

OFFICERS' PULSE

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COVERAGE.

The Hindu

The Indian Express

PIB

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AT A GLANCE & IN DEPTH.

Polity and Social Issues

Economy

International Relations

Environment

Science and Tech

Culture

CURRENT AFFAIRS WEEKLY
THE PULSE OF UPSC AT YOUR FINGER TIPS



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News @ a glance

POLITY

Clarification:

- In Pulse 27 edition, under the topic “NOTA” it is given that, “NOTA option in the Indian electoral system was introduced in India following the **2013 Supreme Court (SC) directive** in the *People’s Union for Civil Liberties v. Union of India* judgment. The Supreme Court held that “If the right to vote is a statutory right, then the right to reject a candidate is a fundamental right of speech and expression under Article 19 (1) (a) of the Constitution.”
- However, it should be noted that, in the *Rajbala v. State of Haryana case (2015)*, the SC held that the right to vote and the right to stand for elections is a **constitutional right**. In 2017 CSE prelims, a similar question was asked (**Right to vote and to be elected in India is a**) and as per upsc key the answer is it is a **constitutional right**.

1) Postal Ballots for NRIs

What’s in the news?

- Recently, the Election Commission of India (ECI) wrote to the Law Ministry, proposing to extend the facility of postal ballots to overseas non-resident Indians (NRIs) for the Assembly elections in Assam, Kerala, Puducherry, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal in 2021.
- The ECI proposed **amending the Conduct of Election Rules, 1961**, in order to allow this facility.

How can overseas voters currently vote in Indian elections?

- **Prior to 2010**, an Indian citizen who is an eligible voter and was residing abroad for more than six months owing to employment, education or otherwise, **would not have been able to vote** in elections. This was because the NRI’s name

was deleted from electoral rolls if he or she stayed outside the country for more than six months at a stretch.

- After the passing of the **Representation of the People (Amendment) Act, 2010**, eligible NRIs who had stayed abroad beyond six months have been **enabled to vote, but only in person at the polling station where they have been enrolled as an overseas elector**.
- Yet, the provision of having to visit the polling booth in person has discouraged eligible voters from exercising their mandate. Only a **very low proportion** of eligible overseas residents actually registered or turned up to vote.

What is the current strength of NRI voters?

- According to a UN report of 2015, **India’s diaspora population is the largest in the world** at 16 million people.
- Registration of NRI voters, in comparison, has been very low: a little over 1 lakh overseas Indians registered as voters in India, according to the ECI.

Government’s proposal

- In the winter session of Parliament in 2017, the government **proposed to remove the restriction imposed by Section 20A of the Representation of the People Act**, which required them to be physically present to vote in their constituencies.
- The Bill provided for overseas voters to be able to **appoint a proxy to cast their votes on their behalf**, subject to conditions laid down in the Conduct of Election Rules, 1961. The Bill was later passed in 2018, but **lapsed with the dissolution of the 16th Lok Sabha**.
- Now the ECI has approached the government to permit NRIs to vote via postal ballots similar to a system that is already used by service voters (**the Electronically Transmitted Postal Ballot System, or ETPBS**).

What is ETPBS and how does it function?

- The **Conduct of Election Rules, 1961** was **amended in 2016 to allow service voters to use the ETPBS**.
- Under this system, **postal ballots are sent electronically to registered service voters**. The service voter can then download the ETPB, register their mandate on the ballot and send it to the returning officer of the constituency via ordinary mail. The post will include an attested declaration form (after being signed by the voter in the presence of an appointed senior officer who will attest it). The postal ballot **must reach the returning officer by 8 a.m. on the day of the counting of results**.
- This facility is **now available for service voters** (being a member of the armed Forces of the Union; or a member of a force to which provisions of the Army Act, 1950; a member of an Armed Police Force of a State, and serving outside that State; or a person who is employed under the Government of India, in a post outside India) and the ECI now proposes to extend this facility to overseas voters as well. For this to commence, the Law Ministry has to amend the Conduct of Election Rules, 1961.

Are postal ballots a viable means of voting?

- The ETPBS method **allowed for greater turnout among service voters** in the 2019 Lok Sabha election.
- With increasing mobility of citizens across countries for reasons related to work, the postal ballot method has been recognised by the **International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance** (an intergovernmental organisation that works to support democratic processes and institutions) as a means to allow overseas voters to exercise their right, subject to certain conditions normally related to the time spent abroad or the work carried out abroad.
- Postal ballots were proven to be a **secure and an easy way** of registering the mandate in the presidential elections in the United States recently with many voters preferring to use this method due to the COVID-19 social distancing norms.
- A postal ballot mechanism that allows for **proper authentication of the ballot** at designated consular/embassy offices and an effective postal system should ease this

process for NRIs, but the rules must be clearly framed for eligibility on the basis of time spent away from the country.

2) Health data shows India doesn't need a two-child policy

What's in the news?

- The latest data from the National Family Health Survey-5 (NFHS-5) provides evidence of an **uptake in the use of modern contraceptives** in rural and urban areas, an **improvement in family planning demands being met**, and a **decline in the average number of children borne by a woman**.
- The data prove that the country's population is stabilising and fears over a population explosion and calls for a two-child policy are misguided.

Key Findings

- The first part of the NFHS-5 report, which was made public earlier this month, records data for 17 States and five Union Territories.
- The analysis of the data by the **international non-profit Population Council (PC)** shows that the **Total Fertility Rate** (number of children born per woman) has **decreased across 14 out of 17 States and is either at 2.1 children per woman or less**.
- This also implies that most States have attained **replacement level fertility**, i.e., the average number of children born per woman at which a population exactly replaces itself from one generation to the next.
- While during NFHS-3 and NFHS-4, conducted between 2005 and 2016, there was a decline in the use of modern methods of contraception (oral pills, condoms, intra-uterine device) across 12 of 22 States and UTs, in NFHS-5 as many as 11 out of 12 States where there was a slump have witnessed an increase in their use.
- Experts draw attention to the **rise in child marriages** recorded by the Survey and appeal that policy makers should pay attention to this area to curb early pregnancies.

3) Standing committee on Home Affairs

What's in the news?

- The standing committee on Home Affairs has submitted its report to Rajya Sabha Chairman Venkaiah Naidu.

Recommendations

Need for a comprehensive public health Act

- The standing committee recommended that there should be a comprehensive public health Act with suitable legal provisions to **keep checks and controls over private hospitals** in times of a pandemic and to curb black marketing of medicines.
- There had been several reported instances of beds reserved for COVID-19 patients in private hospitals being sold at exorbitant rates.

Awareness campaigns on repurposed medicines

- The committee suggested that the government should be proactive by holding awareness campaigns on cheaper and effective repurposed medicines to prevent people from panicking and spending a huge amount of money on expensive drugs.

COVID-19 insurance

- The committee observed that in the initial phase of the pandemic, medical insurance was not extended to patients with COVID-19 infection. With exorbitant charges levelled by private hospitals, many had to suffer.
- There is a need to have regulatory oversight on all hospitals working in the country to prevent refusal to accept insurance claims. The committee recommended that the target should be to make COVID-19 treatment cashless for all people that are having insurance coverage.

Separate wing in NDMA

- While appreciating the work done by the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) by coming out with standard operating procedures (SOPs), guidelines and awareness generation, and most importantly, acting as a nodal centre for funding manpower deployment to meet exigencies, the committee recommended that a **separate wing may be formed in the NDMA that will specialise in handling /managing pandemics like COVID-19 in future.**
- This wing may take a leading role in building a partnership of government with

the public sector, corporates, NGOs and other stakeholders.

Mid-day meal

- The committee expressed concern that with schools shut down now for more than nine months, many children were deprived of mid-day meals. Many States continued the scheme by delivering **dry ration to students** at their homes or giving them allowances. But this was not uniform.
- The committee, therefore, strongly recommended that the Ministry of Home Affairs, along with the Department of Food and Public Distribution, take up the matter with the State governments to **ensure that the local administrations are delivering the rations/ allowances in time and this should be continued until the schools reopen.**

4) Scheduled Castes post-matric scholarship

What's in the news?

- The Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs has approved major and transformatory changes in the centrally sponsored **Post Matric Scholarship Scheme for students belonging to Scheduled Castes** to benefit at least 40 million SC students in the next five years so that they can successfully complete their higher education.
- The Centre's share of the cost of the scheme vis-a-vis that of the states had also been increased. The **Centre will pay 60% of the scholarship amount while the states would bear 40% of the cost.**
- Under the current formula, the Centre provides only funds above the 'committed liability', which in effect translates to about 11 per cent of the total cost. This led to many states ending the scheme.
- The cabinet has approved a total investment of Rs 59,048 crores, of which the Centre would contribute Rs 35,534 crores, or 60%, with the states providing the rest. The central assistance was around Rs 1,100 crores annually during 2017-18 to 2019-20.

About the scheme

- The Post Matric Scholarship Scheme for Scheduled Castes allows **students to**

pursue any post-matric course starting from Class 11 and onwards.

- The central government is committed to giving a big push to this effort so that the **gross enrolment ratio (GER) in higher education** of SC students would reach the national standard within five years, the statement said. **The GER ratio for SC students is around 20% while the national average is 27%.**
- The focus of the scheme would be on enrolling the poorest students, timely payments, comprehensive accountability, continuous monitoring and total transparency.
- A campaign will be launched to enrol the students, from the poorest households, passing the 10th standard in the higher education courses of their choice.
- According to government estimates, **13.6 million students** currently not pursuing

higher education would be able to do so in the next five years because of the revamped scheme.

- The scheme will be run on an online platform with robust cyber security measures that would assure transparency, accountability, efficiency, and timely delivery of the assistance without any delays.
- Transfer of financial assistance to the students under the scheme shall be in **DBT [direct benefit transfer] mode**, and preferably using the Aadhaar Enabled Payment System.
- **Community audits** of the scheme would be conducted to make sure the benefits were reaching the students.

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ENVIRONMENT

1) Overexploitation, long life cycle have endangered a common Himalayan herb

Himalayan trillium



- It is famously called Nag Chatri and found at an altitude of 2,400-4,000 metres above sea level.
- It is a slow growing plant. It can be found in the countries **India, Bhutan, Nepal, China, Afghanistan and Pakistan**.
- In India, it is found in four states only- Himachal Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir, Sikkim, and Uttarakhand.
- It is one of the **Himalayan medicinal plants** which is used to cure diseases such as dysentery, wounds, skin boils, inflammation, sepsis, as well as menstrual and sexual disorders.
- Recently, it was found that it has **anti-aging and anti-cancer properties**.

Why in the news?

- Recently, Himalayan Trillium has been put under the **ENDANGERED** category by IUCN after its over-exploitation due to its medicinal quality.
- It is vulnerable to poachers due to huge market demand.
- Though a common plant in the Himalayan region, it is expected that by 2079, 50% of its population will decline.
- Long life cycle, slow to reach reproductive maturity, highly specific habitat requirement, high trade value, increasing market demand and poor capacity for seed

dispersal are other factors which can be responsible for its decline.

How to conserve this plant?

- **Stop Illegal trade:** Implementation and enforcement of sustainable collection protocols and quotas and designation of areas of natural habitat to local communities for management of harvest are the best option to control its illegal trade.
- **Implement FairWild Standard:** It is a global framework for implementing a sustainable and fair trading system for wild-collected plant ingredients and their products. It will help traders, and concerned agencies in the sustainable harvest and trade of the species.
- **Public awareness:** Educate the public surrounding about the threats to the species and best harvesting practices.

