

OFFICERS' PULSE

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COVERAGE

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AT A GLANCE & IN DEPTH.

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News @ a glance

POLITY

1) e-portal for reporting tax evasion, 'benami' assets

What's in the news?

- The Central Board of Direct Taxes (CBDT) has launched an **automated dedicated e-portal** on the e-filing website of the Department to **receive and process complaints of tax evasion, foreign undisclosed assets as well as complaints regarding benami properties.**
- Public can now file a Tax Evasion Petition through a link on the e-filing website of the Department
<https://www.incometaxindiaefiling.gov.in/> under the head "**File complaint of tax evasion/undisclosed foreign asset/benami property**".
- The complainant can file complaints in respect of violations of the Income- tax Act, 1961, Black Money (Undisclosed Foreign Assets and Income) Imposition of Tax Act, 1961 and Prevention of Benami Transactions Act (as amended) in three separate forms designed for the purpose.
- The e-portal is an initiative of the Income Tax Department to bring about **enhanced ease of interaction with the Department**, while strengthening its resolve towards **e-governance**.

2) Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana 3.0

About the scheme

- Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY) is the flagship scheme of the **Ministry of Skill Development & Entrepreneurship (MSDE)** implemented by **National Skill Development Corporation**. The scheme was launched in 2015.
- The objective of this Skill Certification Scheme is to **enable a large number of Indian youth to take up industry-**

relevant skill training that will help them in securing a better livelihood.

- Individuals with prior learning experience or skills will also be assessed and certified under **Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)**.
- Under this Scheme, Training and Assessment fees are **completely paid by the Government**.
- Skill training is based on the **National Skill Qualification Framework (NSQF)** and industry led standards.

About NSQF

- The National Skills Qualifications Framework is a competency-based framework that organizes all qualifications according to a series of levels of knowledge, skills and aptitude.
- These levels, graded from one to ten, are defined in terms of learning outcomes which the learner must possess regardless of whether they are obtained through formal, non-formal or informal learning. NSQF in India was notified on 27th December 2013.
- Under NSQF, the learner can acquire the **certification for competency** needed at any level through **formal, non-formal or informal learning**. In that sense, the NSQF is a quality assurance framework.

About NSDC

- The National Skills Development Corporation is a **not-for-profit public limited company** incorporated in 2008 under the section 25 of the Companies Act, 1956 (corresponding to section 8 of the Companies Act, 2013).
- It is a public-private partnership formed under India's **Ministry of Finance**, with 51 percent equity held by the private sector and the remaining 49 percent by the Government of India.
- NSDC acts as a catalyst in skill development by providing funding to

enterprises, companies and organizations that provide skill training.

- It also develops appropriate models to enhance, support and coordinate private sector initiatives.

Why in News?

- The Third Phase of Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana was launched recently in 600 districts across the country.
- Spearheaded by the Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship, this phase will focus on new-age and COVID-related skills.
- PMKVY 3.0 envisages training of eight lakh candidates over a scheme period of 2020-2021 with an outlay of Rs 949 crore.

3) New Education Policy 2020

What's in the news?

- Last year, the Union Cabinet approved the New Education Policy 2020. The policy aims to pave way for transformational reforms in school and higher education systems in the country. This policy replaces the 34 year old National Policy on Education, 1986.

Highlights of NEP

5+3+3+4 curricular structure

- The New Education Policy expands age group 6-14 years of mandatory schooling to **3-18 years of schooling**. The NEP introduced hitherto uncovered three years of pre-schooling, age group of 3-6 years under the school curriculum.
- With an emphasis on Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE), the 10+2 structure of school curriculum is to be replaced by a **5+3+3+4 curricular structure** corresponding to ages 3-8, 8-11, 11-14, and 14-18 years respectively.

Targets

- The new policy aims for **universalisation of education** from pre-school to secondary level with 100 per cent Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in school education by 2030 and aims to raise **GER in higher education to 50 per cent by 2025**.
- NEP 2020 has set the target to increase the public investment in the education sector to reach **6 per cent of GDP** by the Centre and State.

Universal foundational literacy and numeracy

- NEP 2020 calls for the setting up of a **National Mission on Foundational Literacy and Numeracy** by the Education Ministry. States will prepare an implementation plan for attaining universal foundational literacy and numeracy in all primary schools for all learners by grade 3 by 2025.
- A new National Assessment Centre, **PARAKH** (Performance Assessment, Review, and Analysis of Knowledge for Holistic Development), will be set up as a standard-setting body.
- NEP emphasises on setting up of **Gender Inclusion Fund** and also **Special Education Zones** for disadvantaged regions and groups.
- Every state/district will be encouraged to establish "**Bal Bhavans**" as a special daytime boarding school, to participate in art-related, career-related, and play-related activities. Free school infrastructure can be used as Samajik Chetna Kendras.

Medium of instruction

- The policy states, the medium of instruction until at least class 5 (and preferably till class 8) should be "home language or mother tongue or local/regional language". Thereafter, the home or local language should continue to be taught as a language.
- The policy gives the **freedom to the state, region, and child to choose three languages** to be learned. However, at least two of the three languages should be native Indian languages.
- High performing Indian universities will be encouraged to set up campuses in other countries, and similarly, selected universities, those from among the top 100 universities in the world will be facilitated to operate in India.

Vocational education

- An autonomous body, the **National Educational Technology Forum (NETF)** will be created to promote digital learning. It will provide a platform for the free exchange of ideas on the use of technology to enhance learning, assessment, planning, administration and so on, both for school and higher education.

- **Vocational education** will start in schools from the 6th grade.

Why in News?

- Union Education Minister Ramesh Pokhriyal Nishank reviewed the implementation of New Education Policy-2020 with the senior officials of the ministry.
- During the meeting, Mr. Pokhriyal recommended the **constitution of a Task**

Force for coordinating implementation of the New Education Policy between Higher Education and School Education Departments of the Ministry of Education.

- The Task Force will facilitate smooth transition of students from school education to higher education.

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ENVIRONMENT

1) Management Effectiveness Evaluation (MEE) of Protected Areas

About MEE

- MEE is a joint effort of **Wildlife Institute of India and Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change.**
- Protected Area (PA) management effectiveness evaluation (MEE) is defined as the assessment of **how well National Parks and Wildlife sanctuaries (NP&WLS) are being managed**—primarily, whether they are protecting their values and achieving the goals and objectives agreed upon.
- The term ‘management effectiveness’ reflects three main themes of PA management:
 - Design issues relating to both individual sites and PA systems
 - The adequacy and appropriateness of management systems and processes
 - Delivery of the objectives of NP&WLS, including conservation of values.
- Management Effectiveness Evaluation of Protected Areas has emerged as a key tool for PA managers and is increasingly being used by governments and international bodies **to understand the strengths and weaknesses of the protected area management systems.**

Assessment

- 30 ‘Headline Indicators’ have been developed under 6 Elements of MEE framework which are suitable in Indian context for evaluation. Each ‘Headline Indicator’ had four possible answers, ‘poor’ (score 2.5), ‘fair’ (score 5), ‘good’ (score 7.5) and ‘very good’ (score 10) to choose for evaluation. The total score would be 300 by including the maximum score of all questions.
- The ratings assigned in four categories, as **Poor - upto 40%; Fair - 41 to 59%; Good - 60 to 74%; Very Good - 75% and above.**

About India’s Protected Areas

- India’s major portion of biodiversity is being safeguarded as Protected Areas (PAs). India has systematically designated

its PAs in four legal categories viz. **National Parks, Wildlife Sanctuaries, Conservation Reserves and Community Reserves under Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972.**

- As per this Act, India has set up 903 formally designated PAs with the total coverage 1,65,012.65 sq. km (**5.02% of the country's geographical area**). Among 903 PAs, 101 National Parks, 553 Wildlife Sanctuaries, 86 Conservation Reserves and 163 Community Reserves (as on 1st January, 2020).
- The National Parks and Wildlife Sanctuaries are presently the categories being subjected to evaluation through management effectiveness evaluation process.

About Wildlife Institute of India (WII)

- WII is an **autonomous Institution** of the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, Government of India, established in 1982.
- WII is an internationally acclaimed Institution, which offers training programs, academic courses and advisory in wildlife research and management. The Institute is actively engaged in research across the breadth of the country on biodiversity related issues.

Why in the news?

