Area: India Mainland and Island
- Mission Life: 15 Years
- Orbit: Geostationary Orbit

Significance of GSAT 31:

- The GSAT 31 will replace the satellites INSAT-4CR and INSAT-4A which are going to expire soon and will help in maintaining continuity of services currently provided by these satellites.
- The satellite will provide connectivity to very small aperture terminals (VSAT) for ATM, stock exchange, e-governance applications, and Direct-to-Home (DTH) services.
- It will also provide telecommunication applications for bulk data transfer for a host of applications, emergency

communications, disaster management support.

- It has a unique configuration of providing flexible frequency segments and coverage.
- 2 Ku-band beacon downlink signals are transmitted by the satellite for ground tracking purpose. (ku band- a microwave frequency band used for satellite communication and broadcasting).

Rashtriya Kamdhenu Aayog

Why in news?

- The Union Cabinet has approved the proposal for establishment of Rashtriya Kamdhenu Aayog for Conservation protection and development of cows and their progeny.

Significance of Rashtriya Kamdhenu Aayog:

- The setting up of Rashtriya Kamdhenu Aayog will lead to conservation, protection and development of cattle population in the country including development and conservation of indigenous breeds.
- It will result in increased growth of livestock sector which is more inclusive, benefitting women, and small and marginal farmers.
- The Rashtriya Kamdhenu Aayog will work in collaboration with Veterinary, Animal Sciences or Agriculture University or departments or organizations of the Central/State Government engaged in the task of research in the field of breeding and rearing of cow, organic manure, biogas etc.

Medical journals' publisher under fire

About E-cigarettes:

- Electronic cigarettes, or e-cigs, have been on the market in the U. S. since 2008. It has gained wider use in recent years.
- The handheld devices deliver not only addictive and harmful nicotine, but can be loaded with toxic chemicals such as lead, diacetyl and nickel.
- E-cigarettes are battery-powered devices that heat a liquid - usually containing nicotine mixed with the chemicals propylene glycol and glycerin.

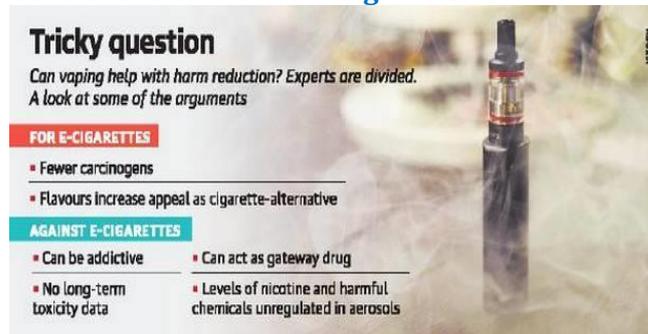
Why in news?

- The Indian Journal of Clinical Practice (IJCP) Group, a doctor-run publisher of medical journals, has come under sharp criticism from public health experts for

Officers IAS Academy, Chennai partnering with American e-cigarette maker Juul Labs Inc.

- Juul, which is evaluating an entry into India, has retained the Group to "better understand the India market,".

Controversies around e-Cigarettes:



- Union Ministry of Health and Family Welfare issued advisory to all states and Union Territories to not allow manufacture, sale and advertisement of e-cigarettes and other Electronic Nicotine Delivery Systems (ENDS).
- It also has issued warning that use e-cigarettes and other ENDS devices pose great health risk to public at large, especially to children and pregnant women.
- Do E-Cigarettes Help Smokers Quit?
 - Some studies show that e-cigarettes help people quit tobacco cigarettes, and others suggest that they interfere with quitting.
 - As more research is conducted, the effectiveness of e-cigarettes as a quitting aid will become better understood.
 - Meanwhile, smokers who want to quit have other good options with proven effectiveness.

Plants to remove lead from soil

Why in news?

- Researchers from Mahatma Gandhi University, Kerala have identified a native roadside plant that can take up lead from the soil and thus help in removing the metal from the environment.

About the research:

- Among the hundreds of native plants screened, research done earlier by the group shortlisted three plants.
- The present study found that Eclipta prostrata had the highest lead tolerance.

- E. prostrata or 'False Daisy' is found across the Indian subcontinent.
- Known 'Bhringraj' (Karisalankanni in Tamil), it is used as a 'hair-growth stimulant' and in many ayurvedic preparations.
- The plant may be using the lead to protect itself from the pests, or other predators.
- These plants grow in soils that are continuously exposed to lead from vehicle exhausts.
- Such experiments using naturally contaminated soils are significant further steps in using the plant for bioremediation of lead-contaminated soil.

'Alexa teacher'

Why in news?

- Amazon's Alexa has joined as a 'virtual assistant' teacher in Waruda Primary school, Maharashtra.

What is Amazon Alexa?

- Amazon Alexa, known simply as Alexa, is a virtual assistant developed by Amazon.
- It is capable of voice interaction, music playback, making to-do lists, setting alarms, streaming podcasts, playing audiobooks, and providing weather, traffic, sports, and other real-time information, such as news.
- Students speak to Alexa in English, and are now learning math, poems, general knowledge, weather information and more, from the device. Bollywood music now forms a part of the school's extra-curricular activity.

New Scientific Standard of Kg

Current version of kilogram:

- **Currently, it is defined by the weight of a platinum-based ingot called "Le Grand K"** which is locked away in a safe in Paris.
- Le Grand K has been at the forefront of the international system of measuring weights since 1889. Several close replicas were made and distributed around the globe. But the master kilogram and its copies were seen to change – ever so slightly – as they deteriorated.
- In a world where accurate measurement is now critical in many areas, such as in drug development, nanotechnology and

Officers IAS Academy, Chennai precision engineering – those responsible for maintaining the international system had no option but to move beyond Le Grand K to a more robust definition.

How wrong is Le Grand K?

- The fluctuation is about 50 parts in a billion, less than the weight of a single eyelash. But although it is tiny, the change can have important consequences.

How does the new system work?

- Electromagnets generate a force. Scrap-yards use them on cranes to lift and move large metal objects, such as old cars. The pull of the electromagnet, the force it exerts, is directly related to the amount of electrical current going through its coils. There is, therefore, a direct relationship between electricity and weight.
- So, in principle, scientists can define a kilogram, or any other weight, in terms of the amount of electricity needed to counteract the weight (gravitational force acting on a mass).

Planck's constant:

There is a quantity that relates weight to electrical current, called Planck's constant – named after the German physicist Max Planck and denoted by the symbol h .

- But h is an incredibly small number and to measure it, the research scientist Dr Bryan Kibble built a super-accurate set of scales. The Kibble balance, as it has become known, has an electromagnet that pulls down on one side of the scales and a weight – say, a kilogram – on the other. The electrical current going through the electromagnet is increased until the two sides are perfectly balanced.
- By measuring the current running through the electromagnet to incredible precision, the researchers are able to calculate h to an accuracy of 0.000001%. This breakthrough has paved the way for **Le Grand K to be deposed by "die kleine h"**.

Why in news?

- Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food & Public Distribution informed that there is no such proposal at present before the Government to achieve the new prototype of kilogram through physical constants.

Environment

Micro plastics found in dolphins

Why in news?

- Microplastics have been found in the guts of every marine mammal examined in a study of animals washed up on Britain's shores, scientists say.

Findings of the report:

- Researchers from the University of Exeter and Plymouth Marine Laboratory (PML) in the U.K. examined 50 animals from 10 species of dolphins, seals and whales — and found microplastics in them all.
- Most of the particles (84%) were synthetic fibres, which can come from sources, including clothes, fishing nets and toothbrushes while the rest were fragments, whose possible sources include food packaging and plastic bottles.
- We don't yet know what effects the microplastics, or the chemicals on and in them, might have on marine mammals.
- More research is needed to better understand the potential impacts on animal health.
- Though the animals in the study died of a variety of causes, those that died due to infectious diseases had a slightly higher number of particles than those that died of injuries or other causes.

Micro plastics ?

- Micro-plastics are particles that are **smaller than 5 millimetres in size**.
- They enter the environment as primary industrial products, such as those used in scrubbers and cosmetics.
- It could also enter via urban waste water and broken-down elements of articles discarded by consumers.
- Washing of clothes too releases synthetic microfibrils into water bodies and the sea.**
- Micro-plastics escape the filtration and treatment processes for waste water, and end up in sites of nature.
- The durable properties of plastics make them persistent and slow to degrade in the environment.
- Evidently, various studies have found micro-plastics in the oceans, soil, air, lakes, and rivers. It thus enters the food chains of even birds, animals and fishes.
- This results in significant global impacts on wildlife, from marine environment pollution.

- Micro-plastics hold the potential for both **bioaccumulation** and **biomagnification**. It may thus finally end up in the human body.
- But based on current limited knowledge on the effects, there is little human health concern.
- This is because the human body is well-adapted to dealing with non-digestible particles. As much as 90% of micro-plastic that is consumed might be excreted.
- Of the other 10%, some plastic under 150 microns (0.15 millimetres) could enter the gut's lymphatic system. It may pass from the bloodstream to the kidneys or liver.

Bio-accumulation:

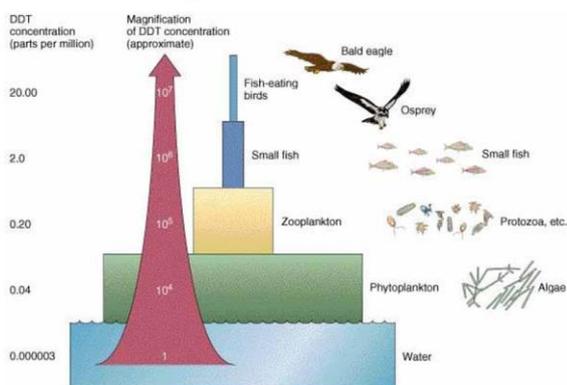
- It is the process of increase in the concentration of toxic elements within the body of particular organism (i.e. it refers to how an element first made an entry into the food chain) and in general the concentration of such pollutants become higher in the body of the organism compared to the external environment like air, water etc.
- Moreover, this accumulation will grow until it leads the organism to a deadly situation.
- Example- The air pollution which is caused due to various factors including the vehicular emission, progresses to an accumulation of toxic elements like PM2.5 and PM10 inside an organism and can have dangerous impacts on humans as well as other organisms.

Bio-magnification:

- Biomagnification is also known as bio amplification, in this the concentration of the toxicants increases at the successive trophic levels.
- It is due to the reason that toxic elements cannot be absorbed and simultaneously they get transferred to the successive higher trophic levels resulting in more concentration of toxicants at the higher trophic level.
- Biomagnification can be seen in the case of **Mercury or DDT**.
- The concentration of Mercury/DDT increases at the successive trophic levels.
- DDT concentration in zooplankton gets magnified when DDT contaminated water is consumed by the Zooplanktons.

- In the successive trophic levels like, small fish, big fish, and at top carnivore, the magnification is much higher, which proves the event of Biomagnification.

Biomagnification of DDT



- A pollutant having properties like long life, mobile, soluble in fat, biologically active will lead to the process of biomagnification.
- Persistent Organic Pollutants (PoPs), dioxins, heavy metals all are agents of biomagnification since they persist in the environment and magnify in the food web.
- In the case of an Oil spill, the oil can get absorbed by the fatty tissues of the fishes and which accumulates there and later when they are consumed by the bigger fishes or successively by humans this will cause Bio-Magnification as the concentration of toxicant gets increased across the entire food chain.

Kole wetlands

Why in news?

- The Kole Fish Count, conducted on February 2, 2019 in connection with **World Wetland Day** across the Kole wetlands of central **Kerala**, recorded 82 aquatic species.

More about the survey:

- Some of the most common species encountered during the survey include the orange chromide (known as pallathi in Malayalam), the dwarf pufferfish, Malabar leaf fish, and pearl spot or karimeen.
- The teams also came across six non-native fish species, raising concerns on the sustainability of the fishery and aquaculture practices being followed in the Kole and vicinity.
- The presence of **six species of non-native fish** in the Kole is of significant concern as

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these have the potential to compete with, and outnumber native species.

- Particularly alarming is the frequent catches of the Amazonian sucker catfish from various parts of the Kole.

