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Schemes

1) Integrated Ombudsman Scheme

What is the Banking Ombudsman Scheme?

- The Banking Ombudsman Scheme is an expeditious and inexpensive forum for bank customers for **resolution of complaints relating to certain services rendered by banks.**
- It is introduced under Section 35 A of the Banking Regulation Act, 1949 by RBI with effect from 1995.

Who is a Banking Ombudsman?

- The Banking Ombudsman is a senior official appointed by the RBI to redress customer complaints against deficiency in certain banking services covered under the grounds of complaint specified under the Banking Ombudsman Scheme.

Grounds of complaints

- The Banking Ombudsman can receive and consider any complaint relating to the following deficiency in banking services:
 1. Non-payment or inordinate delay in the payment or collection of cheques, drafts, bills etc.;
 2. Non-acceptance, without sufficient cause, of small denomination notes tendered for any purpose, and for charging of commission in respect thereof;
 3. Non-payment or delay in payment of inward remittances;
 4. Non-adherence to prescribed working hours;
 5. Failure to issue or delay in issue of drafts, pay orders or bankers' cheques; etc.

When can one file a complaint?

- One can file a complaint before the Banking Ombudsman if the **reply is not received from the bank within a period of one month** after the bank concerned has received one's complaint, or the **bank rejects the**

complaint, or if the complainant is **not satisfied with the reply** given by the bank.

- It should be noted that **one's complaint will not be considered by the Ombudsman if he/she has not approached his bank for redressal of his grievance first.**
- The Banking Ombudsman **does not charge any fee** for filing and resolving customers' complaints.

Institutions covered under the Ombudsman Scheme

- **All Scheduled Commercial Banks, Regional Rural Banks and Scheduled Primary Co-operative Banks** are covered under the Banking Ombudsman Scheme.
- In addition to this, the RBI has introduced separate ombudsman schemes for **Non-Banking Financial Companies (NBFCs) and Digital Transactions** with similar guidelines.

Why in News?

- The RBI has announced an integrated ombudsman scheme to improve grievance redressal mechanism for bank customers. The scheme will be rolled out in **June 2021.**
- There are dedicated ombudsman schemes devoted to consumer grievance redressal in **banking, non-bank finance companies and digital transactions**, respectively, at present.
- These are **operated by the RBI** from 22 ombudsman offices located across the country.

About the new framework

- The RBI plans to integrate the three separate ombudsman under one centralised scheme to make the grievance redressal mechanism more efficient and simpler.
- The new framework will have a **'One Nation One Ombudsman' approach** and is intended to make the process of redress of grievances easier by

enabling the customers to register their complaints under the integrated scheme, with **one centralised reference point**.

- According to this framework, there would be regulations which will require banks to provide enhanced disclosure of complaints and pay for the cost of redressal in case the complaints are higher than the peer group etc.
- The redressal will continue to be **cost-free** for customers of banks and members of the public.

Related Information

Internal Ombudsman Scheme, 2018

- To strengthen the grievance redressal mechanism for customers, the RBI introduced the 'Internal Ombudsman Scheme, 2018'.
- It mandates **Banks with more than 10 branches to have an Internal Ombudsman** to review complaints that were partially or wholly rejected by the respective banks.
- It aimed to ensure that the complaints of the customers are redressed at the level of the bank itself so as to minimize the need for the customers to approach other fora for redressal.

2) Pradhan Mantri Awaas Yojana-Gramin

About PMAY-G

- The Pradhan Mantri Awaas Yojana-Gramin (PMAY-G) was launched in 2016 to address the housing gaps existing in the **rural areas**. It aims to provide a **pucca house with basic amenities** to all rural families who are homeless or living in kutcha or dilapidated houses by the end of March 2022.
- It was initiated with the objective of achieving "**Housing for All**" by 2022.

Features

- The houses built under the PMAYG scheme are **low-cost and disaster-resilient**.

- The minimum size of the houses built under the PMAYG scheme is **25 sq. mt.**
- The Central and State governments share the cost of assistance at a ratio of **90:10** in the hilly areas and **60:40** in the plain areas.
- Identification of beneficiaries as per the housing deprivation parameters and exclusion criteria prescribed **under Socio Economic Caste Census (SECC) 2011** after due verification by **Gram Sabha**.

Financial Assistance

- Under PMAY-G, each beneficiary is given **100% grant of Rs.1.20 lakh** (in plain areas) and **Rs.1.30 lakh** (in Hilly States/North Eastern States/Difficult areas/UT of J&K and Ladakh/Left Wing Extremism (LWE) districts).
- The beneficiaries of PMAY-G, in addition to the unit assistance, are also provided support of unskilled labour wages under Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) and assistance of Rs. 12,000 for construction of toilets through Swachh Bharat Mission-Gramin (SBM-G), MGNREGS or any other dedicated source of funding.
- The scheme has provisions for convergence with other schemes of Government of India and State/UTs for providing LPG connection under Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Scheme, electricity connection, access to safe drinking water under Jal Jeevan Mission, etc.

Why in News?

- According to the Ministry of Rural Development, less than 6% of houses sanctioned under the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana-Gramin in 2020-21 have reached completion so far this year, with COVID-19 stalling progress.
- However, some States such as Odisha and Jharkhand used the scheme to provide employment opportunities for

migrant workers who returned to their villages during the crisis.

- With a little over a year to go to achieve its goal of “Housing for All”, the PMAY-G has **only completed 55% of its construction target**, although money has been sanctioned for almost 85% of beneficiaries.
- Of the 2.28 crore houses to be built for the rural poor under the Yojana, less than 1.27 crore had been completed by January 28, 2021. Another 61 lakh are under construction.

3) Atal Pension Yojana

About the Scheme

- Atal Pension Yojana (APY) addresses the **old age income security** of the working poor. It is **focused on the unorganized sector workers**.
- It encourages the workers in the **unorganised sector to voluntarily save for their retirement**. The Government had launched the scheme with effect from **1st June, 2015**.

Eligibility

- Any citizen of India can join the APY scheme. The age of the subscriber should be between **18-40 years**. The contribution levels would vary and would be low if a subscriber joins early and increases if she joins late.
- The benefits of the scheme will arise to the subscribers on attaining the **age of 60 years**.

Features of APY

- Fixed pension for the subscribers ranging between **Rs.1000 to Rs. 5000**, if s/he joins and contributes **between the age of 18 years and 40 years**.
- The same pension is payable to Spouse after death of Subscriber.
- Return of indicative pension wealth to nominees after death of spouse.
- Under the scheme, individuals who have registered before March 31, 2016, will get a co-contribution from the government, which will be 50 percent of the subscriber contribution up to a

maximum of Rs. 1,000. The co-contribution will be for 5 years from 2015-16 to 2019-20.

- APY is administered by the **Pension Fund Regulatory and Development Authority (PFRDA)**.

Why in News?

- Government has said that the Atal Pension Yojana subscribers base crossed the 3 crore mark by the end of March 2021.

Related Information

About PFRDA

- The Pension Fund Regulatory & Development Authority is a **statutory regulatory body** set up under PFRDA Act passed on 19th September, 2013.
- The PFRDA is ensuring the orderly growth and development of the pension market.
- PFRDA functions under the **Ministry of Finance**.

4) Pradhan Mantri Shram Yogi Maan-dhan

About Pradhan Mantri Shram Yogi Maan-dhan

- It is a **Central Sector pension scheme** to ensure old age protection for **Unorganised Workers**. It was launched in 2019.
- It is administered by the **Ministry of Labour and Employment** and implemented through **Life Insurance Corporation of India (LIC)** and **Common Service Centres (CSCs)**.
- LIC will be the Pension Fund Manager and responsible for Pension pay out.

Eligibility

- The **Unorganised workers** whose **monthly income is Rs 15,000/ per month or less** and belong to the **entry age group of 18-40 years** are eligible for the scheme.
- They should not be covered under New Pension Scheme (NPS), Employees' State Insurance Corporation (ESIC) scheme or Employees' Provident Fund Organisation (EPFO).

- He/she **should not be an income tax payer.**

Salient Feature of PM-SYM

- **Matching contribution by the Central Government:** PM-SYM is a voluntary and contributory pension scheme on a **50:50 basis** where prescribed age-specific contribution shall be made by the beneficiary and the matching contribution by the Central Government.
- **Minimum Assured Pension:** Each subscriber under the PM-SYM, shall receive a minimum assured pension of **Rs 3000/- per month** after attaining the age of 60 years.
- **Family Pension:** During the receipt of pension, if the subscriber dies, the spouse of the beneficiary shall be entitled to receive 50% of the pension received by the beneficiary as family pension. Family pension is applicable only to the spouse.

Why in News?

- The Ministry of Labour and Employment conducted a nationwide review of the Pradhan Mantri Shram Yogi Maan-dhan programme.

5) Pradhan Mantri Van Dhan Yojana

About PMVDY

- Pradhan Mantri Van Dhan Yojna (PMVDY) is an initiative targeting **livelihood generation for tribals** by harnessing the wealth of forest i.e. Van Dhan.
- Launched by the **Ministry of Tribal Affairs and TRIFED** in **2018**, the programme aims to tap into traditional knowledge & skill sets of tribals by adding technology & IT to upgrade it at each stage and to convert the tribal wisdom into a viable economic activity.
- It is a mechanism for marketing of Minor Forest Produce (MFP) through Minimum Support Price (MSP) & Development of Value Chain.

- Under the program, MFP based tribal groups / enterprises of around 300 members will be formed for collection, value addition, packaging & marketing of Minor Forest Produces. These tribal enterprises will be in the form of **Van Dhan Self Help Groups (SHGs)** which will be a group of 15-20 members and such 15 SHG groups will further be federated into a larger group of **Van Dhan Vikas Kendras (VDVKs)** of around 300 members.
- **TRIFED** will support the VDVKs through providing them with model business plans, processing plans & tentative list of equipment for carrying out the value addition work of MFPs.

Why in News?

- Van Dhan Kendras, established under PMVDY are leading the way in helping tribals in Maharashtra generate their livelihood during the COVID pandemic.
- Through their sustained efforts and initiatives, Van Dhan teams in Maharashtra are helping 19350 tribal entrepreneurs to find a platform to market the products in order to generate sustained livelihood.

Related Information

TRIFED

- It is a national-level apex organization functioning under the administrative control of the **Ministry of Tribal Affairs** and it came into existence in 1987.
- TRIFED works with the main objective of promoting tribal art and craft for the benefit of tribal artisans of the country.
- TRIFED, under the brand name **TRIBES INDIA**, markets the handcrafted products directly procured from the tribals in India through its 73 brick and mortar outlets all over India.
- Main activities of TRIFED include:
 1. Retail Marketing Development
 2. Minor Forest Produce Marketing Development

3. Skill up-gradation & Capacity Building of ST Artisans and MFP Gatherers
4. R&D Development/Intellectual Proprietary Rights (IPR) Activity

About Minor Forest Produce

- Minor Forest Produce (MFP) means **all non-timber forest produce of plant origin** and includes bamboo, canes, fodder, leaves, gums, waxes, dyes, resins and many forms of food

including nuts, wild fruits, Honey, Lac, Tussar etc.

- The Minor Forest Produce has significant economic and social value for the forest dwellers as an estimated 100 Million people derive their source of livelihood from the collection and marketing of Minor Forest Produce (Report of the National Committee on Forest Rights Act, 2011).

Initiatives

1) Border Roads Organisation

About BRO

- The Border Roads Organisation (BRO) develops and maintains road networks in India's border areas and friendly neighbouring countries.
- It functions under the **Ministry of Defence**.
- It is engaged in road construction to provide connectivity to difficult and inaccessible regions in the border areas of the country.
- The BRO has also constructed roads in **friendly foreign countries** like Bhutan, Myanmar, Afghanistan etc. thus contributing towards our strategic objectives in the region.
- It is staffed by officers and troops drawn from the Indian Army's Corps of Engineers, Electrical and Mechanical Engineers, Army Service Corps, Military Police and army personnel on extra regimental employment.

Role of the BRO

In Peace

- Develop & Maintain the Operational Road Infrastructure of General Staff in the Border Areas.
- Contribute to the Socio-Economic Development of the Border States.

In War

- To Develop & Maintain Roads to Keep Line of Control through in Original Sectors and Re-Deployed Sectors.
- To Execute Additional Tasks as laid down by the Govt Contributing to the War Effort.

Why in the news?

- BRO restored connectivity to 13 border villages of Uttarakhand's Chamoli district cut off due flash floods in a record time of 26 days.

2) Pradhan Mantri Swasthya Suraksha Nidhi

What's in the news?

- The Union Cabinet has approved the Pradhan Mantri Swasthya Suraksha Nidhi (PMSSN).
- It is a **single non-lapsable reserve fund for health** in the **Public Account of India**. Proceeds of **Health and Education Cess** will be credited into PMSSN.

About PMSSN

- In the 2018 Budget, the Central Government while announcing Ayushman Bharat Scheme, also announced replacement of existing 3% Education Cess by **4% Health and Education Cess**.
- With the establishment of PMSSN, proceeds of share of health in the Health and Education Cess will be credited into PMSSN and accruals into the PMSSN will be utilized for the flagship schemes of the Health Ministry such as
 - Ayushman Bharat-Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (AB-PMJAY),
 - Ayushman Bharat-Health and Wellness Centres (AB-HWCs),
 - National Health Mission, Pradhan Mantri Swasthya Suraksha Yojana (PMSSY),
 - emergency and disaster preparedness and responses during health emergencies and
 - any future programme/scheme that targets to achieve progress towards SDGs and the targets set out in the National Health Policy (NHP) 2017.
- Administration and maintenance of the PMSSN is entrusted to the **Union Ministry of Health** and in any financial year, the expenditure on such schemes of the Ministry would be initially incurred from the PMSSN and thereafter, from Gross Budgetary Support (GBS).

Significance

- The government said the major benefits of PMSSN will be the **enhanced access to universal and affordable health care** through availability of earmarked resources, while ensuring that the amount does not lapse at the end of the financial year.

Related Information

What is a cess?

- The Union government is empowered to raise revenue through a gamut of levies, including taxes (both direct and indirect), surcharges, fees and cess.
- While **direct taxes and indirect taxes** are taxes where the revenue received can be spent by the government for **any public purpose** in any manner it deems appropriate for the nation's good, a cess is an earmarked tax that is collected for a **specific purpose** and ought to be spent only for that.
- Every cess is collected after **Parliament has authorised its creation through an enabling legislation** that specifies the purpose for which the funds are being raised.
- **Article 270** of the Constitution allows cess to be **excluded from the purview of the divisible pool** of taxes that the Union government must share with the States.

3) National Social Assistance Programme

About NSAP

- Launched in 1995, the National Social Assistance Programme (NSAP) is a welfare programme being administered by the **Ministry of Rural Development**.
- This programme is being implemented in **rural areas as well as urban areas**.
- NSAP represents a significant step towards the fulfilment of **Article 41 of the Constitution of India** which directs the State to provide public assistance to its citizens in case of

unemployment, old age, sickness and disablement and in other cases of undeserved want within the limit of its economic capacity and development.