2) Pokhran's 'firefly bird diverters' shine to save the Great Indian Bustard

About Great Indian Bustard



- It is **CRITICALLY ENDANGERED** bird; only 150 of them are left in the wild in India.
- **Only two districts in Rajasthan** — Jaisalmer and Barmer — have a **breeding GIB population in the wild**. The bird can also be found in very small numbers in

Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka, Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh.

- It is endangered by hunting and loss of its habitat, which consists of large expanses of dry grassland and scrub.
- At present, the GIB populations in India are too small and fragmented.

Firefly bird diverters

- They are the flaps installed on power lines.
- They work as reflectors for bird species and birds can spot them from a distance of about 50 meters and change their path of flight to avoid collision with power lines.



Why in the News?

- In a report by the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC) it was found that the high-tension power lines of Pokhran area of Rajasthan were the reason for 15% reduction in Great Indian Bustard population.
- GIBs are one of the heaviest flying birds in India. Therefore, when they encounter these wires, they are unable to change the direction of their flight.
- To tackle the issue, MoEFCC, along with **Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS)** jointly initiated a program where firefly bird diverters were installed along two stretches of power lines of approximately 6.5 km.
- A total of 1,813 firefly bird diverters are being installed in this stretch — a model that has been endorsed by experts from the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Species Survival Commission's (SSC) Bustard Specialist Group.
- The diverter will not only save GIB but other species of large birds, including migratory birds.

Wildlife Conservation Society

- WCS is a non-governmental Organisation working for saving wildlife and wild places

worldwide. It is headquartered in New York.

- WCS India has been working since 1988, and is headquartered in Bengaluru.

3) World's oldest panda in captivity dies in China

About Giant Panda



- The panda, with its distinctive black and white coat, is adored by the world and considered a national treasure in China.
- Pandas live mainly in temperate forests high in the mountains of southwest China.
- The Pandas subsist almost entirely on bamboo. They must eat around 26 to 84 pounds of it every day, depending on what part of the bamboo they are eating.
- According to IUCN they are given **VULNERABLE** status.

Why in the news?

- The oldest Giant Panda named Xinxing, which lived for 38 years and 4 months (equal to a person living for 110 years) died in China's Chongqing Zoo.

4) New population of blue whales discovered in western Indian Ocean

Blue Whales



- Blue whales are the largest animals ever known to have lived on Earth. These

magnificent marine mammals rule the oceans at up to 100 feet long and upwards of 200 tons.

- According to IUCN, they are put under **ENDANGERED** species.
- During certain times of the year, a single adult blue whale consumes about 4 tons of krill (small shrimp like animals) a day.
- Blue whales live in all the world's oceans, except the Arctic, occasionally swimming in small groups but usually alone or in pairs. They often spend summers feeding in polar waters and undertake lengthy migrations towards the Equator as winter arrives.
- They emit a series of pulses, groans, and moans, and it's thought that, in good conditions, blue whales can hear each other up to 1,000 miles away.
- Aggressive hunting in the 1900s by whalers seeking whale oil drove them to the brink of extinction. Between 1900 and the mid-1960s, some 360,000 blue whales were slaughtered. They finally came under protection with the 1966 **International Whaling Commission**, but they've managed only a minor recovery since then.
- Blue whales have few predators but are known to fall victim to attacks by sharks and killer whales, and many are injured or die each year from impacts with large ships.

Why in the news?

- Scientists have discovered a population of blue whales in the North Western Indian Ocean through analysis of calling sound recordings from the region.
- Scientists say that there is an urgent need to learn more about this species and its behaviour as there is a huge threat to them by maritime industries.

5) Habitats Trust awards conservation grants

About The Habitats Trust

- It is a grant providing trust to those institutions and individuals who are engaged in wildlife conservation work.
- The grants facilitate conservation work through funding on a partnership model. There are four categories — Strategic Partnership (₹5 lakhs), Lesser-Known Habitats (₹15 lakhs), Lesser-Known Species

(₹10 lakhs) and Conservation Hero (₹10 lakhs).

Malabar Tree Toad



- They are **endemic to Western Ghats**.
- This species is known to live in **tree habitats**. The Malabar Tree Toad stays on trees for much of its life, only coming down during the breeding season.
- IUCN has put this species under **ENDANGERED** status.

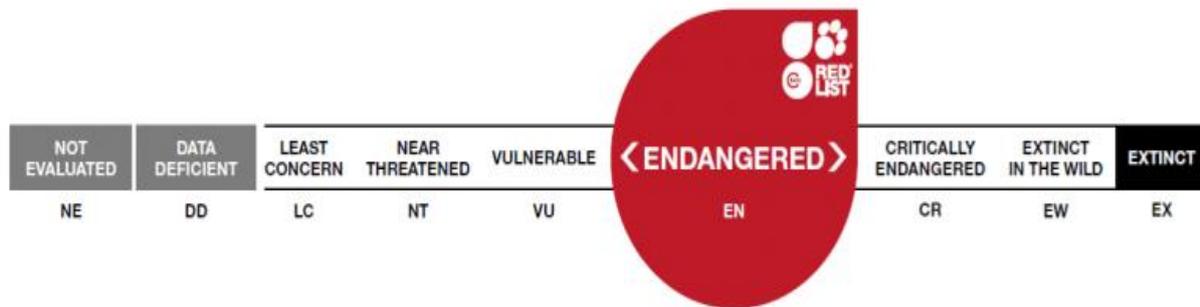
Why in the news?

- The Habitats Trust announced grants under Lesser-known Species Grant to Metastring Foundation which is working on the conservation Of Malabar Tree Toad across Maharashtra, Goa, Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu.

6) Kerala to update red list of animals, birds

What is the Red List of IUCN?

- The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species is the world's most comprehensive inventory of the global conservation status of plant and animal species. It uses a set of quantitative criteria to evaluate the extinction risk of thousands of species.
- These criteria are relevant to most species and all regions of the world. With its strong scientific base, the IUCN Red List is recognised as the most authoritative guide to the status of biological diversity.
- The IUCN Red List Categories define the extinction risk of species assessed. Nine categories extend from NE (Not Evaluated) to EX (Extinct).



Why in the news?

- Kerala is about to update its red list of threatened species in accordance with the IUCN Red List according to local threats and risks.
- State-specific conservation data of its threatened species will help Kerala state to protect its habitat and address the conservation threats.

7) Teams formed to trace missing tortoise

Aldabra Giant Tortoise



- The Aldabra Giant Tortoise (*Aldabrachelys gigantea*), one of the largest tortoise species on Earth, is endemic to the **Aldabra atoll, Seychelles**.
- It has been given **VULNERABLE** status by IUCN. These tortoises can live upto 200 years.

- Once found all over the Indian Ocean, their population is reduced due to sailors catching them for food.

Madras Crocodile Bank

- It is about 40 km away from Chennai City which provides shelter to endangered species of Crocodiles, snakes, lizards and tortoises.
- It was setup in 1976 with the specific goal of securing breeding populations of the three species of Indian crocodile: the mugger (*Crocodylus palustris*), the saltwater crocodile (*Crocodylus porosus*) and the rarest of all, the gharial (*Gavialis gangeticus*).
- It promotes the conservation of reptiles and amphibians and their habitats through education, scientific research and captive breeding.

Why in the News?

- 2 Aldabra tortoises have been stolen from the Madras Crocodile Bank in November 2020. Mamallapuram police has set up a special police team to investigate and rescue these tortoises.
- Generally they are smuggled for meat or as pets.

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ECONOMY

1) Labour Codes

Background

- The Parliament recently passed three labour law codes that complete the government's consolidation of 29 labour laws into four codes. The three Bills are the Industrial Relations Code, 2020, the Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code, 2020 and the Social Security Code, 2020.
- The first of the four codes- Code on Wages Bill was passed in 2019.
- It should be noted the **labour falls under the concurrent zlist** of the Constitution. Therefore, both Parliament and state legislatures can make laws regulating labour.

Code on Wages

- The Code replaces the following four laws:
 1. the Payment of Wages Act, 1936
 2. the Minimum Wages Act, 1948
 3. the Payment of Bonus Act, 1965
 4. the Equal Remuneration Act, 1976
- **Coverage:** The Code will apply to all employees to enforce minimum wage among **both formal and informal sector workers**.
- **Floor wage:** According to the Code, the **central government will fix a floor wage**, taking into account the living standards of workers. Further, it may set different floor wages for different geographical areas.
- The minimum wages decided by the central or state governments must be higher than the floor wage. In case the existing minimum wages fixed by the central or state governments are higher than the floor wage, they cannot reduce the minimum wages.
- **Fixing the minimum wage:** The Code prohibits employers from paying wages less than the minimum wages. Minimum wages will be notified by the central or state governments. The minimum wages will be revised and reviewed by the central or state governments at an interval of **not more than five years**.
- **Overtime:** The central or state government may fix the number of hours that constitute a normal working day. In case employees

work in excess of a normal working day, they will be entitled to overtime wage, which must be **at least twice the normal rate of wages**.

- **Deductions:** Under the Code, an employee's wages may be deducted on certain grounds including: (i) fines, (ii) absence from duty, (iii) accommodation given by the employer, or (iv) recovery of advances given to the employee, among others. **These deductions should not exceed 50% of the employee's total wage.**
- **Gender discrimination:** The Code prohibits gender discrimination in matters related to wages and recruitment of employees for the same work or work of similar nature. Work of similar nature is defined as work for which the skill, effort, experience, and responsibility required are the same.
- **Advisory boards:** The central and state governments will constitute advisory boards to advise the respective governments on various issues including: (i) fixation of minimum wages, and (ii) increasing employment opportunities for women.

The Code on Social Security, 2020

- It replaces nine laws related to social security, including the Employees' Provident Fund Act, 1952, the Maternity Benefit Act, 1961, and the Unorganised Workers' Social Security Act, 2008. Social security refers to measures to ensure access to health care and provision of income security to workers.
- **Changes in definitions:** The Code changes the definitions of certain terms. These include: (i) expanding the definition of **'employees'** to include workers employed through contractors, (ii) expanding the definition of **"inter-state migrant workers"** to include self-employed workers from another state, (iii) expanding the definition of **"platform worker"** to additional categories of services or activities as may be notified by the government, (iv) expanding the definition of **audio-visual productions** to include

films, web-based serials, talk shows, reality shows and sports shows, and (v), **exempting construction works** from the ambit of “building or other construction work” if the total cost of construction work exceeds Rs 50 lakhs (and if they employ more than a certain notified number of workers).

- **Social security funds for unorganised workers, gig workers and platform workers:** The central government will set up a social security fund for unorganised workers, gig workers and platform workers. Further, state governments will also set up and administer separate social security funds for unorganised workers.
- **Gig workers refer to workers outside of the traditional employer-employee relationship (e.g., freelancers). Platform workers are workers who access other organisations or individuals using online platforms and earn money by providing them with specific services. Unorganised workers include home-based and self-employed workers.**
- The Code makes provisions for **registration of all three categories of workers** - unorganised workers, gig workers and platform workers.
- **National Social Security for gig workers and platform workers:** The Code provides for the establishment of the **National Social Security Board** and various state-level boards for welfare of unorganised sector workers, gig workers and platform workers and can recommend and monitor schemes for them.
- **Term of eligibility for gratuity:** Gratuity is payable on the termination of employment, if the employee has been in the organisation for **at least five years**. The Code extends gratuity entitlement to **fixed term employees** as well. Such employees would be paid gratuity based on the term of their employment contracts on a pro-rata basis, even if the contract period is less than 5 years.

The Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code, 2020

- The Code seeks to regulate health and safety conditions of workers in establishments with **20 workers** for premises where the manufacturing process is carried out using power, and **40 workers**

for premises where it is carried out without using power.

- **Contract workers:** The Code will apply to establishments or contractors employing **50 or more workers** (on any day in the last one year).
- Establishments covered by the Code are required to register with registering officers, appointed by the central or state governments.
- Welfare facilities, working conditions and work hours for different types of establishments and workers will be prescribed by the central or state governments through rules.
- It subsumes and replaces 13 labour laws relating to safety, health and working conditions. These laws include: Factories Act, 1948; Mines Act, 1952; Dock Workers Act, 1986; Contract Labour Act, 1970; and Inter-State Migrant Workers Act, 1979.
- The Code sets up **occupational safety boards at the national and state level** to advise the central and state governments on the standards, rules, and regulations to be framed under the Code.
- The Code **bars civil courts from hearing matters under the Code**. Therefore, the only judicial recourse for a person aggrieved under the Code is to file a writ petition before the relevant High Court.
- **Daily work hour limit:** The Code fixes the maximum daily work hours for workers at **eight hours per day**.
- **Benefits for inter-state migrant workers:** The Code provides for certain benefits for inter-state migrant workers. These include: (i) option to avail the benefits of the public distribution system either in the native state or the state of employment, (ii) availability of benefits available under the building and other construction cess fund in the state of employment, and (iii) insurance and provident fund benefits available to other workers in the same establishment.
- **Database for inter-state migrant workers:** The Code requires the central and state governments to maintain or record the details of inter-state migrant workers in a portal.
- **Social Security Fund:** The Code provides for the establishment of a Social Security Fund for the welfare of unorganised

workers. The amount collected from certain penalties under the Code will be credited to the Fund.

- The Code **empowers the state government** to exempt any new factory from the provisions of the Code in order to create more economic activity and employment.

The Industrial Relations Code, 2020

- It seeks to replace three labour laws: (i) the Industrial Disputes Act, 1947, (ii) the Trade Unions Act, 1926, and (iii) the Industrial Employment (Standing Orders) Act, 1946.
- It **defines 'workers'** to include, besides all persons employed in a skilled or unskilled, manual, technical, operational and clerical capacity, supervisory staff drawing up to ₹18,000 a month as salary.
- It introduces **'fixed term employment'**, giving employers the flexibility to hire workers based on requirement through a written contract. Fixed term employees should be treated on a par with permanent workers in terms of hours of work, wages, allowances and other benefits, including statutory benefits such as gratuity.
- **Applicability of standing orders:** All industrial establishments with **300 workers or more** must prepare standing orders on the matters listed in a Schedule to the Code. These matters relate to: (i) classification of workers, (ii) manner of informing workers about work hours, holidays, paydays, and wage rates, (iii) termination of employment, and (iv) grievance redressal mechanisms for workers.
- **Closure, lay-off and retrenchment:** An establishment having at least 300 workers was required to seek prior permission of the government before closure, lay-off, or retrenchment.
- *Lay-off refers to an employer's inability to continue giving employment to a worker in the face of adverse business conditions. Retrenchment refers to the termination of service of a worker for any reason other than disciplinary action.*
- **Negotiating Union and Council:** If there were more than one registered trade union of workers functioning in an establishment, the trade union having **more than 51% of the workers as members** would be recognised as the sole negotiating union.

- In case no trade union is eligible as sole negotiating union, a negotiating council will be formed consisting of representatives of unions that have at least 20% of the workers as members.
- **Prior notice:** The code has expanded to cover **all industrial establishments** for the required notice period and other conditions for a legal strike. It proposes that no person employed in an industrial establishment shall go on strike without a **60-day notice** and during the pendency of proceedings before a Tribunal or a National Industrial Tribunal and sixty days after the conclusion of such proceedings. The Industrial Disputes Act, 1947, had placed such restrictions on announcing strikes only in respect of public utility services. However, the present Code extends it to all establishments.
- **Disputes relating to termination of individual workers:** Any dispute in relation to discharge, dismissal, retrenchment, or otherwise termination of the services of an individual worker to be an industrial dispute. The worker may apply to the **Industrial Tribunal** for adjudication of the dispute.
- It confers on the **'appropriate Government'**, that is the Centre or the State governments, the power to exempt, with or without conditions, any industrial establishment or class of industrial establishments from all or any of the provisions of the Code, if it is satisfied that adequate provisions exist to fulfil its objectives.

Why in News?

- The majority of the Central trade unions has boycotted the Labour and Employment Ministry's consultation on the draft rules for the four labour codes enacted by the government in 2019 and 2020.
- The codification of laws on wages, social security, occupational safety and industrial relations into four codes is expected to be implemented in the next financial year, for which the process of framing rules is underway.
- In a statement, the joint platform of 10 unions said the exercise was being undertaken "only to meet the criticism that this government at the Centre is violating tripartite consultations".

2) Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code

Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code (IBC)

- The Code creates time-bound processes for insolvency resolution of companies and individuals. These processes will be completed within **180 days** (unless extended by a onetime extendable period of **90 days**). If insolvency cannot be resolved, the assets of the borrower may be sold to repay creditors (known as *liquidation*).
 - The resolution processes are conducted by licensed insolvency professionals (IPs). These IPs are members of insolvency professional agencies (IPAs).
 - **Information utilities** (IUs) are established to collect, collate and disseminate financial information to facilitate insolvency resolution.
 - The **National Company Law Tribunal** (NCLT) adjudicates insolvency resolution for companies and Limited Liability Partnerships. The **Debt Recovery Tribunal** (DRT) adjudicates insolvency resolution for individuals and partnership firms.
 - The **Insolvency and Bankruptcy Board of India** (IBBI) regulates the functioning of IPs, IPAs and IUs.
- IBC was later amended with the provision to **bar promoters from bidding for their own companies**. It prevented defaulters from regaining control of their companies at a cheaper value
 - The code was again amended in 2019 which mandates a deadline for the completion of the resolution process **within 330 days, including all litigation and judicial processes**.

Background

- In March 2020, the government suspended fresh proceedings under the IBC for loan defaults on or after March 25 for six months. The suspension was further extended by three months until December 25.
- The move was to provide relief for corporates as the pandemic and subsequent lockdown had significantly impacted economic activities.

Why in News?

- The government has decided to extend the suspension of the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code till March 31, 2021, to help businesses cope with the lingering difficulties posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

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INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

1) Brexit Trade Deal

Background

- Brexit ("British exit") refers to the United Kingdom's decision in a 2016 referendum to leave the European Union (EU), which is a group of 27 countries that operates as a cohesive economic and political block.

Why did it take so long?

- Brexit was meant to happen on March 29, 2019, two years after then Prime Minister Theresa May had triggered **Article 50** of the **Lisbon Treaty**, which officially signified the decision of the UK to leave the EU. The March 29 deadline was delayed twice after MPs rejected the withdrawal deal.
- One of the most crucial sticking points for MPs was the **Irish backstops** that govern the nature of the border between **Northern Ireland (which is a part of the UK) and the Republic of Ireland (part of EU)**.
- Under EU arrangements, it is currently easy for people and goods to cross the border between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, and there were fears that it will not remain so after Britain leaves.
- Many also feared that barriers between both the territories could revive the tensions that prevailed during the 30-year conflict that ended in 1998.

Transition period

- After it formally exited the EU on January 31 this year, the UK entered a 11-month transition period during which it continued to follow EU rules. This was when the country began negotiating a deal with the bloc to determine key aspects of their relationship once the transition phase ended.

Why in News?

- Just days before the 11-month transition period ends, the UK and the European Union struck a trade and co-operation deal—which will affect the relationship between the two parties in the years to come—after months of negotiations.
- The new agreement which was unanimously approved by the EU nations will come into effect from January 1.

What will change from January 1 onward?

- At 23:00 GMT on December 31, the **UK will leave the EU Single Market and Customs Union** (under the customs union the UK could not negotiate with other member nations of the EU separately), **all EU policies and international agreements**.
- This means that the free movement of goods, people, services and capital will stop from January 1 onwards as the EU and UK will become two separate market spaces, with distinct regulations.
- When the UK was a member of the EU (UK's biggest trading partner), it could not hold trade negotiations with countries such as the US and Australia, but now it will be able to set its own trade policy.
- As part of the agreement, which is a free trade agreement, the UK and EU have agreed to a **100 per cent tariff liberalisation**, which means that there will be **no tariffs or quotas on goods** that move between the UK and EU. This will be the first time that the EU has agreed to zero quotas and zero tariffs with a trading partner.
- However, despite these benefits, from January 1 onwards there will still be barriers to trade in goods and services, something that did not exist before. For instance, businesses are anticipating increased paperwork once the new trade agreement is in effect.
- For people travelling between the UK and EU, it means that while their **entry will still be visa-free**, they may be subject to screening and will no longer be able to use the biometric passports.
- Further, **the UK will have sovereignty over its fishing waters**, one of the major sticking points during negotiations.
- To address that there is no hard border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, under the new agreement, there will be a **new trade border between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK**. It means that the former will still be under the EU's single market and will follow EU's customs rules.
- Lastly, the agreement is based on international law and not on EU law. This

means the European Court of Justice can no longer play a role and the UK does not have to follow EU law.

2) Legion of Merit

What's in the news?

- Prime Minister Narendra Modi was awarded the 'Legion of Merit' by U.S. President Donald Trump for his role in advancing the India-U.S. relationship.
- The award was also presented to Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison.
- India, the U.S., Japan and Australia constitute the '**Quad** group of countries – seen as an alternative to Chinese dominance in the Indo-Pacific region.

About the award

- The Legion of Merit, instituted in 1942 by former U.S President Franklin D. Roosevelt, is awarded to members of the U.S. armed forces and also members of foreign (i.e., non-U.S.) armed forces and sometimes heads of state or government.
- Other Indians who have won the award include Field Marshal K.M. Cariappa who had received the Legion of Merit in 1949 from then U.S. President Harry S. Truman.
- While the India-US relationship has had its challenges under the Trump administration, such as on the trade front, the **security relationship** grew over the last four years and the **Quad was strengthened**.

3) OPEC & OPEC+

About OPEC arrangement

- The Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) is a group consisting of **13 of the world's major oil-exporting nations**.
- Countries that belong to OPEC include **Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Venezuela** (the five founders), plus the **United Arab Emirates, Libya, Algeria, Nigeria, Angola, Congo, Equatorial Guinea and Gabon**.

- OPEC was founded in 1960 to coordinate the petroleum policies of its members and to provide member states with technical and economic aid.
- OPEC is used to work as a cartel and fix prices in a favourable band. It could bring down prices by increasing oil production and raise prices by cutting production.
- The 2014 oil crisis, which was accentuated by oversupply of crude, brought down prices below \$30 a barrel. Since then, OPEC has been working with non-OPEC countries like **Russia, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Brunei, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Mexico, Oman, Sudan and South Sudan** to fix the global prices and supply.
- Known as the "**OPEC Plus**" arrangement, this alliance kept production lower and pumped up the prices.

Why in News?

- Russia expects to support an increase in oil production by the OPEC+ group of another 500,000 barrels per day (bpd) from February at next month's summit of the leading global oil producers.
- Oil prices are trading above \$50 per barrel, after coming under pressure this week from concerns that new fast-spreading variants of the coronavirus will lead to reduced fuel demand.
- Moscow views an oil price between \$45 and \$55 per barrel as the optimum level to allow for recovery of its oil production, which has been significantly reduced as part of the OPEC+ supply deal.
- Russia, other leading oil producers and the OPEC+ group, agreed to reduce output to support the global oil market as the COVID-19 pandemic has weakened fuel demand.
- Since the agreement on a record global supply cut in April, OPEC+ has progressively reduced the cuts and is expected in January to release an extra 5,00,000 bpd into the market.

