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EDITORIAL

A new beginning with Nepal

- ☛ It is a long-standing tradition that Nepali Prime Ministers make Delhi the first foreign port of call after taking over. The only exception was Maoist leader Pushpa Kamal Dahal 'Prachanda' in 2008 who visited China first and found his tenure cut short months later when his coalition collapsed, forcing him to resign and adding a touch of superstition to the tradition. Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli maintained the tradition during his state visit to India last week. Perhaps not on account of superstition but because as a pragmatic politician, he knows which controversies are best avoided ?
- ☛ His earlier nine-month tenure as PM in 2015-16 had seen relations with India hit a new low, and it made eminent sense to begin his second term on a positive note. From all accounts, the visit went well but it will take pragmatism and patient nurturing on both sides to restore the trust and confidence.

Contentious years

- ☛ Nepal's political transition began nearly three decades ago when it adopted a new constitution in 1990 which ushered in multiparty democracy. However, stability eluded Nepal with a spreading Maoist insurgency. In the process, the gains of democracy were eroded. After a decade-long insurgency, which claimed 15,000 lives, followed by reconciliation, an interim constitution was introduced and the ground prepared for yet another exercise in constitution drafting. This seven-year exercise finally produced a new constitution in 2015. Nepal abolished its 250-year-old monarchy and emerged as a federal republic. During these decades, political instability prevailed with 25 Prime Ministers in 27 years.
- ☛ Last year, 2017, was a year of elections in Nepal. Local body elections were held after a gap of 20 years. This was followed by the elections under the new constitution for the national parliament (the House of Representatives and the National Assembly) and the seven Provincial Assemblies which concluded earlier this year. Finally, on February 15, Mr. Oli began his second tenure as Prime Minister. Unlike the first tenure, which began on the sour note of the Madhesi agitation against the new constitution, this time he has come to power with convincing election victories.
- ☛ In the local body elections, Mr. Oli's party - the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist), or UML - won the Mayor/Council Chair's position in 294 out of the 753 local bodies. In most of the seven provinces, UML leaders are Chief Ministers. Together with the Maoists with whom the UML had announced an electoral alliance last year, Mr. Oli has a convincing majority of 174 in the 275-strong House of Representatives. In the Upper House, which has a strength of 59, the alliance has 42 seats. All this puts Mr. Oli in a comfortable position at home. He is shrewd enough to realise that his campaign rhetoric of Nepali nationalism with overt shades of anti-Indianism needed to be modified, and by observing the tradition of visiting Delhi, he was signalling the shift.

A rethink in Delhi

- ☛ In New Delhi too, there has been a growing realisation that time had come to make a new beginning with Nepal. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit in August 2014 had marked a new high in relations, but Mr. Oli's nine-month tenure in 2015-16 was marked by acrimonious exchanges. India's openly stated reservations on the new constitution in support of the Madhesi cause and the economic

disruptions caused by the undeclared blockade had fuelled anti-Indianism which Mr. Oli cleverly exploited by donning the mantle of nationalism and making significant electoral gains. Last year, on December 19, when the UML's election victory was clear, Mr. Oli visited Rasuwagadhi on the Nepal-Tibet border and announced that it would be upgraded as a road and rail hub between China and Nepal. The message was not lost, and the following day Mr. Modi telephoned Mr. Oli to congratulate him on his election success. This was followed up with a couple more phone calls and Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj's visit to Kathmandu to convey an invitation even before he was sworn in as Prime Minister.

- ☛ Compared to the Joint Statement issued in August 2014 at the time of Mr. Modi's visit, the latest one is much shorter and talks about strengthening relations on the basis of "equality, mutual trust, respect and benefit". Difficult issues, including a review of the contentious 1950 Treaty, recruitment of Nepali nationals in the Gurkha regiments of the Indian Army, resolving the fallout of the 2016 demonetisation exercise which has left the Nepal Rastra Bank holding a stock of Indian currency, long-pending hydel projects like Pancheshwar, resumption of the SAARC summit process which remains stalled since 2016 after Jaish-e-Mohammed militants attacked the Army base in Uri, and the need for an inclusive political process, do not find any mention. Yet it is a step forward from Mr. Oli's last visit in February 2016 when there was no Joint Statement. There is a realisation in Delhi that cultural and historical ties between the people in both countries are important but just as for India, globalisation offers new openings to Nepal too. China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative offers Nepal an option that may end up carrying unacceptable baggage but at least appears attractive at first.

Project implementation

- ☛ For decades, India has been Nepal's most significant development partner. Yet the pace of project implementation has been slow, leading to significant time and cost over-runs. To be fair, both India and Nepal share the responsibility for this and political instability in Nepal hardly helped.
- ☛ The idea of four Integrated Check Posts (ICP) on the India-Nepal border to facilitate movement of goods, vehicles and people was mooted 15 years ago and an MOU signed in 2005. While preparation of surveys and project reports moved slowly on the Indian side, acquisition of land by the Nepali authorities got held up leading to delayed construction. As a result, only the Raxaul-Birgunj ICP has been completed and was inaugurated last week. During this time, the cost of the project went up fourfold.
- ☛ The two Prime Ministers also witnessed the ground breaking ceremony of the Motihari-Amlekhgunj cross-border petroleum products pipeline, a project for which the MOU between the two governments was signed in 2004. It took another three years for the Indian Oil Corporation and the Nepal Oil Corporation to sign the follow-up MOU, eight years to convert it into an agreement and three more to begin the works. Its implementation within the 30-month timeframe will require proper project monitoring by both sides.
- ☛ More examples abound with the hydro-electric sector being the prime example. Misperceptions about the unequal agreements relating to the Kosi barrage (1954) and Gandak barrage (1959) have grown over the years preventing any development in this sector. Nepal's installed hydel capacity is less than 700 MW while it sits on a hydel potential of over 80,000 MW and has to import electricity from India during the lean season. Given that over 60% of the Ganga waters come from Nepal's rivers (Sarda, Ghagar, Rapti, Gandak, Bagmati, Kamala, Kosi and Mechi) and 80% of these flows take place in monsoon months, the imperative for effective water management for both irrigation and power generation is evident, and yet this sector has languished for decades.

- ☛ Pragmatism led to the visit taking place and the unscripted one-on-one meeting between the two leaders would have helped in clearing the air about key concerns on both sides. What is now needed is effective delivery on the pending projects, the remaining ICPs, the five railway connections, postal road network in the Terai and the petroleum pipeline so that connectivity is enhanced and the idea of 'inclusive development and prosperity' assumes reality.



Art and Culture, Society, Social and National Issues

Interpretation centre and the tourist facilitation centre at Sun Temple, Konark

Why in news?

- ☛ An aesthetically designed interpretation centre with world-class facilities that showcases the unique architectural features of Kalingan era was recently inaugurated at Sun Temple, Konark. The Indian Oil Foundation has developed the interpretation centre and the tourist facilitation centre at a cost of Rs. 45 crore.

Key facts

- ❑ Built in the 13th century, the Konark temple was conceived as a gigantic chariot of the Sun God, with 12 pairs of exquisitely ornamented wheels pulled by seven horses.
- ❑ It was built by King Narasimhadeva I, the great ruler of Ganga dynasty.
- ❑ The temple is included in UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1984 for its architectural greatness and also for the sophistication and abundance of sculptural work.
- ❑ The temple is perfect blend of Kalinga architecture, heritage, exotic beach and salient natural beauty.
- ❑ It is protected under the National Framework of India by the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains (AMASR) Act (1958) and its Rules (1959).
- ❑ The Konark is the third link of Odisha's Golden Triangle. The first link is Jagannath Puri and the second link is Bhubaneswar (Capital city of Odisha).
- ❑ This temple was also known as 'BLACK PAGODA' due to its dark color and used as a navigational landmark by ancient sailors to Odisha. Similarly, the Jagannath Temple in Puri was called the "White Pagoda".
- ❑ It remains a major pilgrimage site for Hindus, who gather here every year for the Chandrabhaga Mela around the month of February.

Source: PIB

Kalamkari art museum' opened at Pedana, Andhra Pradesh

Why in news?

- ☛ A 'Kalamkari art museum' has been opened at Pedana in Andhra Pradesh. The museum traces the history of the art and displays the process of extraction of natural colours from various sources.

Kalamkari

- Kalamkari is an ancient style of hand painting done on cotton or silk fabric with a tamarind pen, using natural dyes. The word Kalamkari is derived from a Persian word where 'kalam' means pen and 'kari' refers to craftsmanship.

- ❑ There are two identifiable styles of Kalamkari art in India – Srikalahasti style and Machilipatnam style.
- ❑ In the Machilipatnam style of Kalamkari, motifs are essentially printed with hand-carved traditional blocks with intricate detailing painted by hands.
- ❑ On the other hand, Srikalahasti style of painting draws inspiration from the Hindu mythology describing scenes from the epics and folklore. This style holds a strong religious connect because of its origin in the temples.

Source: The Hindu

Adopt a Heritage Project

Why in news ?

- ☞ The ‘Adopt a Heritage Scheme’ of Ministry of Tourism was launched on World Tourism Day i.e. 27th September, 2017.
- ☞ This project is a key initiative of Ministry of Tourism in close collaboration with Ministry of Culture and Archeological Survey of India (ASI), to develop the heritage sites / monuments and making them tourist-friendly to enhance the tourism potential and their cultural importance in a planned and phased manner.

Key facts

- ✓ Infrastructure conglomerate GMR and tobacco company ITC Ltd are currently bidding to adopt the Taj Mahal under the ‘Adopt a Heritage’ project.
- ✓ The iconic tomb in Agra was not initially on the list of monuments to be adopted under the Adopt a Heritage scheme, because of its importance.
- ✓ However, it was added to the list in February and a seven-member Oversight and Vision Committee will now decide whom to hand over the bid to.

How it works?

- ❑ The project plans to entrust heritage sites/monuments and other tourist sites to private sector companies, public sector companies and individuals for the development of tourist amenities.
- ❑ The project aims to develop synergy among all partners.
- ❑ Successful bidders selected for adopting heritage sites / monuments by the Oversight and Vision Committee shall be called as Monument Mitras.
- ❑ The basic and advanced amenities of the tourist destinations would be provided by them.
- ❑ They would also look after the operations and the maintenance of the amenities. The ‘Monument Mitras’ would associate pride with their CSR activities.

Background

- In 2007, the government of Maharashtra had announced its own adopt-a-monument scheme, inviting private and public sector companies to adopt heritage sites for a period of five years.

- ❑ This was extended to 10 years in 2014 because of the poor response from companies.
- ❑ So far, the only site to be adopted by a private company under this scheme is Osmanabad district's Naldurg fort, where tourism amenities are now being managed by Unity Multicons.

Source: PIB

National Culture Fund

Why in news?

- ☞ As per latest data released by the government, 34 projects have been successfully implemented under National Culture Fund Scheme till date, thus, promoting, protecting and preserving India's cultural heritage.

About National Culture Fund:

- ❑ National Culture Fund (NCF) was set up as a Trust under the Charitable Endowment Act, 1890 in November 1996 by the Government, with a view to mobilize extra resources through Public Private Partnerships.
- ❑ The National Culture Fund is managed and administered by a council headed by Hon'ble Culture Minister to decide the policies and an Executive Committee headed by Secretary, Culture to actualize those policies.
- ❑ The Fund aims at inviting the participation of the corporate sector, non-government organizations, private/public sector as well as individuals in the task of promoting, protecting and preserving India's cultural heritage.
- ❑ All the projects undertaken by the NCF are completed within a specified period, in accordance with an MoU signed by NCF with the concerned donor organization.

Source: PIB

Social Progress Index - 2017

Why in news?

- ☞ The Social Progress Index for 2017 has recently been released by an NGO Social Progress Imperative.

About Social Progress Index

- ❑ The Social Progress Index (SPI) measures the development of the country based on the social and environmental measures provided by the country to its citizens.
- ❑ It defines social progress as the capacity of a society to meet the basic human needs of its citizens to enhance and sustain the quality of their lives, and create the conditions for all individuals to reach their full potential.
- ❑ Fifty-four indicators in the areas of basic human needs, foundations of well-being, and opportunity to progress show the relative performance of nations.