- Presently NSAP comprises of five schemes, namely –
 1. Indira Gandhi National Old Age Pension Scheme (IGNOAPS),
 2. Indira Gandhi National Widow Pension Scheme (IGNWPS),
 3. Indira Gandhi National Disability Pension Scheme (IGNDPS),
 4. National Family Benefit Scheme (NFBS) and
 5. Annapurna.

Eligibility and scale of assistance

- For getting benefits under NSAP the applicant must belong to a **Below Poverty Line (BPL)** family according to the criteria prescribed by the Govt. of India. The other eligibility criteria and the scale of central assistance under the sub - schemes of NSAP are as follows.
- **Indira Gandhi National Old Age Pension Scheme (IGNOAPS):** A monthly pension of **Rs.200/-** to old age BPL persons in age group 60-79 years and **Rs.500/-** to old age BPL persons of age of 80 years and more.
- **Indira Gandhi National Widow Pension Scheme (IGNWPS):** A monthly pension of **Rs.300/-** to BPL widows aged 40-79 years and **Rs.500/-** upon attaining the age of 80 years.
- **Indira Gandhi National Disability Pension Scheme (IGNDPS):** A monthly pension of **Rs.300/-** is given to disabled BPL persons aged 18-79 years and **Rs.500/-** upon attaining the age of 80 years.
- **National Family Benefit Scheme (NFBS):** A one-time assistance of **Rs.20,000/-** to the surviving members of a BPL family upon the death of the primary breadwinner.
- **Annapurna Scheme: 10 kg food grains (wheat or rice)** are given to

those BPL elderly who remain uncovered under IGNOAPS.

Why in News?

- The Parliamentary Standing Committee on Rural Development in its report submitted to the Lok Sabha said that the Centre must increase the “meagre” pensions provided for poor senior citizens, widows and disabled people under the National Social Assistance Programme.
- The panel pointed out that it had previously urged the increase of these miniscule pensions in its reports on the Department of Rural Development’s (DoRD) demand for grants in 2019-20 and 2020-21.

4) Project GATI

About the Programme

- **GATI (Gender Advancement for Transforming Institutions)** is an innovative overarching pilot project supported by the **Department of Science and Technology (DST)**.
- It ushers a new intervention programme for **gender equality in science and technology** in India.
- Project GATI was announced on 28 February 2020, the National Science Day, by the Hon’ble President of India.

Objectives

- Project GATI aims to nudge institutions of higher education and research towards supporting diversity, inclusion and the full spectrum of demographic talent for their own success and progression.
- In particular, it aspires to create an **enabling environment for equal participation of women in science, technology, engineering, medicine and mathematics disciplines (STEMM)** at all levels, addressing deep-rooted problems.
- It envisages a fresh perspective on not just measures for increasing retention and recruitment but the progression of

women throughout their professional journey.

Assessment and Accreditation Process

- Project GATI pilots a **sustainable self-assessment and accreditation model**.
- Institutions who are signatory to the GATI charter would be expected to commit to adopting its principles within their policies, practices, action plans and institutional culture.
- They would be required to create **SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time-bound) action plans** for systemic and cultural transformation.

Why in News?

- The Department of Science and Technology recently reviewed the GATI Project.

5) Nirbhaya Fund

About the Framework

- Nirbhaya Fund is a dedicated fund set up by the Government of India in **2013** which can be utilized for projects specifically designed to **improve the safety and security of women**.
- It is a **non-lapsable corpus fund** administered by the **Department of Economic Affairs of the Ministry of Finance**.
- As per this framework, the **Ministry of Finance through the Department of Economic Affairs** is the nodal Ministry for any accretion into and withdrawal from the corpus, and the **Ministry of Women & Child Development (WCD)** is the nodal authority for appraisal of the schemes/proposals received under Nirbhaya Fund.
- **Funding to Non-Governmental Organisations is not envisaged under the framework**.
- The proposed projects under the Nirbhaya Fund should have the following features:
 - ✓ Direct impact on safety and security concerns of women

- ✓ Optimum use of existing infrastructure
- ✓ Innovative use of technology
- ✓ No duplication of existing government schemes/programmes
- ✓ Provision for real time intervention as far as possible.

Why in the news?

- The Parliamentary Standing Committee on Human Resource Development has highlighted **underutilisation of the Nirbhaya fund** in its recent report to Parliament.
- According to the report, titled '**Issues related to safety of women**', **only about 36 per cent of the funds allocated for the Nirbhaya fund has been utilised** over the past seven years.
- The report states that the **pace of implementation** of the projects funded from the Nirbhaya Fund is **lethargic and needs to be fast-paced**.
- The total apportioned amount under the Nirbhaya Fund currently stood at Rs 7436.66 crore for 32 different projects/schemes across the country. However, an amount of only Rs 2647.89 crore had been disbursed by the concerned ministries/departments for the various projects/schemes under the Nirbhaya Fund, which is on the extremely low side.

Initiatives under Nirbhaya fund

- The Nirbhaya fund is primarily meant to implement three initiatives through coordination between the WCD Ministry and the central government as well as state and union territory administrations: **One-Stop Centres (OSC), Universalisation of Women Helpline (WHL), and Mahila Police Volunteers (MPV)**.
- The OSCs are meant to **help women who are victims of violence** by providing a range of services such as police, medical aid, legal aid and counselling, and psychological support under one roof.

- The WHL scheme oversees a **toll-free 24X7 helpline** — available at **181** — for women seeking immediate support and information in cases of violence.
- The MPV scheme, implemented by the WCD Ministry in collaboration with the Ministry of Home Affairs, seeks to **identify volunteers who can act as a link between police and society** at large and help report incidents of violence against women.
- However, the report noted that many of the states have not yet utilised the total funds allocated to them under One Stop Centers and Women Helpline schemes. Only 20 to 30 per cent of the fund has been utilised by the majority of the states.
- The committee recommended that the WCD Ministry organise direct meetings with the state governments and UT administration quarterly to monitor the expenditure of funds on the schemes.

6) Vehicle Scrapage Policy

What's in the news?

- Recently, the Union Transport Minister announced the country's first formal vehicle scrappage policy.

About the Policy

- This proposed policy is a **voluntary modernization program** which seeks to phase out unfit vehicles to reduce vehicular pollution, meet the climate commitments, improve road safety and fuel efficiency, formalise informal vehicle scrapping industry and recover low cost material for automotive, steel and electronics industry.
- The policy will lead to **new investments of around ₹10,000 crore and create as many as 50,000 jobs** and the automobile industry will turn into one such sector that will offer maximum employment.

Need for a Vehicle Scrapage Policy

- As of now, there are around 51 lakh vehicles in India which are older than

20 years, 34 lakh vehicles which are more than 15 years old and around 17 lakh vehicles older than 15 years, but do not have vehicle fitness certificates.

- The **old vehicles pollute air 10-12 times** more compared to vehicles that are fit, and also pose a **risk for road safety**.
- There is a greater need for shift to new vehicles as it will lead to **lower fuel consumption which may result in lower maintenance cost** which is a major expenditure for the vehicle owners.
- The **low cost materials** obtained from the scrap can be used for various other industries like steel and other rare earth materials and may further bring the **informal scrapping sector into the formal scrapping sector**.
- The new vehicle scrapping policy will be a **win-win proposal for the auto industry** as scrapping old vehicles will lead to increased demands for newer vehicles, which will boost the auto sector and will result in **increased GST collection** for both centre and states.
- The policy will give a boost to **new technologies** with better mileage of vehicles besides promoting green fuel and electricity and cut on India's huge **₹10 lakh crore crude import bills**.
- India could emerge as a **hub for automobile manufacturing** as key raw material available from scrapping like steel, aluminium and plastic are bound to be recycled, bringing down automobile prices by 20-30 per cent.

Key Provisions of the Policy

- Under the voluntary vehicle scrapping policy, personal vehicles would undergo **fitness tests** after 20 years while commercial vehicles would require it after completion of 15 years. Also, **government departments** will have to let go of their vehicles after they are used for 15 years.
- The new policy has **advised the state government to waive off 25 per cent road tax** for personal vehicles and 15 per cent for commercial vehicles **along with the registration fees**.
- **Vehicle manufacturers have also been advised to provide a five per cent discount** on purchase of new vehicles against scrapping certificates. Also, vehicle owners will get a value for their old vehicles from scrap yards which will be around 4-6% of the price of a new vehicle.
- Also, the Union government's proposal to levy an **extra green cess** on old commercial and passenger vehicles will push fleet owners to replace old vehicles with new ones.
- Driving such vehicles that fail to pass automated tests will attract **huge penalties and also be impounded**.
- The Union Ministry of Road Transport and Highways will help to set up registered **vehicle scrapping facilities** including integrated vehicle scrapping facilities under public private participation and ensure compliance with environmental regulations for safe disposal of waste. This will enable **depollution equipment, water and sound pollution control and hazardous waste management**.
- The central government will also support a **network of automotive fitness centres** with adequate test only lanes, information technology servers and other facilities and encourage private investments. These centres will help **identify unfit and end-of-life vehicles**.
- It has been reported that scrapping centres will keep records and verify ownership of vehicles based on the **VAHAN database**.
 - VAHAN portal of the **Ministry of Road Transport and Highways** is a data repository of all vehicles registered in the country. The

VAHAN data is uploaded daily by regional transport offices (RTOs) across India. It allows people to check the registration status of their vehicles.

- It is designed, maintained, and supported by the **National Informatics Centre**.

Timelines

- Tentative timeline for application of Proposed Scrapping Policy is as follows:
 - Rules for Fitness Tests and Scrapping Centres: 01st October 2021
 - Scrapping of Government and PSU vehicles above 15 years of age: 01st April 2022
 - Mandatory Fitness Testing for Heavy Comm. Vehicles: 01st April 2023
 - Mandatory Fitness-Testing (Phased manner for other categories): 01st June 2024

Criticisms

- This policy has **only 'advised'** the state governments and the automobile industry to provide voluntary incentives to the owners of old vehicles. It has not been made mandatory.
- The proposed policy puts the **entire onus of incentivising fleet renewal on the state governments**. They have been advised to waive off a big chunk of road tax and registration fees on replacement vehicles. These are important sources of state revenue.

- More effective leveraging of this policy is possible if the **central government allows GST cuts** for replacement vehicles, including electric vehicles.
- The strategy can be different for older personal vehicles: Cars and two-wheelers. For these vehicles, the **central incentive can be linked with replacement with electric vehicles**. This can be additional to the normal scrapping of end-of life vehicles as already proposed in the draft policy. This can **maximise air quality gains** and contribute towards accelerating the **target of 30-40 per cent electrification by 2030**.
- In **Germany**, replacing old cars with newer ones powered by internal combustion engines did not provide as effective emissions gains as replacing them with electric vehicles, according to a study by the **International Council on Clean Transportation**.

Conclusion

- Clearly, this first ever formal scrappage policy in India is urgently needed to help build infrastructure for safe disposal and material recovery to minimise environmental hazards.
- But India would be adopting scrappage policy during these unprecedented pandemic times, so it is necessary to leverage this targeted fleet renewal with **well-designed central support** for a post-pandemic green deal.

Environment

1) Stockholm conference

About

- The **United Nations Conference on the Human Environment** (also known as the **Stockholm Conference**) was an international conference convened under **United Nations** auspices held in Stockholm, Sweden in 1972.
- It is the **first world conference on the environment** and marked a turning point in the development of international environmental politics.

Significance

Stockholm Declaration

- The participants of the Stockholm Conference adopted a series of principles for sound management of the environment including the **Stockholm Declaration and Action Plan for the Human Environment** and several resolutions.
- The official declaration, known as the **Stockholm Declaration**, provided a **foundation for many of the environmental policies** that have been established in the participating countries.
- Known as the **“Magna Carta” of environment protection and its development**, the Stockholm Declaration contained **26 principles** and placed environmental issues at the forefront of international concerns.
- It marked the start of a dialogue between industrialized and developing countries on the link between economic growth, the pollution of the air, water, and oceans and the well-being of people around the world.
- It urged each nation to create **regulations for protecting wildlife and conserving the natural resources** that are available within that country, and suggested creating national population policies, since

overpopulation exacerbates the strain on natural resources.

Action Plan for the Human Environment

- Whereas the Declaration of the Convention contained many lofty ideals, the action plan of the Stockholm Conference contained **109 specific recommendations** for achieving these goals.
- The action plan presented recommendations on how governments, intergovernmental agencies, and NGOs could work together to implement environmental protection strategies.

United Nations Environment Programme

- The Stockholm Conference also led to the creation of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) in 1972 to coordinate global efforts to **promote sustainability and safeguard the natural environment**.

Stockholm Conference and India

- **Mrs. Indira Gandhi**, the then Prime Minister of India, participated in the Stockholm Conference representing the country.
- The conference had a great impact on the environmental related laws. After the year 1972, India enacted the Water Act of 1976, Environment Protection Act of 1986, Air Act of 1981 and many other policies and notifications of environmental law.

Why in News?

- The year 2022 marks the 50th anniversary of the Stockholm Conference.

2) Simlipal forest fire

What is a Biosphere Reserve?

- Biosphere Reserve is an international designation assigned by **UNESCO** for representative parts of **natural and cultural landscapes** extending over

large areas of terrestrial or coastal/marine eco-systems or combination thereof.

- These are intended to **promote conservation of biodiversity and also to promote alternate livelihood for man and preserve cultural values.**

How are they different?

- The Biosphere Reserves are different from wildlife sanctuary and National Parks in the following aspects:
 - ✓ Its **emphasis is on overall biodiversity and landscape** rather than some specific flagship species.
 - ✓ It lays **importance on research activities.**
 - ✓ It takes into account the **overall developmental activities and resolves conflict between development and conservation.**

- ✓ It ensures **increased and broad based participation of the local people** by special attention given on different components of Biosphere Reserves like landscape, habitats, species and land races.

- The Biosphere Reserves are **not a substitute or alternative to, but re-enforcement of the existing protected areas.**

- The **Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change** launched the **Biosphere Reserve programme in 1986** with these aspects in mind.

Zones of BR

- In order to undertake activities relating to biodiversity conservation and development of sustainable management aspects, Biosphere Reserves are demarcated into **three zones**, namely **core, buffer and transition zones.**

These three functions are pursued through the Biosphere Reserves' three main zones



1. The **core zone** is absolutely undisturbed and secures legal protection and management and research activities. **In this zone, management and research activities**

that do not affect natural processes and wildlife are allowed. The core zone is to be kept free from all human pressures external to the system.

2. The buffer zone adjoins the core zone. In this zone, **only those activities which protect the core zone are allowed.** The activities allowed include limited recreation, tourism, fishing, grazing which are permitted to reduce its effect on the core zone. Research and educational activities are to be encouraged.
3. The transition zone is the outermost part of BR. This is a **zone of collaboration** where conservation knowledge and management skills are applied primarily to foster alternate livelihood and reduce dependence on consumptive use of the forest.