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DEFENCE

1) Coastal Radar Network

Why in News?

- As part of efforts to further expand the **coastal radar chain network** of India meant to enable **real time monitoring of the high seas for threats** as also expand India's assistance for capacity building to Indian Ocean littoral states, efforts are in advanced stages to set up coastal radar stations in **Maldives, Myanmar and Bangladesh**.

About the network

- Mauritius, Seychelles and Sri Lanka** have already been integrated into India's coastal radar chain network.
- Similar plans are in the pipeline with Maldives and Myanmar and discussions are ongoing with Bangladesh and Thailand.
- The Indian Navy's Information Management and Analysis Centre (**IMAC**) located in Gurugram, Haryana, which was set up after the 26/11 Mumbai terror attacks is the nodal agency for maritime data fusion.
- The Navy has been authorised by the government to conclude **white shipping agreements** with 36 countries and three multilateral constructs. So far agreements have been concluded with 22 countries and one multilateral construct.
 - White shipping agreement involves exchange of relevant advance information on the identity and movement of commercial non-military merchant vessels.*
- At the Navy's Information Fusion Centre for the Indian Ocean Region (**IFC-IOR**) which is meant to promote **Maritime Domain Awareness**, three more International Liaison Officers (ILO) are expected to join soon. ILOs from France, Japan and the U.S. have already joined the centre.

INFORMATION FUSION CENTRE – INDIAN OCEAN REGION

- With over **75% of the world's maritime trade and 50% of daily global oil consumption** passing through the region;

IOR is vital to world trade and the economic prosperity of many nations.

- The IOR is also a fragile environment, with threats such as maritime terrorism, piracy, human and contraband trafficking, illegal and unregulated fishing, arms running and poaching being prevalent. Hence, facilitating a conducive environment to undertake legitimate maritime activities in this region is a necessity.
- The **IFC-IOR** was established with the vision of **strengthening maritime security** in the region and beyond. The IFC has been established at the Navy's Information Management and Analysis Centre (**IMAC**) in Gurugram, which is the single point centre linking all the coastal radar chains to generate a seamless real-time picture of the nearly 7,500-km coastline.
- Through this Centre, information on "**white shipping**", or commercial shipping, will be exchanged with countries in the region to improve maritime domain awareness in the Indian Ocean.

Information Management and Analysis Centre (IMAC)

- Functions under the National Maritime Domain Awareness (**NMDA**) Project. NMDA project was launched in accordance with **SAGAR** (Security and Growth for All in the Region).
- IMAC **collects shipping information, analysing traffic patterns and sharing the inputs with the user agencies.**

Need for Maritime Domain Awareness

- Each littoral and island nations have their own interests and values which must be protected.
- Countering maritime piracy** in the region.
- Mutual **collaboration and exchange of information** and understanding the concerns and threats.

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SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

1) Bioplastic Bacteria

Why in News?

- A bacterium called **Zobellella denitrificans ZD1**, has now been **reported to aid in the production of bioplastics**. They feed on sludge, wastewater and produce polyhydroxybutyrate. The researchers say that this **can help reduce the burden on landfills**.

Bioplastics

- **Bioplastics** are **plastic materials produced from renewable biomass sources**, such as vegetable fats and oils, corn starch, straw, woodchips, sawdust, recycled food waste, etc.
- Bioplastic can be made from **agricultural by-products** and also from used plastics (i.e. plastic bottles and other containers) by using microorganisms.
- Bioplastics are **usually derived from sugar derivatives**, including starch, cellulose, and lactic acid.
- **Common plastics**, such as **fossil-fuel plastics** (also called petrobased polymers) are **derived from petroleum or natural gas**.

Role of Bacteria

- **Bacteria have the ability to produce bioplastics** in the form of polyhydroxyalkanoates (PHAs) and they are capable of producing PHA from various carbon sources ranging from inexpensive, complex waste effluents to alkanes, fatty acids, plant oils and as well as simple carbohydrates.

Need for Bioplastics

- About 140 million tons of plastic are consumed every year worldwide, which necessitates the processing of approximately 150 million tons of fossil fuels and directly causes immense amounts of waste that can take thousands of years to naturally deteriorate, if it degrades at all.

India's fight against Plastic

- **25,940 tonnes** of plastic waste is generated every day in the country, with 40 per cent plastic waste being uncollected and 60 million tonnes of solid waste generated in one year.

- **Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) scheme:** Under the **Plastic Waste Management (PWM) Rules, 2016**, producers, importers and brand owners are asked to take primary responsibility for collection of used multi-layered plastic sachets or pouches or packaging.
- **Swachhata Hi Seva India Plog Run**
- India pledged to **eliminate single-use plastic by 2022** and won global acclaim for its "Beat Plastic Pollution" resolve.

2) Exoplanets

Exoplanets

- All of the planets in our solar system orbit around the Sun. **Planets that orbit around other stars** are called exoplanets. Exoplanets are very hard to see directly with telescopes.
- The first exoplanet was discovered in 1992, orbiting a pulsar (a neutron star that emits electromagnetic radiation).
- More than 4,000 have been detected to date using several techniques.

Why in News?

- An international team of scientists has collected the first possible radio signal from a planet beyond our solar system, emanating from an exoplanet system about 51 light-years away.
 - *A light-year is the distance light travels in one year.*

About the discovery

- Using the Low Frequency Array (**LOFAR**), a radio telescope in the Netherlands, the researchers uncovered emission bursts from the **Tau Bootes star-system** which contains a binary star system and an exoplanet.
- This radio detection opens up a new window on exoplanets and provides a novel way to examine alien worlds that are tens of light-years away.

LOFAR

- Low Frequency Array is currently the **largest radio telescope** operating at the lowest frequencies that can be observed from Earth.
- Unlike single-dish telescopes, LOFAR is a multipurpose sensor network, with an

innovative computer and network infrastructure that can handle extremely large data volumes.

3) New virus variant

Why in news?

- The World Health Organization (WHO) convened a meeting of members to discuss strategies to counter a new, more infectious coronavirus strain that emerged in Britain.

About the new variant

- The WHO cautioned against major alarm over the variant, saying it was a **normal part of a pandemic's evolution**.
- The main worry is that the new variant is **40%-70% more transmissible**.

Evolution of a virus

- Viruses undergo **evolution and natural selection**, just like cell-based life, and most of them evolve rapidly.
- When **two viruses infect a cell** at the same time, they may **swap genetic material** to make new, mixed viruses with unique properties. For example, flu strains can arise this way.
- **RNA viruses have high mutation** rates that allow especially fast evolution. An example is the evolution of drug resistance in HIV.

Why is this mutation a problem?

- Developed **vaccines** may get **impotent**.
- Chances of **re-infection** may rise.

4) Greening of plants

Why in news?

- Researchers at the Indian Institute of Science Education and Research (IISER) have identified a gene that facilitates in the greening of plants by playing a crucial role in regulating the levels of **protochlorophyllide** — an intermediate in the biosynthesis of the green pigment chlorophyll.

About the discovery

- The scientists have identified the gene 'BBX11'.
- The synthesis of **chlorophyll** in plants is a lengthy, multi-step process. When a seedling emerges from under the soil it must quickly synthesise chlorophyll to start supporting its own growth.
- In order to facilitate quick synthesis of chlorophyll, plants make a precursor of chlorophyll called 'protochlorophyllide' in

the dark, which glows red when blue light is shone on the plant.

- As soon as the plant comes out into the light from under the soil, light-dependent enzymes convert protochlorophyllide to chlorophyll.
- If there is excess of free protochlorophyllide, then exposure to light converts it into molecules that cause '**photobleaching**'.
- Thus, it is very important to regulate the amount of protochlorophyllide synthesized by the plant and here comes the vital plant played by the '**BBX11**' gene.
- If it is less, plants are unable to efficiently 'green' in order to harvest sunlight. If the **amount** of protochlorophyllide is **more**, then **plants bleach under the light**.

The significance of this discovery

- The study could have tremendous implications in the agriculture sector in tropical countries like India and can help provide leads to **optimise plant growth** under stressful and rapidly **changing climatic conditions**.
- Due to the rapidly changing climatic conditions, farmers in several states in India, especially in Maharashtra, are suffering huge losses in crop yields.
- **Severe drought, high temperature and high light** are some of the major reasons for crop failure. **Young seedlings** emerging out of the soil are extremely sensitive to high irradiance of light. This study can provide leads to **optimise plant growth** under these stressful conditions.

5) Srinivasa Ramanujan

About

- Srinivasa Ramanujan was an **Indian mathematician** who lived during the British Rule in India.
- Though he had almost no formal training in **pure mathematics**, he made substantial contributions to **mathematical analysis, number theory, infinite series, and continued fractions**, including solutions to mathematical problems then considered unsolvable.
- Ramanujan was the **first Indian fellow of Trinity College, London**. Being selected at the age of 30, he was also one of the

youngest fellows in the history of Royal Society.

- **Ramanujan Prime, Theta functions** & many more mathematical formulas were his original contribution.
- The scientists & mathematicians are working to use the research of Ramanujan to find out more facts about **black-holes & formation of the Universe**.

Why in News?

- In honour of Srinivasa Ramanujan who died exactly a hundred years ago, in 1920, Vigyan Prasar organised events under the name "Ramanujan Yatra" which included a series of talks held monthly on Ramanujan's work.

6) Chandrayaan-2

Why in News:

- The Indian Space Research Organisation said it has released the first set of data from the country's second mission to the Moon, the Chandrayaan-2, for the general public.

About the mission

- The Orbiter which was injected into a lunar orbit in 2019, carries eight experiments to address many open questions on lunar science.
- The first set of data from the Chandrayaan-2 mission is now being released for the wider public use through the **PRADAN portal**

Chandrayaan 1 Findings

- Chandrayaan-1 data showed evidence for **water in the exosphere of Moon**, on the surface of Moon and also sub-surface
- Chandrayaan-1's X-ray Spectrometer (C1XS) has detected titanium, confirmed the presence of **calcium, and gathered the most accurate measurements yet of magnesium**, aluminium and iron on the lunar surface
- enabled scientists to study the **interaction between the solar wind and a planetary body** like moon without a magnetic field

7) Coronavirus in Antarctica

Why in news?

- Researchers in a Chilean research station in Antarctica have been found infected with the novel coronavirus.

About research stations in Antarctica

- Antarctica is uninhabited except for those manning the nearly 60 permanent stations

established by several countries, including India, for carrying out scientific research.

- The two Indian permanent stations, **Maitri and Bharati**, are at least 5,000 km away from the Chilean base.
- National Centre for Polar and Ocean Research (NCPOR) is the **nodal agency for India's scientific expeditions in Antarctica and the Arctic**.

Indian Antarctic Programme

- It is a multi-disciplinary, multi-institutional program under the control of the **National Centre for Polar and Ocean Research, Ministry of Earth Sciences**.
- The program gained global acceptance with India's signing of the **Antarctic Treaty** (1959) and subsequent construction of the **Dakshin Gangotri Antarctic research base** in 1983, superseded by the **Maitri base** from 1989.
- Under the program, **atmospheric, biological, earth, chemical, and medical sciences** are studied by India.

8) Printed Buildings

What is 3d Printing?