Significance of SPI

- ❑ Generally, many aspects of social progress tend to improve with income growth and wealthier countries deliver better social outcomes than lower-income countries. But it has been observed by SPI that where there is an imbalance between economic growth and social progress, political instability and unrest often arise.
- ❑ It indicates lagging social progress also holds back economic growth.
- ❑ The SPI data also indicates that countries have a higher level of social progress even with lower GDP such as Costa Rica.

How SPI differs from GDP?

- ❑ GDP is an old measure that was developed as a statistical tool for policy makers to determine the recovery from the Great Depression in 1930's.
- ❑ It focuses only on economic growth and is calculated quarterly to primarily analyze the strength of an economy, and for setting economic goals and objectives.
- ❑ It does not capture the social and environmental processes such as level of inequity which exists in the society regardless of overall economic growth.
- ❑ Therefore SPI is seen as a better yardstick to measure a country's level of progress by understanding the citizen's development needs and priorities.

Findings of the Index in Indian context

- ❑ The list is topped by Scandinavian countries like Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, while India is at 93rd position.
- ❑ India's performance on health-related Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) Index is the worst among BRICS nations.
- ❑ India still lags in areas such as water, sanitation and access to higher education.
- ❑ India also scored poorly on incidences of those under 18 who experienced sexual violence.

Source: Business Standard

World Heritage Site

Why in news?

- ☞ As many as 6 monuments/historical sites in the North Eastern states have been identified tentatively for listing under World Heritage Site.

Key Facts

- ☞ Monuments/sites identified/placed under tentative list for listing under world heritage in the north eastern states are:

- ❑ Apatani Cultural Landscape, Arunachal Pradesh.
- ❑ Iconic Saree Weaving Clusters of India.
- ❑ Moidams – the Mound – Burial System of the Ahom Dynasty, Assam.
- ❑ Namdapha National Park, Arunachal Pradesh.
- ❑ River Island of Majuli in midstream of Brahmaputra River in Assam.
- ❑ Thembang Fortified Village, Arunachal Pradesh.

About UNESCO world heritage site:

- ❑ A UNESCO World Heritage Site is a place that is listed by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as of special cultural or physical significance.
- ❑ The list is maintained by the international World Heritage Programme administered by the UNESCO World Heritage Committee, composed of 21 UNESCO member states which are elected by the General Assembly.
- ❑ Each World Heritage Site remains part of the legal territory of the state wherein the site is located and UNESCO considers it in the interest of the international community to preserve each site.
- ❑ As of July 2017, 1,073 sites are listed: 832 cultural, 206 natural, and 35 mixed properties, in 167 states. Italy is the home for the largest number of sites with 53.

Criteria for Selection of a site:

- ❑ To be selected, a World Heritage Site must be an already classified landmark, unique in some respect as a geographically and historically identifiable place having special cultural or physical significance (such as an ancient ruin or historical structure, building, city, complex, desert, forest, island, lake, monument, mountain, or wilderness area).
- ❑ It may signify a remarkable accomplishment of humanity, and serve as evidence of our intellectual history on the planet.

Legal status of designated sites:

- ☞ UNESCO designation as a World Heritage Site provides prima facie evidence that such culturally sensitive sites are legally protected pursuant to the Law of War, under the **Geneva Convention, its articles, protocols and customs, together with other treaties including the Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property** in the Event of Armed Conflict and international law.

What are endangered sites?

- ❑ A site may be added to the List of World Heritage in Danger if there are conditions that threaten the characteristics for which the landmark or area was inscribed on the World Heritage List.
- ❑ Such problems may involve armed conflict and war, natural disasters, pollution, poaching, or uncontrolled urbanization or human development.
- ❑ This danger list is intended to increase international awareness of the threats and to encourage counteractive measures. Threats to a site can be either proven imminent threats or potential dangers that could have adverse effects on a site.

- ❑ The state of conservation for each site on the danger list is reviewed on a yearly basis, after which the committee may request additional measures, delete the property from the list if the threats have ceased or consider deletion from both the List of World Heritage in Danger and the World Heritage List.

Source: The Hindu

State of Prisons in India

Why in news?

- ❑ Supreme Court expressed its dismay over the pathetic condition of jails in the country and had asked the state governments to respond.
- ❑ Significantly, overcrowding is a major problem and it continues in spite of capacity enhancement of prisons and fast-tracking of cases.

Prison statistics in India

- ❑ Supreme Court has asserted that prisoners cannot be kept in jail like animals and has been demanding states to reduce overcrowding of prisons.
- ❑ As of 2016, India's 1,412 jails are crowded to 114% of their capacity, with a count of 4.33 lakh prisoners against a capacity of less than 3.81 lakh.
- ❑ Of the jails, there are - 741 sub jails, 379 district jails and 134 central jails, the rest being open jails, juvenile centres, women's jails, and special jails.
- ❑ Notably, women's jails are just 18 and comprise just over 1% of the total but despite this, it is the men prisons that are overcrowding.
- ❑ Women's prisons had an overall occupancy of 71%, but some states like Chhattisgarh (186%), Uttarakhand (141%), Delhi (138%), Goa (120%) and Uttar Pradesh (117%) had overflowing women prisoners.
- ❑ Goa presented a unique case, where women prisoners were 20% over capacity, while men prisoners were less than 36% of capacity.

Who has the authority for governing prisons?

- ❑ Prisons are governed by the Prisons Act, 1894, and the Prison Manuals of respective state governments.
- ❑ Thus, states have the primary role, responsibility and authority to change the current prison laws, rules and regulations.
- ❑ However, the Centre has set up various committees from time to time to recommend modernisation of prisons.
- ❑ In 2016, a model prison manual was drafted by the Ministry of Home Affairs and was sent to all States and Union territories for implementation.

Steps taken to address overcrowding

- ❑ The primary reason for overcrowding of prisons is pendency of court cases (above 3 crore) and 67% of all prisoners were under-trials (as per NCRB data).
- ❑ Notably, in its landmark judgement on inhumane conditions in prisons, SC issued an “eight-point guideline” in which under-trials featured prominently.
- ❑ **SC Directive** – The 8 point agent called for the establishment of an “Under-trial Review Committee” in every district and should meet quarterly.
- ❑ The committee should see to that under-trial prisoners are released at the earliest even if poverty is a hindrance for them to furnish a bail bond.
- ❑ The secretary of the District Legal Services Committee will also look into the issue of the release of under-trial prisoners in compoundable offences.
- ❑ Notably, compoundable offences are less serious in nature and can be settled through a compromise rather than requiring a trial.
- ❑ Recently, the government acknowledged the large number of under-trials as a major reason for overcrowding, and listed measures taken to address them:
 - ❑ Establishing fast-track courts
 - ❑ Establishing open prisons in states and UTs
 - ❑ Launching a “National Mission for Justice Delivery and Legal Reforms”
 - ❑ Introducing “Plea bargaining” through Section 265 of CrPC
 - ❑ Capping the maximum period for detaining an under-trial prisoner
 - ❑ Strengthening “National Legal Services Authority” (NALSA)

Source: Indian Express

National Institutional Ranking Framework, 2018

Why in news ?

- ☞ Ministry of Human Resource Development recently released the National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) 2018.

What is NIRF ?

- ❑ The National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) was approved by the MHRD and launched in 2015.
- ❑ The framework outlines a methodology to rank institutions across the country.
- ❑ The parameters broadly cover -
 1. Teaching, Learning and Resources
 2. Research and Professional Practices

3. Graduation Outcomes
 4. Outreach and Inclusivity
 5. Perception
- ❑ There were a total of 9 categories this year under which India's higher education institutions were judged.
 - ❑ The 2018 exercise newly added the disciplines of law, medicine and architecture.

What are the latest rankings?

- ❑ The ranking of most colleges and universities have remained almost the same this year.
- ❑ Indian Institute of Science (IISc), Bengaluru, is again ranked first in both overall and university categories.
- ❑ The Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) are the best among engineering institutes.
- ❑ The Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs) are the best among management institutes.
- ❑ This is for the third time in row on the NIRF ranking that IITs and IIMs are leading.
- ❑ IIT-Madras was adjudged the best engineering institute.
- ❑ IIM-Ahmedabad was adjudged the best management institute.
- ❑ The All India Institute of Medical Sciences was adjudged the top medical college.
- ❑ There were some institutes, which could not be placed in any of the 9 categories.
- ❑ These have been placed in special category because of the quality of research work.
- ❑ Some of them include the National Dairy Research Institute, Karnal, Indian Agricultural Research Institute, New Delhi, etc.

What are the concerns?

- ❑ **Participation** - India has around 860 universities, 40,000 colleges and 11,600 standalone institutions of higher education.
- ❑ Of these, only around 4,500 institutes took part in the India Rankings 2018.
- ❑ Even among the institutions that participated, there is a clear skew towards southern, south-eastern and western India.
- ❑ The government is planning to cut some sort of funding to those which do not participate in the rankings.
- ❑ **Parity** - Older institutions with historical advantages now enjoy a higher ranking.
- ❑ This obscures newer entrants who may have stronger claims to excellence.
- ❑ **Approach** - The ranking approach worldwide is critiqued for failing to capture the crucial metric of learning outcomes.
- ❑ The rankings instead rely on proxy data on faculty strength and qualifications.

What is the way forward ?

- ❑ **Funding** - The governing bodies should make available adequate financial and academic resources to colleges.
- ❑ This is particularly essential for the developing colleges, to help them improve performance.
- ❑ **Participation** - Ranking educational and research institutes has some significant practical uses.
- ❑ It helps students make study choices, sponsors to identify research projects, and other universities to form partnerships.
- ❑ Thus, for a reliable and relevant process, all recognised educational institutions should be enrolled, and not just the public ones.
- ❑ **Objective** - Beyond competitive ranking, the higher order goal is to foster learning and scholarship.
- ❑ Encouraging faculty to exercise complete academic freedom is essential to achieve this.
- ❑ The NIRF ranking thus needs a fine tuning to incorporate these aspects.

Source: Business Standard, The Hindu

Aspirational Districts Programme

Why in news ?

- ❑ NITI Aayog has recently launched the baseline ranking for 115 aspirational districts.
- ❑ This is in line with the Aspirational Districts Programme (ADP) announced earlier by the Prime Minister.

About ADP

- ❑ It aims to quickly and effectively transform some of India's most underdeveloped districts.
- ❑ It will identify areas of immediate improvement, measure progress, and rank districts.
- ☞ The broad ideas of the programme include the following:
 - ✓ Convergence of central and state schemes, collaboration of central, state level 'Prabhari' (in-charge) officers and district collectors, competition among districts
 - ✓ The states are the main drivers in the programme.
 - ✓ Deliberately, the districts have been described as aspirational rather than backward.
 - ✓ The motive is to view them as areas of opportunity and hope rather than of distress and hopelessness.

How are the districts selected ?

- ❑ The 115 districts were chosen by senior officials of the Union government.
- ❑ This was in consultation with State officials on the basis of a composite index.

The parameters included are -

- ✓ Deprivation enumerated under Socio-Economic Caste Census

- ✓ Key health and education performance indicators
- ✓ State of basic infrastructure

What is the present ranking on?

- ❑ The present ranking is based on 49 indicators across 5 sectors.
- ❑ These sectors are areas that have been targeted for transformation -
 - ❑ health and nutrition
 - ❑ education
 - ❑ agriculture and water resources
 - ❑ financial inclusion and skill development
 - ❑ basic infrastructure
- ❑ A minimum of one district was chosen from every State.
- ❑ Apparently, the largest concentration of districts is in the States which have historically under-performed.
- ❑ This includes states such as UP and Bihar, or which are afflicted by left-wing extremism such as Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh.
- ❑ The present ranking would be followed by delta ranking of these districts based on their “incremental progress”.

Monitoring

- ❑ NITI Aayog in partnership with the government of Andhra Pradesh has created a dashboard.
- ❑ This is for monitoring the real-time progress of the districts.
- ❑ District collectors of all the aspirational districts can input the latest available data of their respective districts.
- ❑ The dashboard will also be open to the public.