About Similipal Biosphere Reserve

- The Similipal Biosphere Reserve was notified by the Government of India in 1994. Situated in **Odisha**, Similipal derives its name from 'Simul' (silk cotton) tree. It lies in the **Eastern Ghats**.
- The Biosphere Reserve comprises the entire **Similipal sanctuary** (core and buffer together), the adjoining **Nato and Satkoshia Reserve Forests** forming an additional buffer and a belt of approximately 10 KM width all around the entire buffer designated as the 'transition zone'.
- Similipal is surrounded by high plateaus and hills, the highest peak being the twin peaks of **Khairiburu and Meghashini** (1515m above mean sea level).
- At least twelve rivers cut across the area, all of which drain into the Bay of Bengal. The prominent among them are **Burhabalanga, Palpala Bandan, Salandi, Kahairi and Deo**.
- The reserve is known for the **tiger, elephant and hill mynah**. **Sal** is a dominant tree species.

Livelihood

- Apart from its biodiversity, the region around Similipal forests is home to a variety of tribes. Prominent among these are **Kolha, Santhala, Bhumija,**

Bhatudi, Gondas, Mankadia and Sahara.

- Most of them are settled agriculturists, supplementing their income by collecting firewood and timber except for the last three who are indigenous hunter-gatherer communities living primarily off the forest, collecting forest produce.
- **Kharias**, a primitive tribe inside the Similipal sanctuary, subsist on collection of non-timber forest products.

Why in News?

- Widespread forest fires in the Similipal biosphere reserve area caused extensive damage to the local environment as well as property and livelihoods.

Similipal and Forest Fires

- The Similipal forest area remains vulnerable to forest fires during the onset of summer.
- This duration coincides with the **shedding of deciduous forests** in the forest areas. The fallen leaves are more vulnerable to catching fire and facilitate the spreading of these forest fires quickly over the entire forest area.

Main factors of Forest fires in Similipal

- **Natural causes** such as lighting or even soaring temperatures can sometimes result in these fires, but forest officials and activists say most of the fires can be attributed to **man-made factors**.
- With dried leaves and tree trunks, even a spark can lead to a raging fire. Instances of **poaching and hunting** wherein the poachers set a small patch of forest on fire to divert the wild animals can lead to such fires.
- Jungle areas are also set on fire by villagers to clear the dry leaves on the ground for easy **collection of mahua flowers**. These flowers are used to prepare a drink which is addictive in nature.

- Villagers also believe burning patches of sal trees will lead to better growth when planted again.
- The transition zone of the reserve has 1,200 villages with a total population of about 4.5 lakh. Tribals constitute about 73 per cent of the population.
- This year, along with man-made factors, an **advanced heat wave** with the early onset of summer further deteriorated the condition.

How can forest fires be controlled?

- Such fires are generally brought under control by **natural rains**. Similipal has a **unique microclimate**. It sees occasional afternoon showers during the summer months that act as natural fire controllers. There are, however, certain years wherein dry spells last for more than two-three weeks which spells disaster for the Similipal National Park.
- Forecasting fire-prone days and **including community members** to mitigate incidents of fire, **creating fire lines, clearing sites of dried biomass, and crackdown on poachers** are some of the methods to prevent fires.
- The **forest fire lines** which are strips kept clear of vegetation, help break the forest into compartments to prevent fires from spreading.
- **Awareness programmes** are also being initiated at a community level to prevent poaching and other such incidents.

3) Green Bonds

Context

- India is at a crossroads where balancing between economic development and the environmental health of its citizens has become crucial. That is difficult for any developing country to choose.
- India failed to reduce its carbon emissions per tonne even when its per capita GDP over the years was

increasing (at a rate of 7-8 per cent per year).

- Without economic development, the environmental health of a country cannot be improved. This process is very systematic and time-consuming, as it takes years to make investments in environmental-friendly technologies.
- However, achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for countries like India is very crucial as the deadline they have put is 2030.
- In order to balance conservation and development, the **evolution of green finance** came into being with the first green bond issued in 2015.

What are green bonds?

- Green bonds are debt securities issued by financial, non-financial or public entities where the proceeds are used to **finance specific climate-related or environmental projects**.
- The green bonds finance projects aimed at energy efficiency, pollution prevention, sustainable agriculture, fishery and forestry, the protection of aquatic and terrestrial ecosystems, clean transportation, clean water, sustainable water management, etc.
- Such bonds also finance the cultivation of environmentally friendly technologies and the mitigation of climate change.
- This is a very efficient way chosen by developed and developing countries to achieve environmental sustainability in a cost-effective manner.

What is India's position?

- Since 2015, the Indian green bond market has been growing.
- According to the **Economic Survey 2019-20**, India is the **second-largest market** (after China) globally for green bonds, with \$10.3 billion worth of transactions in the first half of 2019, as issuers and investors continued to adopt policies and strategies linked to sustainable development goals.

- Green bonds have developed a large base in the following years and are highly preferred by investors and the issuing authorities.
- Several government agencies have contributed to issuance of green bonds including Indian Renewable Energy Development Agency and Indian Railway Finance Corporation. In 2018, the State Bank of India entered the green market with a \$650 million certified climate bond.

Potential of green bonds

- Green bonds have emerged as a mainstream instrument to finance the transition of economies globally, especially for India. The benefits of green bonds are both tangible and measurable to investors and the public at large.
- These can be experienced on a daily commute on a newly built mass transit system, paying lower energy bills through renewable energy, or the significant number of jobs generated from building new green and resilient infrastructure, all of which can be financed through green bonds.

Conclusion

- For these reasons, green finance and green bonds, in particular, may play a key role in the forthcoming economic recovery.
- This will bring in sustainability of the environment and help achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the long term.

4) Marine Protected Areas

What is the Marine Protected Area?

- A Marine Protected Area (MPA) is essentially a space in the ocean where **human activities are more strictly regulated than the surrounding waters** - similar to national parks we have on land.
- These places are given special protections for natural or historic marine resources by local, state,

territorial, native, regional, or national authorities.

Why in the news?

- A group of scientists have published a study, stating that **declaring parts of Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) as Marine Protected Areas can boost fisheries yield, protect the ocean's capacity to capture carbon and boost biodiversity.**
- The study is one of the important documents which is to serve as a reference point for the adoption of the **30x30 target** in the upcoming **UN Convention on Biological Diversity (Refer Pulse September 2020 edition)** in Kunming, China, later this year.
 - *30X30 target under the UN Convention on Biological Diversity is a call to action to safeguard at least 30% of the planet — land and sea — by 2030.*
- The scientists stress the need for greater international cooperation to extend the boundaries of protection through MPAs.
- **Although 7% of the world's oceans are designated as MPAs currently, in practice, only 2.7% of MPAs are enjoying full or high levels of protection.**

MPAs and food extraction

- Usually countries lower the standards of MPAs by reducing the protection with a thought that protected areas prevent extraction of food and materials.
- But scientists have found that expanding MPAs would actually **produce overflow effects in other parts, which would raise the yield of food.**
- If we strategically protect some of the oceanic area, we can boost our food stock upto 5.2 million metric tonnes.

How will MPAs help in protection of biodiversity?

- As per the study, if we declare 43% of **Exclusive Economic Zones** and 6% of

the **high seas** of the world as MPAs, we can raise the protection of the endangered and critically endangered marine species upto 82% and 87% respectively.

- *The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) defines EEZ as a belt of water which extends up to 200 nautical miles from the baseline of the coastal state.*
- *High seas is the part of the sea that is not included in the exclusive economic zone, in the territorial sea, or in the internal waters of a coastal state or archipelagic waters of an archipelagic state.*
- *Refer Pulse August 2020 edition for details about UNCLOS.*
- Among the seas recommended for enhanced protection are Antarctica, the Mid-Atlantic Ridge, the Mascarene Plateau, the Nazca Ridge and the Southwest Indian Ridge.

MPAs and Carbon capture

- Currently **deep sea trawling and dredging** are the most frequent ways of fishing in the world.
- But the above activities destabilise the sediments containing organic carbon and leading to remineralisation of the sedimentary carbon into CO₂ and thereby **lead to acidification of the ocean**.
- The carbon released by above activities is equivalent to 15–20% of

the atmospheric CO₂ absorbed by the ocean each year. This affects the absorption of carbon by the ocean and ultimately adds to global warming.

- The areas with the highest priority are found where carbon stocks and present threats from human activity are the highest.
- Creating MPAs would stop large-scale dredging up of the carbon-laden sediments, with potential to reduce emissions.

India's case

- The **Environment (Protection) Act, 1986, Coastal Regulation Zone Notifications and National Biodiversity Act, 2002** have been enacted in India for conservation of coastal and marine environment, along with the **Wildlife (Protection) Act 1972**, which also provides for establishment of Protected Areas.
- The **Gulf of Kachchh Marine National Park** (Gujarat), **Gulf of Mannar National Park** (Tamil Nadu) and **Sundarbans National Park** (West Bengal) are some of the important MPAs of India.
- The MPA network in India has been used as a tool to manage natural marine resources for biodiversity conservation and for the well-being of the people dependent on it. (figure denotes important MPAs of India)



5) Project RE-HAB

About KVIC

- Khadi and Village Industries Commission (KVIC) is a **statutory body** under the **Ministry of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises**.
- Established in 1956, KVIC aims to plan, promote, facilitate, organize, and assist in the establishment and development of Khadi and Village industries in the rural areas.
- Over the years, the main thrust of KVIC activities has been to provide a larger share of employment to scheduled caste and scheduled tribes and women.

Why in News?

- The Karnataka government's project **Reducing Elephant Human Attacks using Bees (RE-HAB)**, which was launched recently, has significantly reduced the elephant-human conflict.
- This project is being implemented by the **Khadi Village Industries Commission**. As part of the project, boxes filled with bees were placed in

four locations on the periphery of **Nagarhole National Park** in the Kodagu district of Karnataka, where several incidents of elephant attacks on humans have been reported.

- The bees act as a barrier to prevent elephants from entering areas of human settlement.

What are the benefits?

- Project RE-HAB is an effective way of restricting elephants from entering the villages because **elephants are naturally afraid of bees** as they might sting the elephants in their eyes and inner trunk. Furthermore, the buzzing of the bees in certain frequencies also makes the elephants irritable and subsequently drive them away.
- It is a unique way of preventing elephant-human conflicts without causing any harm to the animals and the humans.
- It is extremely **cost-effective** as compared to various other measures

such as digging trenches or erecting fences.

- The night vision cameras installed at these locations show evidence of the success of the project. The bee boxes not only reduced the movement of elephants at the respective points but also recorded footage of a number of elephants backing off from the points where the bee boxes have been installed.



Significance

- The Central Government said that project RE-HAB would soon be implemented in certain areas of states West Bengal, Jharkhand, Odisha, Chhattisgarh, Assam, Tamil Nadu and Kerala.
- Since 2015, approximately 2,400 people have been killed in elephant attacks, and huge damage to property and crops have been recorded. Various state governments had taken several preventive measures like digging up trenches, electric fencing, spiked pillars etc., but nothing came off as effective and harmless as project RE-HAB.

6) Why did the first inter-state tiger relocation project fail?

What was the Tiger Relocation Project?

- The first tiger relocation project was initiated in 2018 wherein two big cats, a male (Mahavir) from **Kanha Tiger Reserve** and a female (Sundari) from **Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserve** (both in **Madhya Pradesh**) were relocated to **Satkosia Tiger Reserve in Odisha**, to

shore up the tiger population in the state.

- The relocation was meant to serve **two purposes**
 - reducing tiger population in areas with excess tigers to majorly reduce territorial disputes, and
 - to reintroduce tigers in areas where the population has considerably reduced due to various reasons.

What is the Satkosia Tiger Reserve and why was it chosen?

- Encompassing an area of 963.87 sq km, the Satkosia Tiger Reserve spreads across four districts in Odisha and has as its core area 523 sq km, its population was significantly reduced in the last decade.
- The purpose of the relocation was to repopulate tigers in the reserve areas.

What was the outcome of the project?

- The project ran into trouble within weeks of initiation. The **villagers feared the big cats would endanger their livelihoods, lives and livestock**.
- They also alleged that they were **not consulted or informed prior to the translocation**.
- Within months of the translocation, Mahavir was found dead due to **poaching**. Sundari was involved in **man-animal conflict** killing two persons in the tribal village.
- Subsequently, the project was **suspended** by the **National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA)**.
 - NTCA is a statutory body under the MoEF&CC. It performs functions as provided in the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972.
 - It is chaired by the Minister in charge of the MoEF&CC.

What factors contributed to the likely failure of the project?

- As per wildlife conservation activists and former forest officials from the state, the major reason which contributed to the failure of the project

was the **lack of confidence and trust building between the forest department and the villagers.**

- While Mahavir had settled down after initial exploration of the forest area, Sundari was venturing into human habitation. This was also because the already existing female tigress in the core area did not allow the presence of another tigress and chased her away. **Sundari's proximity to human habitations** which are in abundance even close to the core area in Satkosia could have led to the human-animal conflict.
- **Capacity for tiger monitoring was poor.** The local communities were not taken into confidence nor conveyed the benefits from tourism that tigers could bring them.

Way Forward

- **Relocating villages** should be prioritised before tiger reintroduction is continued.
- Locals should be given the confidence regarding the project and how **tiger tourism can be beneficial for all of them.**

7) E-Waste

What is E-waste?

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

E-Waste Management Rules, 2016

- E-Waste (Management) Rules, 2016 was enacted on October 1, 2017. It superseded the e-waste (Management & Handling) Rules, 2011.
- The rules extended its purview to components or consumables or parts

or spares of **Electrical and Electronic Equipment (EEE)**, along with their products.

- The EWM Rules, 2016 strengthened the **Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR)**, which is the global best practice to ensure the take-back of end-of-life products.
- The EPR requires producers to set up **e-waste exchange facilities** to facilitate collection and recycling, and assigning specific responsibility to bulk consumers of electronic products for safe disposal.
- A new arrangement called **Producer Responsibility Organisation (PRO)** was introduced to strengthen EPR further. PRO, a professional organisation, would be authorised or financed collectively or individually by producers, to share the responsibility for collection and channelisation of e-waste generated from the 'end-of-life' products to ensure environmentally sound management of such e-waste.
- The **urban local bodies** have been assigned the responsibility of collecting back the e-waste arising from the orphan products and channelizing it to authorized dismantlers or recyclers.

E-Waste (Management) Amendment Rules, 2018

- The E-Waste (Management) Amendment Rules, 2018 of the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change amended the E-Waste Management Rules, 2016.
- It **revised the collection targets** under the provision of EPR. According to the 2018 Amendment Rules, the **phase-wise collection targets** for e-waste in weight shall be **10% of the quantity of waste generation during 2017-18, with a 10% increase every year until 2023. After 2023 onwards, the target has been made 70% of the quantity of waste generated.**

- The rules also say that the responsibility of producers is not confined to waste collection, but also to ensure that the waste reaches the authorised recycler/dismantler.
- Under the amended Rules, **PROs are required to apply to the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB)** for registration to undertake their activities.