- The Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change has released **Management Effectiveness Evaluation (MEE) 2018-19** of 146 National Park and Wildlife Sanctuaries in the Country.
- The assessment of management effectiveness of these Protected areas is essential to know how best the country is doing in its conservation efforts.
- The Ministry also announced that from 2021 onwards 10 best National Parks, 5 coastal and marine parks and top five Zoos in the country will be ranked and awarded every year.

Results of MEE 2018-19

- The results of the present assessment are encouraging with an overall mean MEE score of **62.01% which is higher than the global mean of 56%.**

- **Tirthan Wildlife Sanctuary** and **Great Himalayan National Park** in Himachal Pradesh were rated with the highest MEE score of 84.17% and **Turtle Wildlife Sanctuary, Uttar Pradesh** rated with **least MEE** score of 26.66%.

Table 2.9: Top two highest and lowest scored NP&WLS in five regions

Region	Highest Scored PA	Lowest Scored PA
Northern	1. Great Himalayan NP, H.P.- 84.17% (Very Good) 2. Tirthan WLS, H.P.- 84.17% (Very Good)	1. Turtle Wildlife Sanctuary, U.P.- 26.66% (Poor) 2. Khaparwas WLS, Haryana- 29.17% (Poor)
Southern	1. Someshwara WLS, Karnataka- 80% (Very Good) 2. Gulf of Mannar Marine NP, Tamil Nadu- 79.17% (Very Good)	1. Oussudu Lake Bird WLS, Tamil Nadu- 45.83% (Fair) 2. Madei WLS, Goa- 50% (Fair)
Eastern	1. Raiganj WLS, West Bengal- 81.03% (Very Good) 2. Jaldapara WLS, West Bengal- 80.83% (Very Good)	1. Topchanchi WLS, Jharkhand- 43.33% (Fair) 2. Pamed Wild Buffalo WLS, Chhattisgarh-40% (Fair)
Western	1. Pachmarhi WLS, M.P.-80.83% (Very Good) 2. Kuno-Palpur WLS, M.P.- 79.16% (Very Good)	1. Van Vihar WLS, Rajasthan- 32% (Poor) 2. Ramsagar WLS, Rajasthan- 29.31% (Poor)
North-eastern	1. Nongkhyllem WLS, Meghalaya- 79.17% (Very Good) 2. Khangchendzonga NP, Sikkim- 77.50% (Very Good)	1. Marat Longri WLS, Assam- 34.16% (Poor) 2. Pani-Dihing Bird WLS, Assam- 31.66% (Poor)

- With this round of evaluation, the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC) successfully completed one full cycle of evaluating all terrestrial National Parks and Wildlife Sanctuaries of the country from 2006 to 2019.

MEE-ZOO

- MoEFCC has also launched **Management Effectiveness Evaluation of Indian Zoos (MEE-ZOO)** framework which proposes guidelines, criteria and indicators for evaluation of zoos of the country through Management Effectiveness Evaluation Process in a manner which is discrete, holistic and independent.
- The MEE-ZOO exercise is moving towards **developing highest standards in Zoos** across India and adhering to core values of accountability, transparency, innovation, use of technology, collaboration and integrity to achieve the mandate of conservation of endangered species.

2) One Planet Summit on Biodiversity

About the summit

- The 'One Planet Summit' has been organized by the **French Government since 2017**.
- It tackles climate change challenges and supports the objectives of the Paris Agreement, by encouraging stronger commitments and more concrete decisions from stakeholders.
- The One Planet Summit **promotes environmental and climate solutions** that go hand in hand with employment, innovation and the creation of economic opportunities. It serves as a platform for the international community.

The High Ambition Coalition (HAC) for Nature and People

- It was launched in 2019 by Costa Rica, France and Britain.
- It is an intergovernmental group of more than 45 countries co-chaired by Costa Rica and France and by the United Kingdom as Ocean co-chair, championing a global deal for nature and people that can **halt the accelerating loss of species, and protect vital ecosystems that are the source of our economic security**.
- The HAC for Nature and People is raising our global ambition to **achieve at least**

30% protection of the land and ocean by 2030 and ignite transformative change for the future of all life on Earth.

PREZODE

- It is an initiative to **prevent emerging zoonotic risks and pandemics**. It was announced on the occasion of the One Planet Summit for biodiversity.
- Three French research institutes – INRAE, CIRAD and IRD – have teamed up with around ten other research bodies in France, Germany and the Netherlands to launch PREZODE, which has already mobilized more than 1000 researchers.

The Great Green Wall Initiative

- The Great Green Wall is **Africa's flagship initiative to combat climate change and desertification and address food insecurity and poverty**. It can be a game-changer for Africa, transforming the lives of millions of people by creating a great mosaic of green and productive landscapes across North Africa, the Sahel and the Horn.
- Launched in 2007, as the 'Great Green Wall for the Sahara and the Sahel Initiative' (GGWSSI), it aims to **plant an arc of trees** running 7,000 kilometers (4,350 miles) across Africa — from **Senegal along the Atlantic all the way to Djibouti on the Gulf of Aden**.
- It brings together more than 20 African countries with international organizations, research institutes, civil society and grassroots organizations.

Why in the news?

- On 11th January, the video-conference of One Planet Summit was held in Paris, France. It was jointly organized by France, the United Nations and the World Bank.
- The one-day summit focused on four major topics:
 1. Protecting terrestrial and marine ecosystems;
 2. Promoting agroecology, a more sustainable way to grow food;
 3. Increasing funding to protect biodiversity; and
 4. Identifying links between deforestation and the health of humans and animals.
- It was attended by 30 leaders but many big countries such as Brazil, **India**, USA and Russia **were absent**.
- **Events during the summit**

- French President Emmanuel Macron announced that the High Ambition Coalition for Nature and People, has now been joined **by 50 countries**.
- The summit also saw the launch of **PREZODE**.
- **A new coalition** has been formed of Mediterranean countries working to better protect the sea from pollution and overfishing.
- The Great Green Wall initiative was gifted with an accelerator which will pump \$14.3 billion over the next five years to finance the program.

3) Study finds metal pollution in aquaculture farms

Why in the news?

- A study commissioned by the Federation of Indian Animal Protection Organisations (FIAPO) and All Creatures Great and Small (ACGS) on brackish and freshwater aquaculture farms showed presence of metal pollution in the industry.
- The study was conducted in nine highest producing States and one Union Territory with an objective to assess the **condition of fish and shrimp farms in India on animal welfare, public health, and environmental hazard standards**.

What are the major findings of the study?

- All of the fish and shrimp farms had **toxic levels of lead and cadmium**, and all the shrimp farms that the surveyors visited were releasing this toxic waste water directly into the nearby canals or estuaries.

- Exposure to high levels of **lead** may cause **anemia, weakness, and kidney and brain damage**. Very high lead exposure can cause **death**. Lead can cross the placental barrier, which means pregnant women who are exposed to lead also **expose their unborn child**. Lead can damage a developing baby's nervous system.
- Only a small amount of cadmium remains in the body after eating food contaminated with cadmium, but if consumed over a long period of time, cadmium can lead to **kidney disease and cause bones to become weaker**. Large amounts of cadmium can **damage the kidney, liver and heart** and in severe

cases may cause **death**.

- The unhygienic conditions led to **frequent disease outbreaks** at half the farms visited, and which caused significant commercial losses.
- 65% of the fish farms had **poor dissolved oxygen levels**, which means fish were struggling to survive with high mortality rates.
- **Excessive use of antibiotics and insecticides** for cultivation and the threat of **antimicrobial resistance** have contributed to making aquaculture a “ticking time bomb.”
- Some fish farms are also into **cultivation of banned species** such as catfish and Red-bellied Piranha.
- **Recommendations**

- There is a need for a **central and state level regulatory framework** for freshwater & brackish water aquaculture.
- The **Aquaculture Authority** needs to be empowered to work directly with the **Animal Welfare Board of India and the Union Environment Ministry** to strictly enforce aquaculture specific laws.
- Fishes need to be given the same level of legal protection as other animals.
- And, considering the amount of antibiotics used and the water quality, the **Food Safety and Standards Authority of India** should be empowered to not just regulate the end product, but the conditions in which the fishes are grown.

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ECONOMY

1) India-China trade

What's in the news?