Significant aspects of ADP

- ❑ This is the first time India’s most backward districts are being focused.
- ❑ ADP is a better vision of how public services are best delivered to those who need them the most.
- ❑ Achieving success in this programme necessitates the contribution of all 3 tiers of government.
- ❑ The role of states is important in terms of facilitating resource, personnel, etc.
- ❑ On financial inclusion, the full cooperation of banks is necessary and only the Central government has leverage over them.
- ❑ The most crucial is the role of District Magistrate or Collector.
- ❑ As he is familiar with the challenges of his or her geography and has considerable power to implement government schemes.

- ❑ The spirit of cooperation needs to be supplemented by a culture of competition.
- ❑ ADP takes the principle of competitive federalism down to district administrations.
- ❑ ADP has opened its door to civil society and leveraged the tool of corporate social responsibility.
- ❑ This will bring new ideas and fresh energy from non-government institutions, to join the “official” efforts.
- ❑ It aims at leveraging the already existing resources of several government programmes, to use them more efficiently.
- ❑ With real time data in ADP, those on the ground level can alter strategies after accurate feedback.
- ❑ In a way, the ADP reorients how government does its business of delivering development.

Source: The Hindu, Economic Times

Death penalty for those convicted for raping minors

Why in news ?

- ❑ Recently, an ordinance was passed for mandating death penalty for those convicted for raping minors below the age of 12.
- ❑ While some have welcomed this, some others have dismissed it as a political gimmick with little deterrent value.

Views of the supporters of the ordinance

- ❑ The supporters believe that severity of punishment has a direct bearing on the reduction in the commission of a crime due to fear.
- ❑ Rational jurisprudence demands that punishment meted out should be in proportion to the crime.
- ❑ Rape of a minor below 12 years of age is a heinous crime by any standard that severely damages the child’s physical and psychological wellbeing.
- ❑ Hence, it is desired to present a more severe punishment to this category of offenders than those involved in other rapes.
- ❑ The ordinance backers have also stated that debates regarding the same have been around since 2012-13 and hence it is not a knee-jerk reaction.

Criticism of the ordinance

- ❑ People who oppose the ordinance vouch that it is a highly rushed through patchy legislation that will have little consequence on the crime.
- ❑ They also stress that, as raping a minor and killing him/her would attract the same punishment, this might prompt the offender to murder the victim.
- ❑ Notably, victims do constitute the primary evidence and their elimination could make the conviction of the perpetrators very difficult.

- ❑ Additionally, the ordinance route for the bill is said to have bypassed the deserved parliamentary scrutiny, which is crucial to refine its provisions.
- ❑ Moreover, in a considerable number of cases, the offender is a relative to the victim, and death penalty might put the victim's side in such cases under a moral dilemma on whether to report the case.

The way forward

- ❑ Increasing the severity of punishments hasn't always led to reduction in crime, and available data suggests that there is no concrete connection between both.
- ❑ Either ways, just making a law doesn't change anything unless robust mechanisms are evolved to nail the offenders with surety.
- ❑ There needs to be considerable improvements in our criminal justice system to ensure that criminals are brought to book through fair and swift trials.
- ❑ Protection for victims and witnesses needs to improve and more sensitivity needs to be bred into our investigative forces to ease the pressure on victims.
- ❑ Also, there is gross under-reporting of rapes in India due to social stigma, and concerted efforts are needed to overcome this.

Source: The Hindu



Polity & Governance, Social Justice, Social Development

Reducing the Areas under AFSPA

Why in news ?

- ☛ Ministry of Home Affairs (MoHA) has decided to reduce the central forces deployed under AFSPA Act in north-eastern states.

What is the AFSPA act ?

- ☐ Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act 1958, gives armed forces the power to maintain public order in “disturbed areas”.
- ☐ It can be invoked in places where the use of armed forces in aid of the civil power is necessary.
- ☐ The causes could be differences or disputes between members of different religious, racial, language or regional groups or castes or communities.
- ☐ The Central or State/UT administration can declare the whole or part of a State or Union Territory as a disturbed area.
- ☐ MoHA would usually enforce this Act where necessary.
- ☐ Under this act armed forces can have the authority to prohibit a gathering of five or more persons in an area.
- ☐ They can use force or even open fire after giving due warning if they feel a person is in contravention of the law.
- ☐ If reasonable suspicion exists, the army can also arrest a person without a warrant.
- ☐ They can also enter or search a premise without a warrant, and ban the possession of firearms.

AFSPA in North-Eastern states

- ☐ The Act came into force in the context of increasing violence in the North-eastern States decades ago.
- ☐ They state governments clearly found it difficult to control.
- ☐ The Armed Forces (Special Powers) Bill was passed by both the Houses of Parliament.
- ☐ It was approved by the President in 1958.
- ☐ It became known as the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, 1958.
- ☐ It was effective in the whole of Nagaland, Assam, Manipur (excluding seven assembly constituencies of Imphal), Meghalaya and parts of Arunachal Pradesh.

About the recent decision

- ☐ The Centre has revoked The Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA) from Meghalaya since April 1, 2018.

- ❑ Earlier the AFSPA was effective in 20 km area along the Assam-Meghalaya border.
- ❑ In Arunachal Pradesh the impact of AFSPA was reduced to 8 police stations instead of 16 police stations.
- ❑ The Ministry has also relaxed the Protected Area Permit (PAP) for foreigners visiting Manipur, Mizoram and Nagaland.
- ❑ The PAP will be valid for 5 years, but residents from Pakistan, Afghanistan and China will not be allowed to visit these areas.
- ❑ In 2017, the Home Ministry gave up its power and asked the Assam government to take a decision on continuing AFSPA in the State.
- ❑ Recently, Home Ministry has decided to reduce the number of central armed police force personnel deployed in the north-eastern States.

The Way Ahead

- ❑ In 2004, Union Government appointed a five-member committee headed by Justice B.P. Jeevan Reddy to review AFSPA, 1958. The committee submitted its report in 2005.
- ❑ Besides repealing the Act, it recommended that the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967 should be modified to clearly specify the powers of the armed forces and central forces.
- ❑ Union government is now considering a proposal to make AFSPA more operationally effective and humane by taking Jeevan Reddy committee's report.
- ❑ Government's recent moves also signify a willingness to reconsider the use of the special law as and when the ground situation improves.
- ❑ Thus, as of now, there is no sign that the vigour of the law will be diluted, but the area of its use may be progressively curtailed over time.

Source: The Hindu

Terms of Reference (ToR) of the 15th Finance Commission

Why in news ?

- ☞ The 15th Finance Commission constituted recently is shaped with certain issues relating to the Terms of Reference (ToR).

What is the role of the Finance Commission ?

- ❑ The Finance Commission (FC) is a constitutional body created to address issues of vertical and horizontal imbalances of federal finances in India.
- ❑ It is appointed every five years and consists of a chairman and four other members.
- ❑ The constitutional mandate of the FC is
 1. To decide on the proportion of tax revenue to be shared with the States
 2. The principles which should govern the grants-in-aid to States.

3. Responsibility to make recommendations on policy issues referred by the President in the interests of sound finance.

- ❑ The recommendations made by the FC are advisory in nature and, hence, not binding on the Government.

What is Terms of Reference (ToR) ?

- ❑ Besides the core mandated areas of FC like tax devolution, ToR is a set of other areas that the President mandates the FC to provide its recommendations.
- ❑ Although the FC is an independent quasi-judicial body, it can work on areas which suit the government's preferences by careful handling of the ToR.
- ❑ Some of the key ToR for the 15th FC are reviewing the need for revenue deficit grants, assessing the increased tax devolution of the 14th FC, measuring effect of flagship schemes, etc.

Concerns with ToR in 15th FC

- ❑ Some provisions under the ToR of the 15th FC seem to transgress upon the discretionary domain of the Commission.
- ❑ The ToR of 15th FC has referred for estimation of revenue potential and fiscal capacity of only the Union and States leaving aside the local governments (LG), which are a crucial part of the Federal structure.
- ❑ There is a provision in ToR for examining the fiscal impact of the "enhanced tax devolution" of the 14th FC and of national development programmes including the New India 2022.
- ❑ Evaluating the fiscal impact of 14th FC whose period of recommendation ends in 2020 is beyond the purview of this Commission.
- ❑ The 15th FC's ToR has omitted certain significant provisions like 'sums to be paid to states in need of assistance', which are generally found in all the previous FCs.
- ❑ These provisions could hugely affect the LGs whose shares have increased many times since the last 2 FCs.

What measures needs to be taken to address these concerns?

- ❑ Provisions in ToR have to be in line with the principle of cooperative federalism which ensures citizens with comparable level of fundamental services irrespective of residential jurisdiction.
- ❑ The efforts to provide grants to local bodies have to be consolidated with the initiatives taken by 13th and 14th FC to improve the quality of basic services.
- ❑ Balanced regional development, inter regional equity are goals to be focused by all tiers of the federal structure and not left to the states as implied in the ToR to usher in inclusive growth.

Source: Business Standard

Push for Simultaneous Elections

What is the issue ?

- ☞ The proposal for holding simultaneous elections to the centre and the states has gained traction in recent times. But there are many practical difficulties and democratic challenges that needs recognized before proceeding forward.

What are the political developments regarding simultaneous elections?

- ❑ Simultaneous elections to the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies is said to have the benefits of saving poll expenditure considerably.
- ❑ It would also help the ruling parties to focus on governance instead of being put constantly in electioneering mode.
- ❑ The BJP led government at the Centre has been talking about the need for simultaneous elections for some time now.
- ❑ The Union Law Commission has sought the opinion of the public, political parties, academicians and other stakeholders on the proposal.
- ❑ The Commission has also released a document outlining the amendments that may be required in the Constitution and electoral laws for achieving the same.
- ❑ While the final draft will be put out after the views of the public are incorporated, the present outline itself holds very significant provisions.
- ❑ **Envisioned Provisions** - Among the possible recommendations mentioned in the outline, there is a proposal for “constructive vote of no-confidence”.
- ❑ I.e. while expressing lack of confidence in one government, members of the legislature will have to repose trust in an alternative.
- ❑ Towards this end, even a temporary waiver of anti-defection law is being considered to help in forming a stable alternative government.
- ❑ However, critics hold that such provisions for stabilizing governments could be considered even now without simultaneous elections.
- ❑ **Political Motivation** - Obverses believe that voters would tend to prefer the same party at the centre and the state if elections are held simultaneously.
- ❑ In this backdrop, it is to be noted that PM Modi has clearly emerged as the primary pole at the centre with no potent alternative in sight.
- ❑ Hence, skeptics believe that BJP’s zeal for simultaneous elections is driven by this situational advantage– which it seeks to capitalise on across states.

How can the electoral cycles be synchronised?

- ❑ The primary challenge is regarding the termination of existing legislatures to align it with the parliamentary election cycle.

- ❑ This would be difficult to execute as palpable political repercussions are bound to crop up on the timing and modalities of dissolution.
- ❑ Additionally, this would undermine the federal polity and representative democracy that India has cherished since independence.
- ❑ The Law Commission has suggested an alternative to this by indicating its openness to embrace 2 distinct electoral cycles into which states are clubbed.
- ❑ I.e. to align elections for one set of states elections with the central and the rest will face elections 30 months later (mid-way through Lok Shaba's term).
- ❑ The decision on which states are to be clubbed together is to be decided based on the proximity of the state legislature's current tenure with that of the parliamentary elections.
- ❑ Overall, there are multiple difficulties involved in the process and detailed debates and deliberations are needed before proceeding further.

Source: The Hindu

SC judgements on Master of Roster

Why in news ?

- ☞ In recent times, the master of roster controversy has emerged in the Supreme Court. This issue is focused on Chief Justice of India's absolute power on the judicial administration.

Significance of Master of Roster

- ❑ Master of Roster is a judge appointed by the SC to list out the allocation of cases to different judges, for preventing two different benches from hearing the same kind of case.
- ❑ The Roster will allow for effective case management, by allocating similar cases to judges with more experience.
- ❑ Last year, the SC through few judgments, formalized the "convention" that the CJI is Sui generis (unique) and hence the master of roster.

What events led to the judgements regarding issue of roster?