Why in the news?

- India has not met its e-waste collection target, though its capacity to recycle has consistently increased.

News in detail

- India is the **world's third largest electronic waste producer**, as per the **UN's Global E-waste Monitor 2020**. This despite the government documents suggesting that the country has **enough installed capacity** to recycle its e-waste.
- The **CPCB**, the nodal agency responsible for e-waste management in the country, claims there are 407 authorised e-waste dismantlers or recyclers that can scientifically handle 1.1 million tonnes per annum.
- The country generated an almost equal amount of e-waste in 2019-20 yet **just 10 percent of the e-waste generated in 2018-19 and 3.5 percent of that generated in 2017-18 was collected**. This falls short of the targets set by the E-Waste (Management) Amendment Rules, 2018.
- The CPCB is yet to release the collection data for 2019-20. However, the country saw a 32 percent jump in e-waste generation in 2019-20.

Reasons behind the problem

- Three major e-waste generators in the country are:
 - Individual consumers,
 - Bulk consumers such as companies and government departments and
 - Electrical and electronic industry.

- A major share of the e-waste generated by individuals and bulk consumers end up in the **informal sector**.
- Though there are several stakeholders that play a role in the e-waste collection channel, the **poor reach of formal collectors** and the **unwillingness of consumers to take ownership** of waste produced by them are largely responsible for the low collection rate.
- The 2016 rules clearly say it is the producers' responsibility to collect end-of-life electronic products as part of the Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR). Yet, **leakage is rampant** and many often these products end up with **dismantlers and recyclers**.

Issues

- The consequences of improper e-waste disposal in landfills or other non-dumping sites pose **serious threats to current public health and can pollute ecosystems** for generations to come.
- When e-waste is improperly in regular landfills or in places where it is dumped illegally, both heavy metals and flame retardants can seep directly from the e-waste into the soil, causing **contamination of underlying groundwater or contamination of crops** that may be planted nearby or in the area in the future.
- **Contamination in the air** occurs when e-waste is informally disposed of by dismantling, shredding or melting the materials, **releasing dust particles or toxins**, such as dioxins, into the environment that cause air pollution and damage respiratory health.
- e-waste contains **toxic components that are dangerous to human health**, such as mercury, lead, cadmium, polybrominated flame

retardants, barium and lithium. The negative health effects of these toxins on humans include brain, heart, liver, kidney and skeletal system damage.

- **Chronic diseases and cancers** are at a higher risk to occur when burning e-waste because it also releases fine particles, which can travel thousands of miles, creating numerous negative health risks to humans and animals.

Way forward

- **State Pollution Control Boards should play a crucial role** and take effort to strengthen the e-waste collection mechanism.
- **Individual users need to be sensitised** to the challenge of e-waste and how they contribute to the same.
- **Close monitoring** is required to deter producers and recyclers from leaking the waste to the informal sector.
- Since India is highly deficient in precious mineral resources (whereas untreated e-waste goes to landfill), there is a need for a well-designed, robust and regulated e-waste collection and recovery regime which would generate jobs as well as wealth. It is also crucial for preventing the adverse effects on the environment and public health.

8) Earth Hour

What is 'Earth Hour'?

- Every year, millions of people across the planet turn off the lights between

8:30 pm and 9:30 pm on the last Saturday in March, this annual tradition is known as 'Earth Hour'. The goal of this activity is to **spread awareness about sustainability and climate change**.

- The annual tradition of shutting down electric lights for one hour was started by the **World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF)**. The first Earth Hour was held in Sydney in 2007. WWF had encouraged 2.2 million people to turn off their lights for one hour.
 - *WWF is an international nongovernmental organization founded in 1961 that works in the field of wilderness preservation and the reduction of human impact on the environment.*
- The aim was to encourage individuals, communities, and businesses to turn off all non-essential lights for an entire hour symbolising their commitment to the planet Earth.
- In the following years, Earth Hour became a worldwide event. Global landmarks such as Eiffel Tower, Big Ben, Sydney Opera House, the Empire State Building have also switched off electric lights during Earth Hour.
- Earth Hour has become **one of the biggest grassroots movements for the environment**.

Why in News?

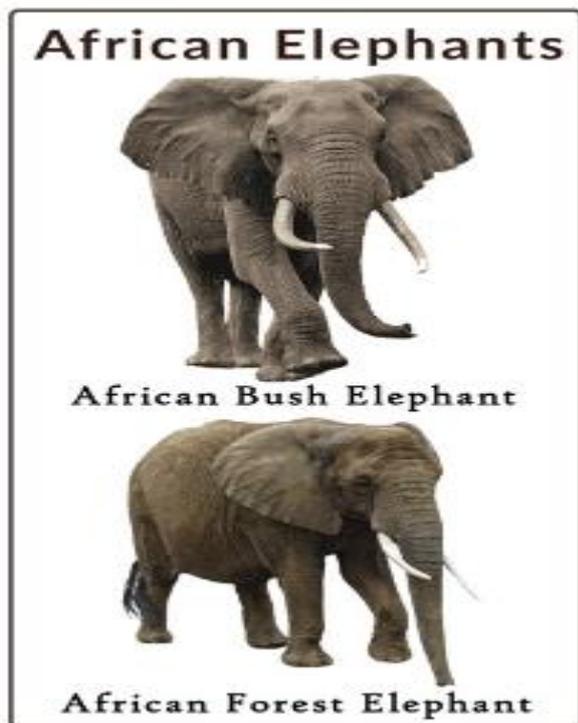
- This year Earth Hour was celebrated on March 27, 2021.

Flora & Fauna

1) African elephants face growing risk of extinction

About African Elephant

- African elephants are the largest land animals on Earth. They are slightly larger than their Asian cousins and can be identified by their larger ears.
- Although they were long grouped together as one species, scientists have determined that there are actually **two species of African elephants**.



1. **Bush/Savanna elephants** (*Loxodonta africana*): They are larger animals that roam the plains of sub-Saharan Africa.
 2. **Forest elephants** (*Loxodonta cyclotis*): They are smaller animals that live in the forests of Central and West Africa.
- African elephants are **keystone species**, meaning they play a critical role in their ecosystem.
 - They are known as “**ecosystem engineers**” as elephants shape their habitat in many ways. They dig riverbeds and create watering holes many animals can drink from. Their

dung is full of seeds, helping plants spread across the environment—and it makes pretty good habitat for dung beetles too.

- Elephants are **matriarchal**, meaning they live in female-led groups. The matriarch is usually the biggest and oldest. She presides over a multi-generational herd that includes other females, called cows, and their young.

Why in the News?

- Following population declines over several decades due to poaching for ivory and loss of habitat, the **African forest elephant** is now listed as **Critically Endangered** and the **African savanna elephant** as **Endangered** on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species.
- Earlier, the African elephants were treated as a single species and listed as a **Vulnerable**. First time the two species have been assessed separately for the IUCN Red List, following the emergence of new genetic evidence.
- The population of African forest elephants plummeted by 86 per cent in the last 31 years while that of the savanna elephants dropped by 60 per cent in the last 50 years.

Related Information

About IUCN

- Established in 1964, The **International Union for Conservation of Nature's (IUCN) Red List of Threatened Species** has evolved to become the world's most comprehensive information source on the **global conservation status of animal, fungi and plant species**.
- The IUCN Red List is a critical indicator of the health of the world's biodiversity. It uses a set of quantitative criteria to evaluate the extinction risk of thousands of species.
- The IUCN Red List Categories and Criteria are intended to be an easily

and widely understood system for classifying species at high risk of global extinction. It divides species into **nine categories**: **Not Evaluated, Data**

Deficient, Least Concern, Near Threatened, Vulnerable, Endangered, Critically Endangered, Extinct in the Wild and Extinct.

Endangered Species: Categories and Criteria

	Population Reduction Rate	Geographic Range		Population Size	Population Restrictions	Extinction Probability (in the wild)
		Extent of Occurrence	Area of Occupancy			
Least Concern	A species that has a widespread and abundant population					
Near Threatened	A species that is likely to qualify for a threatened category in the near future					
Vulnerable Species	30-50% population decline	<20,000 km ²	<2,000 km ²	<10,000 mature individuals	<1,000 mature individuals or an area of occupancy of <20 km ²	at least 10% within 100 years
Endangered Species	50-70% population decline	<5,000 km ²	<500 km ²	<2,500 mature individuals	<250 mature individuals	at least 20% within 20 years or 5 generations
Critically Endangered	≥80-90% population decline	<100 km ²	<10 km ²	<250 mature individuals	<10 mature individuals	at least 50% within 10 years or 3 generations
Extinct in the Wild	Only survives in cultivation (plants), in captivity (animals), or as a population well outside its established range					
Extinct	No remaining individuals of the species					

Image courtesy: www.nationalgeographic.org

2) Genetic profiling of Swamp deer

About Swamp Deer or Barasingha



- It is the **state animal of Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh.**
- The swamp deer differs from all other Indian deer species in that the antlers carry more than three tines (spikes). Because of this distinctive

character it is designated "**bārah-singga**", meaning "twelve-horned".

- Swamp deer are already extinct in Pakistan and Bangladesh. It is now found only in **South- Western Nepal and Central and North-Eastern India.**
- There are **three subspecies** of swamp deer found in the Indian Subcontinent.
 1. Western swamp deer (*Rucervus duvaucelii*) found in Nepal,
 2. Southern swamp deer (*Rucervus duvaucelii branderi*) found in **Central and North India** and
 3. Eastern swamp deer (*Rucervus duvaucelii ranjitsinhi*) found in the **Kaziranga and Dudhwa National Parks.**

- With their numbers estimated at over 3,000, **Dudhwa National Park** has the largest number of barasingha in the country. They are also found in significant numbers in **Kanha National Park** in Madhya Pradesh.
- **Protection Status:** IUCN Red List: **Vulnerable**; CITES: **Appendix I**; Wildlife Protection Act (1972): **Schedule I**.

Conservation Issues

- The swamp deer populations outside protected areas and seasonally migrating populations are threatened by poaching for antlers and meat, which are sold in local markets.
- Swamp deer lost most of its former range because wetlands were converted and used for agriculture so that suitable habitat was reduced to small and isolated fragments.

Why in the news?

- Efforts are on to conduct the **first genetic profiling** of swamp deer in the Dudhwa Tiger Reserve. Scientists will also try to find out about the genetic health of Barasinghas.
- DNA/Genetic profiling is the process where a specific DNA pattern, called a profile, is obtained from a person or sample of bodily tissue. Information collected from DNA samples can be used to identify species, track their movements and diagnose genetic diseases.

Dudhwa National Park

- It lies adjacent to the **Indo-Nepal border** in **Uttar Pradesh**.
- It also comprises **Kishanpur and Katarniaghat Wildlife Sanctuaries**. The area of the Park is composed of a vast alluvial plain along the tributaries of **Mohana and Suheli rivers**, interspersed with numerous rivulets, lakes and pools.
- It is famous for its Swamp deer and Tiger population.

3) Great Indian Bustard

About GIB

- Great Indian Bustard (GIB) is one of the heaviest flying birds **endemic to the Indian subcontinent**.
- **Protection Status:** IUCN Red List: **Critically Endangered**; CITES: **Appendix I**; Wildlife Protection Act (1972): **Schedule I**.
- Historically, the great Indian bustard was distributed throughout Western India, spanning 11 states, as well as parts of Pakistan. Today, its population is **confined mostly to Rajasthan and Gujarat**. Small populations occur in Maharashtra, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh.

Conservation Issues

- The biggest threat to this species is hunting, which is still prevalent in Pakistan. This is followed by occasional poaching outside Protected Areas, collisions with high tension electric wires, fast moving vehicles and free-ranging dogs in villages.
- Other threats include habitat loss and alteration because of widespread agricultural expansion and mechanized farming, infrastructural development such as irrigation, roads, electric poles, as well as mining and industrialization.

Conservation strategies

- The only opportunity to potentially recover this species remains in the **Thar landscape of Rajasthan**, where the birds are now limited to two extant populations – one inside **Desert (National Park) Sanctuary** near Jaisalmer, and the second population located in the **grasslands and agricultural lands of Pokhran and Ramdeora**.
- The Great Indian Bustard has also been identified as one of the species for the **recovery programme for critically endangered species** (*Refer Pulse February 2021 edition*) of the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC).



Why in News?

- A study by the MoEFCC has 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** (a non-governmental organisation) have jointly initiated a program where **firefly bird diverters** were installed along two stretches of power lines of approximately 6.5 km.



- Firefly bird diverters 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.
- 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.

4) Olive Ridley turtles

About olive ridley turtles

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

Mass nesting

- The Olive Ridley Turtles come to the beaches of Odisha coast annually between November and December and stay on until April and May for mass nesting. Such mass nesting events are called **arribadas**.
- While states like Maharashtra, Goa, and the offshore Andaman islands witness sporadic nesting of olive ridley turtles, **Odisha** is the only state in India that sees mass nesting of olive ridley turtles.
- The Olive Ridley turtles turn up in millions for mass nesting along the Odisha coast every year. **Gahirmatha beach in Odisha** is acclaimed as the **world's largest-known nesting site** for the marine species.
- Apart from Gahirmatha, turtles turn up at the **mouths of Rushikulya and Devi river** (both in Odisha) for mass nesting.



Threats

- The Olive Ridley turtles face serious threats across their migratory route, habitat and nesting beaches, due to human activities such as turtle unfriendly fishing practices, development and exploitation of nesting beaches for ports, and tourist centers.
- Though international trade in these turtles and their products is banned, they are still extensively poached for their meat, shell and leather.
- All the five species of sea turtles occurring in India, including the Olive

Ridley turtles, are legally protected under **Schedule I** of the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972 and **Appendix I** of the CITES Convention which prohibits trade in turtle products.

- As the nesting period stretches over six months, the Indian Coast Guard undertakes the Olive Ridley Turtle protection program under the code name '**Operation Olivia**' every year.

Why in News?

- The number of deaths of Olive Ridley sea turtles along the Odisha coast has come down this year as the state forest department has taken various measures for the protection of the marine species and their habitats.
- However, the Orissa High Court has directed the state government to enforce a prohibition on fishing activities by trawlers near the mouth of **Devi River** and along the coast to protect the marine species.

Defence

1) Exercise Desert Flag

About the Exercise

- Exercise Desert Flag is an annual multi-national large force employment warfare exercise hosted by the **United Arab Emirates (UAE) Air Force**.
- The aim of the exercise is to provide operational exposure to the participating forces, while training them to undertake simulated air combat operations in a controlled environment.

What's in the news?

- The Indian Air Force (IAF) participated in the Exercise Desert Flag-VI for the first time along with the air forces of the UAE, the US, France, Saudi Arabia, South Korea and Bahrain.
- The exercise was conducted in March at the Al-Dhafra airbase in the UAE.