About Kole wetlands:



- Kole Wetlands is a **Ramsar site**, a **wetland of international importance**, designed under the Ramsar Convention lying in Thrissur District in Kerala, India.
- The Kole wetlands located in Kerala's Thrissur and Mallapuram districts spans about 13,500 hectares, merging with **Vembanand, India's largest lake**, thus nurturing one of the most biologically diverse ecosystems in South Asia.
- The Kole ecosystem supports the third largest population of waterfowl in India during winter.
- It is also an important stopover in the Central Asian-Indian Flyway, which is the **migratory route of birds** that fly south from Siberia in the winter months.

Concerns:

- In Kole, rice cultivation and fishing are the traditional economic activities, both of which are under threat due to the increasing population.
- Spreading out from cities like Thrissur, the pressure of population has resulted in vast swathes being converted into housing sites here.
- The fields have also been subdivided and fragmented umpteen times, hence hindering rice cultivation.
- Fishing too has suffered, with a nexus of a profit-driven, capital-intensive system that is driving away the traditional fishing communities in the area.

Ramsar Convention:

- The number of contracting parties is 169.
- Ramsar is a city in Iran. In 1971, an international treaty for conservation and sustainable use of wetlands was signed at Ramsar.

- The Convention's mission is "the conservation and wise use of all wetlands through local and national actions and international cooperation, as a contribution towards achieving sustainable development throughout the world".
- At the time of joining the Convention, each Contracting Party undertakes to designate at least one wetland site for inclusion in the List of Wetlands of International Importance.
- The inclusion of a "Ramsar Site" in the List embodies the government's commitment to take the steps necessary to ensure that its ecological character is maintained.
- The **2nd of February each year is World Wetlands Day**, marking the date of the adoption of the Convention on Wetlands on **2 February 1971**.
- The **Ramsar Sites Information Service (RSIS)** is a searchable database which provides information on each Ramsar Site.
- The Ramsar Convention works closely with six other organisations known as International Organization Partners (IOPs). They are:
 - 1) Birdlife International.
 - 2) International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN).
 - 3) International Water Management Institute (IWMI).
 - 4) Wetlands International.
 - 5) WWF International.
 - 6) Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust (WWT).

Temples stave off extinction of turtles

Why in news?

- With consistent efforts the black Softshell turtle (*Nilssonina nigricans*) is back where it belongs – in the wild - where it went extinct years ago.

About:

- Temple priests in Assam has offered fresh hope for reviving wild population of black softshell turtle, a species classified as extinct in the wild by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) in 2002.
- A few temple ponds in Assam and Bangladesh are bringing these turtles back from the brink.
- One such pond is in Hayagriva Madhab Temple at Hajo, about 30 km west of Guwahati.
- Locals regard the turtles in the pond as Kurma avatar of Lord Vishnu to whom the Hajo temple is dedicated.
- The other turtle species moved from the temple pond to the wild was Indian softshell (*Nilssonina gangetica*) and the peacock softshell (*Nilssonina hurum*).

About Black softshell turtle (*Nilssonina nigricans*):

- It is a freshwater turtle and are original natives of the Brahmaputra in Assam and Chittagong and Sylhet areas in neighbouring Bangladesh.



Black softshell turtle

- Figures in the International Union for Conservation of Nature's (IUCN) Red List as "extinct in the wild".
- Schedule I species in the Wildlife Protection Act.
- Hunted extensively for its meat and cartilage, the turtle that was found in abundance along the Brahmaputra flood plains has dwindled in numbers and is now rarely spotted in wild.

RAMSAR SITES IN INDIA



Indian softshell:

- Nilssonina gangetica or Indian softshell turtle, classified as Vulnerable by the IUCN.
- Protected under Schedule I of the wildlife protection act.
- The Indian softshell turtle is used for its meat. And it is in high demand.
- It is a species of softshell turtle found in South Asia in rivers such as the Ganges, Indus and Mahanadi.



Peacock softshell (Nilssonina hurum):



- Species of turtle found in South Asia, and is listed on the IUCN Red List as a **vulnerable** species.
- Protected under **Schedule I of the Wildlife Protection Act 1972**.

Endosulfan agitation

Why in news?

- Families who have been affected by Endosulfan had been asking compensation from state of Kerala.
- The state government had agreed to their demands to include youngsters diagnosed in 2017 with signs of 'plausible' pesticide impairment on the current list of the 1,905 persons involved in the State's endosulfan compensation scheme.

About Endosulfan:

- Endosulfan is a **toxic pesticide** having hazardous effects on human genetic and **endocrine** systems.
- The **Stockholm Convention** on Persistent Organic Pollutants in 2011 added it in list of banned substances and phasing it out as an agrichemical.

- It is banned in over 80 nations due to its 'high toxicity.'
- It is sprayed as pesticide on crops like cotton, fruits, tea, paddy, cashew, tobacco etc. for control of pests in agriculture such as whiteflies, aphids, beetles, worms etc.

Impact of Endosulfan:

- Endosulfan pesticide was used widely on crops like cashew, cotton, tea, paddy, fruits and others until 2011, when the Supreme Court banned its production and distribution.
- The health effects of the chemical include neurotoxicity, late sexual maturity, physical deformities, poisoning, among others. People, especially newborns, have suffered deformities, health complications and loss of family members due to exposure to the agrochemical.
- Over 20 years of aerial spraying on cashew plantations in Kerala and other states has left many with mental and physical disorders.
- Studies have established linkages between aerial spraying of the pesticide and the growing health disorders in Kasaragod district.
- Over the years, other studies confirmed these findings, and the health hazards associated with endosulfan are now widely known and accepted.

Banning of water sachets in Araku valley

Why in news?

- The officials of **Integrated Tribal Regional Development Authority (ITDA)**, Paderu are planning to enforce a prohibition on the sale of plastic water sachets in Araku valley.

Important Facts:

- According to officials, the water sachets amount to around 40% to 50% of the total plastic waste dumped at the tourist destinations in Araku Valley.
- Apart from environment pollution, these sachets are inadvertently consumed by stray cattle, putting their lives at risk.

Ban on Plastic:

- ITDA had also banned the use of plastic carry bags and polythene covers in Araku Valley since January 1st, 2019.
- In an attempt to create awareness about the environmental hazards associated with

plastic, ITDA has been putting up boards, posters and carrying out educative campaigns in Araku.

About araku valley:

- Araku Valley is a hill station in **Visakhapatnam** district in the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh.



- It has rich bio-diversity and is **mined for bauxite**.
- Galikonda** hill rising to a height of 5,000 feet (1,500 m) is amongst the highest peaks in Andhra Pradesh.

Indus river dolphin

Why in news?

- Punjab declared the endangered Indus river dolphins- one of the world's rarest mammals as the state's aquatic animal.

About Indus river dolphin:



- It is the second most endangered **freshwater river dolphin**.
- At present, there are only around 1,800 of these in the Indus in Pakistan.
- Indus river dolphins are freshwater aquatic mammal found **only in the Beas in Punjab**.
- It is listed **endangered** in the IUCN's Red List of Threatened Species and its International trade is prohibited by virtue of it being listed under **Appendix I** of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (**CITES**).
- Indus dolphin like Ganges River dolphin is functionally **blind** and relies on echolocation to navigate, communicate and hunt prey in muddy river water.

Gangetic Dolphin:

- Gangetic Dolphins are the only surviving freshwater dolphin in India.

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- Found in the river systems of Ganga, Brahmaputra, Meghna and Karnaphuli-Sangu in Nepal, India and Bangladesh.
- The IUCN status: **Endangered**.
- Gangetic Dolphin is the National Aquatic Animal of India.



True fresh water river dolphins:

- There are only four true freshwater river dolphins found around the world viz. Ganges River Dolphin, Indus River Dolphin, Amazon River Dolphin and Yagtze River Dolphins.
- Further, the **Irrawady river dolphins** can survive in **both fresh and marine waters**.



- Both Ganges River Dolphin and Indus river Dolphin are now taxonomically considered one species since 1998.
- The Amazon River Dolphins are found in plenty number in Amazon river.
- The Yangtze river dolphins have not been seen in last one decade and it is believed that they have gone extinct.
- The Irrawady river dolphins, which can survive both in fresh water and marine water are found in Myanmar, Indonesia and the Mekong river delta in south-east Asia.

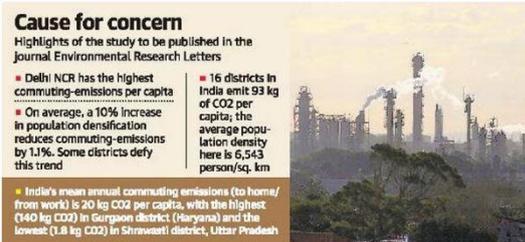
- Some of the Irrawady River Dolphins are also found in Bangladesh and India's Chilka Lake in Odisha.

Emission levels rising faster in Indian cities than in China

Why in news?

- Urbanisation is accelerating greenhouse gas emissions from vehicles in India at a faster than in China says a study that analysed the link between population density and emissions from transport, across India's districts.
- The study is to be published in the peer-reviewed journal Environmental Research Letters.

Findings of the study:



- As per a study, on an average, an Indian emitted about 20 kg per capita while commuting for work, with the highest (140 kg CO₂) in Gurugram district (Haryana) and the lowest (1.8 kg CO₂) in Shrawasti district (Uttar Pradesh).
- Thus, the study analysed the link between population density and emissions from transport, across India's districts.
- For developed countries, urbanisation led to reduction in emissions due to shorter distances between workplace and home. This also made people use more public transport.
- However, this is not the case with developing countries. In China a 1% increase in urbanisation was linked with a 0.12% increase in CO₂ emissions whereas, in India, it translated into 0.24% increase in emissions.
- As per the data from Global Carbon Project, India's CO₂ emission grew by an estimated 4.6% in 2017 and its per-capita emission was about 1.8 tonnes.
- In spite of being the 4th largest emitter, India's per capita emissions are much lower than the world average of 4.2 tonnes. But those emissions have been growing steadily, with an average growth rate over the past decade of 6%. Further increase in

Officers IAS Academy, Chennai fuel price did not reduce commuting emissions by much.

- Delhi had the highest commuting emissions per capita - a factor that also contributed to its high level of pollution. National capital region had 2.5 times higher commuting emissions than Mumbai, Kolkata, Chennai, Bangalore, and Hyderabad.
- "Delhi's higher socio-economic status and heavy reliance on private travel modes led to higher commuting emissions than in other megacities."

Atal Bhujal Yojana

Why in news?

- The World Bank has approved Atal Bhujal Yojana (ABHY), a Rs.6000 Crore scheme, for sustainable management of ground water with community participation.

About:

- Ministry of Water Resources, River Development and Ganga Rejuvenation.
- Aims** to tackle ever-deepening crisis of depleting groundwater level.
- The funding pattern is 50:50 between Government of India and World Bank.
- The identified over-exploited (OE) and water stressed areas for the implementation of the scheme fall in the States of Gujarat, Haryana, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh.
- ABHY envisages active participation of the communities in various activities such as formation of 'Water User Associations', monitoring and disseminating ground water data, water budgeting, preparation & implementation of Gram-panchayat-wise water security plans and IEC activities related to sustainable ground water management.

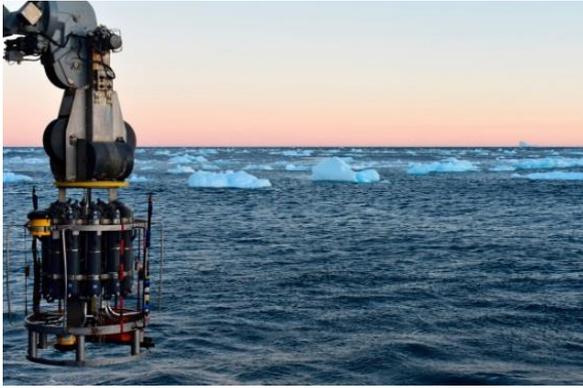
Oceanic conveyer belt

Why in news?

- One of the key drivers of the world's climate is an area in the North Atlantic Ocean, where warmer and colder water mix and swirl.

About:

- When scientists went for their first close look at this critical underwater dynamo, they found they were looking in the wrong place. By hundreds of miles.