- ❑ Earlier in 2017, four senior most judges of the SC had blamed the present CJI for selectively allotting cases to preferred benches.
- ❑ In response to that, the CJI published a new subject wise roster for allocation of cases.
- ❑ This allocation did little to pacify the judges as the CJI allocated most important public litigations matters to himself.
- ❑ Following this, a verdict responded to the criticism by declaring that the CJI is only a first among the equals as a judge.
- ❑ But the bench also agreed that no one, even the fellow judges of SC can question the powers of CJI as the court's top administrator.

- ❑ Final judgement confirmed that the CJI's dominance over the roster was necessary to protect the SC from anarchy.

What are the concerns of the SC judgements?

- ❑ There is deterioration in the unwritten and righteous custom that the law of the land is supreme.
- ❑ Concentration of immense powers on a single person is harmful for the nation and is also against the principles of democracy.
- ❑ The issues triggering these judgments are also concerning as the cases were relating to allegations of a conspiracy to bribe SC judges.
- ❑ Previous norms of pronouncing sensitive judgments by consulting with collegiums also will get affected as the CJI will solely decide on cases as well as judgments.

Source: The Hindu

Implications of SC's verdict on PoA Act

Why in news ?

- ☞ A nationwide protest against the Supreme Court's decision on SC/ST Act has resulted in violence.

What is the recent verdict of SC on the PoA ?

- ❑ SC has ruled that Section 18, which bars grant of anticipatory bail to anyone accused of violating its provisions, is not an absolute bar on giving advance bail to those against whom, prima facie, there is no case.
- ❑ In addition, the Bench has prohibited the arrest of anyone merely because of a complaint that they had committed an atrocity against a Dalit or a tribal person.
- ❑ In respect of public servants, no arrest should be made without the written permission of the official's appointing authority.
- ❑ And for private citizens, the Senior Superintendent of Police in the district should approve the arrest.

What were the reasons for this verdict ?

- ❑ There has been increasing number of false and frivolous complaints filed under the SC/ST act for personal motives.
- ❑ No guidelines were present in the act to prevent the misuse of the law and for protecting the innocent.
- ❑ There are also acknowledged abuses of the power to arrest under this Act which perpetuated casteism.
- ❑ Thus, this verdict was made to explain that interpretation of the PoA Act should promote constitutional values of fraternity and integration of society.

Implications from the SC's verdict

- ❑ In response to the verdict, most parties demanded that the Union government file a petition to review the order.

- ❑ They contend that the judgment and some of its observations would result in leaving dalits unprotected against atrocities.
- ❑ Following this, there have been nationwide protests resulting in violence due to the explosion of dalit anger after the verdict.
- ❑ The dalit victims also claimed that it would be more difficult for them to get their complaints of caste-based violence and discrimination investigated.

Source: The Hindu

Speaker's Power Related to the No Confidence Motion

Why in news ?

Recently several Lok Sabha members produced written notices to the Speaker for a no-confidence motion.

What is a no confidence motion ?

- ❑ A no-confidence motion is a tool of opposition party to prove no majority or no confidence in the PM and Council of Ministers.
- ❑ No-Confidence motion is not mentioned in the Constitution of India.
- ❑ If the motion is passed, the ruling government ceases to enjoy the trust and confidence of the house and is subsequently removed.
- ❑ A No confidence motion needs to be necessarily brought only in Lok Sabha.
- ❑ Rajya Sabha cannot take up a No confidence motion or Adjournment motion.

What is the objective ?

- ❑ The Prime Minister and the Council of Ministers can hold office only as long as they have the confidence of the Lok Sabha.
- ❑ The parliamentary system is thus primarily based on the idea of accountability.
- ❑ It is achieved through processes such as questions, adjournment motions, etc.
- ❑ The no-confidence motion is a final measure in this context.

What is the Speaker's role ?

- ❑ The no-confidence motion needs to be given priority over all other businesses of the Parliament.
- ❑ This is because other businesses cannot be undertaken when the very legitimacy of the government is being questioned.
- ❑ If there are notices for no-confidence motion, the Speaker has to verify whether there are at least 50 MPs who support its introduction.
- ❑ He should then fix a time for discussing it.
- ❑ The Speaker has the prime responsibility of ensuring that the House functions in order.

- ❑ In case of disruptive behaviour by some MPs, the Speaker has the powers and the responsibility to bring order to the House.
- ❑ MPs failing to comply with the Speaker's order can be asked to withdraw from the House, or can even be forcibly removed.
- ❑ Necessary steps including suspension of members can be taken to ensure order in the House.

What is the present issue?

- ❑ The Parliament is witnessing disrupt for quite some time due to various concerns of different States.
- ❑ In this backdrop, the Speaker has expressed her inability to ensure the required number of members supporting the no-confidence motion.
- ❑ The inability of Parliament to function and to test the support for the government undermines the very basis of democratic structure.

Source: The Hindu

Concern on 15th FC's Decision

Why in news?

- ☞ The 15th Finance Commission will be using data from 2011 census for the devolution of taxes. Some states have expressed concern over the decision as it is likely to result in lower resource allocation.

Role of the Finance Commission

- ❑ The Finance Commission is a constitutional body created to address issues of vertical and horizontal imbalances of federal finances in India.
- ❑ The Finance Commission is appointed every five years and consists of a chairman and four other members.

The constitutional mandate of the Finance Commission is as follows:

- To decide on the proportion of tax revenue to be shared with the States
- The principles which should govern the grants-in-aid to States.
- Responsibility to make recommendations on various policy issues, as and when they arise.
- The recommendations made by the Finance Commission are advisory in nature and, hence, not binding on the Government.

Significance of census in Finance Commission

- ❑ The population figure derived from the census is used for calculating the devolution of taxes to the states.
- ❑ However not the entire amount of taxes to be disbursed is based on the population but only a certain percentage of the funds.

- ❑ In the case of the 14th Finance Commission, that was 25%.
- ❑ The 1971 census recorded an increase in population compared to the previous censuses and to counter the issue of growing population family planning methods were introduced.
- ❑ The 42nd Amendment picked the 1971 Census data as base for all calculations and froze it till 2001 Census.
- ❑ This is to equalize the shares and safeguard the states actively undertook the family planning programme.
- ❑ In 2001, the 84th Amendment further extended that to the first Census after 2026, which will be the Census of 2031.

What are the concerns of the states?

- Northern states like Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra and Bihar have more than doubled their population in the intervening years.
- Whereas southern states like Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Kerala have had relatively slower growths in population with an exception of Andhra Pradesh.
- The usage of the 2011 Census is being opposed for the same reason the usage of 1971 Census was made mandatory.
- Which made sure states that have worked on population control do not lose out on benefits.
- Thus according to the southern states the decision of the 15th FC to use the 2011 census data is seen as discriminatory and affects the federal structure.

Source: The Hindu

SEBI Acts on Uday Kotak committee Recommendations

Why in news ?

- ☞ Uday Kotak committee to suggest reforms in corporate governance was constituted by the SEBI in June 2017. It has submitted a report with 80 recommendations.

Some of the accepted recommendations are as follows:

- ❑ **Power Separation** - The proposal intends to make a mandatory separation between the “Chairperson of the Board and CEO” in listed companies.
- ❑ This is an important move and is expected to reduce concentration of powers and weed out conflicted decisions such as over-the-top managerial pay.
- ❑ **Transparency** - Disclosure requirements on auditor resignations, related party deals and consolidated quarterly results is also being proposed.
- ❑ These will improve the flow of material information to share holders and help them in knowing the company’s deals better.
- ❑ **Shareholder Approval** - The proposal requires companies to seek shareholder approval in all material deals involving payments of over 2% sales.

- ❑ While this is to curb “cosy related party deals”, it will be difficult for shareholders win a vote against promoters, due to the skewed ownership patterns in many firms.
- ❑ Shareholders are highly constrained in their ability to mobilise institutional support in critical meeting to get vet out transactions.

The rejected recommendations

- ❑ It isn't clear on why the Chairperson-CEO separation or deadlines for holding general body meetings must apply only to the top listed companies.
- ❑ While the intent may be to reduce the compliance burden on smaller firms, it is untenable in the Indian context as retail portfolios are dominated by mid- and small-cap firms.
- ❑ Additionally, it is also the smaller sized firms that feature low levels of analyst scrutiny and thus are at greater risk of mis-governance.
- ❑ SEBI has also omitted the recommendation for expanding its own regulatory ambit to scrutinize qualified accounts and prosecute auditors.
- ❑ Given the seriousness of the issue, it would have been useful if SEBI has elaborated on its reasons for cherry-picking proposals.

What is ‘Corporate Governance’?

- ☞ Corporate governance is the system of rules, practices and processes by which a firm is directed and controlled. Corporate governance essentially involves balancing the interests of a company's many stakeholders, such as shareholders, management, customers, suppliers, financiers, government and the community. Since corporate governance also provides the framework for attaining a company's objectives, it encompasses practically every sphere of management, from action plans and internal controls to performance measurement and corporate disclosure.

Source: Business Standard

I&B Ministry's Move on Fake News

Why in news?

- ☞ The Information and Broadcasting Ministry withdrew its order which was earlier issued to regulate fake news.

About the order

- ❑ I&B ministry recently released a notification on fake news.
- ❑ Under it, accreditation of any journalist found guilty of disseminating “fake news” could be cancelled.
- ❑ The complaints would be referred to the Press Council of India if they pertained to the print media.
- ❑ It would be referred to the News Broadcasters Association (NBA) if they are related to the electronic media.
- ❑ The regulatory agencies would have 15 days to dispose off a complaint.
- ❑ During the period of probe, the journalist's accreditation would be suspended.

- ❑ The note further said that on first violation, the accreditation would be suspended for 6 months.
- ❑ The suspension on the second violation would be for a year and, on the third violation, it would be cancelled permanently.

Concerns Related to this move

- ❑ Many media stakeholders and opposition agitated against this.
- ❑ The move was seen as draconian since it paves the way for government's interference in press freedom.
- ❑ The notification released by the ministry did not define the phrase "fake news".
- ❑ The I&B order will only affect the accredited journalists.
- ❑ Various news portals were not covered by the government's accreditation policy.
- ❑ It is also said that government did not consult on "Media Ethics" with organisations like the PCI and NBA before passing this order.
- ❑ Following the outrage from the media and the Opposition, the Ministry has decided to withdraw its order.

About News Broadcasters Association (NBA)

- ❑ The News Broadcasters Association (NBA) represents the private television news and current affairs broadcasters.
- ❑ It is an organization funded entirely by its members.
- ❑ The NBA presents a unified and credible voice before the Government, on matters that affect the growing industry.

Source: The Hindu

Tamil Nadu's Contempt Petition on Cauvery

Why in news?

- ❑ Tamil Nadu government has filed a contempt petition seeking action against the Centre for not setting up the Cauvery Management Board (CMB).

Background

- ❑ The dispute over Cauvery water sharing started as Tamil Nadu's share of water got reduced due to the multiple dams that Karnataka built across the river.
- ❑ A case was filed and "Cauvery Water Dispute Tribunal" (CWDT) was constituted, which pronounced its verdict in 2007.
- ❑ The 2007 verdict specified the quantum of water for each state and mandated the creation of a "Cauvery Management Board" (CMB).
- ❑ The CMB was envisioned on the lines of "Bhakra-Beas Management Board" (BBMB), based on "Inter-State River Water Disputes Act", 1956.

- ❑ The board was supposed to have representatives of all the concerned governments (including the union government).
- ❑ The water release was to be overseen by a commission constituted by the board. But the case went up for further appeal in the SC.

About the SC judgement

- ❑ The SC ruled, in Feb 2018, by reducing the allocation of water for Tamil Nadu.
- ❑ It also called for a “Water Management Scheme” for dividing water between the concerned states - Karnataka, TN, Kerala and Puducherry.
- ❑ The deadline for constituting such a scheme was fixed by the SC as March 29th. But the Centre did not constitute the CMB within this deadline. It has instead asked for a 3 months extension.
- ❑ Meanwhile, TN government has filed a contempt petition against the center for non-compliance with the court orders.

What is the Centre’s argument ?