2) DUSTLIK-II

What is in the news?

- DUSTLIK-II was conducted recently in Ranikhet, Uttarakhand.
- It is the second edition of annual joint military exercise between **India - Uzbekistan**.
- The first edition of the exercise was held in Uzbekistan in November 2019.

3) Milan Anti-Tank Guided Missile

About the Missile

- The Milan-2T is a Anti-Tank Guided Missile with a **range of 1,850 metres**.

- These missiles can be fired from **ground as well as vehicle-based launchers**.
- They can be deployed in Anti-Tank Roles for both offensive and defensive tasks.
- It is produced by **Bharat Dynamics Limited** under **license from MBDA Missile Systems, France**.

Why in News?

- The Ministry of Defence has signed a contract with state-run Bharat Dynamics Limited for supply of four thousand 960 MILAN-2T Anti-Tank Guided Missiles to Indian Army.
- The induction is planned to be completed in three years which will enhance the operational preparedness of the Armed Forces.
- This project is considered as a step in the direction of achieving the goal of **'Atmanirbhar Bharat' in the defence sector**.
- Under the Atmanirbhar Bharat program, the government has been pushing the Indian private sector to manufacture more defence hardware in the country to reduce India's defence armaments imports as well as transform India into a defence manufacturing hub.



Economy

1) Inflation Targeting

How does India measure retail inflation?

- Inflation is the rate of change in the prices of a given set of items. India bases its retail inflation metrics on the **Consumer Price Index (CPI)**.
- The index records changes in prices for a sample of family budget items that are representative of what consumers typically spend their household income on — food, fuel, housing, clothing, health, education, amusement and even paan, tobacco and intoxicants.
- The measure is based on a **weighted average**. That is, some items in the index may get greater weightage depending on their priority in a typical family's budget.
- The CPI-based retail inflation is measured **monthly** and is published as a percentage value of change in the index from the corresponding year-earlier period.
- Data for a certain month are released by the **Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation** with **base year 2011-12**.

RBI's role in tackling inflation

- The RBI's explicit mandate is to **conduct monetary policy**. The primary objective of monetary policy is to **maintain price stability while keeping in mind the objective of growth**. Price stability is a necessary precondition to sustainable growth.
- In **2016**, the **Reserve Bank of India Act, 1934**, was amended to provide a statutory basis for the implementation of a **flexible inflation-targeting framework**, where the Centre and the RBI would review and agree upon a specific inflation target every five years.
- Under this, **4% was set as the Consumer Price Index (CPI) inflation target** for the period from

August 5, 2016, to March 31, 2021, with the **upper tolerance limit of 6% and the lower tolerance limit of 2%**.

- To the extent that ensuring price stability is its primary goal, the RBI through its MPC must constantly assess not just current levels of inflation and prices of various goods and services in the economy, but also take into consideration inflation expectations both of consumers and financial markets so as to use an array of monetary tools, including interest rates, to contain inflation within its target range.
- When the RBI fails to meet the inflation target, it will send a **report to the central government** stating reasons and remedial actions that will be taken. **A breach of the "tolerance level" for three consecutive quarters will constitute a failure of monetary policy.**

Why in News?

- The Centre has decided to **retain the inflation target of 4%, with a tolerance band of +/- 2 percentage points** for the Monetary Policy Committee of the RBI for the coming five years (April 1, 2021, to March 31, 2026).
- Economists welcomed the continuity in the framework, despite the recent spate of high inflation prints beyond the 6% upper threshold of the inflation target.

Related information About MPC

- The Monetary Policy Committee is a committee of the RBI which is entrusted with the task of fixing the benchmark policy interest rate (repo rate) to **contain inflation within the specified target level**.
- The 2016 amendment of the Reserve Bank of India Act, 1934 provides for a

statutory and institutionalised framework for the MPC.

- The MPC has **six members**
- **RBI Governor (Chairperson)**, RBI Deputy Governor in charge of monetary policy, one official nominated by the RBI Board and remaining 3 members would represent the Government.
- The MPC makes decisions based on **majority vote**. In case of a tie, the **RBI governor will have a second or casting vote**.

2) Anti-dumping duties

What is dumping?

- Dumping is the practice of selling a product in a foreign market at an **unfairly low price** (a price that is lower than the cost in the home market, or which is lower than the cost of production) in order **to gain a competitive advantage over other suppliers**.
- Dumping is done to gain access to the foreign market and eliminate competition. It creates a **monopoly** in the market.
- Dumping enables consumers in the importing country to obtain access to goods at an **affordable price**. However, it can also destroy the local market of the importing country, which can result in layoffs and the closure of businesses.

Anti-dumping duty

- An anti-dumping duty is a protectionist tariff that a **domestic government imposes on foreign imports** when it believes that the goods are being

“dumped” – through the low pricing – in the domestic market.

- Anti-dumping duty is imposed **to protect local businesses and markets** from unfair competition by foreign imports.

Ill effects of such duties

- While the intention of anti-dumping duties is to save domestic jobs, these tariffs can also lead to **higher prices for domestic consumers**.
- In the long-term, anti-dumping duties can **reduce the international competition of domestic companies** producing similar goods.

Dumping and WTO

- The **World Trade Organization (WTO)** plays a critical role in the regulation of anti-dumping measures.
- The **WTO Anti-Dumping Agreement** allows the government of the affected country to take legal action against the dumping country as long as there is **evidence of genuine material injury to industries in the domestic market**.
- The government must show that dumping took place, the extent of the dumping in terms of costs, and the injury or threat to cause injury to the domestic market.
- In other cases, the WTO intervenes to prevent anti-dumping measures.

What is in the News?

- The U.S. Department of Commerce announced that it will tax aluminium sheet exporters from 18 countries (including **India**) after determining that they had benefited from dumping.

Organisations

1) UN Human Rights Council

About the council

- The Human Rights Council is an **inter-governmental body within the United Nations system**.
- The Council's mandate is to promote "universal respect for the protection of all human rights and fundamental freedoms for all" and "address situations of violations of human rights, including gross and systematic violations, and make recommendations thereon."
- It has the ability to discuss all thematic human rights issues and situations that require its attention throughout the year.
- The Council was created by the **United Nations General Assembly in 2006**. It replaced the former United Nations Commission on Human Rights.
- The headquarters of UNHRC is in **Geneva, Switzerland**.

Membership

- The Council is made of **47 Member States**, which are elected by the majority of members of the General Assembly of the United Nations through **direct and secret ballot**.
- The Council's Membership is based on **equitable geographical distribution**.
- Members of the Council serve for a period of **three years** and are **not eligible for immediate re-election after serving two consecutive terms**.

Why in News?

- India has recently abstained from a crucial vote on Sri Lanka's rights record at the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva.
- The resolution on **'Promoting reconciliation, accountability and human rights in Sri Lanka'** was, however, adopted after 22 states of the 47-member Council voted in its favour.
- The resolution gives UN human rights Chief Michelle Bachelet the mandate to

collect and preserve evidence of crimes related to Sri Lanka's civil war that ended in 2009 with the defeat of Tamil Tiger rebels.

- The resolution also contended the human rights situation has deteriorated under the Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa administration and that rights defenders and ethnic and religious minorities are facing problems.

Why did India abstain?

- By abstaining from the vote on the UN Human Rights Council resolution on Sri Lanka, India has signalled its unwillingness to upset its neighbour.
- India seems to have utilised the opportunity to preserve its diplomatic space and to **contain the pervasive influence of China over Sri Lanka** even while maintaining its support for the Tamil minority to achieve equality, justice, dignity and peace.
- India has not been comfortable with externally mandated investigative mechanisms.
- Even when it voted in 2012 in favour of a credible investigation into human rights, India had got the resolution to incorporate the need for **Sri Lanka's 'concurrence' to any assistance** that the UN may offer in such a probe.
- In this session and just ahead of the vote, India stressed on both meaningful devolution to meet Tamil aspirations and the unity and integrity of Sri Lanka — aspects that it believes are **not an 'either-or' choice**.

India's concerns

- India's concerns in Sri Lanka have always been different from the rest of the international community.
- Informed by a sense of the long-term well-being of the Tamils, and that power-sharing does foster reconciliation, **India emphasis on**

devolution rather than accountability.

- It is clear that India has its own limitations in expressing disappointment over the island nation's move away from reconciliation and devolution. It continues to be weighed down by the Chinese presence in the region.

Conclusion

- When pragmatism and principle were needed in equal measure, the Centre seems to have chosen abstention as an easy way out.

2) Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure

About CDRI

- Launched in **2019** by the **Prime Minister Narendra Modi** at the **UN Climate Change Summit**, the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure

(CDRI) is an international collaborative platform involving the public and private sector, aiming to **promote the resilience of new and existing infrastructure systems** to climate and disaster risks in support of sustainable development.

- CDRI envisions enabling **measurable reduction in infrastructure losses** from disasters, including extreme climate events.
- It aims to help tackle these objectives in a **multilateral approach**, which will help implementation of the Paris Agreement, through both global reduction of greenhouse gas emissions and enhanced climate change adaptation action.
- The Coalition's secretariat is based in **New Delhi**.
- **Members of CDRI:** 22 countries and 7 organisations.



Significance of CDRI

- The CDRI will serve as a platform where knowledge is generated and exchanged on different aspects of disaster and climate resilience of infrastructure.
- It will bring together technical expertise from a multitude of stakeholders that will create a mechanism to assist countries to

upgrade their capacities and practices, with regard to infrastructure development in accordance with their risk context and economic needs.

- Economically weaker sections of society, women and children, are the most vulnerable to the impacts of disasters and hence, will be benefited from the improvement of knowledge and practice in creating disaster resilient infrastructure.

Why in the news?

- The third edition of the annual conference of the Coalition for Disaster resilient Infrastructure was held recently in virtual format.

3) Organisation of Islamic Cooperation

About OIC

- The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) is the **second largest inter-governmental organization** after the United Nations with a membership of **57 states**.
- The majority of its member states are Muslim-majority countries, while others have significant Muslim populations, including several African and South American countries.

- **India is neither a member nor an observer of the OIC.**
- The organization is the collective voice of the Muslim world to ensure and safeguard their interest on economic socio and political areas.
- Its Headquarters is in **Jeddah, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.**

Why in News?

- Speaking at the United Nations Human Rights Council, India recently asserted that the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation has no locus standi to comment on Jammu and Kashmir which is an integral part of India.
- India rejected the reference to the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir in the statement of the OIC during the UNHRC meeting.

Science and Technology

1) NISAR

What's in the news?

- NASA and ISRO are collaborating on developing a satellite called **NISAR (NASA-ISRO synthetic aperture radar)**.
- NISAR will be the first satellite mission to **use two different radar frequencies (L-band and S-band) to measure changes in our planet's surface less than a centimeter across**. The radar penetrates clouds and darkness, enabling NISAR to collect data **day and night in any weather**.
- The satellite will be launched in **2022** by ISRO's **Geosynchronous Satellite Launch Vehicle (GSLV)** from the Satish Dhawan Space Center in Sriharikota, India. It will be placed in a **near-polar orbit** and will scan the globe every 12 days over the course of its three-year mission of imaging the Earth's land, ice sheets and sea ice.



What is NISAR?

- It's an all-weather satellite that is being jointly developed by the space agencies of the US and India.
- The partnership agreement was signed between NASA and ISRO in **2014**, according to which NASA will provide the mission's L-band synthetic aperture radar, a high-rate communication subsystem for science data, GPS receivers, a solid-state recorder and payload data subsystem. ISRO, on the other hand, will provide the spacecraft bus, the second type of

radar (called the S-band radar), the launch vehicle and associated launch services.

- Significantly, NISAR will be equipped with the **largest reflector antenna ever launched by NASA**.
- The name NISAR is short for **NASA-ISRO-SAR**. SAR here refers to the **Synthetic Aperture Radar** that NASA will use to measure changes in the surface of the Earth.
- Synthetic Aperture Radar (SAR) refers to a technique for producing high-resolution images. Because of the precision, the radar can penetrate clouds and darkness, which means that it can collect data day and night in any weather.

What are the primary goals of NISAR?

- Primary goals of NISAR include tracking **subtle changes in the Earth's surface, spotting warning signs of imminent volcanic eruptions, helping to monitor groundwater supplies and tracking the rate at which ice sheets are melting**.
- The data from the NISAR helps in better understanding of the causes and consequences of land surface changes, increasing our ability to manage resources and prepare for and cope with global change.

2) Red Echo

What is a Trojan Horse?

- A Trojan horse, or Trojan, is a type of malicious code or software that **looks legitimate but can take control of your computer**.
- A Trojan can be employed by cyber-thieves and hackers trying to gain access to users' systems.
- Users are typically tricked by some form of social engineering into loading and executing Trojans on their systems. Once activated, Trojans can

enable cyber-criminals to spy on you, steal your sensitive data, and gain backdoor access to your system.

Why in News?

- The Maharashtra state government announced that a State Cyber Cell probe had found **14 Trojan horses** in the servers of the Maharashtra State Electricity Transmission Company. These malwares had the potential to disrupt power distribution in the State.
- The announcement came in the wake of a report from **Recorded Future**, a U.S.-based cybersecurity firm, stating that a group linked to the Chinese government, which it called '**Red Echo**', had targeted 10 vital nodes in India's power distribution system and two seaports.
- Recorded Future claims the cyber intrusions from China began in May 2020 amid heightened tensions at the border. It also suggested that these malwares could be the cause of the massive power outage in Mumbai in October 2020.
- Recorded Future found a large number of IP addresses linked to critical Indian systems communicating for months with servers connected to Red Echo. These servers act as command-and-control centres for a malware known as **ShadowPad**.

What is ShadowPad?

- ShadowPad is a **backdoor Trojan malware**, which means it opens a secret path from its target system to its command-and-control servers. Information can be extracted or more malicious code delivered via this path.
- Security firm Kaspersky says ShadowPad is built to **target supply-chain infrastructure** in sectors like transportation, telecommunication, energy and more. It was first identified in 2017.

What could be the aim of these hackers?

- Potential pre-positioning of network access to support Chinese strategic objectives.
- Prepositioning in cyber warfare means to have malware assets in crucial places that can be called on when an actual attack is launched.

3) Helium

What is it?

- Helium is a **colourless, odourless, tasteless, inert and a noble gas**.
- After hydrogen, helium is the **second most abundant element** in the universe. It is present in all stars.
- It is also the **second lightest element** (only hydrogen is lighter).

What are the uses of Helium?