- According to the latest official data, **India's trade with China last year fell to the lowest since 2017**, with the **trade imbalance declining to a five-year low** on the back of a slump in India's imports from China.
- Two-way trade in 2020 reached **\$87.6 billion**, down by 5.6%. India's imports from China accounted for **\$66.7 billion**, declining by 10.8% year-on-year and the lowest figure since 2016.
- **India's exports to China**, however, **rose to the highest figure on record**, for the first time crossing the \$20 billion-mark and growing 16% last year to \$20.86 billion.
- The **trade deficit**, a source of friction between India and China, **declined to a five year-low** of \$45.8 billion, the lowest since 2015.

News in Detail

- While there was no immediate break-up of the data in 2020, India's biggest import in 2019 was **electrical machinery and equipment**, worth \$20.17 billion. Other major imports in 2019 were **organic chemicals** (\$8.39 billion) and **fertilisers** (\$1.67 billion), while India's top exports were **iron ore, organic chemicals, cotton and unfinished diamonds**.
- While India's imports from China declined, so did India's imports overall with a slump in domestic demand last year. There is, as yet, no evidence to suggest India has replaced its import dependence on China by either sourcing those goods elsewhere or manufacturing them at home.
- The trade pattern of the coming 12 months, as India's economy begins to rebound, will reveal whether the past year was an exception or a turning point.

2) Commercial coal mining

Background

- In May 2020, as a part of the announcements made under the **Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyan**, the Central government announced that it

would allow commercial mining in the coal sector.

What is commercial mining?

- Commercial mining **allows the private sector** to mine coal commercially on a **revenue-sharing model without placing any end-use restrictions**.
- Removing end-use restrictions marks the **end of the captive mining regime**.
 1. *Captive mining is the coal mined for a specific end-use by the mine owner, but not for open sale in the market.*
 2. *A revenue sharing mechanism instead of the earlier fixed price per tonne will introduce competition, transparency and private sector participation in the market.*
- The private firms will have the option of either gasification of the coal or exporting it. They can also use it in their own end-use plants or **sell them in the markets**.
- Further, with **100 per cent foreign direct investment** allowed in the coal sector, global companies can also participate in the auctions.
- The complete freedom to decide on sale, pricing, and captive utilisation is expected to attract many private sector firms to participate in the auction process.
- The government expects these steps will generate employment and reduce India's import bill.

Was the private sector never allowed in mining?

- Private sector participation was permitted until the early 1970s. The Indira Gandhi government announced the **nationalisation of the coal blocks** in two phases **between 1971 and 1973**.
- The recently announced reforms will effectively **end state-owned Coal India Ltd (CIL)'s monopoly** over mining and selling of coal.

Is this the first attempt by the government to open up the sector?

- After the Supreme Court cancelled the coal block allocations made to the private sector in 2014, the central government had brought in the Coal Mines (Special provisions) Act of 2015 to return these

coal blocks to the private sector through **auctions**.

- But there had been **end-use restrictions** and the private sector was **not allowed to trade into the market** making it unattractive for the private sector.
- Further in 2018, private sector firms were allowed to **sell upto 25 per cent of the output** in the market, but this also saw a lukewarm response from the private sector.

Why in News?

- Coal Minister Pralhad Joshi said the next tranche of commercial mines auction will be unveiled this month.
- The Minister also unveiled a **single-window clearance system for commercial coal mining** which is in the spirit of **minimum government and maximum governance**. He said it would be a milestone for ease of doing business in the country's coal sector.
- Presently, about 19 major approval or clearances are required before starting a coal mine in the country.

Significance

- The auction for commercial mining was a major step towards making India self-reliant in the energy sector.
- The government has also decided to spend Rs 50,000 crore on creating **infrastructure for coal extraction and transport**. This would also create job opportunities for locals closer to their homes.
- Despite India having the **world's fourth largest coal reserve** and being the **second largest producer**, the country was the **second largest coal importer**. The sector had been kept out of competition and devoid of transparency, hampering investment and efficiency.
- Fully opening up the sector would increase competition, capital, participation and technology. It would ensure new private players did not face the problem of finance.

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INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

1) 1267 sanctions committee

About the committee

- The 1267 sanctions committee of the UN, also known as the **ISIL (Da-esh) and Al Qaida sanctions committee**, oversees sanctions measures related to individuals, entities and groups.
- The committee can impose measures like asset freezes, travel bans and arms embargoes against designated individuals and entities.
- It is **one of the 14 sanctions committees under the UN**. Sanctions committees **comprise all 15 members of the Security Council**, and each committee is chaired by a non-permanent member on a rotational basis.
- All these sanctions committees (including the 1267 sanctions committee) undertake decisions by **consensus**. This requirement effectively gives a veto to all 15 members of the committee.

Why in News?

- In his speech at the UN Security Council, External Affairs minister S. Jaishankar urged members not to make false distinctions of “good” terrorists and “bad” terrorists, making indirect references to both China and Pakistan for delaying the process of designating terrorist individuals and entities, as well as failing to stop the funding of terror.
- “The practice of placing blocks and holds on listing requests without any rhyme or reason must end. This only erodes our collective credibility,” Mr. Jaishankar told UNSC members, in a reference to a number of blocks and holds China placed on designating Pakistan-based terrorists including Jaish-e-Mohammad Chief Masood Azhar before agreeing to put him on the **UNSC’s 1267 sanction list**.

2) Open Skies Treaty

About Open Skies Treaty (OST)

- First proposed in **1955** by former US President Dwight Eisenhower as a means to deescalate tensions during the Cold War, the landmark treaty was eventually signed in **1992** between **NATO members and**

former Warsaw Pact countries following the demise of the Soviet Union.

- It went into effect in 2002 and had **35 signatories**, including key players **US and Russia**, along with one non-ratifying member (Kyrgyzstan). **India** is not a signatory to the treaty.

Treaty in Detail

- The OST aims at building confidence among members through mutual openness, thus reducing the chances of accidental war. It allows countries to monitor signatories’ arms development by **conducting unarmed, surveillance flights** over each other’s territories.
- For each state party or group of state parties, the treaty specifies an active quota, the number of observation overflights it may conduct per year, and a passive quota, the number of overflights it must accept.
- The information gathered, such as on troop movements, military exercises and missile deployments, has to be shared with all member states. Only approved imaging equipment is permitted on the surveillance flights, and officials from the host state can also stay on board throughout the planned journey.

Background

- Last year, the U.S. gave notice that it will exit the Open Skies Treaty alleging Russia had continuously and flagrantly violated the treaty.

Why in News?

- Russia has announced that it was pulling out of the Open Skies treaty, saying that the pact had been seriously compromised by the withdrawal of the United States.
- Russia has raised concerns that despite leaving the treaty Washington could potentially retain access to overflight intelligence gathered by allies who remain members in the treaty.

What happens now that both the US and Russia are out?

- The failure of the Open Skies Treaty follows the demise of another significant arms control accord, the **Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty**, after both the US and Russia left it in 2019.

- Experts now worry about the fate of the much larger US-Russia '**New START**' nuclear arms control agreement, which is slated to expire on February 5, 2021.

Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces treaty

- Signed in 1987, the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces treaty required the United States and the Soviet Union to eliminate all of their **nuclear and conventional ground-launched ballistic and cruise missiles** with ranges of **500 to 5,500 kilometres**.
- As a result of the treaty, both countries destroyed a total of 2,692 short-, medium-, and intermediate-range missiles.
- In 2019, the U.S. announced its formal withdrawal from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces treaty accusing Russia of breaching the terms of the deal.

New START

- The New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) was signed in 2010 by **Russia and the United States** and entered into force in 2011.
- New START replaced the 1991 START I treaty, which expired in 2009, and superseded the 2002 Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (SORT).
- New START **caps the deployed strategic nuclear warheads and bombs** of the United States at Russia at 1,550 each. The Treaty includes limits on missiles, bombers, and land-based launchers for nuclear weapons.
- The Treaty also allows for verification inspections and information-sharing.
- The New Start Treaty is **due to expire this February**.

3) Kalapani issue

Background

- India and Nepal share a 1,800km (1,118-mile) open border.
- Nepal has long claimed the areas of **Limpiyadhura, Kalapani and Lipulekh** under the **1816 Sugauli treaty** with the British East India Company, although these

areas have remained under the control of Indian troops since India fought a war with China in 1962.