- ❑ TN government had perceived the “management scheme” in the recent judgement referred to the CMB as mentioned in the 2007 Tribunal order.
- ❑ But the center has sought clarification from the SC on what exactly “water management scheme” meant, as there are multiple options possible.
- ❑ Center has stated that even existing boards such as Bhakra-Beas Management Board (BBMB) and the Narmada Control Authority (NCA) are not similar.
- ❑ Notably, BBMB has control over operation, maintenance, regulation and control including ownership of the structure.
- ❑ But NCA only looks after the implementation of the Tribunal award with respect to the storage, apportionment, regulation and control of waters.
- ❑ Hence, the ownership, operation and maintenance of structures across Narmada lie with the respective states (MP, Maharashtra, Gujarat and Rajasthan).
- ❑ As there is a divergence in views among the states concerned in the “Cauvery case”, the center has expressed its inability to proceed unilaterally.
- ❑ Notably, the CJI had indicated currently that the court is open to a management scheme that is in variance with the CMB as envisioned in 2007 tribunal order.

What is the stand of other stakeholders ?

- ❑ **Karnataka** - According to the state, the apex court has left the contents of the management scheme open to the discretion of the Centre.
- ❑ It has maintained that Tamil Nadu’s contention that CMB should be constituted was against the autonomy of the state over rivers.
- ❑ **Kerala** - Kerala has suggested that the CMB should be headed by the Union Secretary of water resources and have 4 additional secretaries.

- ❑ It has also stated that the board should only ensure that the states do not overshoot the quantity of water allocated to them.
- ❑ Additionally, Kerala has also petitioned the court to give it complete autonomy to use the 30 TMC ft of water allocated to it according to its own needs.
- ❑ **Puducherry** - The Union Territory has been allocated 7 TMC ft of water for its Karaikal enclave, which falls in the Tamil Nadu delta region.
- ❑ While the Puducherry government wanted to file a contempt plea against the Centre, it was turned down by the Lt. Governor on technical grounds.

Source: Indian Express

15th Finance Commission - Issues and Challenges

Why in news?

- ❑ The 15th Finance Commission (15th FC) has been constituted with the mandate to look into some very sensitive issues.
- ❑ While the concept of “cooperative federalism” has been gaining currency lately, there are genuine concerns of the gains being undone.

Positive developments towards enhancing federalism

- ❑ The 14th Finance Commission had importantly recommended for greater devolution by increasing “state share” from 32% to 42% in the central tax kitty.
- ❑ This along with others was completely accepted by the central government, thereby generating a positive momentum towards “cooperative federalism”.
- ❑ Additionally, the erstwhile planning commission was seen as a central institution that dictated terms to the state governments.
- ❑ Hence, it was replaced with a more inclusive “Niti Aayog” that has provisions for state engagement in ideating and setting of goals and allocating funds.
- ❑ Following these, the GST act set up a “GST Council” as a constitutional body that has fair representation of the states in its decisions – again a positive.

What is key concern regarding the terms referred to the 15th FC?

- ❑ The terms referred for the consideration of the 15th Finance Commission have raised doubts over that cooperative spirit of the centre.
- ❑ Considering the use of 2011 census as the basis for resources allocation between states is the most serious issue (presently, 1971 census is being used).
- ❑ While on the face of it, the idea of using the most recent Census data available seems reasonable, the proposal unleashes immense socio-political challenges.
- ❑ This is because the census switchover would disadvantage states that performed better in controlling their population over the decades.

- ❑ Lower population growth is inherently linked to “lower fertility rates”, which is a consequence of better education, health services and development.
- ❑ Hence, it is seemingly apparent that the states that have progressed faster are being penalized for their successes in developmental initiatives.
- ❑ Particularly, funds for southern states might get stifled as their family planning initiatives have almost stabilized their populations.
- ❑ Even West Bengal and North Eastern states have had considerable success in population control and might thereby see their share of allocations reduce.
- ❑ In contrast, some northern states continue to see a burgeoning trend in their population with little control, which might enhance fund allocations for them.
- ❑ This is creating inter-state tensions, which is adding to the already existing cultural tensions between the northern and southern states.

What is the way ahead?

- ❑ Creative options are needed to reduce this tension between states that have drastically different population growth rates.
- ❑ The centre needs to credit states that have reduced growth rates, and encourage efforts to control population in states where fertility rate is still high.
- ❑ Inter-state migration has been estimated to be as high as 6 crore people and hence supporting states that have seen greater in-migration is also important.
- ❑ Such a support would encourage states receiving migrants to provide them with better services, and discourage discrimination against migrants.
- ❑ Creative handling through the multitude of sensitive issues will help prepare the ground for the bigger battle for political delimitation that waits in 2026.
- ❑ Notably, parliamentary constituencies and state wise representations are also currently based on the 1971 census, which might shift bases to the 2011 census.
- ❑ 15th Finance Commission has been asked to analyze the impact on the finances of the Union government due to enhanced devolution to states.
- ❑ This is an indication that the enhanced devolution of 42% (from 32%) might be reversed if the Union feels financially constrained.
- ❑ Notably, Brazil had recently reversed some of its decentralization initiatives, and thereby is a genuine concern to India’s federal perception too.
- ❑ In India’s case, reversal will be counterproductive as the 2014 devolution did not lead to any change in the quantum of funds that reached the states.
- ❑ The only change was that the funds that were given away through central flagship schemes were trimmed and the money thus saved was transferred to the state kitty for facilitating unfettered spending as per state discretion.
- ❑ The 15th commission has also been asked to examine ways to curb populist spending due to electoral calculations.

- ❑ Given the growing concerns over rising state deficits (especially in Bihar and Punjab), the concerns over excessive state spending are well taken.
- ❑ Additionally, dictating the states on what and how to spend doesn't sound good for cooperative federalism, and it is best for the union merely advice.
- ❑ Also, the union budget too has populist aspects, which needs to be curtailed.
- ❑ Finding ways to encourage "Ease of Doing Business" has also been mandated from the 15th Finance commission.
- ❑ While competition among states for investment is welcome, a race among states to dismantle all regulation is what might unfold, which is undesirable.
- ❑ Better analysis of constrains to business is needed rather than the merely removing regulatory checks that are to key to sustain the business ecosystem.

Source: Business Standard

Aligning Minimum Agricultural and MGNREGA Wages

Why in news ?

- ☞ The gap between the minimum agricultural wages and MGNREGA wages is growing steadily in the last few years.

What are these wages meant for?

- ❑ **Minimum agricultural wage** - It is paid to agricultural workers.
- ❑ It is fixed by the respective state governments.
- ❑ The Supreme Court has upheld the minimum wages as a fundamental right.
- ❑ Moreover, any labour provided at below minimum wage is a "forced labour".
- ❑ **MGNREGA wage** - The NREGA was enacted in 2005 for livelihood security.
- ❑ The Central Government may, by notification, specify the wage rate for the purposes of this Act.
- ❑ This is notwithstanding anything contained in the Minimum Wages Act, 1948.
- ❑ Different rates of wages may be specified for different areas.
- ❑ Wage rate may be specified from time to time, at a rate of not less than 60 rupees per day.

What is the discrepancy ?

- ❑ The union government brought MGNREGA wages at par with minimum agricultural wages in 2009.
- ❑ Notably, in 2011, only 4 states, Kerala, Goa, Haryana and Mizoram, had minimum agricultural wages higher than MGNREGA wages.
- ❑ In 2016, NREGA wages were lower than minimum wages in almost half of India's states.

- ❑ Since then, the gap between the two sets of wages has grown steadily.

What is the latest revision?

- ❑ The Union government recently issued the revised wage rates for MGNREGA workers.
- ❑ The average wage hike for FY 2018-19 is 2.9%.
- ❑ This is only slightly higher than last year's 2.7%.
- ❑ In 2016-17, the average wage hike was 5.7%.
- ❑ Some states have seen only Rs 2 increase in daily wages.
- ❑ The wages remain unchanged in 10 states.
- ❑ These include states like Jharkhand, Bihar, Uttarakhand and Arunachal Pradesh.
- ❑ Notably, these are states where the wages are already the lowest.
- ❑ Unlike this year, in 2017-18 every state had an upward wage revision, even if marginal.
- ❑ With the latest revision, 28 out of 36 states and UTs have NREGA wage below the minimum agricultural wage.

Why is the disparity?

- ❑ The Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD) set up the Mahendra Dev (2014) and Nagesh Singh (2016) Committees.
- ❑ But the Finance Ministry failed to implement these recommendations.
- ❑ The rejection of Mahendra Dev Committee's recommendations led to the lowest ever NREGA wage increase until 2017.
- ❑ Nearly five states received an increase of only a rupee.
- ❑ In 2018, the wages hit a new low after the Nagesh Singh Committee's report was turned down.

Recommendations made

- ❑ **Mahendra Dev Committee** - Workers should be paid either the minimum wage or the NREGA wage, whichever was higher.
- ❑ The panel estimated the need for an additional allocation of Rs 6,000 crore.
- ❑ This was a 17% increase to the then MGNREGA budget.
- ❑ The annual revision of NREGA wages should be based on CPI-R instead of CPI-AL.
- ❑ Consumer Price Index-Rural (CPI-R) reflects the current consumption pattern of rural households.
- ❑ On the other hand, CPI for Agricultural Labourers (CPI-AL) is based on a 35-year-old consumption basket.
- ❑ The Finance Ministry had turned down these recommendations.
- ❑ It insisted on setting up a panel to study the financial implications of the Mahendra Dev report.

- ❑ **Nagesh Singh Committee** - There was no need to bring MGNREGA wages on a par with minimum wages of states.
- ❑ But, the annual wage revision should be linked to CPI (R).
- ❑ As, CPI (R) is a better indicator of wage increase as it gives lower weightage to food items.
- ❑ Whereas, the basket of goods for calculating CPI (AL) is mainly food items (up to 72%).

What is Finance Ministry's argument?

- ❑ The Finance Ministry, however, argued that moving to CPI-R was not advisable at this stage.
- ❑ Besides food items, CPI-R gives weightage to expenses incurred on education, transport and communication, recreation, health, etc.
- ❑ The ministry said that these "miscellaneous items" under CPI-R might not represent the demand of NREGA workers.
- ❑ Moreover, such a move would lead to a bigger fiscal burden.

Why is raising NREGA wage important?

- ❑ The NREGA was primarily enacted for the enhancement of livelihood security of the households in rural areas.
- ❑ A Supreme Court's order mentions MGNREGA work as the last recourse while seeking work.
- ❑ A lower payment for this would push the worker and the family into "sub-human existence".
- ❑ On an average, 5 crore rural households rely on the scheme each year for their livelihood.
- ❑ This increases in times of rural distress, as people use the scheme to make up for falling farm incomes.
- ❑ Nearly 40% of the beneficiaries of the scheme are estimated to have been SCs and STs, bearing a social implication as well.
- ❑ The government should address the disparity in the wages to make sense to the purpose of NREGA.

Source: Indian Express



International Relations, India & the World and International Affairs

India - Nepal Bilateral Ties

Why in news?

- ☞ The new Nepali PM “Sharma Oli” had recently visited India in his 1st foreign trip, which is now a longstanding tradition for Nepali PMs.

Key facts

- ❑ Nepal’s political transition began nearly three decades ago when it adopted a new constitution in 1990 which ushered in multiparty democratic monarchy.
- ❑ But the rise of a violent Maoist insurgency that claimed 15,000 lives had eroded stability and the small democratic gains made.
- ❑ Reconciliation with the Maoists started in 2005, and a subsequent multi-party mass public uprising also saw the abolishing of the 250 year old monarchy.
- ❑ Following this, a constituent assembly was elected for drafting the statutes for the new republic, but the process proved to be long and turbulent.
- ❑ This seven-year exercise finally produced a new constitution in 2015 and several elections were held 2017 and early 2018.
- ❑ Significantly, the local body elections were held after a gap of 20 years as political instability had hindered any chance of local governance.