- Helium is used as a cooling medium for the **superconducting magnets** in **MRI scanners and NMR spectrometers**. It is also used to keep satellite instruments cool and was used to cool the liquid oxygen and hydrogen that powered the Apollo space vehicles.
- Because of its low density, helium is often used to **fill decorative balloons, weather balloons and airships**. Hydrogen was once used to fill balloons but it is dangerously reactive.
- Because it is **very unreactive**, helium is used to provide an **inert protective atmosphere** for making **fibre optics and semiconductors**, and for arc welding. Helium is also used to detect leaks, such as in car air-conditioning systems, and because it diffuses quickly it is used to inflate car airbags after impact.
- A mixture of 80% helium and 20% oxygen is used as an **artificial atmosphere** for deep-sea divers and others working under pressure conditions.
- Helium-neon gas lasers are used to **scan barcodes** in supermarket checkouts. A new use for helium is a helium-ion microscope that gives

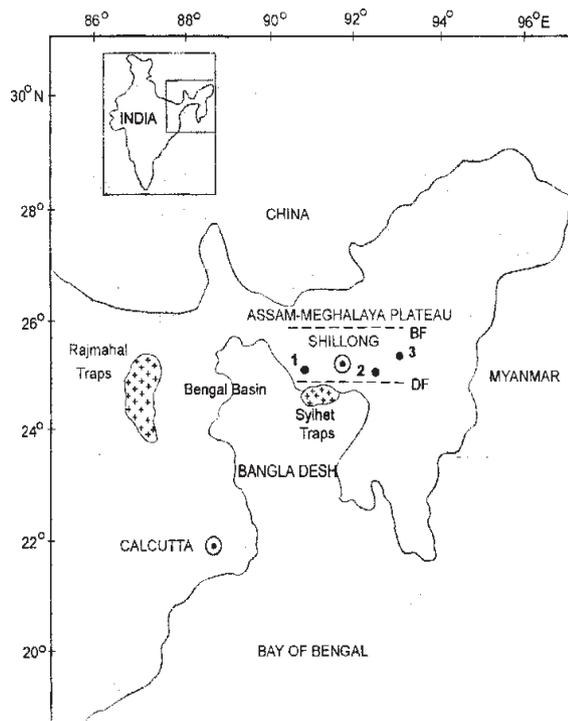
better image resolution than a scanning **electron microscope**.

Why in News?

- The U.S. is the most important exporter of helium across the world. Despite its rarity on Earth, Helium is concentrated in large quantities under the American Great Plains.
- However, the U.S. is looking to cut off exports of helium from 2021.
- Every year, India imports helium worth Rs 55,000 crores from the U.S. to meet its needs.
- **Qatar** is a possible exporter but acute political and diplomatic wrangles have made Qatar unreliable.

Where in India can we find Helium?

- There is a vast reservoir of helium in the **Rajmahal volcanic belt in Eastern India**. It remains untapped till now.
- It is the store house of helium trapped for billions of years. India consumes about 70 million cubic metres per year. But the reserve of helium by far exceeds this.
- At present, researchers are mapping the Rajmahal basin for future exploration and harnessing of helium.



4) SERB-PRISM

About SERB

- The Science and Engineering Board (SERB) is a **statutory body** of the Department of Science and Technology (DST), Ministry of Science and Technology, established through the SERB Act, 2008.
- **Supporting basic research in emerging areas of Science & Engineering** is the primary and distinctive mandate of the Board.
- It is the premier agency for planning, promoting, and funding of internationally competitive research in emerging areas.

Why in News?

- The Science and Engineering Board has launched the portal called '**SERB - Project Information System & Management (SERB - PRISM)**'.
- Developed by SERB, this portal is designed to provide information regarding projects sanctioned by SERB from 2011 onwards, including funding details, status, research summary, and project output information such as publications and patents.

Significance

- SERB-PRISM provides a platform which makes project details, research outcomes, facilities created, and their achievements originating from SERB funding accessible.
- It also allows researchers to look at research trends, learn about cutting-edge science, locate critical equipment in their vicinity and help seek collaborations across disciplines.
- It also helps in the **democratisation of Research & Development funding trends**.

Reports and Indices

1) Arms Import

About SIPRI

- Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) is an independent international institute dedicated to research into conflict, armaments, arms control and disarmament.
- Established in 1966, SIPRI provides data, analysis and recommendations, based on open sources, to policymakers, researchers, media and the interested public. It is based in Stockholm, Sweden.

Why in News?

- SIPRI has released its latest report analysing the trends of arms imports by India and other countries.

Fall in Arms Imports

- **India's arms imports fell by 33%** between 2011-2015 and 2016-2020, but it continues in the strategically-vulnerable position of being the **world's second-largest arms importer** just behind Saudi Arabia.
- The overall drop in arms imports between 2011-15 and 2016-20 seems to be mainly due to its **complex and lengthy procurement processes**, combined with its attempts to **reduce its dependence on Russian arms** by diversifying its network of arms suppliers.
- India accounted for **9.5% of the total global arms imports** during 2016-2020. **Saudi Arabia** topped the list of arms importers (11%), followed by India, Egypt (5.8%), Australia (5.1%) and China (4.7%).

Who are the top suppliers to India?

- India's top arms supplier during 2016-2020 was **Russia**. However, Russia's deliveries share of Indian arms imports fell from 70 to 49% between 2011-2015 and 2016-2020.
- **The U.S.** was the second largest arms supplier to India in 2011-15 but in

2016-20, India's arms imports from the U.S. were 46% lower than in the previous five-year period, making the U.S. the **fourth largest supplier** in 2016-20.

- **France and Israel** were the second and third largest arms suppliers in 2016-20. India's arms imports from France increased by 709% while those from Israel rose by 82%.
- India has broad-based its arms imports, increasingly turning to the US, France and Israel for arms imports over the last 15 years, but over 60% of the weapons systems used by the 1.5 million strong Indian armed forces are still of Russian-origin.

What about indigenization?

- As part of efforts to boost defence imports and promote domestic manufacturing, the Defence Ministry had last year **notified a list of 101 items on the negative import list**.
- It essentially means that the Armed Forces—Army, Navy and Air Force—will only procure all of these 101 items from domestic manufacturers. The manufacturers could be private sector players or defence Public Sector Undertakings (DPSUs).
- India accounted for **0.2% of the share of global arms exports** during 2016-20, making the country the world's 24th largest exporter of major arms. This represents an increase of 228% over India's export share of 0.1 % during the previous five-year period of 2011-15.
- **Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Mauritius** were the top recipients of Indian military hardware

2) Ease of Living Index 2020

What's in the news?

- The Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs has released its Ease of Living Index (EoLI) 2020.

About the Index

- The 'Ease of Living Index' is an assessment tool that evaluates the quality of life and the impact of various initiatives for urban development.
- **111 cities** across the country participated in the Ease of Living Index 2020.
- Performance of the cities has been measured on **four broad parameters: governance and social, physical and economic infrastructure.**
- The EoLI 2020 strengthens its scope by consolidating the framework with the addition of a **Citizen Perception Survey (CPS)** in the index, holding a weightage of 30%. CPS aims to validate citizens' experience of their city in terms of service delivery.

Highlights of the Index

- **Bengaluru** has been adjudged the most liveable city in India (**with more than 1 million population category**), followed by Pune, Ahmedabad, Chennai, Surat, Navi Mumbai, Coimbatore, Vadodara, Indore and Greater Mumbai.
- **Shimla** topped the category of cities with '**population less than million**'. In this category, Bhubaneswar was ranked second, Silvassa came third, and they were followed by Kakinada, Salem, Vellore, Gandhinagar, Gurgaon, Davangere and Tiruchirapalli.

Municipal Performance Index 2020

- The Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs also released the **Municipal Performance Index 2020**, which rated 111 municipalities on five verticals: **Services, Finance, Policy, Technology and Governance.**
- **Indore** topped the ranking of municipalities with over 1 million population, followed by Surat and Bhopal, and the **New Delhi** Municipal Council was the best among civic bodies with under a million

population, followed by Tirupati and Gandhinagar.

3) World Happiness Report 2021

About the Report

- The World Happiness Report is a landmark survey of the state of global happiness that ranks 149 countries by **how happy their citizens perceive themselves to be.**
- It is released by the **UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network.**
- The annual report ranks nations based on
 - ✓ **Gross Domestic Product Per Capita (Purchasing Power Parity);**
 - ✓ **Healthy life expectancy at birth;** and
 - ✓ **Opinions of residents.**
- To assess the 'Opinion of residents', surveys ask respondents to indicate on a 1-10 scale how much **social support** they feel they have if something goes wrong, their **freedom to make their own life choices**, their sense of **how corrupt their society is** and **how generous they are.**

Why in News?

- The UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network has released its World Happiness Report 2021.

Highlights of the Report

- The World Happiness Report 2021 focuses on the effects of Covid-19 and how people all over the world have fared.
- Overall, the index showed little change in happiness levels compared to last years' report, which was based on information from before the Covid-19 pandemic.
- **Finland** has been ranked as the happiest country in the world for the fourth consecutive year. The Nordic nation is followed by Iceland, Denmark, Switzerland, The Netherlands, Sweden, Germany and Norway.

- Despite having one of the most robust economic wealth globally, **the US** has secured the 19th spot for happiness.
- **India** has been ranked **139 out of 149 countries** in the 2021 list. India ranked 140th in 2019 and 144th in 2020.
- People in war-torn Afghanistan are the most unhappy with their lives, followed by Zimbabwe (148), Rwanda (147), Botswana (146) and Lesotho (145).

Related Information **About SDSN**

- The Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) was launched in 2012 by UN Secretary-

General Ban Ki-moon to mobilize global scientific and technological expertise to promote practical problem solving for sustainable development and implement the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

- SDSN's mission is to promote integrated approaches to implement the SDGs and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, through education, research, policy analysis, and global cooperation.
- SDSN works closely with United Nations agencies, multilateral financing institutions, the private sector, and civil society.

Polity

1) NITI Aayog's discussion paper on NFSA

About NFSA

- The National Food Security Act, 2013 (NFSA) provides for **food and nutritional security** in the human life cycle approach, by ensuring access to adequate quantity of quality food at affordable prices for people to live a life with dignity and for matters connected therewith or incidental thereto.
- The Act is in line with **Goal Two of the Sustainable Development Goals** (which seeks sustainable solutions to end hunger in all its forms by 2030 and to achieve food security) set by the United Nations General Assembly.
- Schemes such as the **Mid-Day Meal Scheme (MDM)**, the **Public Distribution System (PDS)**, and the **Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS)** are included under the Act.
- The implementation of the scheme comes under the ambit of the **Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution**.

Key Features

- The Act legally entitled up to **75% of the rural population and 50% of the urban population** to receive subsidized foodgrains under the **Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS)**.
- Under the Act, "**eligible households**" comprises two categories — "**priority households**", and families covered by the **Antyodaya Anna Yojana (AAY)**.
- Priority households are entitled to receive **5 Kgs of foodgrains per person per month at subsidised prices of Rs. 3/2/1 per Kg for rice/wheat/coarse grains**. The existing **AAY households**, which constitute the poorest of the poor, are

entitled to 35 kg per month at the same prices.

- About two-thirds of the population, therefore, is covered under the Act to receive highly subsidized foodgrains.
- The Act also has a special focus on the nutritional support to women and children. **Pregnant women and lactating mothers** will be entitled to meals and **maternity benefits of not less than Rs 6000**.
- **Children upto 14 years of age** will be entitled to nutritious meals as per the prescribed nutritional standards. In case of non-supply of entitled foodgrains or meals, the beneficiaries will receive **food security allowance**.
- The Act also contains provisions for setting up of **grievance redressal mechanism** at the District and State levels
- The **eldest women of the household** of age 18 years or above will be the head of the household for the purpose of issuing ration cards.

Implementation

- It is operated under the **joint responsibility of the Central and the State/Union Territory (UT) Governments**.
- The Central Government is responsible for procurement, allocation and transportation of food grains up to the designated depots of the Food Corporation of India.
- States/UTs hold the operational responsibilities for allocation and distribution of food grains.
- The NFSA currently covers around **81 crore people** which was determined on the basis of the **2011 census**, and has not been revised since the law was passed in 2013.

Why in News?

- NITI aayog has recently circulated a discussion paper on a proposed

revision in the National Food Security Act.

Major Recommendations

Revision of CIPs

- The NFSA provides a legal right to persons belonging to “eligible households” to receive food grains at subsidised price– rice at Rs 3/kg, wheat at Rs 2/kg and coarse grain at Rs 1/kg — under the Targeted Public Distribution System. These are called **central issue prices (CIPs)**.
- Under Schedule-I of the Act, the subsidised prices were fixed for “a period of **three years** from the date of commencement of the Act”. The law came into effect on July 5, 2013 and the three-year period was therefore completed on July 5, 2016.
- However, the **government has yet not revised the subsidised prices**. The government can do so under Schedule-I of the Act, after completion of the three-year period. To revise the prices, the government can amend Schedule-I through a notification, a copy of which has to be laid before each House of Parliament as soon as possible after it is issued.
- A revision of CIPs is one of the issues that have been discussed in the discussion paper.
- Even the **Economic Survey of 2020-21** had recommended a revision in the CIPs.

Identification of Beneficiaries

- The discussion paper also proposes updating the population coverage under the NFSA, and beneficiary identification criteria.
- The Act has prescribed the coverage under “eligible households” — 75% of the rural population and up to 50% of the urban population. On the basis of **Census 2011** figures and the national rural and urban coverage ratios, **81.35 crore persons** are covered under NFSA currently. This overall figure has been divided among the states and

Union Territories, based on the **NSSO Household Consumer Expenditure Survey 2011-12**.

- In its discussion paper, the NITI Aayog has suggested that the national rural and urban coverage ratio be **reduced from the existing 75-50 to 60-40**. If this reduction happens, the number of beneficiaries under the NFSA will drop to **71.62 crore** (on the basis of the projected population in 2020).

What is the implication of the revision for the Centre and the states?

- If the national coverage ratio is revised downward, the Centre can **save up to Rs 47,229 crore** (as estimated by the NITI Aayog paper). However, the move may be opposed by some of the states.
- Right to Food activists and economists such as Jean Dreze, who was instrumental in formulating the NFSA, have argued that with an increased population, the NFSA’s coverage should be expanded, not pruned.
- On the other hand, if the rural-urban coverage ratio remains at 75-50, then the total number of people covered will **increase from the existing 81.35 crore to 89.52 crore** —an increase of 8.17 crore. This estimate by the NITI Aayog is based on the projected **2020 population**, and will result in an additional subsidy requirement of Rs 14,800 crore.
- Niti Aayog’s suggestions come at a time when the food subsidy bill has touched **Rs 4,22,618 crore** for 2020-21, according to Revised Estimates for the year.

2) Electoral bonds

What are Electoral Bonds?

- An electoral bond is designed to be an **interest-free bearer instrument** like a **Promissory Note** — in effect, it will be similar to a bank note that is payable to the bearer on demand.

- It can be purchased by **any citizen** of India or a **body incorporated in India**.
- The electoral bonds were announced in the **2017 Union Budget**.
- The bonds will be issued in multiples of ₹1,000, ₹10,000, ₹1 lakh, ₹10 lakh and ₹1 crore and will be available at specified branches of **State Bank of India**.
- They can be bought by the donor with a **KYC-compliant account**.