- The consequences are not quite yet understood, but eventually it could change forecasts of one of the worst case global warming scenarios still considered unlikely this century, in which the mixing stops and climate chaos ensues.
- It's called the Atlantic Meridional Overturning Circulation, and scientists describe it as a giant ocean conveyor belt that moves water from Greenland south to beyond the tip of Africa and into the Indian Ocean.
- Warm, salty water near the surface moves north and mixes with cold, fresher water near Greenland.
- As that water cools and sinks it drives a slow circulation of the oceans that is critical to global climate, affecting the location of droughts and frequency of hurricanes.
- It also stores heat-trapping carbon dioxide deep in the ocean. The faster it moves, the more warm water gets sent into the depths to cool.

Microbial fuel cell to treat textile wastewater

Why in news?

- Scientists have developed microbial fuel cell (MFC) to treat textile wastewater and generate power during degradation process.
- It uses simple principle to degrade wastewater. This energy-efficient technology can be also used with any other industrial wastewater.

How Microbial fuel cells (MFCs) works?

- In this fuel cell, carefully selected cohort of bacteria is made to act on the textile wastewater placed in it. These bacteria are isolated from very wastewater they are meant to degrade.
- They feed on organic material in water and break it down under anaerobic (without

Officers IAS Academy, Chennai oxygen) conditions, releasing electrons in process.

- The electrons are collected at anode which results in current in circuit. The bacteria forms biofilm on anode making collection of electrons easy at anode.
- During this entire process, bacteria act on wastewater and purify it and waste is segregated in the cell. For example, dye present in wastewater is broken to simpler form.
- At present this technology has been tested in 200 litre capacity prototype, which can generate power of around 1 watt per square-metre.
- Scientists are also incorporating nanotechnology in it, to add nanotech filter to improve process to keep thickness of biofilm within prescribed limit.

Resort project at Andamans

Why in news?

- An expert committee of the Union Environment Ministry has "deferred" clearance to a Rs. 100crore proposal by the Andaman and Nicobar Islands Integrated Development Corporation Limited (ANIIDCL) to develop an island resort on the grounds that it doesn't take into account the biodiversity of the islands' coast.

About:

- The Centre has been working on a long-term plan to make several of the islands more conducive to tourism.
- In 2018 the Home Ministry revived an Island Development Agency that would coordinate infrastructure projects to aid tourism in the A&N islands as well as Lakshadweep.
- In Jan 2019 the Environment Ministry approved a new set of rules for infrastructure development along the coasts.
- The new rules, in general, gave greater flexibility to development and infrastructure projects.
- The panel also expressed "concern" over the management of solid waste collection, treatment and disposal and how these would be managed once the project was commissioned and handed over to the resort.

- The arrival of domestic tourists in A&N islands rose from over 2.02 lakh in 2011 to over 3.84 lakh in 2016.
- The inflow of foreign tourists was stagnant at around 15,000, according to the NITI Aayog in a presentation in August 2018.
- When the latest CRZ rules were announced in December, environmentalists had raised concerns that the A&N islands already vulnerable to soil erosion and threat of climate change would be further susceptible to environmental challenges from infrastructure development.

Conservation and Promotion of Medicinal Plants

Why in news?

- The National Medicinal Plants Board (NMPB) under the Ministry of AYUSH is implementing following schemes to encourage farming/cultivation, conservation, processing and promotion of medicinal plants throughout the country.

National AYUSH Mission (NAM):

- The large scale farming/cultivation of medicinal plants is being supported under the 'Medicinal Plants' component of the National AYUSH Mission (NAM).
- The scheme provides support for:
 1. Cultivation of prioritized medicinal plants on farmer's land.
 2. Establishment of nurseries for the supply of quality planting material.
 3. Post-harvest management.
 4. Primary processing, marketing infrastructure etc.

Conservation, Development and Sustainable Management of Medicinal Plants:

- **Central sector scheme.**
- In-situ conservation through the development of Medicinal Plants Conservation and Development Areas (MPCDAs).
- In-situ/Ex-situ resource augmentation.
- Ex-situ conservation through the establishment of herbal gardens.
- Livelihood linkages with Joint Forest Management Committees (JFMCs) / Panchayats / Van Panchayats / Biodiversity Management Committees (BMCs) / Self Help Groups.
- IEC activities like Training / workshops / Seminars / Conferences etc.

- Research & Development.
- Promotion of marketing and trade of medicinal plants produce.

Voluntary Certification Scheme for Medicinal Plants Produce:

- The scheme is aimed to encourage Good Agricultural Practices (GAPs) and Good Field Collection Practices (GFCPs) in medicinal plants and enhance the quality and safety of their produce.
- As per information of the Botanical Survey of India (BSI), an organization under the Ministry of Environment, Forests & Climate Change estimated more than 8,000 species of medicinal plants are found in India.

National River Ganga (Rejuvenation, Conservation and Management) Bill, 2018

Why in news?

- The government has banned the construction of jetties, ports or "permanent hydraulic structures" in the Ganga, unless permitted by the National Ganga Rejuvenation Authority, according to the proposed 'Ganga Act'.
- The legislation, formally called the National River Ganga (Rejuvenation, Conservation and Management) Bill, 2018, proposes to create a management structure that will supervise the health of the 2,500-kilometre long banks.
- The bill declares that the Centre will take control of the management, regulation and development of Ganga as the river is of unique importance.
- It defines Ganga as India's National River.

For Maintenance of Ecological Flow:

- The Bill lays down a host of restrictions to ensure the uninterrupted, ecological flow of the river.
- Currently, a host of dams in the upper stretches of the river lead to the river's flow being obstructed say several activists and researchers, and persistent campaigns notably led by the late G.D. Agrawal.
- This led government finally recognising the need for proposed and existing hydropower projects to change their design plans to ensure minimum flows all through the year.

Cognizable offences under the act:

- The Bill has listed out a list of offences marked as cognizable which includes:

- Construction activities causing obstruction in the river,
- Withdrawal of ground water for industrial or commercial consumption from the land fronting the river and its tributaries;
- Commercial fishing or aqua culture in the river and its tributaries;
- Discharging untreated or treated sewage into the river.

Preventing Unauthorized Activities:

- The proposed legislation specifies that “unauthorized” activities that cause obstruction or discontinuity of water in the River Ganga due to engineered diversion of water or stoppage of water.
- Carrying out such activities are liable to a prison term of 3 years or fines upto ₹50 crore, or both.
- The legislation looms even as the government is developing a National Waterways Project-1 (River Ganga) from Haldia to Varanasi (1,390 km).
- The waterways project involves creating permanent and movable terminals that require dredging and frequent de-silting to ensure that minimum river depths for the smooth movement of the vessels.

Armed Ganga Protection Corps (GPC):

- The Armed Ganga Protection Corps (GPC) personnel will be provided by the ministry of home affairs and will be deployed by the National Ganga Rejuvenation Authority.
- The GPC personnel will have power to arrest those who pollute the river covering offences like obstructing the flow of the river to commercial fishing.

Section 54: A Contentious Clause:

- Section 54 of the bill on offences by companies, states that if an offence is committed by a company, every person who in charge of the company when the offence is committed and the company will be deemed guilty.
- But if the in-charge is able to prove that the offence was committed without his or her knowledge or that they exercised due diligence to prevent the offence, they will not be punished under the act.
- This section first strongly puts the onus of those heading operations and activities of companies that are damaging the river.
- But then promptly adds a protective clause by saying that action will not be taken if the offence was taken without his or her knowledge.

Culture

Buddhism & India-Bhutan relations

Why in news?

- An international conference and exhibition of rare artefacts about the life and legacy of 8th century Buddhist sage Guru Padmasambhava is being held in New Delhi.
- The conference is titled “Life and Legacy of Guru Padmasambhava”.
- The conference also celebrates the 50 years of diplomatic relations between India and Bhutan.

About Guru Padmasambhava

- Guru Padmasambhava is known as the **Second Buddha** because he played a seminal role in spreading Buddhism and Buddhist teachings across the Himalayan region including Northeast India, Nepal, Bhutan and Tibet.
- In Tibetan, Guru Padmasambhava is generally referred to as Guru Rinpoche, which means “precious master.”
- He undertook many travels across India, Bhutan, Tibet and Nepal.
- **Thangka paintings**, sculptures and photographs portray the life and teachings of the Guru.



20th Bharat rang Mahotsav

Why in news?

- The Minister of State for Culture (I/C), Govt. of India, inaugurated the 21-day-long nationwide theatre spectacle at New Delhi.

About Bharat rang mahotsav:

- The 20th edition of Bharat Rang Mahotsav (BRM), the international theatre festival of India, is organized by National School of Drama (NSD), one of the prominent training institutions in the world.

- The 20th BRM comes with 111 national and international acts in its basket that includes folk and other traditional theatre forms, invitee plays, and productions by the students of the National School of Drama.

About National School of Drama:

- The National School of Drama is one of the foremost theatre training institutions in the world and the only one of its kind in India.
- It was set up by the Sangeet Natak Akademi as one of its constituent units in 1959.
- In 1975, it became an independent entity and was registered as an autonomous organization under the Societies Registration Act XXI of 1860, fully financed by the Ministry of Culture, Government of India.
- Training in the School is highly intensive and is based on a thorough, comprehensive, carefully planned syllabus which covers every aspect of theatre and in which theory is related to practice. As a part of their training, students are required to produce plays which are then performed before the public.

Postage stamp on Kumbh mela

Why in news?

- Union Minister of State for Railways and Communication, released a special postage stamp of the Indian Postal Department on Kumbh Mela.
- A special first day cover was also released on the occasion. Its cost is five rupees.



About kumbh mela:

- It has been inscribed on the UNESCO's Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.
- Kumbh Mela, in Hinduism, is a religious pilgrimage that is celebrated four times over a course of 12 years.

- The geographical location of Kumbh Mela spans over four locations in India and the Mela site keeps rotating between one of the four pilgrimages on four sacred rivers as listed below:
 - Haridwar on the Ganges in Uttarakhand
 - Ujjain on the Shipra in Madhya Pradesh
 - Nashik on the Godavari in Maharashtra
 - Prayagraj at the confluence of the Ganges, the Yamuna, and the mythical Sarasvati in Uttar Pradesh
- Each site's celebration is based on a distinct set of astrological positions of the Sun, the Moon, and the Jupiter.
- The celebrations occur at the exact moment when these positions are fully occupied, as it is considered to be the holiest time in Hinduism.
- The Kumbh Mela is an event that intrinsically encapsulates the science of astronomy, astrology, spirituality, ritualistic traditions, and socio-cultural customs and practices, making it extremely rich in knowledge.

National Virtual Library of India

About National Mission on Libraries:

- It is a mission by Ministry of Culture to modernize and digitally link public libraries across the country.

About National Virtual Library of India(NVLI):

- The objective of National Virtual Library of India (NVLI) is to facilitate creation of a comprehensive database on digital resources of India on information about India in an open access environment. Salient features of NVLI are :-
 - Federated searching through multilingual user interfaces.
 - Virtual learning environment
 - E-Governance platform facilitating data analytics
 - Multilingual searching and retrieval on ontology/thesaurus based

Why in news?

- The project of creation of National Virtual Library of India costing Rs.72 crore had been entrusted to IIT Bombay (in collaboration with C-DAC, Pune and IGNOU, Delhi).

Sangeet Natak Akademi Awards (Akademi Puraskar)

About Sangeet Natak Akademi Awards:

- The Sangeet Natak Akademi's Fellowships and Sangeet Natak Akademi Awards are recognised as among most coveted national honours bestowed on **performing artists** as well as teachers and scholars of performing arts in the country.
- They are given by Sangeet Natak Akademi, India's National Academy of Music, Dance & Drama.
- Sangeet Natak Akademi Awards are given in categories of music, dance, theatre, other traditional arts and puppetry, and for contribution and scholarship in performing arts.
- The award since 2003 consists of Rs. 1 lakh, a citation, an angavastram (shawl), and tamrapatra (brass plaque).

Why in news?

- The President of India, Shri Ram Nath Kovind conferred the prestigious Sangeet Natak Akademi Awards 2017 at Rashtrapati Bhawan on Jan 7th,2019.

Dard Aryan Tribe

Who are the Dard Aryans?