Implications of Mr. Oli’s rise for India

- ❑ Previously, when Mr. Oli had began his 1st term as PM (that lasted just 9 months), the Madhesi agitations were at its peak.
- ❑ Significantly, Madhesis had protested against certain clauses in the new constitution, and India was accused of tacitly backing the agitators.
- ❑ All this created much bitterness between India and Nepal and Mr. Oli was openly reaching out to China as a counter-balance to India.
- ❑ Even in Mr. Oli’s election campaigns, there was a distinguishable anti-India Nepali nationalist tinge, which added to his popular appeal.
- ❑ But after the comfortable the win that has secured his position domestically, Mr. Oli has been visibly shrewd in recognizing India’s criticality.
- ❑ India too had realised the need to befriend the new leader to prevent a pro-China tilt in Nepal’s polity and had proactively reached out to him.
- ❑ Consequently, Mr Oli has begun his 2nd turn with a positive outreach to India and is probably signalling his intention to look beyond the past tensions.
- ❑ As a result of all this back-track reconciliations, his recent visit was smooth, but a sustained engagement by both sides is required to restore complete trust.

What were the specifics that emerged out of the current visit?

- ❑ A short joint statement was issued which stressed the need for strengthening relations on the basis of “equality, mutual trust, and respect”.
- ❑ Multiple contentious issues like “a review of 1950 Treaty, recruitment of Nepali nationals in the Indian Army” did not find mention.
- ❑ Also, resolving the fallout of India’s demonetisation exercise that devalued a large trove of Nepali Central Bank’s Indian currency reserves wasn’t remarked.
- ❑ Madhesh issues, delays in hydel projects like Pancheshwar, and resumption of SAARC was also missed out.
- ❑ But despite all these, this seems to be progress from Mr. Oli’s Feb 2016 visit, when there was no Joint Statement at all.

Important bilateral projects between India and Nepal

- ❑ For long, India has been Nepal’s biggest development partner, but the project implementation pace has been bad and there were also multiple cost overruns.
- ❑ While both India and Nepal have a shared responsibility in this tardy work, the political instability in Nepal had worsened the shabby track-record.
- ❑ Despite its humongous hydro-electric potential, Nepal’s installed capacity is less than 700 MW and it imports power from India.
- ❑ Over 60% of the Ganga waters come from Nepal’s rivers namely - Sarda, Ghagar, Rapti, Gandak, Bagmati, Kamala, Kosi and Mechi.
- ❑ Misrepresentations have delayed India collaborated hydel projects for long, and it’s imperative to resolve these issues and push these projects ahead.
- ❑ The proposal for 4 Integrated Check Posts (ICP) on the India-Nepal border to facilitate movement of goods, and people was mooted 15 years ago.
- ❑ An MOU for the same was signed in 2005 but multiple administrative and political constrains delayed construction and costs overshoot by 400%.
- ❑ As a result, only the Raxaul-Birgunj ICP has been completed and was inaugurated last week.
- ❑ Motihari-Amlekhgunj cross-border pipeline has now been started after almost 15 years since the MOU was signed.
- ❑ Now, for the work to be completed within the planned 30 months, a brisk paced work and proper monitoring is needed.

Way ahead

- ❑ Cultural and historical ties between the people in both countries are a big positive for in the relationship, but there are other aspects too.
- ❑ Importantly, just like for India, globalisation offers multiple opportunities for Nepal too and it is only logical that Nepali leaders aspire to capitalize on them.

- ❑ In this context, China's "Belt and Road Initiative" (BRI) currently appears attractive for the Nepali dispensation, despite some serious concerns.
- India would do good to recognize these aspirations and desires while simultaneously enhancing co-operation with our land-locked neighbour.
- Firstly, one should ensure that the ongoing projects like - border check-posts, rail connectivity, and Terai's postal road network are executed to perfection.

Source: The Hindu

Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting

Why in news?

- ☞ The Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) was held recently in London.

About the Commonwealth grouping

- ❑ It is a group of nations of mostly former British colonies.
- ❑ It is now a 53-nation grouping.
- ❑ The present Queen Elizabeth II is the head of CHOGM.

How was the latest summit perceived?

- ❑ The meeting came with hopes of a "re-energised Commonwealth".
- ❑ The summit was held in the U.K., the founder State, after 32 years.
- ❑ Besides, Queen Elizabeth II attended the summit.
- ❑ She has skipped the meeting often in the last few years owing to her health.
- ❑ Also, the present meet took place amidst Britain's exit from the EU.
- ❑ All these led to hopes of reviving the grouping as Commonwealth 2.0.
- ❑ Mr. Modi was the first Indian PM to attend CHOGM in a decade.
- ❑ Some of the earlier summits were skipped over bilateral differences.
- ❑ It was widely expected that India would step up to play a leadership role.
- ❑ It was seen to be helping chart a future course for the Commonwealth. Prince Charles's visit to Delhi to invite Indian PM bolstered that belief.

Were the expectations met?

- ❑ The outcome of the meet was largely against the expectations.
- ❑ CHOGM again failed to make a case for its relevance in the 21st century.
- ❑ It was announced that Prince Charles would 'succeed' his mother as the head of the Commonwealth.
- ❑ This has ignored calls by members for the position to be more democratically shared or rotated.

- ❑ **China** - There were statements on the Blue Charter on Ocean Governance and on the Commonwealth Connectivity Agenda for Trade and Investment.
- ❑ This could together counter China's Belt and Road Initiative.
- ❑ But there was little by way of a road map to achieve the goals.
- ❑ **Immigration** - Britain PM Theresa May apologised for her Home Office's threat to deport thousands of immigrants.
- ❑ They were brought as manual labour in the 1940s on the ship Empire Windrush from the Caribbean.
- ❑ But she failed to convince most members of the Commonwealth that Britain would reverse its present policies on immigration.
- ❑ **Trade** - The U.K.'s hard line on Indian "illegals" prevented the signing of a bilateral agreement on immigrant "returns" with India.
- ❑ This was in regard to return of illegal Indian migrants within a month of their being detected by authorities.
- ❑ This indicates that post-Brexit London is likely to welcome trade in goods from the Commonwealth, but not services.

The way Ahead

- ❑ The Commonwealth remains a great platform for development aid, democratic values and educational opportunities.
- ❑ But its relevance is put to test with increasing call for democracy within the grouping.
- ❑ It needs to adopt a more egalitarian and inclusive attitude to its next generation of Commonwealth citizens.
- ❑ Only this can ensure the sustainability and credibility of this grouping.

Source: The Hindu

Korean Peace - A Synoptic Overview

Why in news?

- ☞ North Korea has lately been engaged in a string of diplomatic engagements to resolve the nuclear standoff in the Korean peninsula. While this is a positive, the other stakeholders will have to adopt a pragmatic approach to negotiations in order to achieve sustain peace.

Historical Background

- ❑ The Korean War (1950-53) split the Korean peninsula into the North and South Korea along the 38th parallel latitude.
- ❑ The North was communist dictatorship backed by USSR, while the South flourished into a vibrant democracy that is part of the US security alliance.
- ❑ After the fall of USSR and re-unification of East and West Germany, the North Korean regime got isolated internationally and saw a threat to its survival.

- ❑ Notably, both the North and South Korean government's claim to be the official representatives of the entire of Korea and do not recognize each other.
- ❑ While China is North Korea's strongest ally, despite pressure from Pyongyang, Beijing recognized South Korea in 1992.
- ❑ South Korea has now developed into a strong economic power and has become one of China's biggest trade partner and investment destination.
- ❑ All these factors have made North Korean leadership increasingly insecure as an US assisted South Korean annexation of North loomed large.
- ❑ While both Koreas have a stated official policy for reunification, neither seems ready to accept the political leadership of the other.
- ❑ Consequently, North Korea took refuge in developing nuclear weapons for securing its political survival since 2006.

About the ongoing conflict

- ❑ North has conducted 6 nuclear tests thus far and the latest one in Sept 2017 is said to be 6 times as powerful as Hiroshima bomb.
- ❑ The current North Korean supreme leader Kim Jong Un took over from his father Kim Jong Il in 2011 and has since accelerated the weapons mission.
- ❑ While his father conducted 16 missile launch tests during his 16 year rule till 2011, the current leader in his 7 years rule has conducted 80 launches.
- ❑ The last test in Nov 2017 successfully demonstrated the "Hwasong-15 missile", which has a 12,000 km range, and has the entire US territory within its reach.
- ❑ The Weapons program got the whole world concerned and multiple sanctions were passed in the UN.
- ❑ These effectively cut-off all international ties of North Korea except China which continued to trade defying sanctions (although largely unofficially).
- ❑ Notably, China too got concerned due to
- ❑ Due to North's continued intimidations, Mr. Trump had threatened the Mr. Kim with a furious attack like never before in human history.

Evolving diplomatic engagements

- ❑ Despite the harsh rhetoric of the other stakeholders, South Korean president Mr. Moon had been paddling a softer approach towards Pyongyang all along.
- ❑ Consequently, in Jan 2018, Mr. Kim had spelt out his willingness to negotiate a solution, which set of a new diplomatic breakthrough.
- ❑ North Korea participated in the recent Winter Olympic Games hosted by South Korea in Feb, and also Mr. Kim's sister led a delegation to the South Korea.
- ❑ Kim has also paused his weapons program and he recently travelled to Beijing for a short diplomatic meet with the Chinese premier Mr. Xi Jinping.

- ❑ A South Korean delegation also visited Pyongyang, and Mr. Kim is said to have conveyed his willingness to denuclearize if negotiations are successful.
- ❑ Additionally, North and South Korean leadership is touted to meet in April at the “Peace House in Panmunjom” for furthering the warmth.
- ❑ Also, the North Korean and US leadership are expected to meet sometime in May, which is touted to be the most significant part of the engagement.

Stand of various stakeholders

- ❑ **South Korea** – South wants to restore peace in the peninsula by sustaining this dialogue and furthering the cause of reunification.
- ❑ It would also like to be kept in loop with any US decision regarding the North to ensure that its interests aren't compromised.
- ❑ Notably, despite the multi-power geopolitics in the Korean peninsula, the current initiatives are solely powered by the North and South Korea.
- ❑ **North Korea** - The North has been effectively isolated from the world due to sanctions, and it would like all sanctions to be lifted to help its economy.
- ❑ It would also want to ensure its regime survival and its concerns regarding the massive US troop presence in South Korea also needs to be addressed.
- ❑ While the desire for reunification is strong in both the Koreas, current engagements can increase the chances of a mutual and peaceful unification.
- ❑ **China** - It hopes that the peace process will result in denuclearisation of its neighbourhood and withdrawal of the US troop and arms from South Korea.
- ❑ While the reunification of the Koreas isn't to China's liking, the possibility of that happening anytime soon is low and isn't concern for Beijing currently.
- ❑ **USA** - For the US, it is treaty obligated to protect South Korea in addition to its assumed role of being the “world saviour”.
- ❑ Additionally, it would want to curtail Beijing's increasing clout in the region, which demands an increased engagement in region's conflicts.
- ❑ But there are multiple hardliners in the Trump administration, who might vouch for unrealistic expectations and thwart a deal, which is a genuine risk.
- ❑ **Others** – Japan is also a key member in the Korean neighbourhood, and has been advocating a hard-line on North Korea for long.
- ❑ Notably, it's also part of the US military alliance and fears that a pro-North Korean shift by US would weaken its case vis-a-vis China.
- ❑ Additionally, Russia was an erstwhile player in the region during the Soviet era and has been asserting itself worldwide again under Mr. Putin.
- ❑ It may want to engage and has to be satiated through suitable dialogues.

Source: The Hindu

US-China Trade War

Why in news ?

- ☛ The US and China are announcing tariff hikes on a range of each other's import products. The retaliatory measures have the potential of taking shape as US-China trade war.

What is the US stand ?

- ❑ The US announced a proposed list of products imported from China that could be subject to additional tariffs.
- ❑ It announced a possible 25% tariff amounting to \$50 billion on around 1300 Chinese imports.
- ❑ The sectors include industries such as aerospace, information and communication technology, robotics, and machinery.
- ❑ After completion of the review process, the final determination on the products subject to the additional duties will be issued.

What is the rationale ?

- ❑ China has its "Made in China 2025" industrial promotion policy in place.
- ❑ The unfair intellectual property and technology transfer practices under it are said to cause harm to the US economy.
- ❑ They allegedly coerce US companies into transferring technology and intellectual property to domestic Chinese enterprises.
- ❑ The proposed list of products is thus based on an extensive inter-agency economic analysis of the harm.
- ❑ The measure thus targets products that benefit from China's industrial plans while minimizing the impact on the US economy.
- ❑ Also, the issue of US's trade gap with China is highlighted as a reason.
- ❑ U.S. is not ready to afford to have a \$500 billion a year trade deficit with Beijing.