Features

- The bonds will be available for purchase for a period of 10 days each in the beginning of every quarter, i.e. in January, April, July and October as specified by the Central Government.
- The donor will remain **anonymous**. The electoral bonds will **not bear the name of the donor**. The intention is to ensure that all the donations made to a party will be accounted for in the balance sheets **without exposing the donor details to the public**.
- Political parties are allotted a verified account by the Election Commission and all the electoral bond transactions are done through this account only.
- **Only political parties registered under Section 29A of the Representation of the Peoples Act, 1951** and have **secured no less than one per cent votes** in the last Lok Sabha or State elections are eligible to receive electoral bonds.
- A donor will get **tax deduction** and the recipient, or the political party, will get **tax exemption**, provided returns are filed by the political party.
- The information furnished by the buyer shall be treated confidential by the authorised bank and shall not be disclosed to any authority for any purposes, except when demanded **by a competent court or upon registration of a criminal case by any law enforcement agency**.

Criticisms

- The key critique is that, for something meant to bring transparency to the system, electoral bonds actually make political funding **more opaque – but only for the public**. Companies don't have to say who they are donating money to and parties don't need to say from whom they're getting the cash.
- Experts have said this undercuts the freedom of political information, which is an integral element of **Article 19(1)(a)** of the Constitution (the free expression clause).
- Prior to 2017, **Companies Act, 2013**, stipulated that a company can donate **only up to 7.5% of its average profit of the last three years**. Now, through the electoral bonds, there is **no limit** to the amount companies can donate, and the requirement for such firms to **have existed for the last three years on a profit-making basis** has also been deleted.
- The implication is that even **loss-making companies or shell companies** can be used to purchase electoral bonds.
- In 2016 and 2017, **amendments were made to the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act (FCRA), 2010**, with retrospective effect. Thus, **enabling the Indian subsidiaries of foreign companies to make donations to political parties** through electoral bonds.
- This allows **anonymous financing by foreign entities** opening Indian elections to the influence of foreign interests.
- The **Reserve Bank of India (RBI) and the Election Commission** had both said the sale of electoral bonds had become an avenue for shell corporations and entities to park illicit money and even proceeds of bribes with political parties.
- The Election Commission of India criticised electoral bonds saying it would **wreck transparency** in

political funding and allow for **unchecked foreign funding** of Indian political parties.

- However, the government defended the scheme, saying it allowed anonymity to political donors to protect them from “political victimisation”.

Why in News?

- The Supreme Court declined to stay the sale of the electoral bonds ahead of assembly elections in four states and one Union Territory, dismissing the application filed by the NGO Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR) which claimed it would increase illegal and illicit funding of political parties through shell companies.
- The apex court noted that bonds were allowed to be released in 2018 and 2019 without interruption and that ‘sufficient safeguards are there’.

Way Forward

- If bonds are to be retained as an instrument for contributing to political parties, **donations must be made transparent** and the information **must be placed in the public domain**.
- It is necessary to safeguard democracy and ensure that elections do not become a mere formality.

3) Mines & Minerals Amendment Act

What's in the news?

- The Parliament has passed the Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) Amendment Act, 2021. It amends the Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) Act, 1957 which regulated the mining sector in India.
- This assumes significance given that the **mineral sector contributes only 1.75% to the country's gross domestic product (GDP)**, with India importing minerals worth ₹2.5 trillion annually. Of India's obvious geological

potential area of 0.571 million sq. km, **only 10% has been explored**.

- Today, **100 per cent FDI** is permissible through automatic route in the steel and mining sectors, and for coal and lignite. The Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) Amendment Act, 2021 takes a step further towards attaining **mineral security** of the nation.

Highlights of the Act

Removal of restriction on end-use of minerals

- The 1957 Act empowers the **central government** to reserve any mine (other than coal, lignite, and atomic minerals) to be leased through an auction for a **particular end-use** (such as iron ore mine for a steel plant). Such mines are known as **captive mines**.
- The amendment provides that **no mine will be reserved for particular end-use**.

Sale of minerals by captive mines

- The amendment provides that **existing captive mines (other than atomic minerals) may sell up to 50% of their annual mineral production in the open market** after meeting their own needs.
- The central government may increase this threshold through a notification. The lessee will have to pay additional charges for minerals sold in the open market.
- This reform helps in many ways. For example, manganese, which is a byproduct of iron ore production, currently cannot be used by captive mines for anything at all and just piles up by the side of mines because companies cannot sell or refine it. This is a big change because while India imports manganese from countries like South Africa, Zimbabwe, its own manganese lies wasted.
- This increased flexibility would **allow miners to maximise output from captive mines** as they would be able

to sell output in excess of their own requirements.

- The reform will also **prevent hoarding of mines** — since companies can sell in the market, the incentive to hoard is gone.

Auction by the central government in certain cases

- Under the parent Act, **states conduct the auction of mineral concessions** (other than coal, lignite, and atomic minerals). Mineral concessions include mining lease and prospecting license-cum-mining lease.
- The amendment act empowers the **central government to specify a time period for completion of the auction process** in consultation with the state government. If the state government is unable to complete the auction process within this period, the **auctions may be conducted by the central government.**

Transfer of statutory clearances

- In **2015**, the Act was amended to provide that mines will be leased through an **auction process**. Upon expiry of a mining lease (other than coal, lignite, and atomic minerals), mines are leased to new persons through auction. The statutory clearances issued to the previous lessee are transferred to the new lessee for a period of two years. The new lessee is required to obtain fresh clearances within these two years.
- The new Act replaces this provision and instead provides that **transferred statutory clearances will be valid throughout the lease period of the new lessee.**
- Despite change of lessee, this particular amendment will guarantee uninterrupted mining operations, preservation of mineral and avoidance of repetitive, overlapping, and superfluous process of obtaining clearances yet again for the same mine.

Allocation of mines with expired leases

- The amendment act adds that mines (other than coal, lignite, and atomic minerals), whose lease has expired, may be allocated to a government company in certain cases. This will be applicable if the auction process for granting a new lease has not been completed, or the new lease has been terminated within a year of the auction.
- The state government may grant a lease for such a mine to a government company for a period of up to 10 years or until the selection of a new lessee, whichever is earlier.

Extension of leases to government companies

- The 1957 Act provides that the period of mining leases granted to government companies will be prescribed by the central government.
- The amendment provides that the period of mining leases of government companies (other than leases granted through auction i.e. PSUs which have old mining contracts) may be extended on payment of additional amount prescribed in the latest act.

Conditions for lapse of mining lease

- The new law mandates that whoever takes a mining lease **has to start producing within three years** of taking such lease or the lease will be taken over and the mine will be re-auctioned.

4) POCSO Act

Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, 2011

- The Act, which came into force in **2012**, is the first comprehensive law in the country **dealing specifically with sexual abuse of children.**
- Under the Act, any person below the **age of 18 years** is defined as a “child”.
- The Act increased the scope of reporting offences against children, which were not earlier covered under

the Indian Penal Code. This included **aggravated penetrative sexual assault** to include punishment for **abuse by a person in position of trust or authority** including public servants, police, armed forces, management or staff of an educational or religious institution.

- It also defined the procedure for reporting of cases, including a provision for punishment for **failure to report a case or false complaint**.
- It provided **procedures for recording of the statement of a child** by the police and court, laying down that it should be done in a **child-friendly manner**, and by the setting up of **special courts**.
- Each district shall designate a Sessions Court to be a **Special Court**. The Court shall, as far as possible, **complete the trial within one year**. The trial shall be held in camera and in the presence of the child's parents or any person trusted by the child.
- The Act also includes penalties for **use of children for the purpose of pornography and abetment of an offence**.

2019 Amendment

- The Act was amended in 2019 to enhance punishment under various sections of the Act including punishment for aggravated penetrative sexual assault to be increased to include **death penalty**.
- The important part of this act is that it is **gender-neutral** and creates no discrimination against children belonging to any gender be it cis male, cis female, trans male, trans female, or any other gender.

Why in the news?

- The Madras High Court recently said that it is high time that the POCSO Act is amended appropriately as punishing an adolescent boy who enters into a relationship with a minor girl by

treating him as an offender was never the objective of the Act.

- The court noted that several cases booked under the stringent POCSO Act fell under the category of elopement of teenagers. However, as a consequence of police complaints lodged by family members of the girls, the boys get arrested invariably and thereafter their youthful life comes to a grinding halt.

5) Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act

Key Provisions of the Act

- The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013 addresses the issue of workplace sexual harassment faced by women in **private institutions and government organisations**.
- The act superseded **Vishakha Guidelines** laid down by the Supreme Court in 1997.
- The Act defines sexual harassment at the work place and creates a mechanism for redressal of complaints. It also provides safeguards against false or malicious charges.

Definition of Workplace

- Under the Act, a workplace is defined as "any place visited by the employee arising out of or during the course of employment, including transportation provided by the employer for undertaking such a journey."
- As per this definition, a workplace covers **both the organised and unorganised sectors**.
- It also includes all workplaces whether owned by Indian or foreign company having a place of work in India.
- As per the Act, workplace includes:-
 - Government organizations, including Government company, corporations and cooperative societies;-

- Private sector organisations, venture, society, trust, NGO or service providers etc. providing services which are commercial, vocational, educational, sports, professional, entertainment, industrial, health related or financial activities, including production, supply, sale, distribution or service;-
- Hospitals/Nursing Homes;-
- Sports Institutes/Facilities;-
- Places visited by the employee (including while on travel) including transportation provided by employer;
- A dwelling place or house.

ICC & LCC

- Every employer is required to constitute an **Internal Complaints Committee** at each office or branch with **10 or more employees**.
- Every district will have a **Local Complaints Committee (LCC)** so as to enable women in the unorganised sector or small establishments to work in an environment free of sexual harassment.
- The LCC will receive complaints:
 - ✓ From women working in an organisation having less than 10 workers;
 - ✓ When the complaint is against the employer himself;
 - ✓ From domestic workers.
- At least **50 percent** of the nominated members in any Internal or Local Committee must be women.
- The Complaints Committees have the powers of **civil courts** for gathering evidence.
- The Complaints Committees are required to provide for **conciliation** before initiating an inquiry, if requested by the complainant.

Why in News?

- The Ministry of Women and Child Development has developed a handbook and a training module for

effective implementation/ awareness of the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act.

6) Only NRI quota seats based on entrance exams for OCI cardholders

Overseas Citizen of India

- Overseas Citizens of India (OCI) are of Indian origin but they are foreign passport holders and are not citizens of India. They are registered under **section 7A of the Citizenship Act, 1955**.
- Following categories of foreign nationals are eligible for registration as OCI Cardholder:-
 - who was a citizen of India at the time of, or at any time after the commencement of the Constitution i.e. 26.01.1950; or
 - who was eligible to become a citizen of India on 26.01.1950; or
 - who belonged to a territory that became part of India after 15.08.1947; or
 - who is a child or a grandchild or great grandchild of such a citizen; or
 - spouse of foreign origin of a citizen of India or spouse of foreign origin of an OCI Cardholder
- No person who or either of whose parents or grandparents or great grandparents is or had been a citizen of **Pakistan, Bangladesh or such other country** as the Central Government may, by notification in the Official Gazette, specify, shall be eligible for registration as an OCI Cardholder.

What benefits an OCI cardholder is entitled to?

- **India does not allow dual citizenship** but provides certain benefits under **Section 7B(I) of the Citizenship Act, 1955** to the OCIs. It includes:

- ✓ Multiple entry life-long visa for visiting India for any purpose.
- ✓ **Parity with Non-Resident Indians (NRIs)** in respect of all facilities available to them in economic, financial, and educational fields **except in matters relating to the acquisition of agricultural or plantation properties.**
- ✓ Registered OCI Cardholder shall be treated at par with NRIs in the matter of inter-country adoption of Indian children.

The OCI Card holder is not entitled:

- To vote,
- To be a member of a Legislative Assembly or of a Legislative Council or of the Parliament of India,
- To hold Indian constitutional posts such as that of the President, Vice President, Judge of the Supreme Court or High Court etc.
- He/she cannot normally hold employment in the Government.

Why in News?

- The Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) has reiterated through a gazette notification that **OCI cardholders can lay claim to “only Non Resident Indian quota seats” in educational institutions** based on all-India entrance tests such as National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET), Joint Entrance Examination (Mains), Joint Entrance Examination (Advanced) or other such all-India professional tests.
- The recent notification is in response to petitions filed by several OCI cardholder students claiming that they are eligible to get admission against general seats in medical, engineering and other government colleges if they clear the all-India tests.

Related Information

Who is a Non-Resident Indian?

- An Non Resident Indian is an Indian Citizen who resides in India for less than one hundred & eighty two days

during the course of the preceding financial year, or

- Who has gone out of India or who stays outside India for the purpose of employment, or
- Who has gone out of India or who stays outside India for carrying on business or vocation outside India, or
- Who has gone out of India or who stays outside India for any other purpose indicating his intention to stay outside India for an uncertain period.

7) National Commission for Allied and Healthcare Professions Act, 2020

What's in the news?

- The Parliament has passed the National Commission for Allied and Healthcare Professionals Act, 2021, which seeks to set up a commission to regulate the allied healthcare sector, standardise training and qualifications across the country.
- This legislation is expected to benefit an estimated 9 lakhs allied and healthcare-related professionals and thousands of other professionals joining the workforce annually.

Key features of the Act

Allied health professional

- The Act defines an ‘allied health professional’ as an associate, technician, or technologist trained to support the diagnosis and treatment of any illness, disease, injury, or impairment. Such a professional **should have obtained a diploma or degree** under this Act.
- The **duration** of the degree /diploma should be **at least 2,000 hours (over a period of two to four years).**

Healthcare professional

- A ‘healthcare professional’ includes a scientist, therapist, or any other professional who studies, advises, researches, supervises, or provides

preventive, curative, rehabilitative, therapeutic, or promotional health services.

- Such a professional **should have obtained a degree** under this Act. The **duration** of the degree should be **at least 3,600 hours (over a period of three to six years)**.

Allied and healthcare professions

- The Act specifies certain categories of allied and healthcare professions as **recognised categories**. These are mentioned in the Schedule to the Act and include life science professionals, trauma and burn care professionals, surgical and anaesthesia related technology professionals, physiotherapists, and nutrition science professionals.
- The central government may amend this Schedule after consultation with the National Commission for Allied and Healthcare Profession.

National Commission for Allied and Healthcare Professions

- The Act sets up the National Commission for Allied and Healthcare Professions. The **Commission will consist of**: (i) the Chairperson, (ii) Vice-Chairperson, (iii) five members (at the level of Joint Secretary) representing various Departments/Ministries of the central government, (iv) one representative from the Directorate General of Health Services, (v) three Deputy Directors or Medical Superintendents appointed on a rotational basis from amongst medical institutions including the AIIMS, Delhi and AIIPMR, Mumbai, and (vi) 12 part-time members representing State Councils, among others.

Functions of the Commission

- **The Commission will perform the following functions with regard to Allied and Healthcare professionals**: (i) framing policies and standards for regulating education and practice, (ii) creating and maintaining an online

Central Register of all registered professionals, (iii) providing basic standards of education, courses, curriculum, staff qualifications, examination, training, maximum fee payable for various categories, and (iv) providing for a uniform entrance and exit examination, among others.