- Some 200 km from Leh are the villages of Dha, Hanu, Garkone and Darchik on both sides of the Indus River, inhabited by the Buddhist Dard Tribes.
- The villages are together called the "Aryan valley".
- The community now numbers about 4,000.
- The word 'Dard' is derived from a Sanskrit word, 'Daradas', which means people who live on hillsides.
- People of this region are culturally and linguistically different from those in other parts of Ladakh.
- There is a line of thought that the "Aryans of Ladakh" or the "Brokpas" might have descended from soldiers in Alexander's army who had come to the region over 2,000 years ago.



Tradition and Customs:

- They rear goat and sheep for milk and meat, and their festivals are based on the solar calendar.
- Their traditions go back 5,000 years; those who still follow the original customs worship trees, rivers and mountains.

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- These tribals are mainly dependent on agriculture; the apricots grown here are considered among the best in the world and there are 12 varieties of grapes in the region.
- Grape-wine is very popular in the “Aryan valley”.

Why in news?

- Ministry of Culture, held a seminar on the cultural traditions of Dard Aryans of Ladakh was organised during Dard Aryan Festival (Aryan Utsav) held in Indira Gandhi National Centre for Arts (IGNCA) from 16-21 January, 2019.
- During the seminar it was discussed that ‘Dard Aryan’ is not among the list of notified Schedule Tribes.
- Ministry of Tribal Affairs said, it has not formally received any charter of demands from the concerned State Government for seeking financial help for preservation of cultural heritage of ‘Dard Aryans’.

Miscellaneous

Operation smile

Why in news?

- The 'Operation Smile-V' initiative launched by **Hyderabad** Police has helped in rescuing 325 children, who were either working as labourers or begging on the streets, since January 1 2019.

About:

- *Objective is* to trace the missing children and rescue child labourers, Operation Smile-V was launched on January 1 across Telangana.
- *Operation Smile also called as* **Operation Muskaan** is an initiative of the **Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA)** to rescue/rehabilitate missing children.

Varahi hydel project

Why in news?

- Tremors(a slight earthquake) of light intensity were experienced in villages in the vicinity of Varahi hydro-electric project in Hosanagar and Thirthahalli taluks of Shivamogga district,Karnataka. There were no casualties or damage.

About varahi river:

- Varahi River originates and flows through Western Ghats in the Indian state of Karnataka.
- It is also known as Halady or Haladi river in downstream areas.
- It joins with the Souparnika River, Kedaka River, Chakra River, and Kubja River which are known by **Panchagangavali river** and merges into the **Arabian Sea**.

Suraksha Yatra

Why in news?

- Smt Sushma Swaraj and Shri Nitin Gadkari flag off Suraksha Yatra – a **motor rally** to **reinforce Gandhain values** and advocate **Road Safety**, from Rajghat in New Delhi to commemorate the 150th Birth Anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi.

About:

- Objective of the rally is to spread Gandhiji's message of *Satya* and *Ahimsa* among people.
- A host of initiatives were launched on the occasion of the 30th National Road Safety Week aimed at generating awareness and sensitizing people about safe road usage.
- These include a **Dash Board for Road Accident Data** of India and states which will be available on the website of the Road Ministry.
- People can access road accident related data and other information from this Dash Board.
- The Society of Indian Automobile Manufacturers (SIAM) has declared 2019 as the **Year of Road Safety**, to underline its commitment and support for promoting safety on Indian roads.
- The Ministers also launched the 3rd edition of **iSAFE** - 9-Month long championship on road safety issues for schools and colleges across India.
- **Retro Reflective Stickers** carrying the message of road safety - Sadak Suraksha Jeevan Raksha - were also launched on the occasion.
- Automobile manufacturers have assured that all new vehicles will henceforth come with these stickers.

News in-depth

General Studies-1

Risks to global growth

- The world economy on the surface is on a steady trajectory.
- Many developed economies are **operating close to their full potential with unemployment rates at historical lows.**
- But beneath the surface, a worrisome picture of the world economy emerges.
- The newly released **World Economic Situation and Prospects for 2019** illustrates **how rising economic, social and environmental challenges hamper progress towards the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.**

Analysis:

- Policymakers and experts find the following factors as risks for global growth.
- **Global private and public debt is at a record high**, well above the level seen in the run-up to the global financial crisis.
- **Interest rates remain very low in most developed economies**, while **central bank balance sheets are still bloated.**
- **With limited monetary and fiscal space, policymakers around the globe will find it difficult to react effectively to an economic downturn.**
- Also experts from thinktanks are of the view that concerted actions — like those implemented in response to the 2008-09 crisis — will not effectively contain the problem, **given the support for multilateralism is decreasing in recent times.**

- Other major issues in the global economy cited by economists include **income levels** in the Africa, Western Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean **continue to stagnate or grow only marginally.**
- Also **the nature of growth is not compatible with holding the increase in the global average temperature to well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels.**
- **The impacts of climate change are becoming more widespread and severe.** The frequency and intensity of extreme weather events are increasing, damaging vital infrastructure and causing large-scale displacement.
- **The human and economic costs of such disasters fall overwhelmingly on low-income countries.**
- The transition towards environmental sustainability is not happening fast enough.

Conclusion:

- Many of the challenges are global in nature **and require collective and cooperative policy action.**
- **Withdrawal into nationalism and unilateral action** will only pose further setbacks for the global community, especially for **those already in danger of being left behind.**
- Instead, **policymakers need to work together to address the weaknesses of the current system and strengthen the multilateral framework.**

General Studies-2

Legitimacy of the basic structure

- The basic structure doctrine has, since its inception in *Kesavananda Bharati v. State of Kerala* in 1973, often been criticized as being illegitimate.

Analysis:

- The basic structure doctrine is often criticized on the following grounds.
- **The “basic structure doctrine” finds no mention anywhere in the Constitution.**
- The doctrine accords the **judiciary a power to impose its philosophy over a democratically formed government**, resulting in something termed as a **“tyranny of the unelected”**.
- It is criticized on the grounds of **not clearly defined by the Judiciary**, as the Judiciary adds to Basic Structure Doctrine **in a case by case basis**.
- However the author of the article argues that **“Basic Structure Doctrine” is deeply rooted in the Constitution’s text and history**, but also possesses **substantial moral value, in that it strengthens democracy by limiting the power of a majoritarian government to undermine the Constitution’s central ideals**.
- The author considers arguments forwarded by Conrad, who considers that **“even if a legislature were bestowed with the widest of powers to amend the Constitution, its authority was always subject to a set of inherent constraints.”**
- **Parliament, he contended, was, after all, a creation of the Constitution.**
- Conrad gives the example of Germany, **where the Nazi regime brought end to the Weimer Republic , the same organisation which sworn in the Nazi regime in the first place.**
- To which Germany responded in adopting **its Basic Law in 1949** , which quite **explicitly placed checks on the legislature’s powers.**
- The author interprets **“Article 368” grants Parliament the power to amend the Constitution, making it clear that on the exercise of that power “the Constitution shall stand amended”**
- Therefore, the author argues, **after amendment what should stand should**

be a constitution of India, and should reflect values of the constitution

- The author considers **for an amendment to be valid**, the constitution **that remains standing after such a change must be the Constitution of India; it must continue to possess, in its essence, those features that were foundational to it even at its conception.**

Conclusion:

- One can argue that the “Basic Structure Doctrine” is derived from the abstract. But that scarcely means it doesn’t exist within the Constitution.

Insights on performance of India on key indexes - Analysis:

Ease of Doing Business:

- From a rank of 134 in 2014, India’s rank improved to 77 in 2018. As 190 countries were ranked in 2018, India was in the top 50%.
- The Ease of Doing Business Index is released by World Bank Group.
- Higher rankings (a low numerical value) indicate better, usually simpler, regulations for businesses and stronger protections of property rights.
- A nation’s ranking on the index is based on the average of 10 sub indices:
- Starting a business – Procedures, time, cost and minimum capital to open a new business
- Dealing with construction permits – Procedures, time and cost to build a warehouse
- Getting electricity – procedures, time and cost required for a business to obtain a permanent electricity connection for a newly constructed warehouse
- Registering property – Procedures, time and cost to register commercial real estate
- Getting credit – Strength of legal rights index, depth of credit information index
- Protecting investors – Indices on the extent of disclosure, extent of director liability and ease of shareholder suits
- Paying taxes – Number of taxes paid, hours per year spent preparing tax returns and total tax payable as share of gross profit

- Trading across borders – Number of documents, cost and time necessary to export and import
- Enforcing contracts – Procedures, time and cost to enforce a debt contract
- Resolving insolvency – The time, cost and recovery rate (%) under bankruptcy proceeding
- But other problems associated with using the EDB is that it measures the effect of government regulations alone.
- It is important to take it into account but the ease of doing business is dependent upon other factors too. One of these is the availability of 'producer services', with electricity, water supply and waste management.
- Improvement in infrastructure has not seen any significant changes. The Planning Commission used to release data on infrastructural investment, but we have had none since its demise.

Human Development Index:

- The HDI is a combination of indicators of income, health and education in a country
- India ranks 130 among 189 countries in the 2018 index.
- India's human development index value is above the average of 0.638 for the region with Bangladesh and Pakistan, countries with similar population size ranked 136 and 150 respectively.
- However, its **conceptual basis has been critiqued.**
- First, it has been pointed out that the index combines incommensurate categories, as income, health and education are not substitutes.
- Second, while it does go **beyond purely economic measures of progress, in that it looks at the health and education achievements in a population, it can say little about the 'quality' of development.**
- As pointed out by Selim Jahan of the UNDP, data can "[tell] us only a part of the story about people's lives. For instance, it is increasingly clear that it is not enough simply to count how many children are in school: we need also to know whether they are learning anything."
- However, the index is of relevance here that India's HDI ranking has not improved despite it being the world's fastest growing major economy in recent years.

- Despite income being a component of the index.
- What this reveals is that an economy can grow fast without much progress in human development.

Environmental Performance Index(EPI):

- In 2018, India ranked 177 out of 180 countries, having slipped from an already very low rank of 155 in 2014.
- **The EPI is produced jointly by Yale and Columbia Universities in collaboration with the World Economic Forum.**
- The index ranks countries on 24 performance indicators across several 'issue categories', each of which fit under one of two overarching objectives, namely, environmental health and eco-system vitality.
- The issue categories are **air quality, water and sanitation, water resources, agriculture, forests, fisheries, biodiversity and habitat, and climate and energy.**
- These **metrics are meant to serve as a gauge at a national level of how close countries are to accepted environmental policy goals.**
- The country is today among the worst performing on the environmental front and its ranking has worsened over the past five years.

Conclusion:

- In the above we have discussed performance of India in the past five years in the three crucial spheres of business, human development and the natural environment.
- The government has aggressively pursued an improvement in the business environment. This appears to have yielded fruit in terms of an improvement in the EDB index.
- However, at a time when it has been the fastest growing economy in the world, India's rank on human development has remained unchanged and on environmental performance has slipped close to the last place.
- It is important that the Government of the Centre and states recognise the value of natural capital and human capital and take steps in the right direction to improve rankings other indexes like HDI and EPI too.

We need a leap in healthcare spending

- India's per capita expenditure on health remains among the lowest in the world.
- 10.6% of the total amount in the Interim Budget is allocated to defence, while only 2.2.% is allocated to healthcare.
- Despite several innovations in the healthcare sector in recent times, in line with India's relentless pursuit of reforms, the government remains woefully short of its ambition to increase public health spending to 2.5% of GDP.
- And also at present, health spending is only 1.15-1.5% of GDP.

Analysis:

- The total allocation to healthcare is ₹61,398 crore. While this is an increase of ₹7,000 crore from the previous Budget, there is no net increase since the total amount is 2.2% of the Budget, the same as the previous Budget.
- The increase roughly equates the ₹6,400 crore allocated for implementation of the Ayushman Bharat-Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (PMJAY).
- According to the National Health Profile of 2018, public per capita expenditure on health increased from ₹621 in 2009-10 to ₹1,112 in 2015-16.
- Although in 2018 the amount may have risen to about ₹1,500.
- And this amounts to about \$20, or about \$100 when adjusted for purchasing power parity.
- Despite the doubling of per capita expenditure on health over six years, the figure is still abysmal.
- To compare this with other countries, The U.S. spends \$10,224 per capita on healthcare per year (2017 data).
- A comparison between two large democracies is telling: the U.S.'s health expenditure is 18% of GDP, while India's is still under 1.5%.
- This healthcare cost in the U.S. is not to be emulated, since comparable developed countries spend half as much per capita as the U.S.
- \$4,000-\$5,000 per capita spending in other OECD countries is also not comparable with India's dismal per capita health expenditure.