- 3D printing is a process, in which the **material is printed under computer control to build a 3-dimensional product**, typically layer by layer.
- It is predominantly used in manufacturing industries to print rapid prototypes, complex shapes and small batch production using special polymers and metal alloys.

Why in News?

- Larsen & Toubro Construction said it has successfully 3D printed a G+1 (Ground plus one) building, claiming it to be the first in India.

Significance

- With the country aggressively pursuing the objective of creating 60 million houses under the **Housing for All by 2022 programme**, this achievement will certainly give a huge fillip for the mass housing segment.
- 3D concrete printing is one of the technology disruptors with the potential to radically redefine construction methodologies, and is well-positioned to push the boundaries of automated robotic construction.

- It will not only **accelerate the pace of construction** but also significantly improve **build quality**.
 - It will even be extremely useful in **slum rehabilitation, post disaster rehabilitation** etc.
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ART & CULTURE

1) Sentinel Island

Sentinelese

- Sentinelese, with a population of about 50 to 100 on the North Sentinel Island of the Andaman Islands, are not only among the most isolated PVTGs across the country, but also among the five in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands which include **Great Andamanese, Onge, Jarawa, and Shompens**.
- The Sentinelese, a **negrito tribe**, are connected to the Jarawa on the basis of physical, as well as linguistic similarities.
- Based on Radiocarbon dating of kitchen middens by the Anthropological Survey of India, Sentinelese presence was confirmed in the islands 2,000 years ago. Genome studies indicate that the Andaman tribes could have been on the islands even 30,000 years ago.

Why in News?

- Anthropological Survey of India (AnSI) in its recent report said that any exploitation of the North Sentinel Island of the Andamans for commercial and strategic gain would spell the death knell for its occupants, the Sentinelese.

PVTG's

- PVTGs are more vulnerable among the tribal groups. Due to this factor, more developed and assertive tribal groups take a major chunk of the tribal development funds, because of which PVTGs need more funds directed for their development.
- In 1973, the **Dhebar Commission** created Primitive Tribal Groups (**PTGs**) as a separate category, who are less developed among the tribal groups. In 2006, the Government of India renamed the PTGs as Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs).
- **75 tribal groups** have been categorized by the **Ministry of Home Affairs** as PVTGs. PVTGs reside in **18 States and UT of A&N Islands**.
- Among the 75 listed PVTG's the highest number are found in **Odisha** (13), followed by Andhra Pradesh (12).

- The Government of India follows the following criteria for identification of PVTGs.
 - Pre-agricultural level of technology
 - Low level of literacy
 - Economic backwardness
 - A declining or stagnant population.

2) Jallikettu

Why in News:

- The Tamil Nadu government has granted permission to hold the popular bull taming sport jallikattu.

About Jallikettu

- Jallikattu is a popular **bull taming sport held during Pongal** (multi-day Harvest festival in TamilNadu).
- An **ancient reference** to bull taming is found in a seal discovered at **Mohenjodaro**, which is dated between 2,500 BC and 1,800 BC.
- The sport was called **Eru thazuval** or **"embracing the bull"** (as mentioned in ancient Tamil Sangam literature).
- Bos indicus bulls are **bred specifically** by people of the village for the event. Bulls that are able to participate successfully in the jallikattu event are used as **studs for breeding**.
- The Supreme Court of India banned Jallikattu in 2014 following the petitions of Animal Welfare Organizations including Federation of India Animal Protection Agencies (FIAPO) and People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA).
- Following popular protests across the state against the SC ban, Tamil Nadu government amended the central law, the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act, 1960, and allowed Jallikattu with precautionary measures. (Prevention of Cruelty to Animals falls under Entry 17 in the Concurrent List of the Constitution).

Points in favour for Jallikattu

- With the help of Jallikattu, the **native breeds are reared more** leading to an increase in their numbers.
- DPSP- Article 48-Prohibit the slaughter of cows, calves and other milch and draught cattle and to **improve their breeds**.
- **Cultural Significance**

Points against Jallikettu

- Can lead to violation of the **Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act**.
- The **bulls** may get **injured**
- **Article 48A**- To protect and improve the environment and to safeguard forests and wildlife.

3) Visvabharati

About Visvabharati

- It is a public research central university and an Institution of National Importance located in Santiniketan, West Bengal.
- It was established by **Rabindranath Tagore** in 1921. Visva Bharati means the **communion of the world with India**.
- Tagore believed in **open-air education** and had reservations about any teaching done within the four walls as he believed that walls represent the conditioning of the mind.
- He did not have a good opinion about the Western method of education introduced by the British in India; and in this regard, Tagore and Gandhiji's opinion matched.
- So he devised a new system of learning in Visva-Bharati. He allowed students to continue their course till the student and his teacher both were satisfied.

About Rabindranath Tagore

- Popularly known as '**Gurudev**', Tagore was primarily known as a writer, poet, playwright, philosopher and aesthetician,

music composer, choreographer and a painter.

- Tagore released his first collection of poems under the pen name '**Bhanusimha**'.
- He had spoken at the **World Parliament for Religions** in the years 1929 and 1937.
- He wrote the **National Anthems of India and Bangladesh**.
- In 1913, he became the first Indian to receive a **Nobel Prize in Literature** for his novel '**Geetanjali**'.
- Tagore wrote the song **Banglar Mati Banglar Jol** (Soil of Bengal, Water of Bengal) to unite the Bengali population after the Bengal partition in 1905.
- Tagore rejected violence from the British as well and **renounced the knighthood** that had been given to him by Lord Hardinge in 1915 in protest of the **Jaliwanwala Bagh massacre**.
- Tagore's beliefs and work is the idea that anti-colonialism cannot simply be achieved by rejecting all things British, but should **consist of incorporating all the best aspects of western culture into the best of Indian culture**.

Why in News?

- PM Modi recently said that Visva-Bharati is the essence of self-reliance and it embodied Tagore's vision for the country.

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PIB ANALYSIS

1) Archaeological Survey of India

About:

- The Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) under the **Ministry of Culture** is the premier organization for **archaeological research and protection of the cultural heritage of the nation**.
- Maintenance of ancient monuments and archaeological sites and remains of national importance is the prime concern of the ASI.
- Besides, it **regulates all archaeological activities** in the country as per the provisions of the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act, 1958.
- It also regulates Antiquities and Art Treasure Act, 1972.
- One of its functions include preservation, conservation and environmental development of centrally protected monuments and sites, including World Heritage Monuments and antiquities

Constitutional Provision

- The Constitution of India has divided the jurisdiction over these monuments, **cultural heritage, and archaeological sites** as follows:

Union:

- Ancient and Historical Monuments and Archaeological sites and remains, declared by Parliament, by law to be of national importance.

State:

- Ancient and Historical Monuments other than those declared by Parliament to be of national importance.

Concurrent:

- Besides the above, both the Union and States have concurrent jurisdiction over archaeological sites and remains other than those declared by law and Parliament to be of national importance

Why in News?

- The Archaeological Survey of India has removed the cap on the number of visitors to its Centrally Protected Monuments/sites

2) Recognition of Prior Learning

About

- Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) refers to an assessment process used to **evaluate a person's existing skill sets, knowledge and experience gained either by formal, non-formal or informal learning**. RPL has primarily has threefold objectives:
- It aims to **align the competencies of the un-regulated workforce** of the country to the standardized **National Skills Qualification Framework (NSQF)**,
- To **enhance the employability opportunities** of an individual as well as provide alternative routes to higher education and
- To **provide opportunities for reducing inequalities** based on privileging certain forms of knowledge over others.
- The implementing agency for the programme is **National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC)**.

Significance

- About 70% of our country's population resides in rural India and hence the inclusion of gram panchayats is crucial for the success of District Skill Development Plans and will provide a huge fillip to the Skill India Mission.
- RPL aims to align the competencies of the pre-existing workforce of the country to the standardized framework.
- Certification builds confidence, brings respect and provides recognition to the candidates, it has the potential to make skills aspirational.
- Supporting formalization of the informal learning of youth will supplement their efforts in finding sustainable livelihood opportunities and reduce inequalities based on privileging certain forms of knowledge over others.

Why in News?

- The Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship conducted Recognition of Prior Learning programme for workers under the Department of Panchayati Raj in Chandauli and Varanasi.

3) Rise in Leopard population

Why in News?

- The Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEF&CC) has released the **Status of Leopards report**.
- According to the report, there has been an **increase in Tiger, Lion & Leopards numbers** over the last few years.

Key Highlights

- India now has 12,852 leopards as compared to the previous estimate of 7910 conducted 2014. More than **60% increase in population** has been recorded.
- The highest concentration of the leopard in India is estimated to be in **Madhya Pradesh (3,421), followed by Karnataka (1,783) and Maharashtra (1,690)**.
- **Sampling in forested habitats:** The leopard was estimated across forested habitats in tiger range areas of the country but other leopard occupied areas such as non-forested habitats (coffee and tea plantations), higher elevations in the Himalayas, arid landscapes and majority of North East landscape were not sampled.

About Leopard

- The leopard (*Panthera pardus*) is one of the five extant species in the genus *Panthera*, a member of the Felidae.
- It occurs in a wide range in sub-Saharan Africa, in small parts of Western and Central Asia, a small part of European Russia, and on the Indian subcontinent to Southeast and East Asia.
- It is listed as **Vulnerable on the IUCN Red List** because populations have declined following habitat loss and fragmentation, poaching for the illegal trade of skins and body parts.

4) Electricity (Rights of Consumers) Rules, 2020

Need for Electricity Rights of Consumers

- The Rules emanate from the conviction that the power systems exist to serve the consumers and the consumers have rights to get the reliable services and quality electricity.
- The **Distribution Companies across the country are monopolies** and the consumer has no alternative.
- Therefore it was necessary that the consumers' rights be laid down in Rules

and a system for enforcement of these rights be put in place.

- The implementation of these Rules shall ensure that new electricity connections, refunds and other services are given in a time bound manner.
- The Rules will benefit about 30 crores existing and the prospective consumers in the country.

Highlights of Electricity (Rights of Consumers) Rules, 2020

- The rules would provide for **rights of consumers and obligations of distribution licensees**, release of new connection and modification in existing connection, metering arrangement, billing and payment.
- An **automatic compensation mechanism** will be put in place which will include no supply to a consumer beyond a particular duration and certain number of interruptions in supply, which will be specified by the regulatory commission.
- The distribution licensee shall supply **24x7 power supply to all consumers**.
- **Transparent, simple and time bound processes:** New connection has to be given within a maximum time period of seven days in metro cities, 15 days in other municipal areas, and 30 days in rural areas.
- The rules state that the state electricity regulatory commissions (SERCs) can specify stricter timelines and service quality parameters, but cannot relax these rights to consumers.
- The rules recognise **consumer as a prosumer** as well, where prosumers will maintain consumer status and have the same rights as a general consumer. **Prosumers are those who consume as well as produce energy.** They will have the right to set up renewable energy generation units, including rooftop solar photovoltaic systems — either on their own or through a service provider.
- **Consumer Grievance Redressal Forum (CGRF)** to include consumer and prosumer representatives. The consumer grievance redressal has been made easy by making it multi-layered and the number of consumer's representatives has been increased from one to four.

- The rules allow **net metering for loads up to 10 kilowatt (kW) and for gross metering for loads above 10 kW.**

- **Net metering** is a mechanism which allows domestic or commercial users who generate their own electricity using solar panels or photovoltaic systems to export their surplus energy back to the grid.
- The process of net metering provides system owners with the opportunity to gain extra revenue by selling their excess power to the grid while also making up for shortfalls via the grid.

Why in News?

- The Union Government has notified the Electricity (Rights of Consumers) Rules, 2020.