- Under the Treaty of Sugauli, **Kali river** was agreed as the demarcation line for the boundary between India and Nepal.
- However, what is meant by "Kali River" in the upper reaches is unclear, which created the scope for different interpretations by the two neighbours.



- The latest border dispute between the countries began over India's inauguration of a Himalayan link road cutting through the Lipulekh Himalayan pass, which will serve as the shortest route between capital New Delhi and Kailash-Mansarovar, a revered Hindu pilgrimage site in the Tibetan plateau.

Nepal's new map

- In June 2020, Nepal's Parliament cleared a Constitution Amendment Bill that endorses the country's new map that includes the areas of Lipulekh, Kalapani, and Limpiyadhura as part of its territory.
- India, which controls the region has rejected the map, said it is not based on historical facts or evidence.

Why in News?

- Nepal has raised the Kalapani boundary dispute with India during the latest Joint Commission meeting.

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SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

1) Meteorite

Why in News?

- A new study has shed light on the mineralogy of the meteorite that fell near Jaipur in 2017.

Meteorite

- A **meteorite** is a solid piece of **debris from** an object, such as a **comet, asteroid, or meteoroid**, that originates in outer space and **survives** its passage **through the atmosphere to reach the surface** of a planet or moon.
- The meteorite named Mukundpura CM2 (which fell near Jaipur) was classified to be a **carbonaceous chondrite**.
- The results of the Mukundpura CM2 study are relevant to the surface composition of near-Earth **asteroids Ryugu and Benu**.
- Meteorites are broadly classified into three groups – **stony** (silicate-rich), **iron** (Fe-Ni alloy), and **stony-iron** (mixed silicate-iron alloy). Chondrites are silicate-droplet-bearing meteorites.

Significance of meteorites

- Some meteorites contain grains of dust (“**stardust**”) that were produced by stars before the formation of our Solar System. Studies of these presolar grains can **increase our understanding of star formation and evolution**.
- By analysing the concentrations of multiple elements and their isotopes in meteorites, researchers are adding to our knowledge of the **age and bulk chemical composition of the Solar System**.
- Large meteorite impacts have **shaped the face of our planet and the Moon** through time. Many scientists believe that a very large impact was even responsible for the **formation of the Moon**.
- The analysis of different types of meteorites and their components are leading to new **knowledge of the earliest conditions in our Solar System**.
- **Meteorites** may have **brought** to Earth the **components necessary for life** – organic compounds such as carboxylic acids, complex amino acids, aliphatic amines, acetic acid and formic acid can be

transported great distances inside space rocks.

- Additionally, large meteorite impacts, like the one ~65 million years ago that killed off the dinosaurs, can lead to major extinctions and influence the course of life on our planet.

Additional Information

- **Meteoroid** - A meteoroid is a small rocky or metallic body in outer space.
- **Asteroid** - Asteroids are small, rocky objects that orbit the Sun. Although asteroids orbit the Sun like planets, they are much smaller than planets.
- **Comet** - A comet is an icy, small Solar System body that, when passing close to the Sun, warms and begins to release gases, a process called outgassing. When a comet comes close to the Sun, the ices sublimate (go directly from the solid to the gas phase) and form, along with entrained dust particles, a bright outflowing atmosphere around the comet nucleus known as a coma.

2) Vanadium

Why in News?

- **Exploration** carried out by Geological Survey of India (GSI) has placed the eastern Himalayan State **Arunachal Pradesh** on the **vanadium** map of the country and geologists are confident of identifying a deposit soon.

Why is the discovery important?

- **India** is a **significant consumer of vanadium** but is not a primary producer of the strategic metal.
- It is recovered as a by-product from the slag collected from the processing of vanadiferous magnetite ores (iron ore).
- According to data provided by GSI, India consumed 4% of about 84,000 metric tonnes of vanadium produced across the globe in 2017. China, which produces 57% of the world’s vanadium, consumed 44% of the metal.
- The **global demand** for vanadium has been **skyrocketing** but there was a deficit of 17,300 metric tonnes between demand and supply in 2017.

- Vanadium finding in Arunachal Pradesh **could help boost the local and national economy.**

About Vanadium

- **Vanadium** is a rare, soft, ductile gray-white element found combined in certain minerals and used mainly to produce certain alloys. It is a **high-value metal used in strengthening steel and titanium.**
- Vanadium alloys are **durable in extreme temperature and environments**, and are **corrosion-resistant.** Its addition improves the tensile strength of steel and of reinforcing bars used for buildings, tunnels and bridges.
- Apart from **increasing fuel-efficiency in automotive and aviation industries due to its high strength-to-weight ratio**, the metal forms the integral part of **vanadium redox batteries that have the least ecological impact in energy storage.**

Additional Details

The Geological Survey of India

- **The Geological Survey of India (GSI)** is a **scientific agency** of India. Founded in 1851, it is one of the oldest of such organisations in the world and the second oldest survey in India after Survey of India (founded in 1767), for conducting geological surveys and studies of India.
- It is an attached office to the **Ministry of Mines.**
- GSI is also the **prime provider of basic earth science information** to government, industry and general public, as well as the official participant in steel, coal, metals, cement, power industries and international geoscientific forums.

3) Quantum science and technology

What is Quantum Technology?

- Quantum technology is an emerging field of physics and engineering, which relies on the **principles of quantum physics.** Quantum computing, quantum sensors, quantum cryptography, quantum simulation, quantum metrology and quantum imaging are all examples of quantum technologies
- **Conventional computers** process information in **'bits' or 1s and 0s**, following classical physics under which

our computers can process a '1' or a '0' at a time.

- **Quantum computers compute in 'qubits'** (or quantum bits). They exploit the properties of quantum mechanics, the science that governs how matter behaves on the atomic scale.
- In this scheme of things, processors can be a 1 and a 0 simultaneously, a state called **quantum superposition.**

Applications of Quantum Technology

- **Secure Communication-** fast computing and unhackable satellite communication to its users.
- **Research-** solving some of the fundamental questions in physics
- Life sciences, agriculture and medicine.
- **Disaster Management:** Predicting disasters using data analysis with quantum applications.
- **Pharmaceutical-** Reducing the time frame of the discovery of new molecules and related processes to a few days
- **Augmenting Industrial revolution 4.0:** Quantum computing is an integral part of Industrial revolution 4.0 like the Internet-of-Things, machine learning, robotics, and artificial intelligence across sectors

Why in News?

- The detailed project report for a National Mission on Quantum Technology and Applications (NM-QTA) has been drawn out and finalised.
- The ₹8,000 crore Mission was announced in last year's budget session to develop quantum science and technology.
- In the next couple of months, this mission is expected to get approval.

About NM-QTA

- The scheme will be implemented by the **Department of Science and Technology (DST)** under the **Ministry of Science and Technology.**
- The focus areas for the mission will be addressing national priorities through:
 1. Fundamental science
 2. Translation
 3. Technology development
- The mission is expected to address the ever-increasing technological demands of society and also take into account the international achievements and trends in this domain.

- It is also expected to benefit in preparing the next generation **skilled manpower, encourage translational research, and promote entrepreneurship** and develop an ecosystem for start-ups.
- Quantum principles will be used to engineer solutions to problems in the field of communications, computing, chemistry, sensing, cryptography, mechanics, imaging among others.

4) Covaxin Usage

Why in News?

- Indian scientists and doctors are divided on the issue of restricted use approval granted to the Hyderabad-based Bharat Biotech's Covaxin, a COVID-19 vaccine.

What is the issue?

- Scientists are asking for Covaxin's **efficacy data** before vaccination. In pharmacology, **efficacy** describes the **maximum response that can be achieved with a drug**.
- It is imperative that relevant data from the larger Phase-3 trial become available before administering the vaccine to large numbers of people. Providing a vaccine without adequate efficacy data **can lead to a false sense of security** among vaccine recipients.
- Scientists who have criticised those raising concerns about granting restricted use approval to Covaxin even in the absence of efficacy data, point out to animal and phase-1 and phase-2 human clinical trial data that shows the vaccine is safe and provides robust immune responses. However, even robust immunogenicity data from phase-2 cannot be used as a substitute for efficacy data from phase-3 trials.

How is Covaxin different from other vaccines?