- The rate of growth in U.S. expenditure has slowed in the last decade, in line with other comparable nations yet healthcare spending is one of the highest.
- India's per capita Budget expenditure on health in India is among the lowest in the world. This requires immediate attention.

Health and Wellness Centre : Prevention

- 1.5 lakh health and wellness centres would be set up under Ayushman Bharat.
- The mandate of these centres is preventive health, screening, and community-based management of basic health problems.
- Experts opine that the mandate should include health education and holistic wellness integrating modern medicine with traditional Indian medicine.
- Both communicable disease containment as well as non-communicable disease programmes should also be included.
- The allocation for each of the wellness centres is less than ₹1 lakh per year.
- This is a meagre amount when compared with allocation of other programmes.
- An estimated ₹250 crore has been allocated for setting up health and wellness centres under the National Urban Health Mission.
- Under the National Rural Health Mission, ₹1,350 crore has been allocated for the same.
- The non-communicable diseases programme of the National Programme for Prevention and Control of Cancer, Diabetes, Cardiovascular Diseases and Stroke has been allocated ₹175 crore, from ₹275 crore.
- Allocation to the National Tobacco Control Programme and Drug De-addiction Programme is only ₹65 crore, a decrease of ₹2 crore.
- "Prevention is better than Cure", and Health and Wellness Centres help in prevention of diseases, which is linked to significant increase in GDP and reduce in healthcare costs.

Conclusion:

- Increase of GDP alone does not guarantee health, since there is no direct correlation between GDP and health outcomes.
- Improvement in health does relate positively to GDP, since a healthy workforce contributes to productivity.
- The 1,354 packages for various procedures in PMJAY must be linked to quality.

- For various diseases, allocation should be realigned for disease management over a defined time period, not merely for episodes of care.
- Since a major innovation in universal healthcare, Ayushman Bharat, is being rolled out, it must be matched with a quantum leap in funding.
- **Only if we invest more for the long-term health of the nation will there be a similar rise in GDP.**

Checks and balance: On EVMs

Context:

- The issue of credibility of EVMs has become quite complicated with different parties raising serious objections about the functioning of the machines.
- The controversy surrounding the electronic voting machine (EVM) tampering was reignited after the opposition raised the issue with the Election Commission.
- Some leaders have gone to the extent of saying that the machines are being tampered with in order to favour the ruling party.
- An open challenge was given by EC to prove allegations of EVM tampering.

What is an EVM and how exactly does it work?

- EVMs or electronic voting machines provide the voter with a button for each choice which is connected by a cable to an electronic ballot box.
- An EVM consists of two units—control unit and balloting unit—and these two are connected by a five-meter cable. When a voter presses a button against the candidate he/she wishes to vote for, the machine locks itself.
- This EVM can be opened only with a new ballot number. This way, EVMs ensure that one person gets to vote only once.

When were EVMs first used in elections?

- The use of EVM started back in 1982 Kerala Assembly elections. Prior to this only ballot papers and ballot boxes were allowed.

Production and Design

- There are only two Indian PSUs (Bharat Electronic Limited (BEL), Electronics Corporation of Indian Limited (ECIL)) that manufacture EVM machines. The secret source code is only accessible to a few engineers. Engineers who are in the factory

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have no clue about the constituency wise deployment of the machine.

Why is India using EVMs?

- Holding free, fair, and fast elections is a cornerstone of democracy and is guaranteed by the Constitution. Introduction of EVMs by due process of consultation and constitutional amendment in the 1980s and '90s was a step in the right direction to further strengthen the democratic process in India, which is by far the largest democracy in the world with more than 800 million voters.
- Using EVMs means doing away with paper ballots, and in turn, saving millions of trees from being cut.
- It makes the entire process of voting simpler—a click on the button and your vote is registered.
- EVMs, in the long-run, have turned out to be cost-effective as well.
- These machines don't require electricity and run on batteries.
- At the same time, the EVMs are lighter and portable compared to the huge ballot boxes.
- And most importantly, EVMs have made the vote-counting process much faster, delivering results in hours as against manual counting of votes which could take days.
- **VVPAT comes into the picture**
- After concerns were raised on whether EVMs are tamper-proof, the Election Commission appointed a committee to look into the possibility of linking the EVMs to a paper trail machine to show voters a slip with the party symbol for which they have voted. As a result, voters can immediately check if their vote is cast for the person/party of their choice.
- The Voter-Verified Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT) was first used in 2013 in Nagaland's Noksen Assembly constituency.

Questions are raised on EVMs, Yet again

- The EC has steadfastly maintained that the machines are perfect and that the software has been examined and re-examined by international experts.
- On the other, some IIT-trained engineers have shown how the machines can actually be manipulated by remote devices, or by inserting pre-programmed chips, or by selectively tampering with only 20% of them to

secure a simple majority. So, only a few constituencies will have those “chosen” machines and that would be enough to tilt the balance in favour of the ruling party.

- The EC says these allegations are outrageous because the whole system and process have been shown to detractors and the matter is settled.
- It is for the first time in India’s electoral history that the EC has been suspected of bias in favour of a ruling party.

Arguments that are in favour of Paper Ballot

- Following arguments question the EVM system and support Paper ballot.
- We invariably come across reports of malfunctioning EVMs.
- The only way an EVM can be tampered with is by physically opening it up and replacing the chipset inside it. The chipset used is non-reprogrammable and data is ‘burnt’ into the device. So, today it is possible to replace the chip if we have access to EVMs
- On the VVPAT (voter verifiable paper audit trail) front too, there are reports of malfunctioning. Also, as per the rules, paper ballots and VVPAT machines are not counted until the Returning Officer asks for it.
- Oldest democracy, US, still uses paper ballot system for the presidential elections as Americans feel safer in using paper ballots as compared to electronic voting machines.
- However, there are problems of paper ballot.
- Transporting them and guarding them is a problem.
- Ballot boxes can be captured.

Arguments in support of significance of EVMs

- EVMs led to a significant decline in electoral fraud, particularly in politically sensitive States as rigging elections became extremely expensive.
- Research has shown a link between luminosity and growth rate, suggesting that EVMs contribute to development.
- EVMs empowered those from the weaker sections of society who were victims of political or electoral violence. In particular, women, lower castes, and those less educated were more likely to participate in the electoral process when EVMs were used.

- EVMs made the electoral process more competitive.
- There has been a significant decline in the incidence of re-election, and winning margins have reduced dramatically.
- However, this does not imply that we lower our guards. The very idea of democracy is based on trust and belief in the fairness of the electoral process where the losing party lives to fight another day. Any erosion of this trust and belief would be an irreversible process with an uncertain outcome.

Way Forward:

- In a significant move from the past, The Opposition parties have demanded for a count of 50% of the VVPAT slips, as opposed to the current system of counting VVPAT slips in one randomly selected booth of each constituency, which is aimed at ensuring that EVMs have not been tampered with.
- ECI safeguards as of now is robust enough to prevent tampering of EVM’s, but VVPAT recounts could eliminate any remaining doubt about possible “insider fraud” by errant officials or manufacturers.

Taliban Talks

US-Taliban talks

- Since, the Afghanistan government has refused talks with Taliban, US has taken the initiative to make negotiations with Taliban.
- This resulted in 6-day meeting between US and Taliban in Qatar.
- The Taliban’s demands for peace in Afghanistan have been that all foreign troops must leave, full Islamic law and customs must be implemented, and the political system must not conflict with the Sharia.
- The recent draft peace pact between US and Taliban was discussed in Qatar.
- It states that foreign troops will leave Afghanistan within 18 months of agreement being signed.

Why US failed in Afghanistan?

- Afghanistan has historically been a difficult place for external invaders because of its complex tribal equations and its rugged mountainous terrain.
- The U.S., which has spent some \$877 billion on the war, has lost at least 2,000 military

personnel in Afghanistan since the war began in 2001.

- U.S. has carried out large-scale air operations in Afghanistan, but it has failed to stop the Taliban's momentum.
- So, US decided to get back its forces and started negotiation talks with Taliban.

Meeting in Russia:

- "Afghan Society of Russia" had arranged for informal meeting between Taliban and leaders from opposition party in Afghanistan.
- This is a rare meeting, because Taliban and leaders in Afghanistan had always refused for talk between them.
- None of the Afghanistan government officials are attending the meeting.
- In the meeting held in Russia, Taliban claimed that the current constitution of Afghanistan is invalid.
- The Taliban demanded a new Constitution for Afghanistan which is based on "inclusive Islamic system" to govern.
- They also asked the Islamic scholars to develop new constitution for the country.

Fear of People

- With US in desperate to leave Afghanistan, people fear that the regime could go back to Taliban as in 1994.
- The people feel that the Taliban government will be a puppet of Pakistan.
- Because Taliban is an ideological movement determined to re-establish a political order that is in alignment with Pakistan's geo-strategic ambitions.
- They also feel that the US-Taliban talks will undermine democracy and sovereignty of Afghanistan.
- The people of Afghanistan want a peaceful, pluralistic and prosperous country.

Role of Iran

- Iran, being neighbor to Afghanistan will play a key role in creating a stable regime in the war hit country.
- But US denies taking Iran into consideration for the peace talks.
- The 6+1 group meetings included representatives from Afghanistan, China, India, Iran, Pakistan, Russia, and the U.S must be resumed.
- Because instability in Afghanistan will affect all the neighborhood countries.

- India must involve Iran in talks for connectivity success.
- India, Iran and Russia were the founding countries of the International North-South Transport Corridor project in 2002.
- The corridor is intended to increase connectivity between India, Iran, Russia, landlocked Afghanistan and Central Asia and Europe. It would also advance their trading interests.
- Afghanistan is friendly with Iran as it announced that it would not allow the U.S. to use its bases in the country to conduct any act of aggression against Iran.
- Allowing Iran could also help US as Iran is the geopolitical hub connecting South, Central and West Asia and the Caucasus.
- The Strait of Hormuz, that crucial conduit, links Iran westwards to the Persian Gulf and Europe, and eastwards to the Gulf of Oman, South and East Asia, which could benefit Trade interest.

India's Stance

- India earlier said that that any peace talks should be Afghan-led, Afghan-owned, and Afghan-controlled and with participation of the government of Afghanistan.
- Reversing that stand it participated with two retired officials in the Moscow meeting.
- This is because US, Russia, China and even the Afghan government have all indicated that they are ready to talk with the Taliban.
- India's engagement demonstrates commitment to the idea of a stable, independent and peaceful Afghanistan.
- India says that its talks with Taliban will not be valid, as the Taliban have strong relationship with Pakistan.
- It also wants Afghanistan to have stable and democratic government with progress on education, women's rights, democracy and thus building an inclusive Afghanistan.

Suspending INF

Overview

- The 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty required the United States and the then Soviet Union to eliminate and permanently destroy all of their nuclear and conventional ground-launched ballistic and cruise missiles with ranges of 500 to 5,500 kilometers.
- Under the INF Treaty, the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. agreed to eliminate within three years all ground-launched-missiles of 500-5,500 km range and not to develop, produce or deploy these in future.
- The U.S. destroyed 846 Ground Launched Cruise Missiles (GLCMs) and the U.S.S.R., 1,846 missiles along with its support facilities.

Recent Developments

- US announced that it would suspend its obligations under the INF.
- The U.S. government says the new Russian missile violates provisions of the pact.
- US alleges that Russia has developed and deployed Novator 9M729 missiles, also known as the SSC-8, that could strike Europe at short notice. Russia has, however, repeatedly denied the allegations.
- Later, Russia also announced that it is suspending INF treaty.
- Russia also confirmed that it is in a plan to create new land-based missile system with a long-range Hypersonic missile.



Implications

- According to US, Cold War-era treaty did not address new missile threats from countries such as China, Iran and North Korea.
- A withdrawal will allow the U.S. to have new weapon options, which are not bound by the INF treaty, in the Pacific region where growing influence of China in the past decade is challenging the dominance of US in the region.
- China also thinks that USA will deploy missiles in Guam, a large military base in Micronesia, Okinawa -a string of islands in the East China Sea that belong to Japan.
- U.S. would be able to virtually box in the movement of Chinese naval ships in the West Pacific through Miyako Strait.
- In turn China has its own medium missiles such as DF-21D missiles.
- This suspension of INF treaty had dragged Russia and China into arms race that has potential of destabilising the Indo-Pacific.