5) FASTag

What are FASTag's ?

- FASTag is a reloadable tag that allows **automatic deduction of toll** without having to stop for carrying out the cash transaction. The tag uses radio frequency identification (**RFID**) **technology** and is fixed on the windscreen of the vehicle once active.
- The tag is **valid for five years** and comes in seven different colours — **violet, orange, yellow, green, pink, blue, black**. Each colour is assigned to a particular category of vehicles.
- The payment method is a part of the National Electronic Toll Collection (NETC) programme. The **National Payments Corporation of India (NPCI)** collects the payments.
- According to the National Highways Authority of India (NHAI), these devices will make passing through tolls considerably smoother since drivers will no longer have to carry cash or stop to make a transaction.
- The objective is to **remove bottlenecks and capture all toll electronically**.
- Cameras at toll booths will take photos of passengers in a vehicle, which will be useful for the Ministry of Home Affairs as there will be a record of a vehicle's movement.

Benefits of using FASTag

- Ease of payment – No need to carry cash for the toll transactions, saves time

- Near non-stop movement of vehicles leading to lower fuel cost.
- Online Recharge – FASTag can be recharged online through Credit Card / Debit Card / NEFT/ RTGS or Net banking

Environmental benefit

- Reduced air pollution
- Reduced use of paper

Social Benefit

- Reduced toll payment hassles ,
- Analytics for better highway management

Economic benefit

- Reduced effort in management at toll plaza,
- Reduced effort in monitoring centrally

Why in News?

- Union Ministry of Road Transport announced that FASTag is being made mandatory for all vehicles in the country from 1st of January, 2021.

6) Consumer Protection Act, 2019

Features of the Act :

Definition of consumer:

- A consumer is defined as a **person who buys any good or avails a service for a consideration.**
- It **does not include a person who obtains a good for resale or a good or service for commercial purpose.**
- It covers transactions through **all modes including offline, and online through electronic means, teleshopping, multi-level marketing or direct selling.**

Rights of consumers:

- The following consumer rights have been defined in the Act, including the right to:
- be protected against marketing of goods and services which are hazardous to life and property;
- be informed of the quality, quantity, potency, purity, standard and price of goods or services;
- be assured of access to a variety of goods or services at competitive prices; and
- seek redressal against unfair or restrictive trade practices.

Central Consumer Protection Authority (CCPA):

- The central government will set up a CCPA to promote, protect and enforce the rights of consumers.

- It will **regulate matters related to violation of consumer rights, unfair trade practices, and misleading advertisements.**
- The CCPA will have an investigation wing, headed by a Director-General, which may conduct inquiry or investigation into such violations.

Functions of CCPA:

- Inquiring into violations of consumer rights, investigating and launching prosecution at the appropriate forum;
- Passing orders to recall goods or withdraw services that are hazardous, reimbursement of the price paid, and discontinuation of the unfair trade practices, as defined in the Act;
- Issuing directions to the concerned trader/ manufacturer/ endorser/ advertiser/ publisher to either discontinue a false or misleading advertisement, or modify it;
- Imposing penalties, and;
- Issuing safety notices to consumers against unsafe goods and services.

Penalties for misleading advertisement:

- The CCPA may impose a penalty on a manufacturer or an endorser of up to Rs 10 lakh and imprisonment for up to two years for a **false or misleading advertisement.**
- In case of a subsequent offence, the fine may extend to Rs 50 lakh and imprisonment of up to five years.

Consumer Disputes Redressal Commission:

- Consumer Disputes Redressal Commissions (CDRCs) will be set up at the district, state, and national levels. A consumer can file a complaint with CDRCs in relation to:
- Unfair or restrictive trade practices;

- Defective goods or services;
- Overcharging or deceptive charging; and
- The offering of goods or services for sale which may be hazardous to life and safety.
- Appeals from a District CDRC will be heard by the State CDRC. Appeals from the State CDRC will be heard by the National CDRC.
- **Final appeal will lie before the Supreme Court.**

Jurisdiction of CDRCs:

- The District CDRC will entertain complaints where value of goods and services does not exceed Rs one crore.
- The State CDRC will entertain complaints when the value is more than Rs one crore but does not exceed Rs 10 crore.
- Complaints with value of goods and services over Rs 10 crore will be entertained by the National CDRC.

Product liability:

- The Act also introduces the Product liability clause.
- A manufacturer or a service provider has to compensate a consumer if their goods/service causes injury or loss to the consumer due to manufacturing defect or poor service.
- The most significant impact of this provision will be on **e-commerce platforms** as it also includes service providers under its ambit.

Why in News?

- National Consumer Day, 2020 with the theme of "New Features of Consumer Protection Act 2019" was observed recently.

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News in Depth

AIR NEWS

1) E-Sampada portal

What's in the news?

- The Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs has launched E-Sampada, a new web portal and mobile app.
- The new application provides a **single window for all the services including allotment for over one lakh government residential accommodations, office space allotment to government organisations** in 45 office complexes in 28 cities and booking of 1,176 holiday home rooms.
- The portal provides online facility to users across India to lodge complaints, submit documents and appear for virtual hearing.
- This is a significant step towards **promotion of e-governance to enhance transparency and accountability** in providing various estate services like allotment, retention, regularisation and no dues certificate.
- Real time information on utilisation of assets and delivery of service will facilitate optimum utilisation of resources. The automated processes will minimize human intervention and will lead to greater transparency.

2) PM-KISAN

About the scheme

- Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi (PM-KISAN) is a Central Sector Scheme with 100% funding from Government of India.
- **Aim** : To augment the income of the farmers by providing income support to all landholding farmers' families across the country.
- The Scheme initially provided income support to all Small and Marginal Farmers' families across the country, holding cultivable land upto 2 hectares. Its ambit was later expanded w.e.f. 01.06.2019 to

cover all farmer families in the country irrespective of the size of their land holdings.

- Under the Scheme an amount of **Rs.6000/- per year** is transferred in three 4-monthly installments of Rs.2000/- directly into the bank accounts of the farmers, subject to certain exclusion criteria relating to higher income status.
- **Eligibility** : All landholder farmer's families in the country are eligible for the PM-Kisan Scheme subject to the prevalent exclusion criteria. **Farmers who do not own any land are not eligible for this scheme.**
- **Excluded from the scheme**
 1. Institutional land holders,
 2. Farmer families holding constitutional posts,
 3. Serving or retired officers and employees of state/central government as well as PSUs and government autonomous bodies.
 4. Professionals like doctors, engineers and lawyers as well as retired pensioners with a monthly pension of over Rs 10,000 and those who paid income tax in the last assessment year.
- **Identification of beneficiaries**: The responsibility of identifying the eligible beneficiary farmers and uploading their data on PM-KISAN portal lies entirely with the state governments.

Why in News?

- The Central government has released the next instalment of financial benefit under PM-KISAN.
- It included transfer of more than Rs. 18 thousand crores to more than 9 crores beneficiary farmer families.

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THE HINDU EDITORIALS

1) Stopping the slide of health care in India

GS-2 HEALTH

CONTEXT

- India's health care consists of 70% private and 30% public in a country where 80% people do not have any protection for health the out-of-pocket expense is as high as 62%.
- Public spending in health care is merely 1.13% of GDP and there exists a huge shortage of health-care workers particularly nurses and midwives.

CHALLENGES WITH PUBLIC HEALTH SYSTEMS IN INDIA

- The existing public primary health care model in the country is limited in scope, as only services related to pregnancy care, limited childcare and certain services related to national health programs are catered on priority basis. This represents **only 15% of all morbidities for which people seek care.**
- Poor health management skills and lack of appropriate training and supportive supervision** for health workers prevent delivery of the desired quality of health services.
- Expenditure on public health funding has been consistently low** in India (approximately 1.3% of GDP), while as per OECD, India's total **out-of-pocket expenditure is around 2.3 % of GDP.**
- Issue of Overlapping Jurisdiction** as there is no single authority responsible to issue guidelines and enforce compliance of the health standards.
- Inability to make early detection and timely prevention** of diseases. Thus, diminishes preparedness and effective management for new and emerging threats such as pandemic like Covid-19.

GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES

- The government has made several efforts to address the shortcoming in the public health system through various schemes like the Pradhan Mantri - Jan Arogya Yojana, Pradhan Mantri Bhartiya Janaushadhi Pariyojana, National Medical Commission

(NMC) Act, 2019, NITI Aayog's National Health Stack, etc.

WAY FORWARD

- Need to enable **Preventive health Care**. In this direction the Union government has announced the conversion of primary health care centers into **Health and Wellness Centers (HWCs)**. These HWCs will act as the pillar of preventive care and 'gateway' for access to secondary and tertiary health services.
- There is a need to bring **behavioural change** to ensure that people eat right, sleep right, maintain good hygiene, exercise, and adopt a healthy lifestyle that necessitates concerted interventions at various levels of the system.
- Catalyse people's participation** for healthy India, through programmes like Swasth Bharat Jan Andolan on lines of Swachh Bharat Abhiyan.
- Cooperative Federalism:** Given the major role that States have to play in creating strong health systems across the country, allocations provided by the Finance Commission can become the critical catalyst for transforming the nation's health.
- Need to increase the Public funding on health to at least **2.5% of GDP** as envisaged in the **National Health Policy, 2017**. Extra funding can be mobilised through **Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)**.
- Need to incentivise state and local governments to invest in creating a dedicated cadre for public health at the state, district and block levels.
- The novel coronavirus pandemic has revealed the mismatch existing in India's health care system. Thus, there is an urgent need to take immediate actions to make adequate investment, for creating a health system that can withstand any kind of public health emergencies.**

2) Losing the plot on women's safety

GS-2 ISSUES RELATED TO WOMEN, GOVERNMENT POLICIES

NEWS

- The **Maharashtra Shakti Criminal Law (Maharashtra Amendment) Bill, 2020**, recently tabled in the state assembly, takes a myopic view of the problem of sexual violence.

ISSUES WITH THE BILL

- Most governments, when faced with the question of improving women's safety, inevitably turn to enacting new laws rather than ensuring a more effective legal system.
- The Bill's content reflects the **absence of a larger consultative process and lack of understanding of existing criminal laws**.
- The Bill proposes **punishment in cases of false complaints**. Offences against women often occur behind closed doors or at desolate places, making finding eyewitnesses difficult. Investigation and prosecution are often shabby and negligent. This results in unfair acquittals, and the victims, in turn, may be accused of having filed false complaints.
- Thus, this provision would result in **counter cases being filed against victims**, and may thus dissuade many victims of sexual assault and acid attacks from filing complaints, thereby muffling women's voices.
- In a country where courts have directed women to marry their abuser, the possibility of a counter case would only make it more difficult for a woman to say 'No' to such a proposition.
- The Bill introduces **provision of the death penalty** for crimes heinous in nature but, it **does not define** what cases would qualify as "heinous in nature", thus leaving it open to the interpretation of courts.
- There is **no evidence affirming potency of death penalty as a deterrent in preventing crimes**. Only the certainty that there will be effective investigation, trial, and therefore punishment, can act as an effective deterrent.
- On the contrary the death penalty will **increase the chances of victim being murdered** in order to get rid of the only witness, as the punishment for both will be the same.
- Studies have shown that often, the accused in sexual assault crimes are relatives or persons known to the victims. If the punishment for the crime is death, then not

only the family of the victim, but the victim herself may choose **not to report the crime or may turn hostile during the trial**.