- Scientists supporting the approval of Covaxin say that the **use of a whole virus inactivated vaccine** which may have **better protection even against mutant strains** of the virus as the immune response will be against multiple antigens and not only against spike protein.
- The **whole virus that has been inactivated is used in Covaxin**. Such a vaccine will produce an array of antigens that will elicit higher and stronger immune

responses. So there is a biological reason for saying inactivated virus vaccines will be more effective against mutant strains.

5) Autism

About:

- Autism, or autism spectrum disorder (ASD), refers to a broad range of **conditions** characterized by **challenges with social skills, repetitive behaviors, speech and nonverbal communication**.
- Problems with communication and social interaction include:
 1. issues with communication, including difficulties sharing emotions, sharing interests, or maintaining a back-and-forth conversation
 2. issues with nonverbal communication, such as trouble maintaining eye contact or reading body language
 3. difficulties developing and maintaining relationships
 - Restricted or repetitive patterns of behavior or activities include:
 1. repetitive movements, motions, or speech patterns
 2. rigid adherence to specific routines or behaviors
 3. an increase or decrease in sensitivity to specific sensory information from their surroundings, such as a negative reaction to a specific sound
 4. fixated interests or preoccupations
- Educational mechanisms for the Autistic children use methodologies like **TEACCH** (Treatment and education of autistic and related communication handicapped children), **ABA** (Applied Behaviour Analysis), Sensory Integration Therapy, etc.
- These methods emphasize on working in collaboration with parents and families, to create programme design around individual strengths, skills, interests and needs of the child; enabling the individual to be as independent as possible.

What causes autism?

- The exact cause of ASD is unknown. The most current research demonstrates that there's no single cause.

India and Autism

- **About 1 in 100 children in India under age 10 has autism**, and nearly 1 in 8 has

at least one neurodevelopmental condition.

- The Government of India recognizes autism as a disability.
- **Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act, 1995** and **The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act 2016**, strives to create awareness of their rights and benefits as caregivers of autistic children.
- **The National Trust for Welfare of Persons with Autism, Cerebral Palsy, Mental Retardation and Multiple Disabilities Act, 1999** was constituted by the Central Government as a legal entity, and was set up in the year 2000.
- The objectives of the Trust is to enable and empower persons with disability, facilitate support to registered organizations, deal with problems of disabled persons who do not have family support, promote measures for their care and protection in the event of loss of parents and guardians, evolve a procedure for appointment of guardians and trustees so that equal opportunities, protection of rights and full participation of such persons is ensured.
- The National Trust has several schemes and programmes available for persons with autism and their families.
- **GHARAUNDA (Group Home And Rehabilitation Activities for Disabled Adults)**- GHARAUNDA seeks to provide an assured minimum quality of care services for persons with autism throughout the life at an affordable price on a sustainable basis; encourage assisted living with independence and dignity and facilitate establishment of requisite infrastructure for the assured care system throughout the country.
- **Niramaya (Health Insurance Scheme)**- This is a unique health insurance scheme for persons with Autism, Cerebral Palsy, Mental Retardation and Multiple Disabilities. This scheme provides comprehensive cover irrespective of type of disability, without any selection or exclusion criteria of the pre-existing condition. An applicant may receive insurance cover up to Rs. 1 lakh with a single premium across age bands.

6) Mars digger

Why in News?

- NASA has declared the 'Mole' on its InSight lander dead after just two years of operations.
- Scientists in Germany hoped to get their 16-inch heat probe - dubbed the mole - to drill 16 feet into the Martian crust and take its temperature - but it could not gain enough friction in the red dirt.
- While they didn't get deep enough to get a temperature reading, the effort will benefit future excavation efforts on Mars.
- This is in part due to the fact they discovered that **not all Martian soil is the same**.
- The mole's design was based on soil examined by previous spacecraft. That soil sample turned out to be nothing like the clumpy dirt encountered this time.

About InSight mission

- **NASA's InSight** (short for Interior Exploration using Seismic Investigations, Geodesy and Heat Transport) arrived on Mars in November 2018. It is a robotic lander **designed to study the deep interior of the planet Mars**.
- InSight is the first mission dedicated to looking deep beneath the Martian surface.
- The mole was one of three key instruments on the lander, the others included a **seismometer and a pair of radio antennas**.
- InSight's French seismometer is still going strong. It has so far recorded nearly 500 Marsquakes since the first discovery of quakes on Mars in 2019.
- The lander's weather station is also still providing daily reports on the Martian weather, and sending them back to Earth for analysis.

Additional Details

- InSight will be joined by NASA's newest rover, **Perseverance**, which will attempt a touchdown in February 2021.
- Perseverance will carry an instrument, **MOXIE** or Mars Oxygen ISRU Experiment: which for the **first time will manufacture molecular oxygen on Mars** using carbon dioxide from the carbon-dioxide-rich atmosphere.
- It will also carry **Ingenuity**, the **first ever helicopter to fly on Mars**. This is the first

time NASA is flying a helicopter on another planet or satellite.

- It is the **planned** first step to **bring back rock samples** from Mars for analysis on

Earth, with the **goal of looking for signatures of present or past life.**

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PIB ANALYSIS

1) Atal Innovation Mission

About Atal Innovation Mission

- The Atal Innovation Mission (AIM) is a flagship initiative set up by the **NITI Aayog** to **promote innovation and entrepreneurship across the length and breadth of the country.**
- AIM's objectives are to create and promote an ecosystem of innovation and entrepreneurship across the country at school, university, research institutions, MSME and industry levels.

Functions

- The Atal Innovation Mission has following two core functions:
- **Entrepreneurship promotion** through Self-Employment and Talent Utilization, wherein innovators would be supported and mentored to become successful entrepreneurs.
- **Innovation promotion:** to provide a platform where innovative ideas are generated.

- The major initiatives of AIM are:
- **Atal Tinkering Labs**-Creating problem solving mindset across schools in India.
- **Atal Incubation Centers**-Fostering world class startups and adding a new dimension to the incubator model.
- **Atal New India Challenges**-Fostering product innovations and aligning them to the needs of various sectors/ministries.
- **Mentor India Campaign**- A national Mentor network in collaboration with the public sector, corporates and institutions, to support all the initiatives of the mission.
- **Atal Community Innovation Center**- To stimulate community centric innovation and ideas in the unserved /underserved regions of the country including Tier 2 and Tier 3 cities.
- **ARISE**-To stimulate innovation and research in the MSME industry.

Why in News?

- On the Occasion of National Youth Day (**January 12**), Atal Innovation Mission

launched a new edition of Atal Tinkering Lab handbook.

About Atal Tinkering Lab

- It is an initiative by the Atal Innovation Mission with the aim of establishing Atal Tinkering Laboratories (ATLs) in schools across India.
- **Objective:** To foster curiosity, creativity and imagination in young minds; and inculcate skills such as design mindset, computational thinking, adaptive learning, physical computing etc.

Key Features of ATL:

- ATL is a work space where young minds can give shape to their ideas through hands on do-it-yourself mode and learn innovation skills.
- Young children will get a chance to work with tools and equipment to understand the concepts of STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math).
- ATL would contain educational and learning 'do it yourself' kits and equipment on - science, electronics, robotics, open source microcontroller boards, sensors and 3D printers and computers.
- ATL can conduct different activities ranging from regional and national level competitions, exhibitions, workshops on problem solving, designing and fabrication of products, lecture series etc. at periodic intervals.

Financial Support

- AIM will provide grant-in-aid that includes a one-time establishment cost of Rs. 10 lakh and operational expenses of Rs. 10 lakh for a maximum period of 5 years to each ATL.

Eligibility

- Schools (minimum Grade VI - X) managed by Government, local body or private trusts/society to set up ATL.

2) Kayakalp Award Scheme

What is the Kayakalp Award Scheme?

- The award scheme was launched in 2015 to **appreciate and recognise the efforts of public health facilities to create a healthy environment.**

- The parameters for judging are hospital/facility upkeep, sanitation and hygiene, waste management, infection control, support services and hygiene promotion.

Objectives of Kayakalp:

- To promote cleanliness, hygiene and Infection Control Practices in public Health Care Facilities.
- To incentivize and recognize such public healthcare facilities that show exemplary performance in adhering to standard protocols of cleanliness and infection control.
- To inculcate a culture of ongoing assessment and peer review of performance related to hygiene, cleanliness and sanitation.
- To create and share sustainable practices related to improved cleanliness in public health facilities linked to positive health outcomes.