What are the implications ?

- ❑ The US administration is right to take measures against China's abuse of economic and trade policy.
- ❑ But imposing tariffs on producer goods will inadvertently hurt Americans.
- ❑ The tariffs could hurt companies by raising prices.
- ❑ It could result in reduced capital investment and lower productivity growth.
- ❑ It could also reduce consumption of the capital equipment they rely on to produce their goods and services.
- ❑ Hitting Chinese manufactures in high-technology sectors could also hurt U.S. businesses that have plants in China.

- ❑ Notably, China has low labour and manufacturing costs.

China's stand

- ❑ Beijing earlier imposed tariffs on 128 US imports worth \$3 billion.
- ❑ This came as retaliation against US's taxes on imported steel and aluminium.
- ❑ Recently, China announced plans to levy an additional 25% tariff on imports of 106 US products.
- ❑ This is a clear response to U.S.'s recent announcement of 25% tariff on some Chinese imports.
- ❑ China's retaliatory tariffs include on products such as soybean, whisky, orange juice, chemicals, aircraft, cars, etc.
- ❑ This would hit the U.S. as 60% of U.S. soybean exports go to China.
- ❑ The tariffs imposed by China are expected to hit \$50 billion of trade in all, similar in value to Chinese goods targeted by the US.

The way ahead

- ❑ Attempts to roll back Chinese innovation mercantilism should be more carefully targeted than this.
- ❑ The focus should be on things that will create the most leverage over China.
- ❑ But it should be without raising prices and dampening investment in the kinds of machinery, equipment, and other technology. This is because machinery and technology are the ones that drive innovation and productivity across the economy

Source: The Hindu

Gaza Conflict

Why in news?

- ☛ A Peaceful protest in Gaza by the Palestinians had recently turned violent after the use of force by Israeli administration.

What is Gaza conflict?

- ❑ Gaza is a densely populated strip of land that is mostly surrounded by Israel and peopled almost exclusively by Palestinians.
- ❑ Israel used to have a military presence, but withdrew unilaterally in 2005. But it is currently under Israeli blockade.
- ❑ In recent years, Egypt has also joined the blockade, practically cutting off the strip from the rest of the world.
- ❑ The flow of both goods and people into and out of Gaza is heavily restricted.

What are the recent happenings in Gaza?

- ❑ Gaza has become a site of frequent border protests against a stifling blockade of the territory.

- ❑ Hamas is an Islamist organization of Palestine which organizes the border protests in Gaza.
- ❑ It recently announced that the protests would continue until May 15, the 70th anniversary of Israel's creation.
- ❑ Recently thousands of Palestinians marched near the border fence and violent protest continued.

What is the issue ?

- ❑ Israel responded unlawfully by calling for the use of live fire against even peaceful Palestinian protesters who posed no imminent threat to life. More than 750 Palestinians were wounded by Israeli fire.
- ❑ It became the deadliest attack in Gaza since the 2014 war between Israel and the Islamic militant group Hamas.
- ❑ In the past, Israel has faced serious allegations of using force against Gaza civilians.
- ❑ But Israel enjoys the privilege in the UN by the U.S. support.
- ❑ US has already blocked move in the UN Security Council seeking any inquiry on Israel.
- ❑ Despite international calls and repeated warnings by rights groups, Israel has not eased its restrictions on the strip.

Palestine's response

- ❑ It accused Israel of "intentionally, grossly and systematically" violating its legal obligation to protect civilians.
- ❑ Recently the Palestinian authorities appealed to the U.N. Security Council for immediate international protection for Palestinian civilians, especially in Gaza.
- ❑ There is also a call for an independent investigation of the killings.

What steps need to be taken ?

- ❑ Joint efforts to mitigate the suffering of Gaza's people need to be taken from both Israel and Palestine side.
- ❑ International community needs to act responsibly when it comes to the grave rights violations.
- ❑ There has to be an international probe into the latest violence.
- ❑ World powers should urgently provide economic assistance to Gaza to save it from total collapse, and put incremental pressure on Israel to end the illegal blockade of the Gaza strip.

Source: Indian Express, the Hindu

Revival of the Neighborhood First Policy: The Urgent Need of the Hour

Why in news ?

- ❑ South Asian relations are facing tough time due to India-Pakistan rivalry, China-Pakistan proximity and India-China hostility. Thus, A paradigm shift in South Asia's regional integration strategy is required to address such issues.

India's neighborhood at a Glance

- ❑ Politics and religion aside, across India, Pakistan and Bangladesh (IPB) there are common socio-cultural bonds.
- ❑ People-to-people connectivity remains positive.
- ❑ The remaining five i.e. Bhutan, Nepal, Maldives, Sri Lanka, and Afghanistan are paying the price of regional disintegration.
- ❑ This is possibly caused by unresolved puzzles having roots in the China-IPB (CIPB) axis.
- ❑ There are cross-border barriers and lack of transport facilitation among IPB.
- ❑ This is leading to freight movement taking place along expensive routes, escalating the investment cost.
- ❑ The Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIM-EC) has a sluggish progress in infrastructural development.
- ❑ Pakistan-Bangladesh relations and the India-China tug of war over Bangladesh are increasing in recent times.

Significance of IPB

- ❑ IPB account for approximately 95% of South Asia's GDP and population.
- ❑ Along with China, they account for 18.5% of global GDP and 41% of global population.
- ❑ South Asia's intra-regional trade, currently 5% of total trade, can grow to \$80 billion from the current \$28 billion, huge share being within IPB.
- ❑ Pakistan and India have potential trade capacity of \$20 billion compared to the current \$3 billion.
- ❑ If IPB can have a strategic partnership factoring China, the remaining five can effortlessly fit into positive regionalism with a win-win situation for all.

Issues and challenges before IPB

- ❑ The supply-demand gap of **power** in IPB is estimated to be around 18,000 MW.
- ❑ Besides, by 2050, China, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh will also experience **water** shortages.
- ❑ India and China are leading globally in terms of **Internet** and smartphone users.
- ❑ But Internet penetration for these four countries is below 55%, indicating the untapped potential.
- ❑ IPB fails to attract sufficient **tourists** due to poor civil aviation connectivity, complex regulations and lack of visa liberalisation procedures.
- ❑ Movement of trucks across the international frontier is limited by absence of **cross-border agreements** between India and Bangladesh, and India and Pakistan.
- ❑ **Rail connectivity** is restricted due to technical problems of different gauges, track structures, signalling and so forth.

Way Ahead

- ❑ **Multilateral Co-operations** - The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is being developed as a bilateral initiative.
- ❑ However, if Indian sensitivities can be addressed, it can be a multilateral project.
- ❑ Combined efforts of BCIM, CPEC and the proposed China-Nepal-India (CNI) Economic Corridor under BRI, can capitalise on regional economic potential.
- ❑ **Infra Projects** - Synergetic integration of the economic corridors with other BRI projects can accelerate inward investment into IPB.
- ❑ Developing transport, logistics services and bureaucratic procedures between India-Bangladesh are essential.
- ❑ This can contribute to the cross border trade growth between the two by 300%.
- ❑ **Renewable Energy** - To unravel the full potential, energy treaties based on renewable sources have become imperative.
- ❑ Greater electricity generation and utilisation of domestic energy endowments along with connectivity are significant to capitalise on the regional energy potential.
- ❑ **Water sharing** - The three largest trans-boundary river basins, Indus, Ganga and Brahmaputra, are all within CIPB.
- ❑ China has expressed interest to pursue water-sharing treaties.
- ❑ IPB could thus come together in a collaborative framework to boost the livelihoods of millions across the region.
- ❑ **Digital transformation** - Digital connectivity can act as the gateway to a holistic transformation of the region via the CIPB conduit.
- ❑ If these opportunities are tapped, it would enhance mobility of both tourists and students.
- ❑ Thus, a strategic collaboration, looking beyond historical animosity and misgivings, can unlock a new era of regionalism whose benefits far outweigh negatives.

Source: The Hindu

India - Azerbaijan and NSTC

Why in news?

- ❑ India's External Affairs Minister recently made a visit to Azerbaijan. Improving logistics is a key for bilateral trade, and here is how NSTC (North South Transport Corridor) could play a significant role in this regard.

India-Azerbaijan relation: At a Glance

- ❑ Azerbaijan is a strategically located, \$170-billion economy with substantial oil reserves.
- ❑ It however ranks low on India's diplomacy index.

- ❑ It supports Pakistan's claim on Kashmir, to the extent of calling for "reduction of Indian excesses in India occupied Kashmir".
- ❑ This is a cause of concern and needs focus.
- ❑ The period 2000-2010 saw a few senior ministers reaching out through various delegations and platforms to Azerbaijan.
- ❑ Despite these, it never really figured even in the second orbit of India's foreign policy outreach.

How is the trade scenario ?

- ❑ Bilateral trade between India and Azerbaijan has been rather different from political diplomacy.
- ❑ Trade between the two has shot up almost 10-fold from 2005 to 2017.
- ❑ This jump in bilateral trade coincided with the opening of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline to the Mediterranean port.
- ❑ Opened in 2007, this where Indian oil companies have been buying substantive quantities of crude oil from.
- ❑ ONGC Videsh is an investor in BTC.

What is the future potential ?

- ❑ Naturally, the bilateral trade between the two countries has largely been hydrocarbon-centred.
- ❑ And India is a minor exporter of anything worthwhile (rice, beef and tea are some of the key items exported to Azerbaijan).
- ❑ Azerbaijan is looking to diversify and reduce its dependence on hydrocarbons.
- ❑ Three sectors that have substantial potential for bi-lateral trade are food processing, pharma and technology.
- ❑ In this backdrop, India can play an enabling role in partnering it for the same.

What is NSTC ?

- ❑ North South Transport Corridor (NSTC) is a multi-modal network of ship, rail, and road routes.
- ❑ It is for facilitating freight movement between India, Iran, Afghanistan, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Russia.
- ❑ The objective of the corridor is to increase trade connectivity between major cities such as Mumbai, Moscow, Tehran, and Baku.

What is the significance ?

- ❑ The route bypasses the Suez Canal and will ensure Indian products reach St. Petersburg in Russia in just 14 days.
- ❑ At present, this is a 42-day journey, skirting North Africa and Europe.
- ❑ Once the Iran-Azerbaijan leg of the NSTC is completed, Indian ports can be linked with Azerbaijan via Iran (Chabahar Port).

- ❑ It could provide a smoother logistics experience for suppliers.
- ❑ The new route could reduce distance and costs by 40% and 30% respectively.
- ❑ It could go a long way in reducing logistical complexity between India and Azerbaijan.

Source: Indian Express

Indo-China Relations: Wuhan Meet

Why in news ?

- ❑ The current Wuhan meet seems largely informal and unstructured, and both the premiers were accompanied only by their translators the entire time. PM Modi and President Xi seem to have changed the tenor of India-China ties.

Key Facts

- ❑ An understanding had been reached to strengthen communication lines between both militaries to avoid Doklam like standoff in the future.
- ❑ Indo-China bilateral trade currently stands at \$84 billion per annum and India faces a massive trade deficit of about \$52 billion with China.
- ❑ The leaders have pledged to better balance this deficit by enhancing China's import of Indian goods in key sectors like agriculture and pharmaceuticals.
- ☞ An attempt has been made to address the international irritants in the relationship like:
 - ❑ China's blocking of "India's NSG membership bid" and "terror designation for Pakistan-based groups".
 - ❑ India's opposition to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and tacit pampering of the Tibet issue.
 - ❑ Additionally, Mr. Modi and Mr. Xi discussed a joint project in Afghanistan, which is a very significant step for the entire south Asian region.