- Also, several researches have also indicated that **judges are unlikely to convict a person** when the punishment is death.
- This **timeline provided by the bill is glaringly insufficient** for gathering all evidence or conducting a just trial and would result in hasty functioning and miscarriage of justice as seen in the trial under the Juvenile Justice Act and the POCSO Act.
- The Bill does not state what happens if the investigation, trial, or appeal is not completed within the prescribed time.

WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE

- Post the Nirbhaya case, criminal law amendments and the recommendations of the **Verma Committee** brought in several progressive amendments to curb violence against women and children, but the **system lacks in infrastructure** required for the effective implementation of the laws already in place. Hence the need of the hour is to focus on strengthening -
 - a robust investigative mechanism
 - a dynamic judiciary
 - adequate infrastructure
- Hence, it is the time for legislators to understand that, unless these systemic problems are solved, new laws will only be a facade.

3) Five years since Paris, an opportunity to build back better

GS-3 Environment

NEWS

- Recently, countries marked the five year anniversary of the Paris Agreement. The international community, including the European Union (EU) and India, gathered at the **Climate Ambition Summit 2020** to celebrate and recognise our resolve in working towards a safer, more resilient world with net zero emissions.

CLIMATE AMBITION SUMMIT 2020

- The summit was co-hosted by the United Nations, United Kingdom and France to mark the fifth year of adoption of the Paris Agreement on Climate Change.

- The UN General Secretary highlighted that the **international community might be able to reach carbon neutrality**, which is set out in the Paris Agreement, **only if global emission will be reduced by 45% by 2030 compared with the levels of 2010.**
- The objective of the summit was to set out new and ambitious commitments under the three pillars of the Paris Agreement that are **mitigation, adaptation and finance commitments.**
- It aims to bring together leaders to make new commitments to tackle climate change and deliver on the goals of the Paris Agreement.
- In the summit, Indian Prime Minister highlighted that India is not only on track to achieve its Paris Agreement targets, but to exceed them beyond expectations.

PRESENT CHALLENGES

- We have the responsibility to pass on the habitable planet earth to the next generation who will have to bear the heavier burden of climate change and pay off the debt of the recovery.
- With the pandemic, all have been hit by a virus with a potentially long lasting impact on our society and economies. This has given rise to a dilemma- 'during this pandemic, is it realistic to call for stronger global action to fight climate change?'

WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE?

- For the future prosperity, we must invest in greening the global economy.
- Recovery after Post COVID19 needs to be a green recovery.

EFFORTS BY EUROPEAN UNION AND INDIA

- The European Commission- launched the **European Green Deal** in 2019. This deal is a new growth model and roadmap to achieve **climate neutrality in the EU by 2050.**
- As well as the EU issued "**Next Generation EU**" **recovery package** and the EU's next longterm budget will earmark more than half a trillion euros for climate change.
- Before the Climate Ambitious Summit, to reach climate neutrality by 2050, EU leaders have unanimously agreed on the 2030 target of reducing greenhouse gas emissions by at least 55% compared to 1990 levels.

- The cost of solar photovoltaics has already declined by 82% between 2010 and 2019.
- India has started many flagship initiatives such as **International Solar Alliance, the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure and the Leadership Group for Industry Transition.**
- India and EU are also engaged to make a success of the forthcoming COP 26 in Glasgow on climate change and COP 15 in Kunming on biodiversity.

WAY FORWARD

- Good public policies are good but not sufficient. Hence, it is more important to come forward with clear strategies for net-zero emissions and to enhance the global level of ambition for 2030.
- No government can never alone tackle climate change.
- There is a need to foster small individual actions to attain a big collective impact.
- The world should mobilise its best scientists, business people, policymakers, academics, civil society actors and citizens to protect together our planet.
- The need of the hour is to make joint global efforts to foster cooperation with partners from all around the world. There is a sense of global momentum which is increasing towards keeping the promise of the Paris Agreement, this momentum needs to be continued till the goal is achieved. **Our global, regional, national, local and individual recovery plans are an opportunity for 'build back better'.**

4) The Farmer's protest, truths and half-truths

GS-2 Government policies and interventions for development

ISSUE

- There have been farmers' protests going on in Punjab, Haryana and around the region of Delhi. Opinion of the general public on the support to the movement is divided.

BACKGROUND

- Government brought three agriculture farm bills which are aimed at bringing reform in agriculture marketing. The bill allows the farmers to sell their produce outside the mandis. Government believes that the step will reduce transportation cost and hence better remuneration for farmers as they

will be able to sell their produce at the MSP. Farmers are apprehensive that privatization of the farm sector will bring corporatization in the agriculture sector and will end MSP.

- While both Government and farmers may be right in their own belief, truths and half-truths of both Government and farmers need to know, so that constructive dialogue may be arrived between the parties.

Protestors' truth

- Protestors of Punjab and Haryana have benefited most by leveraging APMC and MSP provisions, which were put in place some 50 years to attract farmers to the Green revolution. **45% of the marketable surplus of wheat and rice is provided by farmers of the Punjab and Haryana.**
- Due to neglect of the APMCs and MSP outside Punjab and Haryana, the MSP has been identified with wheat and rice and MSP of other crops has been neglected.
- The "*arhtiyas*" (mandi middleman) though seen as villains by farmers of Punjab and Haryana are **lifeline of the agri-markets**. Arhtiyas, which today are Jat Sikhs and are substantial farmers, help in weighing, grading and sorting grain, fertilizer and pesticide agents, money lenders, general knowledge providers.
- APMC mandi fee or cess levied by the state is used primarily to make better roads and storage facilities.
- Contract farming has not been completely successful. Big contractors either renege on their commitment to small farmers or beat down the price or refuse to buy the produce. Second, if they give their lands to them then they may not get them back for no contractor will invest in land if the contract is just for a year and is renewable annually. The anti-zamindari policy of land to the tiller might now work against the interest of farmers if they are not the actual tillers for an extended period.

Government's Truth

- Demand of farmers for MSP as law is unfair as MSP was never a law but a policy.
- Like other produce, agricultural produce needs to obey market price fluctuations.
- **Contract farming may free small farmers from their tiny plot allowing farmers to move out of villages and seek jobs elsewhere.**

- **Farmers get huge subsidies from the state to the tune of 2-2.5% of GDP** which is higher than subsidies farmers receive in the USA, EU, Latin America or Japan. (Subsidies: India:\$ 40-45 billion, USA: \$ 20 billion, EU: \$ 39 billion, Japan: \$ 46 billion)

Half-truths of protesters

- Farmers' demand for MSP as law is not really a roll back to the new agriculture bill but it is to bring a fresh one that makes MSP a law.
- Farmers resented for not being able to sell their produce in International markets when international prices are higher than domestic prices for example in case of Onion and sugars.

Half-truth of government

- Though Contract farming releases farmers from their uneconomical landholdings, issues exist such as selling their produce and when they want their lands back from the contractors.
- Small farmers don't go to mandis because of high transportation costs as there are few APMCs mandis.
- Total farm subsidy may be higher but **per capita subsidy to farmers in India is low**. (Per capita subsidy: India: \$ 48, USA: \$ 7000). This is problematic as **85% of farmers in India are small and marginal farmers** and social cover for health, education and unemployment is poor.
- MSP does not apply to only wheat and rice, but to **22 crops in all**. It is active for only wheat and rice because strong farmers lobby in the northwest whose main crop is wheat and rice.
- Ecological crises like depletion of the ground water due to thirsty crops like rice in Punjab and Haryana can be ended by ways like crop diversification as recommended by **S.S. Johl committee** rather than just focusing on just letting mandis and AMPC go.

WAY FORWARD

- As both versions of government and farmers have their truth and anti-truth, a comprehensive dialogue between the stakeholders is needed to remove anti-truth of both sides.
- It is true that subsidy is undesirable considering market ethos, and when a particular subsidy is withdrawn the population that was served by it will

protest. Subsidy is bad, but only for other people not for one benefiting from subsidy.

- But it is equally true that everybody, not only farmers, ranging from Central government employees, ministers, prisoners, poor children, armed forces and businessmen (through “revenues foregone”) benefits from subsidies. Hence the need of the hour is a common meeting ground between government and farmers.

5) The tightrope between production, industrial peace

GS 2- Important aspects of governance, transparency and accountability

NEWS

- The Wistron incident (recently its workers rioted at its iPhone factory outside Bengaluru) is an example of how exploitative labour practices could accompany businesses moving to India.

BACKGROUND

- Apple has decided to place its Taiwanese supplier- Wistron Corp., on probation by not giving it new orders. This decision came, after an audit which revealed the serious lapses in labour practices that led to violence in its facility in Narasapura in Karnataka.

SIGNIFICANCE OF APPLE'S DECISION

- This is a step forward in **corporate accountability and ethical business operations.**
- Pressured by Apple's response, Wistron has also been forced to apologise to the workers, removed its Vice-President in charge of India operations, and initiated corrective measures to address workers' grievances.

REALITIES OF MANUFACTURING UNITS

- The incident at Narasapura, points to the realities of high-tech manufacturing outsourced through supply chains in the global south is built on uncertainties of labour involved in them.
- Many of the suppliers subcontracting in the high-end electronics sector are involved in **wilful violations of labour standards and practices.**
- Other cases of violent labour contentions in units manufacturing and assembling high-end technological devices in India have received less attention in the past.

- The default response of the brands has been- escaping the responsibility by either shifting the onus to the subcontracting firms or keeping things in silent mode.
- The prevailing norms of work arrangements practised by the suppliers are hiring labour from multiple subcontractors/third party work supply firms. This process creates **ambiguity in identifying the primary employer and thus impedes workers from getting effective redress to their grievances.**

TRAUMA FOR WORKERS

- Brands, in order to produce devices in speed and with tight timelines 24x7, put huge burden on the shoulders of the workers employed in the supplier factories.
- It forces them to work under harsh conditions, doing overtime, long tiring shifts without much breaks, and under constant disciplinary monitoring by supervisors.
- This is further worsened with low pay and little or no social security, leading to strain and traumatic experiences, both physical and mental.
- Another prevalent problem is of **unpaid, forced student internships** to fill labour shortages and offset costs. Thus, students from vocational educational institutions are compulsorily employed, and subjected to the same exploitative conditions as the workers. Legally not classified as workers, these students have no compulsory social protections.
- The supply of student-workers is encouraged by local governments, since they are dependent on the suppliers' support for resources, due to skewed tax and revenue structure favouring the central government.

SAFEGUARDS VS. INVESTMENTS

- That many of these exploitative labour practices and violations of safeguards could be carried over when these facilities move into the Indian terrain is illustrated by the occurrence in the Wistron facility.
- The exploitative labour practices when combined with the precarities already embedded in India's manufacturing sector, can have debilitating consequences for labour.
- This becomes more pertinent, in the backdrop of increasing keenness of

governments in India to attract Taiwanese investments and existing weak legal-regulatory labour architecture. Thus, raising the questioning on India's supervision capabilities on foreign invested enterprises entering India.

- The passing of the new labour codes further erodes existing modicum of labour protection.
- Thus, the fear of 'flight of capital', coupled with weak state capacity in supervision make state administrations reluctant to step in unless things escalate.

PROGNOSIS AHEAD

- Increasing pressure from the consumers side and to keep its brand image clean, Apple has provided a '**Code of Conduct**' to all its suppliers, seeking to monitor and audit compliance of labour standards and safeguards.
- But the latest incident highlights the need to maintain tough balance between fulfilling production targets and ensuring industrial peace.
- In the absence of avenues for workers to channelise their grievances — representative associations and unions — and adequate collective bargaining mechanisms as well as social dialogue, frequent labour unrest including to the extent of violent confrontations, could very well be a daily reality in these high-end manufacturing facilities.