Why in News?

- Union Minister for Health & Family Welfare Dr. Harsh Vardhan felicitated Kayakalp award to Public and Private Health Facilities for high standards of Sanitation and Hygiene.

3) National Innovation Foundation (NIF) – India

About NIF

- An **autonomous body** under the **Department of Science and Technology**, the NIF was established in 2000.
- It is India's national initiative to **strengthen the grassroots technological innovations and outstanding traditional knowledge**.
- Its mission is to help India become a creative and knowledge-based society by expanding policy and institutional space for grassroots technological innovators.
- NIF helps grassroots innovators and outstanding traditional knowledge holders get due recognition, respect and reward for their innovations.

Why in News?

- Union Minister for Science & Technology inaugurated a **National Innovation Portal**, developed by National Innovation Foundation (NIF).

About National Innovation Portal

- The portal is a **database of innovations and traditional knowledge** by the people, for the people and of the people.
- It is currently home to about 1.15 lakh innovations scouted from common people of the country, covering engineering, agriculture, veterinary and human health.
- In terms of domain areas, currently, the innovations cover energy, mechanical, automobile, electrical, electronics, household, chemical, civil, textiles, farm/cultivation practice, storage practice, plant variety, plant protection, poultry, livestock management, nutraceuticals, etc.

Benefits:

- Innovation Portal will help institutionalise new ideas by common people towards finding solutions to local problems.
- It will create an ecosystem where the Institutions will stand behind all those who can convert their ideas and innovations into entrepreneurship.
- The Innovation Portal in coming days could be one of the significant contributions amongst all of our digital progress so far and would act as a bridge between people who are looking for Innovative solutions.

4) ASMI -India's First Indigenously Developed 9mm Machine Pistol

What's in the news?

- DRDO and Indian Army have developed India's first indigenous 9mm Machine Pistol.

About ASMI:

- The weapon is named "Asmi" meaning "Pride", "Self-Respect" & "Hard Work"
- The Machine Pistol fires the in-service 9mm ammunition.
- With an overall empty weight of less than 2 Kg, it features an 8-inch barrel and 33 rounds high capacity magazine.
- It has an upper receiver made from Aircraft grade Aluminium and lower receiver from Carbon Fibre.
- **3D Printing process** has been used in designing and prototyping of various parts including trigger components made by metal 3D printing.



Significance:

- The weapon has huge potential in Armed forces as personal weapon for heavy weapon detachments, commanders, tank and aircraft crews, drivers/dispatch riders, radio/radar operators, Closed Quarter Battle, counter insurgency and counter terrorism operations etc.
- This is also likely to find huge employability with the central and state police organizations as well as VIP protection duties and Policing.
- The Machine Pistol is likely to have production cost under rupees 50000 each and has **potential for exports**.

5) Indian Meteorological Department (IMD)

About IMD

- The Indian Meteorological Department was established in 1875. It is the National Meteorological Service of the country and the principal government agency in all matters relating to meteorology, seismology and allied subjects.
- To take **meteorological observations** and to provide current and forecast meteorological information for optimum operation of weather-sensitive activities like agriculture, irrigation, shipping, aviation, offshore oil explorations, etc.
- To **warn against severe weather** phenomena like tropical cyclones, norwesters, dust storms, heavy rains and snow, cold and heat waves, etc., which cause destruction of life and property.
- To provide **meteorological statistics required for agriculture**, water resource management, industries, oil exploration and other nation-building activities.
- To conduct and **promote research in meteorology** and allied disciplines.

- To **detect and locate earthquakes** and to **evaluate seismicity** in different parts of the country for development projects.

Why in News?

- Indian Meteorological Department recently celebrated its 146th Foundation Day.

Significance:

- Forecasting monsoons are a lifeline to our **food security**, as it resulted in not only an improvement of the economy but also reducing the loss of lives due to monsoonal floods and droughts.
- IMD has been continuously redefining its focus for accurate **Prediction of Monsoon and cyclones**. It has succeeded in minimizing loss of lives from various extreme events like cyclone, heavy rain, thunderstorm, heat wave and cold wave etc. in the recent years with its precise forecasting and timely warnings.

Various mobile apps launched by IMD :

Damini for lightning forecast

- Damini Lightning Alert app, developed by the Indian Institute of Tropical Meteorology (IITM), is for giving warning to the user about the lightning on the basis of user location.
- Lightning is shown on the map on the basis of 5 min lightning, 10 min lightning and 15 min lightning.

MAUSAM for weather forecast including cyclone warning

- The MAUSAM mobile App has the following 5 services:
- **Current Weather** -Current temperature, humidity, wind speed and direction for 200 cities updated 8 times a day. Information on Sunrise/ sunset and moonrise/ moonset are also given.
- **Nowcast**- Three hourly warnings of localized weather phenomena and their intensity issued for about 800 stations, and districts of India by State Meteorological Centres of IMD. In case of severe weather, its impact also is included in the warning.
- **City Forecast** – Past 24 hours and 7 day forecast of weather conditions around 450 cities in India.
- **Warnings**- Alerts issued twice a day for all districts for the next five days in colour code (Red, Orange and Yellow) to warn citizens of approaching dangerous weather. The colour code Red is the most severe category urging authorities to take

action, Orange code prompts authorities and public to be alert and Yellow code prompts authorities and public to keep they updated.

- **Radar products:** Latest Station wise radar products updated every 10 minutes.

Meghdoot for agrometeorological advisories

- The Meghdoot app was developed jointly by the Digital Agriculture & Youth (DAY) team at the International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics (ICRISAT) and the Indian Institute of Tropical Meteorology.

6) Central Adoption Resource Authority

About CARA

- Central Adoption Resource Authority (CARA) is a **statutory body** of the **Ministry of Women & Child Development**, Government of India.
- It functions as the **nodal body for adoption of Indian children** and is mandated to **monitor and regulate in-country and inter-country adoptions**.
- CARA is designated as the Central Authority to deal with inter-country adoptions in accordance with the provisions of the **Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption, 1993**, ratified by the Government of India in 2003.
- CARA primarily deals with adoption of orphan, abandoned and surrendered

children through its associated /recognised adoption agencies.

About Hague Adoption Convention

- The Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption is an international convention dealing with international adoption, child laundering, and child trafficking.
- The Convention was developed by the Hague Conference on Private International Law, the preeminent organization in the area of private international law. It is an effort to protect those involved from the corruption, abuses, and exploitation which sometimes accompanies international adoption.
- The Convention has been considered crucial because it provides a formal international and intergovernmental recognition of intercountry adoption to ensure that adoptions under the Convention will generally be recognized and given effect in other party countries.
- The Convention applies to children **under the age 16 years**.

Why in News?

- Recently, CARA celebrated its 6th Annual Day.

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News in Depth

AIR NEWS

1) Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana

About PMFBY

- PMFBY launched in 2016, provides a comprehensive insurance cover against crop damage or loss arising out of unforeseen events thus helping in stabilising the income of the farmers and encouraging them for adoption of innovative practices.
- The scheme is administered by the **Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers' Welfare**.
- **Crops covered** : Oilseed crops; all food crops; Annual commercial/horticultural crops
- **Premium** : There will be a uniform premium of 2% to be paid by farmers for all Kharif crops and 1.5% for all Rabi crops. For annual commercial and horticultural crops, the premium to be paid by farmers will be 5%.
- **Coverage** : It aims at covering the losses suffered by farmers such as pre-sowing losses, post-harvest losses due to cyclonic rains and losses due to unseasonal rainfall in India. It also covers losses due to localized calamities such as inundation, hailstorm and landslide risks.
- **Exclusions** : The losses arising out of war and nuclear risks, malicious damage and other preventable risks are not covered under this scheme.
- The scheme is implemented by **empanelled general insurance companies**. The funds for the scheme come from the **Krishi Kalyan Kosh**.
- Krishi Kalyan Kosh (farmers' welfare fund) is an emergency fund to support farmers when they incur losses due to low rates of produce, crop damage due to natural disasters, and to assist them when there is

a delay in payment of minimum support price (MSP) by the Centre.