Professional Councils

- The Commission will constitute a **Professional Council for every recognised category of allied and healthcare professions**. The Professional Council will consist of a president and four to 24 members, representing each profession in the recognised category. The Commission may delegate any of its functions to this Council.

State Councils

- **Within six months** from the passage of the Act, state governments will constitute State Allied and Healthcare Councils.
- **The State Councils will consist of**: (i) the Chairperson (at least 25 years of experience in the field of allied and healthcare science), (ii) one member representing medical sciences in the state government, (iii) two members representing state medical colleges, (iv) two members representing charitable institutions, and (v) two members from each of the recognised categories of allied and healthcare professions, nominated by the state government, among others.
- **The State Councils will**: (i) enforce professional conduct and code of ethics to be observed by allied healthcare professionals, (ii) maintain respective State Registers, (iii) inspect allied and healthcare institutions, and (iv) ensure uniform entry and exit examinations.

Establishment of institutions

- **Prior permission of the State Council will be required to**: (i) establish a new institution, or (ii) open new courses, increase the admission

capacity, or admit a new batch of students to existing institutions.

- If such permission is not sought, then any qualification granted to a student from such an institution will not be recognised under the Act.

Offences and penalties

- No person is allowed to practice as a qualified allied and healthcare practitioner other than those enrolled in a State Register or the National Register. Any person who contravenes this provision will be punished with a fine of Rs 50,000.

8) Places of Worship (Special Provisions) Act, 1991

Background

- The Supreme Court has asked the Centre to respond to a petition that challenges the constitutional validity of the **Places of Worship (Special Provisions) Act, 1991**.
- The law was enacted to **freeze the status of all places of worship in the country as on August 15, 1947**.

What does the 1991 Act say?

- The Act says that **no person shall convert any place of worship of any religious denomination into one of a different denomination or section**.
- It contains a declaration that a place of worship shall continue to be as it was on **August 15, 1947**.
- Significantly, it **prohibits any legal proceedings** from being instituted regarding the character of a place of worship, and declares that all suits and appeals pending before any court or authority on the cut-off date regarding the conversion of the character of a place of worship shall abate.
- In other words, all pending cases will come to an end, and no further proceedings can be filed. However, any suit or proceedings relating to any conversion of status that happened after the cut-off date can continue.

Exceptions

- The 1991 Act will not apply in some cases. It will not apply to **ancient and historical monuments and archaeological sites and remains** that are covered by the **Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act, 1958**.
- It will also not apply to any suit that has been finally settled or disposed of, any dispute that has been settled by the parties before the 1991 Act came into force, or to the conversion of any place that took place by acquiescence.
- The Act specifically exempted from its purview the place of worship commonly referred to as **Ram Janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid in Ayodhya**. It was done to allow the pending litigation to continue as well as to preserve the scope for a negotiated settlement.
 - The dispute ended after the Supreme Court ruled that the land on which the Masjid stood should be handed over to the Hindu community for the construction of a Ram temple.
- Anyone contravening the prohibition on converting the status of a place of worship is liable to be **imprisoned for up to three years, and a fine**. Those abetting or participating in a criminal conspiracy to commit this offence will also get the same punishment.

What are the grounds of challenge?

- The petitioner argues that the Act takes away the rights of communities such as Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists and Jains to reclaim the sites of their places of worship through legal proceedings. It amounts to taking away the right of the people to seek justice through the courts and obtain a judicial remedy. He also contends that the cut-off date of August 15, 1947, is arbitrary and irrational.
- It is also said the law violates the right to practise and propagate religion, as well as the right to manage and

administer places of worship. Further, it goes against the principle of secularism and the state's duty to preserve and protect religious and cultural heritage.

What has the SC said on the status freeze?

- In its final verdict on the Ayodhya dispute, the Supreme Court had observed that the Act “imposes a non-derogable obligation towards enforcing our commitment to secularism”. The court went on to say: “Non-retrogression is a foundational feature of the fundamental constitutional principles, of which secularism is a core component.”
- The court described the **law as one that preserved secularism** by not permitting the status of a place of worship to be altered after Independence.
- In words of caution against further attempts to change the character of a place of worship, the five-judge Bench said, “Historical wrongs cannot be remedied by the people taking the law in their own hands. In preserving the character of places of public worship, Parliament has mandated in no uncertain terms that history and its wrongs shall not be used as instruments to oppress the present and the future.”

9) MTP (Amendment) Act, 2020

About MTP Act, 1971

- The Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act, 1971 provides for the termination of certain pregnancies by registered Medical Practitioners. It is possible to get an abortion under the Act if pregnancy is **under 20 weeks**.
- However, it is **subject to several conditions** and conducting an abortion without fulfilling the conditions is considered a crime.

What are the conditions?

- Under the MTP Act, the doctor can perform an abortion in the following situations:
- If the pregnancy would be harmful to life or physical or mental health of the pregnant woman;
- If there is a good chance that the child would suffer from physical or mental abnormalities which would leave him or her seriously handicapped.

Issues with the current law

- Legal and medical experts felt that a revision of the legal limit for abortion is long overdue.
- Foetal abnormalities show up only by **18 weeks**, so just a two-week window after that is too small for the would-be parents to take the difficult call on whether to keep their baby and for the medical practitioner to exhaust all possible options before advising the patient to take the extreme step.
- Since lack of legal approval does not prevent abortions from being carried out beyond 20 weeks, women are put under risk since the abortions then are often conducted in unhygienic conditions by untrained, unqualified persons. It is estimated that about **8% of maternal deaths happen due to unsafe abortions**.

Why in News?

- The Parliament has passed the Medical Termination of Pregnancy (Amendment) Act, 2020 that increases the time period within which an abortion may be carried out.

Highlights of the Act

- The Act **allows abortion up to 24 weeks of gestational age** for vulnerable categories of women and there is **no limit of gestational age** in case of pregnancies with substantial foetal abnormalities, diagnosed by a medical board.
- The Act proposes **constitution of a Medical Board** in every State and UT, which will decide on pregnancies

beyond 24 weeks in cases of foetal abnormalities.

- Each board will have **one gynaecologist, one radiologist or sonologist, one paediatrician, and other members prescribed by the State/UT government.**
- Currently, abortion requires the **opinion of one doctor** if it is done within 12 weeks of conception, and **two doctors** if it is done between 12 and 20 weeks.
- The amendment Act allows abortion to be done on the **advice of one doctor up to 20 weeks**, and **two doctors** in the case of certain categories of women (central government will notify these categories) between **20 and 24 weeks.**
- For a pregnancy to be terminated **after 24 weeks** in case of substantial foetal abnormalities, the **opinion of the State-level medical board is essential.**

Criticisms

Huge vacancies

- A recent study by the Centre for Justice, Law and Society at the O.P. Jindal Law Global School has revealed that a panel of doctors to decide on termination of pregnancy beyond 24 weeks is **“unfeasible”** as 82% of these posts are lying vacant in the country.
- The report analysed district-wise availability of specialists, including surgeons, obstetricians and gynaecologists, physicians and paediatricians.

- The data is based on the **Ministry of Health and Family Welfare’s Rural Health Survey**, which provides details of vacancies filled at secondary healthcare centres. Similar data for urban areas was unavailable.
- The shortfall was starker in the northeast where Sikkim, Mizoram and Manipur had a total absence of obstetricians and gynaecologists, and a **near total absence of paediatricians.** Arunachal Pradesh and Meghalaya had a 100% shortage of paediatricians.

Infringes privacy

- The study also flags the **constitution of the Medical Boards as draconian and invasive** as they strip away autonomy from the pregnant person.
- Even if the Boards are set up, pregnant persons who are in more remote areas of the country will incur many costs in travelling and this will **add to their financial burden.**
- This legal reform will make access to abortion more challenging for many people, especially those from marginalised groups.

Inequality in access

- The **World Health Organization** also urges nations not to create barriers by including complex authorisation processes and noted that negotiating authorization procedures disproportionately burdens poor women, adolescents, those with little education and those subjected to, or at risk of, domestic conflict and violence, creating inequality in access.

International Relations

1) Suez Canal

What's in the news?

- Global trade has been impacted after a container ship got stuck in the Suez Canal recently, the 193-km waterway that is pivotal in connecting Europe and Asia.
- Located in **Egypt**, the **artificial sea-level waterway** was built between 1859 and 1869 **linking the Mediterranean Sea and the Red Sea**.
- As the shortest route between the Atlantic Ocean and lands around the Indian and western Pacific Oceans, the canal is one of the busiest waterways in the world, negating the need to navigate around the Cape of Good Hope in Africa and thus **cutting distances by up to 7,000 kms**.

Suez Canal's History



- The canal has existed in one form or the other since construction started under the reign of **Senausret III, Pharaoh of Egypt (1887-1849 BC)**.
- In 1799, **Napoleon Bonaparte's** efforts to build a proper canal were brought to an end due to an inaccuracy in the measurements. In the mid-1800s, French diplomats convinced the Egyptian viceroy Sa'id Pasha to support the canal's construction.
- In 1858, the **Universal Suez Ship Canal Company** was tasked to construct and operate the canal for **99 years**, after which rights would be handed to the **Egyptian government**.
- The **French and British** held most of the shares in the canal company. The British used their position to sustain their maritime and colonial interests by maintaining a defensive force along the Suez Canal Zone as part of a 1936 treaty.
- In 1954, facing pressure from Egyptian nationalists, the two countries signed a seven-year treaty that led to the withdrawal of British troops.

Egypt takes over Suez Canal

- In 1956, **Egyptian President Abdel Nasser nationalised the Suez Canal** to pay for the construction of a dam on the Nile.
- This led to **the Suez Crisis with the UK, France and Israel mounting an attack on Egypt**. The conflict ended in 1957 after the United Nations got involved and was followed by the **first instance of the UN Peacekeeping Forces being deployed anywhere in the world**.
- Even as the occupying forces withdrew their troops, the UN forces were stationed at Sinai to maintain peace between Egypt and Israel.

Suez Canal crisis

- In 1967, Nasser ordered the peacekeeping forces out of Sinai

leading to a new conflict between the two countries. Israelis occupied Sinai and in response, Egypt closed the canal to all shipping.

- The **closure lasted until 1975**, when the two countries signed a disengagement accord. The canal was the focal point of the Arab-Israeli War of 1973, with the Arab coalition led by Egypt and Syria.

An Economic Lifeline

- The canal continues to be the lifeline for all trade between the West and East as **12 percent of the global trade passes through it every year**. The average 50 ships that pass through it daily carry about \$9.5 billion worth of goods, every day.
- The freight and cargo include everything from crude oil to perishables.

Art and Culture

1) Dadasaheb Phalke Award

Who is Dada Saheb Phalke?

- Considered as the Father of Indian Cinema, Dhundiraj Govind Phalke (1870-1944) was an Indian producer, director and screenwriter.
- He made the **first Indian Feature film Raja Harishchandra** in 1913. Popularly known as **Dadasaheb Phalke**, he then went on to make 95 films and 26 short films in a span of 19 years.
- Government of India instituted Dadasaheb Phalke Award in 1969 to honor his lifetime contribution to Indian cinema.

About the Award

- The Dadasaheb Phalke Award recognises the **contribution of film personalities towards the development of Indian Cinema**. The

first recipient of this award was **Devika Rani**.

- It is given to a film personality for his/her outstanding contribution to the growth and development of Indian Cinema.
- Considered as **India's highest award in the field of cinema**, it is presented annually at the National Film Awards ceremony by the Directorate of Film Festivals, an organisation set up by the **Ministry of Information and Broadcasting**.
- The award comprises a Swarna Kamal, a cash Prize of Rs. 10,00,000, certificate, silk scroll and a shawl.

Why in News?

- The government announced the prestigious Dadasaheb Phalke Award for Actor Rajinikanth for his contribution as an actor, producer and screenwriter.

Miscellaneous

1) Police reforms

What is in the news?

- The landmark Prakash Singh judgment was recently in news due to alleged political interference in police postings in Maharashtra.

What is the SC's Prakash Singh judgment on police reforms?

- Prakash Singh, who served as Director General of Police (DGP) of UP Police, filed a Public interest litigation (PIL) in the Supreme Court post retirement, in 1996, seeking police reforms.
- In a landmark judgment, the **Supreme Court (SC) in 2006 had directed all states and Union Territories to bring in police reforms.**
- The ruling issued a series of measures that were to be undertaken by the governments to ensure the police could do their work without worrying about any political interference.

What measures were suggested by the Supreme Court?

- The main directives from the Supreme Court in the verdict include fixing the tenure and selection of the DGP to avoid situations where officers about to retire in a few months are given the post.
- The court stated that the DGP of states should be appointed through a **merit-based transparent process** and secure a **minimum tenure of two years** to protect them against arbitrary transfers and postings. The court directed to ensure that the DGP of state police is appointed from amongst three senior-most officers who have been empanelled for the promotion by the Union Public Service Commission on the basis of length of service, good record and experience.
- It specified that **other police officers on operational duties** (including superintendents of police in-charge of a district and station house officers

incharge of a police station) should be provided a **minimum tenure of two years.**

- The apex court further directed establishing **Police Establishment Boards (PEB)** comprising police officers and senior bureaucrats to decide **transfers, postings, promotions and other service related matters** of officers of and below the rank of deputy superintendent of police, while making recommendations on postings and transfers of senior ranks.
- Further, there was a recommendation of setting up **State Police Complaints Authority (SPCA)**, with some independent members, to inquire into complaints against police officers in cases of serious misconduct, including custodial death, grievous hurt, or rape in police custody.
- Apart from this, the SC directed **separation of investigation and law and order functions** to better improve policing and setting up of **State Security Commissions (SSC)** that would have members from civil society. These commissions will lay down policy for police functioning, evaluate police performance, and ensure that state governments do not exercise unwarranted influence on the police.
- The court also directed forming a **National Security Commission** at the union level to prepare a panel for selection and placement of Chiefs of the Central Police Organisations (CPO) with a **minimum tenure of two years.**

How did states respond to these directives?

- The **Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative** (a non-governmental organisation), in its report that tracked changes made in the police force following the 2006 judgment, found

that **not even one state was fully compliant with the apex court directives.**

- According to a report of the **NITI Aayog** (2016), the composition and powers of the State Security Commissions and the Police Establishment Boards were at variance with the Supreme Court directions.
- For example, in states such as Bihar, Gujarat and Punjab, the State Security Commission were **dominated by government and police officers.** Further, many of these Commissions **did not have the power to issue binding recommendations.**

Way Forward

- Data shows that bigger states like Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu and UP have been the worst when it comes to bringing about systemic changes in line with the judgment and that it is only the North-Eastern states that have followed the suggested changes in spirit.
- The need of the hour is **an all-India Act that all states have to follow** and small changes can be made in exceptional cases relating to the situation in a particular state.