General Studies 3

At the cost of quality

Introduction:

- On January 30, a little more than four years after the last hike, the Ministry of Science and Technology increased the fellowship stipend for PhD students by nearly 25%.
- The government says the hike will be reviewed periodically. Since the increase is far less than the 80% hike that research fellows have been demanding for the last six months, they have decided to continue with their protests.
- The decision to provide financial rewards for publication in science journals and patents is fraught with problems.

Cause for concern:

- Giving rewards based on papers published in journals, and determining the incentive based on whether the paper is published in an international or Indian journal, is fraught with problems.
- In China, for example, researchers were given about \$44,000 in 2016 for a single paper published in prestigious journals such as Nature and Science.
- The impact factor (a proxy for the relative importance of a journal) of journals was used to calculate the prize money for publication.
- This led to an unprecedented increase in unethical research practices and frauds committed by Chinese researchers.
- This could also happen in India, which already has an ignominious record in this area and has no nodal body to address scientific frauds and unethical practices.
- In addition, giving greater rewards for publication in international journals makes no sense as international journals are not uniformly superior in quality to Indian ones.

Reward for patents:

- The proposal to provide students an incentive of ₹1,00,000 on obtaining a patent (Indian or international) is a bigger recipe for disaster.
- While obtaining a patent is not difficult, it costs ₹10,000-₹30,000 to file a patent in India.
- CSIR faced a disastrous situation on 2016 due to thousands of patent registration

most of which were as simple as a biodata form.

- And hence incentivising patent registration has inbuilt problems.

Way forward:

- Our research scholars are the foundation of our science and most important.
- Timely disbursal of the promised fund and increasing the incentives periodically might reduce the financial burden of the researchers.

Standard deviations

Introduction

- The resignations of the National Statistical Commission's acting Chairperson and one of its members appear linked to the Centre's refusal to release new data on employment that were due to be made public in December 2018.
- They could also be related to unease about the recently unveiled back-series data on the economy, which recorded slower growth during the previous government, and were released by the NITI Aayog bypassing convention and the commission's views.

Unemployment at four-decade high

- Reports suggest that the findings of the new Periodic Labour Force Survey, for July 2017-December 2018, are not too flattering, with unemployment registering a four-decade high at 6.1% in 2017-18. The only year of comparable data when the unemployment rate was higher was in 1972-73. It was at 2.2% in 2011-12.
- Importantly, the data reportedly showed that the labour force participation rate (LFPR), the measure of people working or looking for jobs, declined from 39.5% in 2011-12 to 36.9% in 2017-18.
- This phenomenon of unemployment rising while the LFPR dipped is a cause for serious worry, explaining that it probably shows that people are simply giving up on finding jobs and have stopped seeking work.

Government's denial

- However, NITI Aayog vice-chairman Rajiv Kumar said the leaked unemployment report was only a draft and not approved by the government.

chains and informal jobs in the economy and whose effects have lingered.

- On the question of job-creation for the youth, the present government has been building an argument that jobs abound, but credible data are missing. Instead, proxy data from enrolments into social security schemes for formal sector employees are being touted as a sign of job-creation: economists have rightly called them out as inaccurate.
- The Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy has pegged job losses in 2018 at 11 million based on its regular employment surveys. The government's coy approach to jobs-related data may be due to its disastrous demonetisation gambit which hurt supply

Way Forward

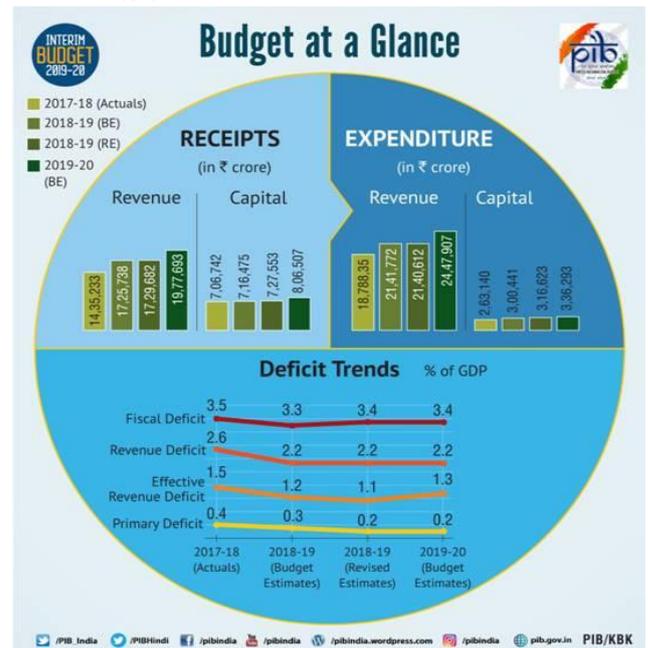
- A key role of the NSC, set up in 2006, is to verify whether data being put in the public domain are reliable and adequate. Information has been collected and disseminated by successive governments under laid-down schedules, earning Indian data greater global trust than most other emerging market peers, especially China.
- The government should give sufficient autonomy to bodies like NSC function without upending India's statistical integrity.

Highlights of Interim Budget 2019-20

SOP OPERA

- The Interim Budget 2019-20 was presented in Parliament on Feb 1 by the Union Minister for Finance, Corporate Affairs, Railways & Coal, Piyush Goyal.
- It contained elements that are aimed at benefiting three major segments of the population — farmers, informal sector workers, and salaried taxpayers — with announcements of an income support scheme for farmers, a new pension scheme for informal sector workers, and tax exemptions for salaried workers.
- Finance Minister announced the New Scheme- namely “**Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi (PM-KISAN)**” to extend direct income support at the rate of Rs. 6,000 per year to farmer families, having cultivable land upto 2 hectares is announced. The scheme was announced with an outlay of Rs.75,000 crore for the FY 2019-20 and Rs.20,000 crore in the Revised Estimates of FY 2018-19.
- Under this Government of India funded Scheme, Rs.2,000 each will be transferred to the bank accounts of around 12 crore Small and Marginal farmer families, in three equal installments. This programme would be made effective from 1st December 2018 and the first installment for the period upto 31st March 2019 would be paid during this year itself.
- While keeping tax rates unchanged, the Finance Minister announced that those earning up to **Rs 5 lakh a year would be exempt from income tax**. This effectively meant that those earning Rs 6.5 lakh a year would not need to pay tax if they made full use of the Rs 1.5 lakh exemption available under Section 80C of the Income Tax Act.
- In a bid to win over informal sector workers, the Mr.Goyal announced the **Pradhan Mantri Shram Yogi Maandhan Scheme** designed to ensure a fixed monthly pension of Rs 3,000 per month for informal sector workers above the age of 60. The contribution would be Rs 100 per month for those joining the scheme at the age of 29, while it would be just Rs 55 a month for those joining at the age of 18. The government will match the monthly

contributions with an equal contribution of its own.



Not really bullish on native cow breeds

- Finance Minister allotted Rs. 750 crore to the **Rashtriya Gokul Mission (RGM)** for the financial year 2018-19. The RGM aims to develop ‘Gokul Gram’ cattle care centres for indigenous breeds of high “genetic merit” as well as breeds that aren’t as gifted. The objective is to get native breeds to produce more milk, be more fecund, and to raise the quality of Indian cows and bulls to eventually outpace Jerseys and Holsteins.
- Setting up of “**Rashtriya Kamdhenu Aayog**” to upscale sustainable genetic upgradation of cow resources and to enhance production and productivity of cows has also been announced. The Aayog will also look after effective implementation of laws and welfare schemes for cow.

Separate Department of Fisheries

- To provide sustained and focused attention towards development of Fisheries, the Government has decided to create a separate Department of Fisheries.
- India is the second largest fish producing nation in the world accounting for 6.3% of global production. The fisheries sector contributes 1% to GDP and provides livelihood to about 1.45 crore people at the primary level.

- The Finance Minister announced **2% interest subvention** to the farmers pursuing the activities of animal husbandry and fisheries, who avail loan through Kisan Credit Card. Further, in case of timely repayment of loan, they will also get an additional 3% interest subvention.

Earning less than Rs 5 lakh? Save a neat Rs 12,500

- In the Budget, Mr. Goyal proposed raising the rebate amount to Rs. 12,500 and increasing the limit to Rs. 5 lakh a year by amending Section 87A of the Income Tax Act. Currently, the Section provides for a rebate of Rs. 2,500 for all taxpayers with an income of less than Rs. 3.5 lakh a year.
- This means that those earning up to Rs. 5 lakh a year will be exempt from tax. However, those earning more than Rs. 5 lakh will not be eligible for this and will have to pay tax according to the normal rates. For example, somebody earning Rs. 8 lakh a year will have to pay Rs. 72,500 of tax (Rs. 2.5 lakh taxed at 5% plus Rs. 3 lakh taxed at 20%).
- Since the 80C exemptions effectively reduce the taxable income, those earning up to Rs. 6.5 lakh a year will not have to pay tax if they make full use of the deductible investments such as Provident Fund.
- Finance Minister said that the **standard deduction** limit for salaried taxpayers would be raised to Rs 50,000 from the Rs 40,000 announced in last year's Budget.
- In another move designed to appeal to the masses, he said the Tax Deduction at Source (TDS) threshold on interest earned on bank/post office deposits has been proposed to be raised from Rs 10,000 to Rs 40,000. Further, the TDS threshold for deduction of tax on rent has also been proposed to be increased from Rs 1,80,000 to Rs 2,40,000.

Relax! Your second home is now tax-free

- The interim Budget has announced several incentives for homebuyers, owners and real estate developers, designed to give a boost the real estate sector.
- Mr. Goyal proposed to exempt the levy of income tax on notional rent on a second self-occupied house. Currently, the second home, even if it was occupied by the owner, was considered to be on rent and tax was levied on this notional rent.

- Further, the Minister proposed to increase the roll-over of capital gains under Section 54 of the Income Tax Act from investment in one residential house to two for a taxpayer with capital gains up to Rs. 2 crore. This benefit can be availed only once in a lifetime.
- The Minister also proposed to extend the period of exemption from levy of tax on notional rent on unsold inventories from a year to two, effective from the end of the year in which the project is completed. Earlier, developers with unsold properties had to pay tax on notional rent on those properties after one year of their completion.
- Also there will now be no tax on house rents up to Rs. 2.4 lakh from the previous limit of Rs. 1.8 lakh, aimed at boosting investment in second homes.

Lower, middle income classes gain

- Various proposals announced in the interim Budget to ease tax burden on salaried class and home-owners are welcome and will go a long way to help the small taxpayers as well as passive income earners such as senior citizens, according to tax analysts. They said the increased spending capacity with consumers would boost various sectors of the economy.
- The tax relief measures are bound to aid consumption across all consumer categories, especially 'essentials' in home and personal care, food and refreshment, thereby providing an impetus to the FMCG and services sectors.
- Raising the TDS threshold for interest and rental income should be a welcome to passive income earners such as senior citizens.

Budget promise: file returns, get tax refund in 24 hours

- Mr. Goyal has announced the **electronic assessment of Income Tax returns** aimed at improving governance and reducing the complexity in the tax system.
- Within the next two years, almost all verification and assessment of returns will be done electronically through anonymised back office, manned by tax experts and officials, without any personal interface between taxpayers and tax officers.
- The Minister said that due to the steps already taken to widen the tax base and ease the compliance process, direct tax

collections increased to almost Rs. 12 lakh crore in the current financial year, from Rs. 6.38 lakh crore in 2013-14.

- The number of returns filed, a measure of compliance, increased from 3.79 crore to 6.85 crore over this period, exhibiting an 80% growth in the tax base.

Telangana and Odisha pay more

- While the farm sector welcomed the government's direct income support scheme — PM-KISAN — experts said the amount offered to small and marginal farmers is lower than what is being provided by the governments of Telangana and Odisha.
- The Rythu Bandhu scheme of Telangana offers Rs. 10,000 per acre a year to all farmers, excluding tenant farmers, while the Krushak Assistance for Livelihood and Income Augmentation (KALIA) scheme of Odisha offers direct benefit cash transfer of Rs. 25,000 for a farm family over five seasons to small and marginal farmers.
- However, the income can be helpful to protect the small and marginal farmers from market and price fluctuation and absorb the inflationary cost increments. Around 72% of farmers are in this category and are likely to increase to 90% by 2025.