6) Article 356 and an activist judiciary

GS 2 - Indian Judiciary

NEWS

- The recent order of the Andhra Pradesh High Court directing the Andhra Pradesh government to come prepared to argue on the 'breakdown of constitutional machinery in the state' is shocking as it opens up the possibility of use or even misuse of Article 356 by the judiciary. The Supreme Court of India has stayed the order.

ISSUE

- The High Court could pass such an order due to the presence of a controversial provision in Article 356 i.e. **the term 'otherwise'**.

THE WORD "OTHERWISE"

- According to **Article 356** of the Constitution, the **President on receipt of a report from the governor of a State or otherwise**, that the government of the State is not being carried according to constitutional provisions, can impose the emergency situations as provided under the Article.

- The word 'otherwise' was criticised because it can include anything.
- Thus, inclusion of article 356 was called a 'retrograde step' that would reduce the autonomy of the states to a farce.

STORY BEHIND THE INCLUSION OF ARTICLE 356

- No liberal democratic Constitution in the world has a provision such as Article 356 that gives the central government the power to dismiss a democratically-elected State government except the Constitution of India and Pakistan.
- Both of them borrowed this provision from the **Government of India Act, 1935**.
- During the freedom struggle, the leaders of India were in so much opposition to this provision that they forced the British government to suspend it.
- But after Independence, the same was incorporated in the Constitution of India, in the name of democracy, federalism and stability.
- On June 11, 1947, it was agreed in the Constituent Assembly that the Governor could use this emergency power.

THE RECORD

- Article 356 has been used/ misused **more than 125 times** though **B.R. Ambedkar** had assured that **it would remain a dead letter**. In almost all cases it was used for **political considerations** rather than any genuine breakdown of constitutional machinery in the States.

INSTANCES OF USE OF ARTICLE 356

- In the very first invocation of Article 356 in 1951, Jawaharlal Nehru removed the Gopi Chand Bhargava Ministry in Punjab though he enjoyed the majority.
- In 1959, it was used against the majority opposition government of the E.M.S. Namboodripad government in Kerala and Governor B. Ramakrishna Rao in his report argued that the government had lost 'support of overwhelming majority of

people' and belittled the fact of it enjoying the confidence of the House.

- Indira Gandhi has the dubious distinction of using Article 356 as many as 27 times, and in most cases to remove majority governments on the ground of political stability, absence of clear mandate or withdrawal of support, etc.
- But the Janata government did worse than Mrs Gandhi by removing nine majority Congress governments in one stroke on April 30, 1977.
- Mrs Gandhi replied in the same currency on her return to power in 1980 by removing nine Opposition majority governments at one go.
- Subsequent governments too acted in similar fashion including the Narendra Modi government which invoked Article 356 in Arunachal Pradesh on Republic Day itself, in 2016.
- The most notable case of non-use of Article 356 was the refusal of the P.V. Narasimha Rao government prior to the demolition of the Babri Masjid on December 6, 1992 as in

the draft Constitution, emergency power could be used to safeguard the 'legitimate interests of minorities' and the government was fully aware of a breakdown of constitutional machinery in Uttar Pradesh.

CONCLUSION

- Today, when many constitutional experts are of the view that the judiciary is increasingly becoming more executive-minded than the executive itself, the observations of the Andhra Pradesh High Court are a worrisome sign.
- **The word 'otherwise' should be deleted from Article 356 and the provision should be used only sparingly and to never remove a majority government.**
- Judicial activism may be good as a rare exception but an activist judiciary is neither good for the country nor for the judiciary itself as it would encourage the government to appoint committed judges.

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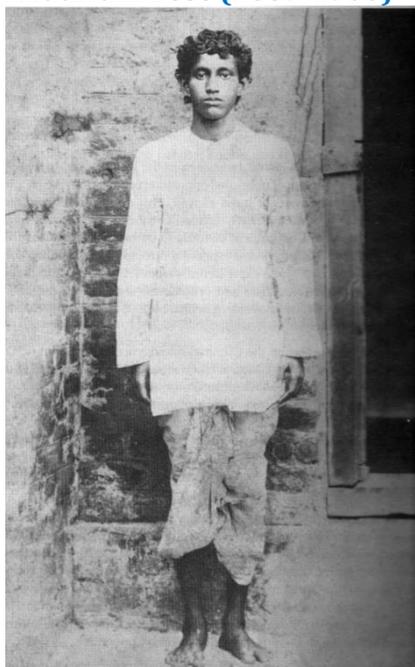
INDIAN EXPRESS EXPLAINED

1) Who was Khudiram Bose?

What is in the news?

- The Union Home Minister recently visited the house of revolutionary Khudiram Bose and said that he belonged to the whole India rather than just West Bengal.

About Khudiram Bose (1889-1908)



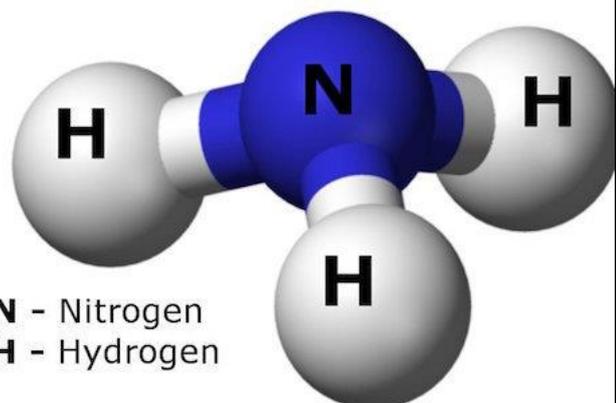
- Born and brought up in Midnapore of **West Bengal**, Khudiram Bose was inspired by talks of revolutionary **Sri Aurobindo** and **Sister Niveditha**.
- He joined **Anushilan Samiti**, an early 20th century organisation founded by **Satish Chandra Basu**, which propounded revolutionary activities in Bengal. He learnt how to make bombs and he would plant them in front of police stations.
- In 1908, he along with **Prafula Chaki** were assigned the task of **assassinating the district magistrate of Muzaffarpur, Kingsford**. They threw a bomb on the Kingsford's carriage but unfortunately it was carrying the wife and daughter of a barrister named Pringle Kennedy, who lost their lives, and Kingsford escaped.
- Khudiram Bose was caught and sentenced to death. He was just 19 years old when he was executed on August 11, 1908.

2) IFFCO gas leak: How dangerous is ammonia?

Why in the news?

- At Indian Farmers Fertilizer Cooperative Limited (IFFCO) unit Prayagraj, Uttar Pradesh, high concentration ammonia leaked, in which 2 persons died and several were injured.
- Let us know more about ammonia.

What is ammonia?



- Ammonia (NH₃) is the building block of **ammonium nitrate** (NH₄NO₃) which is used as a nitrogen fertiliser.
- Ammonia is stored for industrial use in liquid form under high pressure or in gaseous form at low temperature. Ammonia is critical in the **manufacturing of fertilizers**, and is one of the largest-volume synthetic chemicals produced in the world.
- More than 80 per cent of ammonia made is consumed in the manufacturing of fertilizer, and most of the remainder goes into the production of **formaldehyde** (used in making building materials and many household products).

Effects of Ammonia on human body

- Ammonia, which is highly soluble in water, is found in soil, air, and water, but when present in the environment, it is **diluted** and **does not affect the human body to a noticeable level**.
- It is **naturally present in the body** and secreted by the kidneys to neutralise excess acid.

- Ammonia, even in **moderate concentration**, can cause **irritation to eyes, skin, nose and throat**.
- When **inhaled in excess, the gas is toxic and affects the lungs** with a possibility of causing chemical pneumonitis — inflammation of the lung caused by aspirating or inhaling irritants.
- Ammonia interacts immediately upon contact with moisture present in the skin, eyes, oral cavity, respiratory tract to form ammonium hydroxide, which is very caustic and disrupts the cell membrane lipids, ultimately leading to cellular destruction.

3) How Vadodara corporation plans to raise money via municipal bonds

What is in the news?

- Vadodara (a city in Gujarat) municipal corporation is about to raise money through municipal bonds for its developmental work under the Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation (AMRUT).
- It will be the third urban local body in Gujarat after Ahmedabad and Surat to use municipal bonds under this scheme.
- Let us understand what municipal bonds are and how it will work.

AMRUT scheme

- The Government of India has launched the Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation (AMRUT) with the **aim of providing basic civic amenities** like water supply, sewerage, urban transport, parks as to improve the quality of life for all especially the poor and the disadvantaged.

The focus of the Mission is on infrastructure creation that has a direct link to provision of better services to the citizens.

- The purpose of "AMRUT" mission is to (i) ensure that every household has **access to a tap with assured supply of water and a sewerage connection** (ii) **increase the amenity value of cities** by developing greenery and well maintained open spaces e.g. parks and (iii) **reduce pollution** by switching to public transport or constructing facilities for non-motorized transport e.g. walking and cycling.
- The project fund is **divided among States/UTs in an equitable formula in which 50:50 weightage** is being given to the urban population of each State/UT and number of statutory towns.

Municipal Bonds

- A municipal bond or muni bond is a debt instrument issued by municipal corporations or associated bodies in India.
- These local governmental bodies utilise the funds raised through these bonds to finance projects for socio-economic development through building bridges, schools, hospitals, providing proper amenities to households, et al.
- The difference between a bank loan and a municipal bond is that any institution can secure a bond only if it **has favourable credit ratings**.
- It is usually for 10 years tenure and Bonds are issued to institutional and high net worth individuals.

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RSTV BIG PICTURE

1) Regulating Digital Lenders

- Recently, the Reserve Bank of India has cautioned people against unauthorised digital lending apps amid growing concerns over coercive recovery tactics and exorbitant interest rates charged by a section of digital lenders.

Crux of the issue

- The pandemic has given rise to **increasing digital financial transactions as well as it has created a need for providing last mile digital connections** across the country due to which the “**digital lending**” is making its place through various **tech-led digital apps**.
- **Different states have different money lending regulations** which allow certain operators to use the digital apps for running the schemes **which is beyond the purview of Reserve Bank of India (RBI)**.
- Such operators may be **non-authorised NBFCs** and have their own kind of mobile apps which are regulated by their own and charge **exorbitant interest rates** which are around 30-40%.
- The major crux lies in the **need of short term and working capital loans for the unserved sphere of the population who majorly goes for informal lending** as formal lending does not cater the demand for short term loans without collateral. Thus, lack of financial inclusion programmes have given rise to these unauthorised lending.

Major limitations

- The major drawback lies in **lack of creating awareness about the technology** among the people as it is moving at a faster pace.
- There is **no particular regulatory body at state and district level** for regulating the financial and lending activities.
- **Aligning state and central lending activities** is difficult.
- No proper **legal framework at the state level** for regulation of lending activities.

Way Forward

- **Monitoring the lending activities** is a focal point which need to be looked upon along with **coordinating and**

synchronising the legal framework for regulating the digital lending.

- There are provisions for **disseminating information** at the central level by the RBI which can be implemented by state in **local or vernacular language** for spreading awareness among the people.
- Regulation has its own role but **use of digital technology** for addressing the issue of catering the short term loans demand instead of branching can be a fruitful initiative by the formal lending sector.
- State government needs to come on board for a **centralised regulation framework**.
- Catering the **demand of short term loans by the majority of the population through formal lending** is the need of the hour which can be done by ensuring a safe online transaction behaviour.
- Eg: Implement a mechanism for checking registration number of NBFCs on RBI website and move forward for getting loans.

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