Major Changes

- Last year, the Union Cabinet approved the revamp of the Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana to enable quick and accurate yield estimation thus leading to faster claims settlement.
- The enrolment in the scheme has been made **voluntary for all farmers**, including those with existing crop loans.
- The **Centre has reduced its share of the premium subsidy** under PMFBY from 50% to 25% in irrigated areas and 30% for unirrigated areas from the kharif season of 2020. Districts having 50 per cent or more irrigated area will be considered as irrigated area/district.
- Central share in premium subsidy is increased to **90 per cent** for north eastern states from the existing sharing pattern of 50:50.
- Technology solutions like **Smart Sampling Technique (SST)** to be adopted during assessment exercises.
- The Centre has given states/UTs the option to select any number of additional risk covers/features like prevented sowing, localised calamity, mid-season adversity, and post-harvest losses. Earlier, these risk covers were mandatory.

Why in News?

- Agriculture Minister Narendra Singh Tomar has stressed on the need to raise awareness about the Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana so that many more farmers can take advantage of the scheme.

2) PM SVANidhi

About the scheme

- It was launched on June 1, 2020, by the **Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs** for **providing affordable Working Capital loans to street vendors** to

resume their livelihoods that have been adversely affected due to Covid-19 lockdown.

- Under the Scheme, vendors can avail a working capital loan of up to **Rs. 10,000**, which is repayable in monthly instalments in the tenure of **one year**. The loans would be **without collateral**.
- If the vendor repays the instalments in time or earlier, they will develop his credible credit score that makes him eligible for a higher amount of term loan to 20 thousand rupees and so on.
- On timely/ early repayment of the loan, an **interest subsidy @ 7% per annum** will be credited to the bank accounts of beneficiaries through Direct Benefit Transfer on quarterly basis.
- There will be no penalty on early repayment of loan. The scheme promotes digital transactions through cash back incentives up to an amount of Rs. 100 per month.
- The scheme targets to benefit over **50 lakh street vendors**. The duration of the scheme is till March 2022.
- **SIDBI** implements the PM SVANidhi Scheme.
- The lending institutions under the Scheme include Scheduled Commercial Banks, Regional Rural Banks, Small Finance Banks, Cooperative Banks, NBFCs, Microfinance institutions and Self Help Group banks.

Why in News?

- The state level implementation of the PM Street Vendors Atmanirbhar Nidhi (PM SVANidhi) scheme was reviewed recently.

SIDBI

- Small Industries Development Bank of India (SIDBI) set up in 1990 under an Act of Indian Parliament.
- SIDBI acts as the **principal financial institution** for promotion, financing and development of the **Micro, Small and Medium Enterprise (MSME) sector** as well as for coordination of functions of institutions engaged in similar activities.
- The functions of SIDBI include financing small scale industrial units, providing seed capital to startups, providing technical assistance, promoting cleaner production and energy efficiency.
- The **Shares of SIDBI** are held by the Government of India and twenty- nine other institutions / public sector banks / insurance companies owned or controlled by the Central Government.
- SIDBI also maintains the **UdyamiMitra portal** with the objective to help the MSMEs with easy and secure access to financial and non-financial services. This is a one of a kind portal where MSME loan seekers can connect virtually to Lenders and Handholding agencies.

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THE HINDU EDITORIALS

1) Planning an exit out of the easy money regime

GS -3 Indian Economy

Why in the news?

- Countries across the world have been affected by the Covid pandemic which has affected their economy adversely. Central banks of different countries, including RBI, have adopted expansionary recovery policies with steps like slashing of market rates, flooding the market with an unprecedented amount of liquidity and instituting a slew of measures for targeted assistance to especially distressed sectors.
- However, there is always the challenge of an economic crisis while managing an economy as there are inherent challenges associated with recovery plans.

Challenges before the RBI

- First challenge before the RBI is **non-disruptive exit out of the easy money regime**. Reversing a crisis-driven expansionary policy has a deliberative process, with the timing and sequencing carefully planned. Any missteps on the exit path by way of commission, omission, or importantly communication can be costly in macroeconomic terms.
- Biggest challenge before the RBI will be to **manage the tension between restraining inflation and supporting the recovery**. Monetary Policy Committee have been unable to decide against any rate action out of consideration for growth and financial stability and this challenge is bound to be there in future also. As inflation can be caused by many factors, it will be really difficult for RBI to control inflation while focusing on growth.
- Another challenge apart from upside risk to inflation and downside risk to growth, is the plight of savers who are being short-changed by low interest rates at a time of high inflation.
- Another challenge will be to **withdraw the 'excess' liquidity in good time**. All the money that the central bank unleashed into the system is not doing much good. As we are out of that abyss now and it is time

to think of an exit from “excess liquidity” concept in a good time.

- Excess liquidity will drive investors into dodgy ventures and **threaten financial stability**. As the RBI seeks to guard financial stability by normalizing liquidity, there can be chances of possible market tantrums.
- Another big challenge for the RBI going forward will be to **restrain the rupee from appreciating out of line with fundamentals**. There is the classic case of ‘**the impossible trinity**’ — of keeping doors open for capital flows while simultaneously maintaining a stable exchange rate and restraining inflation.
- During this fiscal year, RBI has absorbed nearly \$90 billion to prevent exchange rate appreciation and to maintain the competitiveness of the rupee but it will be difficult to absorb more liquidity as rupee deteriorates further.

Way Forward

- It is better to be roughly right, as Economist John Maynard Keynes said, than be precisely wrong. That should be the guiding principle for RBI as it navigates its way out of the crisis driven easy money policy. The RBI should refrain from doing adventurism and should have evolving dynamic policy to deal with changing economic conditions during the recovery plan.

2) Reclaiming SAARC From the Ashes Of 2020

GS-2: International relations: Bilateral, regional and global groupings and agreements involving India and/or affecting India's interests.

CONTEXT

- The year 2020 marked the sixth year since the leaders of the eight nations that make up the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) were able to meet. India's position on crossborder terrorism from Pakistan that led New Delhi to refuse to attend the SAARC summit in 2016 in Islamabad, is still in place.

WHAT IS SAARC?

- SAARC was set up in 1985 as an organization to build a connected and integrated South Asia with the larger aim of promoting the development and progress of all countries in the region.
- It is the regional intergovernmental organization and geopolitical union of states in South Asia. Its member states are **Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka**.
- India is the foundational member of the grouping and enjoys excellent bilateral relations with Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal and Sri Lanka, as per our **“Neighbourhood First’ policy”**.

IMPLICATIONS OF DYSFUNCTIONING OF SAARC

- Inactive SAARC is making it easier for member countries, as well as international agencies, to deal with South Asia as a fragmented group.
- India’s refusal to allow Pakistan to host the SAARC summit is similar to giving Pakistan a ‘veto’ over the entire SAARC process.
- The events of 2020, particularly the novel coronavirus pandemic and China’s aggressions at the Line of Actual Control (LAC) shone a new spotlight on this mechanism. This should make the government review its position and reverse that trend.

INDIA NEEDS TO REVIEW ITS POSITION ON SAARC

- India continued to attend **Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO)** meetings along with their Pakistani counterparts.
- While China’s incursions in Ladakh constituted the larger concern in the year, India did not decline to attend meetings with the Chinese leadership at the **SCO, the Russia-India-China trilateral, the G-20 and others**.
- No concerns over territorial claims stopped the government from engaging with **Nepal** either.

NEED FOR REVIVAL OF SAARC?

- Reviving SAARC is crucial to countering the common challenges brought about by the pandemic.
- Studies have shown that South Asia’s experience of the pandemic has been unique from other regions of the world,

therefore needs to be studied comprehensively.

- Such an approach is also necessary for the distribution and further trials needed for vaccines, as well as developing cold storage chains for the vast market that South Asia represents.
- Also there has been an overall GDP slowdown, global job cuts which will lead to an estimated 22% fall in revenue for migrant labour and expatriates from South Asian countries.
- The World Bank has suggested that South Asian countries work as a collective to set standards for labour from the region, and also to promote a more intra-regional, transnational approach towards tourism, citing successful examples including the ‘East Africa Single Joint Visa’ system.
- In the longer term, there will be a shift in priorities towards health security, food security, and job security, that will also benefit from an “all-of” South Asia approach.

Dealing with the China challenge:

- In dealing with the challenge from China too, both at India’s borders and in its neighbourhood, a unified South Asian platform remains India’s most potent countermeasure.
- At the border, tensions with Pakistan and Nepal amplify the threat perception from China, while other SAARC members (except Bhutan), all of whom are Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) partners of China will be hard placed to help individually.