'Direct income support a good step'

- Eminent agriculture scientist, touted to be the 'father of the Green Revolution', M.S. Swaminathan welcomed the interim Budget proposal of direct income support to farmers through the PM Kisan Samman Nidhi scheme and termed it as a good step, particularly in wake of the agrarian crisis.
- He said that the provision of direct income support to farmers will enable them to purchase the inputs needed for a technological upgrading of farm operation. He also lauded the emphasis laid on the effective implementation of the ongoing schemes.

Taxpayers, MPs, MLAs can't avail farm income support

- According to the PM-KISAN operational guidelines, Income Tax assessee and sitting or former Members of Parliament or State legislatures are among those who have been excluded from the scope of the scheme.
- The list of exclusions also includes former and present holders of constitutional posts; serving and retired officers and employees

Officers IAS Academy, Chennai of the Union government or State governments, regular employees of local bodies, Class IV or Group D employees.

- Professionals including doctors, engineers, lawyers, chartered accountants and architects have been excluded apart from institutional landholders.

Rs 500 crore for pension for unorganised labour

- The Centre has allocated Rs. 500 crore for a new pension scheme, Pradhan Mantri Shram-Yogi Maandhan, for workers in the unorganised sector, even while reducing its allocation for an existing pension scheme by Rs. 775 crore.
- The new scheme, to be called the, will benefit unorganised sector workers who have a monthly income up to Rs. 15,000. It will provide them a monthly pension of Rs. 3,000 from the age of 60.
- However, an existing pension scheme, which already benefits more than 3 crore poor people who are senior citizens, disabled or widows, has had its allocation slashed. The National Social Assistance Programme (NSAP), a pension scheme administered by the Ministry of Rural Development, had originally been allocated Rs. 9,975 crore in the 2018-19 Budget. For 2019-20, the scheme's allocation has been cut to Rs. 9,200 crore, a drop of Rs. 775 crore.
- NSAP is a comprehensive social security and protection programme to reach every household of old, widows, orphaned children, *divyaang* and deprived as per the Socio Economic Caste Census (SECC).

New panel for welfare of nomadic communities

- Mr. Goyal announced that a committee will be set up under NITI Aayog to complete the task of identifying de-notified, nomadic and semi-nomadic communities, especially as they move from place to place in search of a livelihood. The committee will follow up on the work of the **Renke Commission** and the **Idate Commission**.
- A Welfare Development Board will also be set up under the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment to design and implement programmes for these hard-to-reach communities.

Funds cut for job scheme

- The interim budget may have provided a bonus for landholding farmers, but the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural

Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), which is a lifeline for landless labourers and other rural workers, faces a continued funds crunch.

- The scheme was allocated only Rs. 60,000 crore for the next financial year, slightly lower than its revised estimate of Rs. 61,084 crore for the current year.
- The last Budget had announced an original allocation of Rs. 55,000 crore for the scheme for 2018-19. However, by the end of 2018, the scheme had already exhausted 99% of its funding and had a negative net balance of Rs. 4,413 crore. Early in January, the Centre had announced an additional allocation of Rs. 6,084 crore for MGNREGA.
- Recognising that this amount was unlikely to suffice for the remainder of the year, the Rural Development Ministry had requested another supplementary allocation of Rs. 5,000 crore. Instead of increasing this year's allocation, however, this Budget has actually reduced next year's allocation for the scheme.
- Activists have warned that the funding crunch is resulting in difficulties in meeting the demand for work, as well as delayed payment of wages to workers.

Union Government's fiscal deficit target goes for a toss

- The Finance Minister said the fiscal deficit would be 3.4% of the GDP for both 2018-19 and 2019-20, compared with a target of 3.3% and 3.1% respectively. Economists have flagged that the government would be missing its fiscal deficit target for 2018-19 and 2019-20 as a matter of concern.
- Economists also expressed concern over the disinvestment target being retained at Rs. 80,000 crore for 2018-19 and increased to Rs. 90,000 crore for 2019-20. So far, the government had raised about Rs. 36,000 crore.
- The disinvestment target is still being maintained while it looks increasingly difficult to achieve. The actual deficit numbers will depend on the realised GST collections over the next two months and the government's ability to meet disinvestment target over a timeline of one month left for action before election code kicks in.
- Fiscal Indicators – Rolling Targets as a Percentage of GDP.

- India's **Debt to GDP ratio** was 46.5% in year 2017-18. The FRBM Act prescribes that the Debt to GDP ratio of the Government of India should be brought down to 40% by 2024-25.

		Revised	Budget	(Projections)	
		Estimates	Estimates	2020-21	2021-22
		2018-19	2019-20		
1.	Fiscal Deficit	3.4	3.4	3.0	3.0
2.	Revenue Deficit	2.2	2.2	1.7	1.5
3.	Primary Deficit	0.2	0.2	0.0	0.0
4.	Gross Tax Revenue	11.9	12.1	12.1	12.2
5.	Non-tax Revenue	1.3	1.3	1.3	1.3
6.	Central Government debt	48.9	47.3	45.4	43.4

Increased govt. sourcing, 2% subvention for loans a boost for MSMEs

- The MSMEs sector, the cornerstone of Indian economy, has got a boost in the Interim Budget, with the government offering 2% subvention for loans up to Rs. 1 crore and extending the Government eMarketplace (GeM) platform to support domestic services and trade.
- This will benefit the MSME sector greatly as 51% of all 634 lakh MSMEs are based in rural areas, consequently being a vital source of rural employment.
- The government has increased the share of its procurements from MSMEs through GeM to 25%. Of this, the material to the extent of at least 3% will be sourced from women owned SMEs. So far, GeM has registered transactions of more than Rs. 17,500 crore, which has led to savings of 25%-28%.

Goyal unveils Vision 2030, highlighting 10 dimensions

- Presenting the Interim Budget, Finance Minister laid out the government's vision for India in 2030, highlighting 10 most important dimensions.
 - To create physical and social infrastructure for ten trillion dollar economy and to provide ease of living.
 - Digital India led by the youths with innumerable start-ups and million of jobs.
 - To make India pollution free by focusing on Electrical Vehicles and renewables.
 - Rural industrialisation using modern technologies to generate massive employment.
 - Clean rivers, with safe drinking water to all Indians and efficient use of water

in irrigation using micro-irrigation techniques.

- Besides scaling up Sagarmala, India's coastline and ocean waters will power development.
- Through our space programme – Gaganyaan, India becoming the launch-pad of satellites for the World.
- Self sufficiency in food production and producing food in the most organic way.
- A healthy India by 2030 and a distress free health care and wellness system for all. Ayushman Bharat and women participation would be an important component in it.
- Employees working with elected Government, transforming India into Minimum Government Maximum Governance nation.

Vision 2030 to push-start EVs, mass transportation

- The emphasis laid on electric mobility in the '2030 Vision' is aimed at increasing energy security, reducing oil import dependence and reducing vehicular pollution.
- The government's commitment for a 'Clean & Green' India through proposals in the interim budget such as measures to reduce the use of fossil fuel in a phased manner by 2030 is expected to ensure faster adoption of electric vehicles (EVs) and environment friendly mass transportation in the country. Use of clean energy in the transportation sector will help India tackle the issue of climate change.
- The Society of Indian Automobile Manufacturers (SIAM) said it would work with the government in creating an ecosystem that would enable India to achieve the target of becoming the world leader in electric mobility. However, it requested the government to reduce the customs duty on lithium batteries from 5% to nil.

AI centre on the anvil

- The Finance Minister announced that a **National Artificial Intelligence Portal** will be developed soon as a part of the National Programme on 'Artificial Intelligence'.
- The 'National Programme on Artificial Intelligence' ties into an existing programme led by the Union Science

Officers IAS Academy, Chennai

Ministry called the National Mission on Interdisciplinary Cyber-Physical Systems (NM-ICPS). The latter was cleared by the Union Cabinet in December 2018 at a total outlay of Rs. 3,660 crore for five years.

- Artificial Intelligence is an important component of cyber physical systems. Cyber physical systems deal with training youth for new kinds of jobs that would be created due to the destruction of conventional jobs and the mechanisation of jobs. The mission aims to establish of 15 Technology Innovation Hubs (TIH), six Application Innovation Hubs (AIH), four Technology Translation Research Parks (TTRP).
- CPS and its associated technologies, include Artificial Intelligence (AI), Internet of Things (IoT), Machine Learning (ML), Deep Learning (DL), Big Data Analytics, robotics, quantum computing, quantum communication, quantum encryption (quantum key distribution), Data Science and Predictive Analytics.

Railways gets Rs 1.59 lakh cr., the highest-ever allocation

- Finance Minister proposed a capital expenditure of Rs. 1,58,658 crore for the Railways Ministry for the year 2019-20 in the Interim Budget. This is the highest-ever allocation for the national transporter, surpassing last year's allocation of Rs. 1,48,528 crore.
- The total outlay for 2019-20 comprises Rs. 64,587 crore from budgetary support, Rs. 10,500 crore from internal resources and Rs. 83,571 crore from extra-budgetary resources.
- The government expects railway earnings from passengers to grow to Rs. 56,000 crore from Rs. 52,000 crore in 2018-19, and from goods to grow by more than Rs. 10,000 crore to Rs. 1,31,565 crore.
- Mr. Goyal added that 2018-19 was the safest year in the history of Indian Railways. Additionally, all unmanned level crossings on broad gauge network had been eliminated. Railway officials said that consequentially, train accidents had reduced from 118 in 2013-14 to 47 in 2018-19.
- The Finance Ministry said that the first indigenously developed and manufactured semi high-speed 'Vande Bharat Express'

was a major leap in technology wholly-developed by Indian engineers.

- Mr. Goyal added that the **operating ratio** of Indian Railways is expected to improve to 95% in 2019-20 from 96.2% in 2018-19, and 98.4% in 2017-18. An operating ratio of 95% means that railways is spending 95 paise to earn 100 paise.

Single-window clearance for film-makers to get cameras rolling

- Mr. Goyal announced that there will be a single window clearance for Indian filmmakers and anti-camcorder regulations will be introduced in the Indian Cinematograph Act to prevent piracy.
- The single-window clearance mechanism, which provides a one-stop shop to seek permission to shoot at locations within India, was limited to foreign filmmakers so far. The move has the potential to play a huge role in boosting tourism in the country. Single-window clearance is expected to save pre-production time for filmmakers and producers.

'Undisclosed income of Rs 1.30 lakh cr. assessed'

- Finance Minister said the government's anti-black money measures over the past four-and-a-half years had brought undisclosed income of about Rs. 1.3 lakh crore to tax and led to the attachment of assets worth about Rs. 50,000 crore.
- The steps were in the form of Black Money (Undisclosed Foreign Income and Assets) and Imposition of Tax Act, the Fugitive Economic Offenders Act and demonetisation.
- The Minister said "benami" assets worth Rs. 6,900 crore and foreign assets worth Rs. 1,600 crore had been attached. In all, 3.38 lakh shell companies were detected and de-registered, and their directors disqualified.

Outlay for defence sector inches beyond Rs 3 lakh crore

- The allocation for Defence in the interim Budget stood at Rs. 3.18 lakh crore and Defence pensions at Rs. 1.12 lakh crore compared to last year's allocation of Rs. 2.95 lakh crore excluding pensions. Of this, the allocation for revenue expenditure is Rs. 2.01 lakh crore and capital expenditure is Rs. 1.08 lakh crore.
- In real terms the allocation is barely a hike after factoring in inflation and currency fluctuation. This is a worrisome scenario as

Officers IAS Academy, Chennai for the much-needed military modernisation as several multi-billion dollar Defence deals are in the pipeline.