CONCLUSION

- Seen through Beijing’s prism, India’s SAARC neighbourhood may be a means to contain India, with the People’s Liberation Army strategies against India over the LAC at present, or in conjunction with Pakistan or Nepal at other disputed fronts in the future. New Delhi must find its own prism with which to view its South Asian neighbourhood as it should be: a unit that has a common future, and as a force-multiplier for India’s ambitions on the global stage.

3) “A leopard count with a missing benchmark number”

GS-3 Conservation

Why in the news?

- Recently “Status of Leopard in India, 2018 Report” was released. The report shows an increase of 60% in the population of the Leopard in the last 4 years (between 2014-2018). The government has applauded the report. However, there is concern among the environmentalists about the effectiveness of the methods of report in depicting the real estimates of the leopard population in the country.

Why are Environmentalists skeptical of Reports?

- According to the report, India’s leopard population in 2018 was estimated at 12,852. The report distinctly mentions that the figure is the ‘**minimum number**’. However, environmentalists believe that there is an **underestimation of the leopard in this method which can be as high as approximately 40%**.
- This report was a **byproduct of the report on Tiger census**. It mainly focused on the forested habitats where Tigers are found. Hence other habitats such as rocky outcrops, smaller dry forests, higher elevations in the Himalayas, agricultural landscapes (coffee, tea, arecanut, sugarcane plantations) where leopards are found to be in large numbers have not been included. Even leopard estimates from **Northeast India** are missing. Hence the report does not represent a true pan India leopard population.
- Claim of the increase in population of the leopard population by 60% is **misleading**, as in 2014 the study of minimal leopard population was focused in 18 different Indian states covering 92,164 square

kilometers whereas now it focused on 21 Indian states covering an area of 121,337 square kilometers.

- Not only the number of the states covered has increased, but even the number of camera trap locations has increased by nearly threefold. Hence, a spatial increase in the area is bound to lead to an increase in Leopard population. Hence comparing the result from 2014 with 2018, and hailing it as a 60% increase is misleading.

Way Forward/What need to be done?

- A solid authentic benchmark number of the species is needed to evaluate the trend in leopard population. This will help in conservation of the leopard and dealing with threats for its survival. It will also help in evaluating the effectiveness of the conservations program. We can’t rely on the “minimal number” method as the actual number of leopards can significantly vary from the minimal number.
- The **spatial domain of the survey needs to be increased** to all states rather than only to Tiger habitats.
- As the estimation of pan-India leopard population needs enormous resources and time, hence other research organizations using the same method of camera trapping can be involved to use areas not covered by the present’s reports.
- There is a **need to delink the study of the Leopard with Tigers**. There is a need to develop discourses so that there is sufficient focus on this elusive carnivore.

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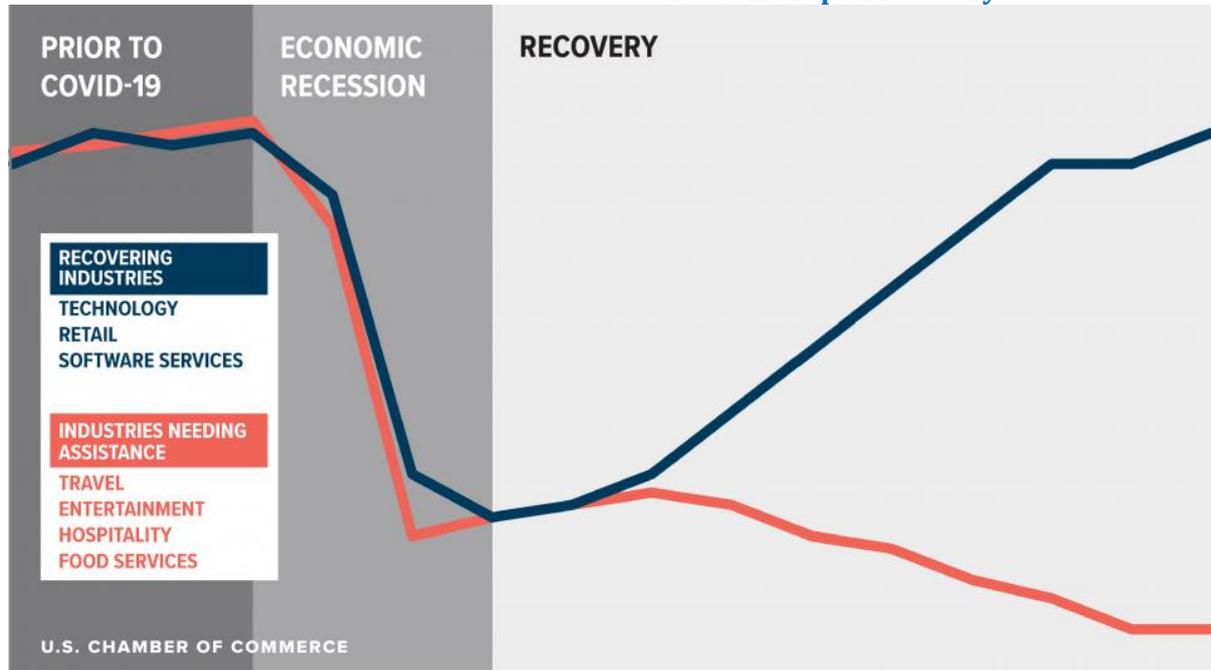
INDIAN EXPRESS EXPLAINED

1) What is a K-shaped economic recovery, and what are its implications?

Why in the news?

- As per Sajjid Chinoy, an economic expert, India and other countries of the world are taking a K-shaped economic recovery.
- Let us understand what K-shaped recovery is and also delve into its implications.

About K shaped recovery



- A K-shaped recovery occurs when, following a recession, **different parts of the economy recover at different rates, times, or magnitudes.**
- This is in contrast to an even, uniform recovery across sectors, industries, or groups of people.
- A K-shaped recovery leads to changes in the structure of the economy or the broader society as economic outcomes and relations are fundamentally changed before and after the recession.

Implications at macro level

- The current K-shape curve is due to three major reasons:
- Many upper-income households presently are spending their SAVINGS to fulfil their consumption. Statistically the top 10 percent of India's households are responsible for 25-30 percent of total consumption. This has caused a **Sugar Rush** (temporary increase in the consumption). Economists say that it is a onetime effect.

- On the other hand, due to COVID-19, bottom-income households had experienced a **permanent loss of income** in the forms of jobs and wage cuts.
- Though COVID-19 is triggering transfer of incomes from rich to poor, the poor have **higher marginal propensity to consume** (i.e. they tend to spend (instead of saving) a much higher proportion of their income). This negatively affects demand in the long run.
- Further continuance of the second factor will cause recurring drag on demand, if the labour market is not healed fast.
- If not handled properly, developing countries will see reduced growth rates by hurting productivity and tightening political economy constraints.

Way forward

- An effective policy needs to be developed after a close watch on these factors and also anticipate what would happen after the sugar rush.

2) India at UN high table

Why in the news?

- India has entered the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) as a non-permanent member in January 2021 and it will stay on the council for two years.
- It is the 8th time India is at the UN security Council Table.

What are the issues before India now?

UN reforms

- New Delhi is pitched on the idea of **expanding the Security Council in both permanent and non-permanent members.**
- India is eminently suited for permanent UNSC membership by any objective criteria, such as population, territorial size, GDP, economic potential, civilisational legacy, cultural diversity, political system and past and ongoing contributions to UN activities — especially to UN peacekeeping operations.

Terrorism

- India will be pushing the UN to relook draft **Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism (CCIT)** which it proposed in 1996. This provides a

comprehensive legal framework to combat terrorism.

- It will also be trying to put terrorists like Masood Azar and others under the UNSC's **1267 Sanctions Committee** which has been pending since 2009.

China

- India is entering the UN at a time when China is at the peak of his power assertion globally.
- China along with Pakistan, is countering India by raising the issue of Kashmir and India is trying to counter by raising issues about Taiwan, Hong Kong and Tibet at the UNSC.

Way Forward

- India is being condemned for human rights issues at home in the UN. The polarising politics inside India gives a window of opportunity to its rivals, and opens up the possibility of criticism.
- India should use diplomacy to settle the issues and use this opportunity to be productive for the nation as well as for the globe.

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