4.9% hike in funds for Home Ministry

- The Home Ministry has got Rs. 1,03,927 crore for 2019-20 which is 4.9% more than Rs. 99,034 crore given in 2018-19. This figure includes Rs. 78.09 crore for the promotion of Hindi language.
- The Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF), engaged in anti-militancy operations in Jammu and Kashmir, the Northeast, and often deployed for internal security duties, has been allocated Rs. 23,742.04 crore for 2019-20.
- The Border Security Force, which guards the Indo-Pak and Indo-Bangladesh borders, has been allocated Rs. 19,647.59 crore for the next fiscal, in comparison to Rs. 18,585.96 crore given in 2018-19.
- The total allocation to Central Armed Police Forces, including the CRPF, Border Security Force, Indo-Tibetan Border Police, Central Industrial Security Force, Sashastra Seema Bal, Assam Rifles and National Security Guard is Rs. 71,618.70.
- Rs. 5,117 crore has been allocated for development of police infrastructure, including constructions of barracks, residential quarters, purchase of vehicles, arms and ammunition. An additional Rs. 3,378 crore has been allocated for modernisation of police forces.

Stocks gain as consumption gets Budget push

- While the interim Budget did not specifically make any announcement for the capital markets, investors gave a thumbs-up to the interim budget on expectations that the sops aimed at enhancing the farm income and tax benefits would boost consumer spend in the coming days.
- The 30-share Sensex gained more than 520 points during intra day trades to touch a high of 36,778.14, soon after the budget speech concluded. The index finally closed at 36,469.43, up 212.74 points, or 0.59%. Meanwhile, the broader Nifty ended the day at 10,893.65, up 62.70 points, or 0.58%.

Centre may relax angel tax norms for start-ups **Introduction**

- The Centre has set up a five-member working committee to look into revising the norms of the angel tax imposed on start-ups.

What is angel tax?

- It is a tax on the excess capital raised by an unlisted company through the issue of shares over and above the 'fair market value' of those shares. This excess capital is treated as income and taxed accordingly.
- This tax most commonly affects start-ups and the **angel investors** who back them.
(An angel investor is an individual who provides capital for a business start-up, in exchange for convertible debt or ownership equity)
- Angel tax was introduced in 2012, with the purpose of keeping money laundering in check.

Why is Angel tax problematic?

- While the intent of such an angel tax may be justifiable, the arbitrary nature of it means the cost of unintended consequences could be larger than the supposed benefits.
- In trying to curb money-laundering, the Indian Income Tax Act, 1961 gives income tax officials a free hand to harass even genuine start-ups looking to raise investments for their growth.
- Under the Act, the IT department is free to arbitrarily decide the 'fair market value' of a company's share and tax start-ups if the price at which their new shares are sold to investors is higher than the fair value of these shares.
- Several startups say that they find it difficult to justify the higher valuation to tax officials.

Govt's decision

- The committee set up by the government will, among other things, consider raising the threshold beyond which new investments into start-ups will be taxed.
- It is expected that start-ups with aggregate paid-up share capital and share premium of less than Rs 25 crore, against the previous threshold of Rs 10 crore, will not be taxed while attracting new investment.

Way Forward

- This would definitely benefit to a certain extent angel investors and start-ups. But it will not address the real problem with the angel tax, which has to do with the unbridled power that it vests in the hands of the income tax authorities.

- Investors, foreign or domestic, may become wary of investing in new ideas when they are taxed while risking money on untested ventures.
- So the government should look to withdraw the angel tax and focus instead on building the capability to better identify and rein in illegal wealth. Otherwise it risks killing the nascent start-up ecosystem in the country.

Growth prop

Introduction

- The Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) has decided to cut the policy repo rate by 25 bps to 6.25% in its latest bi monthly policy review.
- The RBI also changed the policy stance to 'neutral' from 'calibrated tightening'. The move will enable banks to lower their lending rates.

Why MPC decided to cut repo?

- With Consumer Price Index-based inflation having continued to slow and projected to stay well below the medium-term target of 4% till at least the October-December quarter, the MPC saw an opportune moment to pivot to a growth-supportive stance. CPI grew by 2.2% in December its slowest in the last 18 months.
- The need to bolster economic momentum is evident from the RBI's downward revision of the forecast for growth in the first half of the next fiscal year. The projection has been lowered to a range of 7.2-7.4%, from 7.5% projected in the RBI's December statement, as moderating global growth and slowing overseas demand add uncertainties to the prevailing domestic imbalances.
- Specifically, production and import of capital goods, which is a key gauge of investment demand, contracted in November/December and credit flows to industry remain muted.
- With an overall shortfall of 4% in rabi sowing across various crops, and storage in major reservoirs at just 44% of the full level, the slowdown in farm output growth may, worryingly, end up being more protracted.

Other factors

- The central bank may also have been guided by the evolving stance of other global central banks including the US Federal Reserve and the European Central

Bank, which appear inclined to keep monetary policy loose in the face of slowing growth.

- The decision to cut rates, however, carries the risk of being perceived as a monetary stimulus after a relatively expansionist fiscal policy in the run-up to the national polls.
- If the reduction in policy rates is to be accompanied by an interim dividend or transfer of surplus to the government before the end of the current fiscal, it is bound to be seen as a compromise on the RBI's autonomy.

Conclusion

- The RBI's policy statement fails to make any mention of its concern about fiscal prudence. With the Interim Budget showing some slippage from the fiscal roadmap and projecting a budget deficit of 3.4% for both the current financial year and the next, the risk of government borrowing **crowding out** private investment demand remains tangibly real.
- The central bank should resume normal service on providing salutary caution to the government after the coming general election.

A booster dose for consumption, investment

Introduction

- Since Budget 2019 is the last before the general election this year, it was widely expected to be an assessment of the present government's performance.
- It is fair that the government, which imposed the painful reforms and undertook difficult action, should also distribute some rewards of that reform.

Shopping for votes

- There is an income support scheme for farmers who are reeling under the impact of falling realisations for their crops, and a pension scheme for informal sector workers earning up to Rs 15,000 a month. There are income tax concessions for the middle class that have been carefully framed to target the lower rung.
- The Rs 6,000 a year income support to farmers will benefit 12 crore households, which is almost half of the total number of households. The scheme alone could inject Rs 95,000 crore into the farm economy in

the current and next fiscals. CRISIL estimates this would boost profit from farming by 22%.

- Similarly, the increase in standard deduction from Rs 40,000 to Rs 50,000 may be small but it will cover three crore taxpayers, which is again almost half of the 6.8 crore taxpayers. The income tax rebate on those with taxable annual income of up to Rs 5 lakh a year will benefit three crore middle class voters that includes traders, small businesses, those who have just joined the formal workforce and pensioners.
- The housing-related tax proposals can give a leg-up to the real estate sector, which is a job-creator and is now in trouble.

Need to boost consumption, investment

- Some of these ideas may actually work in economic terms as they put money in people's hands. These announcements should push up consumption and in the process, would boost the private-sector investment cycle. That is important because the private sector investment has been slowing down in the past couple of years.
- The tax rebates, the increase in standard deduction, and the hike in the TDS threshold on interest earned on deposits are also consumption triggers.
- Coming after two years of slowing private consumption, continuing sluggish rural demand and wage growth the measures in the Interim Budget can help re-invoke demand from middle and lower strata. That would be opportune because the global economy is witnessing weak and asynchronous growth, with risks tilted to the downside.
- Next fiscal, therefore, India's growth will have to be driven largely domestically. Private consumption, which accounts for over 55% of GDP, can be that domestic driver.

Rewards of higher growth

- It may be asked how payment of Rs 20,000-Rs 75,000 crore can be made to farmers and the tax benefits given with only a marginal impact on the fiscal deficit. But a larger size economy can afford to spend larger absolute amounts with only a small rise in deficit ratios and borrowing requirements.

- Tax receipts have grown from 10% of GDP — a level at which they had stagnated since the tax cuts after the global financial crisis — to 12%. Although the GST has not yet resulted in a rise in indirect tax ratios above 5.5%, it is likely to do so in the future as it stabilises. The transfers to farmers and tax cuts amount to only 0.4% of GDP this year and are partially funded by a 0.3% rise in tax ratios.

The downside

- The PM-KISAN— inspired by Telangana’s Rythu Bandhu — targets only landed farmers who own up to 2 hectares, while bypassing landless cultivators, the most vulnerable class in the agriculture sector.
- The PM-KISAN scheme is likely to encourage further fragmentation of already much fragmented landholdings. Farming households holding larger land parcels will try to split holdings to try to qualify for the benefits under the scheme.
- Had the scheme been dovetailed with a replacement of the highly distortionary fertilizer subsidy with a direct benefit cash transfer, not only would a long-pending reform have been accomplished but the income support offered to farmers could have been nearly twice as much as has been announced.

Overreach of power?

- While these sops will benefit sections of the population, the question is whether it is correct for a government that will be in power for less than two months in the next financial year to write into the statute books proposals that are permanent.
- Though some past governments have announced sops in their interim budgets with an eye on elections, this budget has gone much further by announcing very significant measures.

Conclusion

- The focus of the full Budget in June-July next, irrespective of political outcome, needs to be generously on the lower- and lower-middle income strata. The next leg of growth can then be materially inclusive and therefore more sustainable.

The return of targeted cash transfers

Introduction

- The government in its Interim Budget has announced a scheme, Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi, under which

Officers IAS Academy, Chennai vulnerable landholding farmer families, having cultivable land up to 2 hectares, will be provided direct income support of Rs 6,000 a year.

- The appeal of some form of income transfer is now seriously being discussed by all political formations.

Who will benefit?

- The proposal of transferring some income to every citizen is built on the twin principles of **universality** and a notion of **minimum basic income** to those living at the poverty line. The principle of universality is at the core of it given the problems of targeting. But some form of income support to those who are unable to participate in labour market has been there in most countries in some form or other including in India, like the National Social Assistance Programme (NSAP) pensions for widows, elderly and disabled.
- Although the idea of Universal Basic Income (UBI) has been in discussion for decades, no country has implemented it. While a proposal for UBI was rejected by a three-fourth majority in Switzerland, Finland which started a pilot has now discontinued it. But even in Finland, the pilot was not a strict UBI but a social protection scheme aimed at only the unemployed.
- In developed countries, the UBI is supposed to supplement existing social security provisions and a top-up over and above universal provision of health, education and so on. In the Indian context, most arguments in favour of UBI are premised on the inefficiencies of existing social security interventions and seek to replace some of these with direct cash transfers.

Not leakage proof

- It is not just the fascination for targeting the poor which is at the core of these proposals but also a belief that all existing forms of social security transfers are inefficient. It is not true that the system of cash transfers is efficient and therefore leakage proof.
- Several studies on cash transfers including one by J-PAL South Asia for NITI Aayog found that cash transfers are not greatly superior in terms of leakages compared to other schemes of in-kind transfer such as the public distribution system (PDS).
- On the other hand, numerous studies have documented that a move towards

universalisation and use of technology enabled Chhattisgarh and Tamil Nadu to reduce leakages in the PDS. But the real message from these experiments is also that universalisation is the key to efficient delivery of services against targeting proposed by these cash transfer schemes.

Not a panacea

- The obsession with cash transfers also comes with an understanding that these will take care of all problems. The current sets of proposals claim these as silver bullets for agrarian crisis to malnutrition to educational deficit and also a solution for the job crisis.
- The real issue with the approach of a targeted cash transfer scheme is that it envisions the role of the state to only providing cash income to the poor. This would imply that citizens could be left at the mercy of private, for-profit players to avail even basic services. This might incentivise the state to shirk its constitutional responsibility of providing basic entitlements to all.

Jobs, best antidote

- The best antidote to poverty is enabling citizens to earn their living by providing jobs. For those who are willing to work, schemes such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme should be strengthened to enable them to earn decent incomes. Similarly, the

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crisis in agriculture is unlikely to be resolved by income transfers.

- But even with free and universal access to public services and access to livelihood opportunities, there may be a role for cash transfers, particularly for those who are unable to access the labour market or are marginalised due to other reasons.
- The NSAP seeks to do exactly that by providing pensions to elderly, widows and disabled. But even for these vulnerable and marginalised groups, the Central contribution to pensions has been only Rs 200 per month.

Conclusion

- If uplift of the poor is a priority, why not provide decent employment opportunities, minimum wages and social security to all workers? Why not spend on universalising access to, and provision of, basic public services to all? Why, contrarily, are there periodic cuts in social sector spending, including on public education and primary health; amendments in labour laws in favour of corporates; and privatisation and contractualisation even within the public sector?
- Hurried income transfers before the election could be considered as 'cash for votes', but the larger danger entails the state's diminishing accountability towards its citizens, of upholding their rights to basic entitlements and to work.