The Way Ahead

- ❑ Despite hundreds of years of engaging each other, the two neighbours have been to war only once.
- ❑ Since the signing of the 1993 "Agreement on the Maintenance of Peace and Tranquillity", neither side has fired a weapon against the other.
- ❑ This is very significant as the 3500 Km long border is largely not demarcated.
- ❑ Also, despite both countries possessing atomic weapons, parleys have never carried even a hint of the nuclear overhang.
- ❑ In the run up to Wuhan, there was a conscious toning down of rhetoric by both sides, after the high reached during the Doklam standoff.
- ❑ This has set out a strong message that Indian and China can work together on peaceful terms despite bilateral and geopolitical differences.
- ❑ While much else remains to be done, Wuhan has definitely set the tone for a mutually beneficial and sustained Asian Century.

Source: The Hindu

Indian Economy and Economic Development

PM Fasal Bima Yojana: Issues and Challenges

Why in news ?

- ☛ PM Fasal Bima Yojana (PMFBY) is an all encompassing crop insurance scheme that was touted relieve farmers of their uncertainties. But its implementation has been patchy and widespread delays in payment have been defeating the very purpose of the scheme.

The Highlights

- ☐ PMFBY crop insurance covers losses at every stage, “from sowing to post-harvest” and was intended to insulate farmers from the strain of crop failures.
- ☐ PMFBY insures for production costs for various crops, and farmers having to pay about 2% of total estimated production value as insurance premium.
- ☐ An additional amount is pitched by the government (subsidy) for every policy to make the scheme financially viable for insurance companies.
- ☐ The amount to be paid by the government is decided based on the risk assessment done for various crops and regions – which presently accounts for approximately 50% of the total.
- ☐ Insurance companies collected premiums of Rs 22,180 crore in 2016-17 and Rs 24,454 crore in 2017-18 under PMFBY.
- ☐ But they disbursed only Rs 12,959 crore in claims for 2016-17 and have paid out just over Rs 400 crore for the last crop year so far.
- ☐ There is an argument that 2016 and 2017 were normal monsoon years (thereby resulting in lower payouts), and that claims might go up in calamitous years.
- ☐ However, this assertion doesn't correlate with the field reports, and it appears that PMFBY is faltering to delivering what was promised.

What are the concerns ?

- ☐ The 2017 kharif crop's harvesting was over by December, but farmers have thus far got only Rs 402 crore of payments.
- ☐ This is against the estimated claims of Rs 13,655 crore by state government and Rs 1,759 crore approved by insurance companies.
- ☐ Even for the 2016-17 crop year, there is a difference of Rs 1,474 crore between the payments approved and actually made.
- ☐ The delay in payments is defeating the very purpose of the scheme, which is to reduce the financial distress and save them from the crutches of moneylender.
- ☐ Timely payments are critical to enable farmers settle previous borrowings and access formal credit for the next sowing.

The way forward

- ❑ 50% of the PMFBY premium subsidy is borne by the state governments that are also responsible for determining yield losses.
- ❑ As insurance deserves higher priority than fertilizer and other agri-support, it makes sense for the centre to fund the entire subsidy amount.
- ❑ This will provide for better coordination in subsidy transfer to the insurers and also make claim disposals swift.
- ❑ The Centre can further link release of subsidy to the states adhering to prescribed operational schedules for assessing the extent of crop failure.
- ❑ Also, extensive employment of remote-sensing technology for sampling of fields and capturing survey data with time and date stamping is required.

Source: Indian Express

SEBI's Norm on Algo trading

Why in news ?

- ☞ Recently, SEBI has announced new norms on algorithmic (or) Algo trading.

What is Algo trading?

- ❑ Algorithmic trades are orders executed on the stock exchange platform by computers through a programme designed by the user.
- ❑ Algo trades can involve different degrees of manual intervention ranging from zero-touch algorithms which does not require much manual intervention.
- ❑ It was introduced in 2009 in India and there has been rising interest from large domestic and foreign institutional investors.
- ❑ Algo trade in India accounts for about 35-40 percent of turnover of exchanges.
- ❑ Algo trades help institutional investors increase the efficiency of trade execution and spot fleeting trading opportunities.
- ❑ It will also increase liquidity to the market as there are more transactions and investments which gain using this method.

Concerns related to Algo trading

- ❑ Algo trades have often been blamed for magnifying trends and induce flash crashes in the market.
- ❑ A bug in the programme or error by traders can cause the stock prices to fluctuate wildly and may even collapse the entire market.

About SEBI's recent announcement

- ❑ SEBI approves the Algo programmes before they are put into use in any of the Indian exchanges.

- ❑ By which stock exchanges have to allot a unique identifier to each approved algorithm and ensure that each order is tagged with it.
- ❑ Recently to check price swings SEBI has announced penalties that would be levied on Algo orders placed more than 0.75 per cent away from the last traded price.
- ❑ It has also proposed a stricter monitoring of these trades to ensure the smooth functioning of the market.

Source: Economic Times

Cost-Plus Pricing in Petroleum Industry

What is the issue ?

- ☞ In Indian cities the retail prices of petrol and diesel have risen to new high.

Status of increasing petroleum prices

- ❑ The hike in petrol and diesel prices is attributed to the steadily increasing price of international crude oil.
- ❑ The share of Petrol and diesel out of total indirect tax revenues increased significantly after international crude oil prices started declining from the middle of 2014.
- ❑ The Union and states took advantage of the lower prices to increase excise duty and sales tax on petrol and diesel, respectively.
- ❑ Now there is demand for rolling back these duties as the crude oil prices have begun rising.
- ❑ However, conceding the roll back can be disastrous for the fiscal situation of the Union and the states.

Factors determining the fuel costs

- ❑ The price is determined by the movement of crude oil price (the main raw material), the rupee/dollar exchange rate and demand-supply situation in the market.
- ❑ There was a series of excise duty hikes in the second half of 2015 and the initial months of 2016 on both petrol and diesel to help shore up finances.
- ❑ This has helped the Centre realise higher central excise duties will fetch higher revenues.
- ❑ Oil companies have the pricing freedom and Government has no business interfering in the day-to-day affairs of the companies.

Issues with current system of pricing

- ❑ Daily pricing of petrol and diesel linked with market was introduced in keeping with international practices.
- ❑ This current system of pricing is based on trade parity, assuming 80 per cent of petrol and diesel is imported and 20 per cent is exported.
- ❑ At many instance companies buy crude oil at high price and they sell it for low price due to market trends, to match this losses they hike the prices.

- ❑ This system is no longer relevant as the country does not import any of these products and this system confers undue benefits to private sector refiners on their sales of petrol and diesel in the domestic market.

Suggestive Measures

- ☞ The only way there can be a reduction of taxes on petroleum products is by including them in the GST regime.
- ❑ This is difficult to be implemented in the short run considering the undue shock to the revenues to the Centre and States.
- ❑ Hence, it would be more relevant to allow oil refiners to price their products based on their costs of refining, a reasonable rate of return and marketing overheads.
- ❑ This will introduce an element of competition among different oil refiners and allow more efficient and transparent price discovery for these products.

Source: Business Standard

Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) Bi Monthly Review

Why in news?

- ☞ MPC has acted predictably in opting to keep interest rates unchanged and in retaining its ‘neutral’ stance (i.e. rates further could move in either direction). But the central bank’s policy statements are in contradiction with its actions and therefore MPC has sent out mixed signals.

How does the inflation outlook look?

- ❑ Price stability remains the primary focus of RBI’s ”Monetary Policy Committee” (MPC) decisions regarding interest rates.
- ❑ Currently, trend line retail inflation (based on Consumer Price Index), continues to run above its medium-term target of 4%.
- ❑ The MPC has appreciably lowered its projections for CPI (consumer price index) inflation for the fourth quarter of 2017-18, and for the new fiscal year.
- ❑ RBI has predicted an inflation slowdown over the next quarter and has cited sharp declines in vegetable prices and moderation in fuel prices as reasons.
- ❑ But these inflation projections contradict public expectations.

Issues with RBI’s projections

- RBI is not fully convincing in its assertions as a food price reversal and the assumption of a “normal monsoon” aren’t clear.
- ❑ Notably, despite weather predictions of a normal monsoon, MPC itself has flagged risks of temporally or spatially deficient monsoon over food prices.
- ❑ Also, MPC seems to have glossed over the RBI’s March survey of households’ inflation expectations — where prices are seen to be increasing.

- ❑ Feedback from manufacturers also suggests that they expect input and output prices to rise, all which don't seem to indicate softening inflation pressures.
- ❑ Additionally, while fuel prices are said to ease, MPC seems to have ignored or down played the volatility in the sector.
- ❑ Gross Value Added (GVA) has been replaced by Gross Domestic Product (GDP) as the main measure of economic output, which is surprising.
- ❑ While the policy statement asserts that GDP growth will strengthen in the current fiscal, the earlier forecast of 7.4% has been left unchanged.
- ❑ Hence, the messaging on the economy by the RBI is ambiguous and could have been clearer and more consistent.

Source: The Hindu

Government's Plan on Loan Write-off

Why in news ?

- ❑ India ranks 103rd in the world in bankruptcy resolution, with the average time taken to resolve a case of bankruptcy extending well over four years.
- ❑ Banks in India are able to recover on an average only about 25% of their money from defaulters and also been lenient in collecting their dues from defaulting borrower.

What is the idea of write-off about ?

- ❑ A write-off is technically different from a loan waiver in which the borrower is exempted from repayment.
- ❑ This does not mean banks will manage to collect the dues from defaulting borrowers.
- ❑ Banks prefer to never have to write off bad debt since their loan portfolios are their primary assets and source of future revenue.
- ❑ However, loans that cannot be collected or are unreasonably difficult to collect reflect very poorly on a bank's financial statements and can divert resources from more productive activity.
- ❑ Banks use write-offs, which are sometimes called "charge-offs," to remove loans from their balance sheets and reduce their overall tax liability.

What is the decision of government on write-off?

- ❑ Non-performing assets (NPAs) worth Rs.2.41 lakh crore have been written off from the books of public sector banks between April 2014 and September 2017.
- ❑ Since the banks were able to recover only 11% of the distressed loans worth Rs.2.7 lakh crore within the stipulated time, the rest had to be written off as per regulations.
- ❑ The government, however, clarified that the defaulters will have to pay back the loans, though they were written off.

What is the need behind this move?

- ❑ Instead of classifying sour loans as troubled assets and taking action to recover them, banks have often chosen to hide such assets using unethical accounting techniques.
- ❑ Reserve Bank of India has been stepping up efforts to force both private and public sector banks to truthfully recognise the size of bad loans on their books.
- ❑ This caused the reported size of stressed assets to increase manifold in the last few years.
- ❑ Many large corporations, as well as smaller enterprises, have been admitted to undergo liquidation under the IBC so that the proceeds can be used to pay back banks.
- ❑ As of now the quick resolution of bad loans will free resources from struggling firms and hand them to the more efficient ones.

Source: The Hindu

RBI's Measures to Tackle Bad Debts

Why in news ?

- ☞ RBI has recently announced various measures for tackling the bad loans.

Steps taken by the RBI to resolve the crisis

- ❑ Initially, the central bank in its revised framework on resolving stressed accounts had scrapped the old restructuring schemes such as SDR, S4A or 5/25.
- ❑ This led to the increase in the provisioning for bad loans by the banks with respect to the existing norms for provisioning.
- ❑ Recently, the RBI identified 12 non-performing assets (NPAs), totalling 25 percent of India's gross NPAs, which would be taken up under the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code (IBC).
- ❑ And it relaxed the norms for provisioning from 50 per cent to 40 per cent for those 12 accounts under IBC.
- ❑ Provisioning is an expense where banks set aside a portion of their capital to make up for the unpaid loans which are 'doubtful' or can potentially default.
- ❑ The provisions such as scrapping of restructuring schemes and tightening of banking regulations have brought in more transparency in the bad loans.

Concerns with RBI's measures

- ❑ The accelerated NPA recognition would imply over Rs.25, 000 crore of additional provisioning for banks.
- ❑ Brief measures such as these, do little to re-build the eroded confidence of investors and depositors in the banking system.
- ❑ As an outcome of these measures, in long run banks would witness steep rise in provisioning beyond the current level to handle the bad loans.
- ❑ Apart from this, the recovery of accounts mentioned in IBC would also remain a challenge.

Source: Economic Times

Spike in Oil Prices

Why in news?

- ☛ Oil prices have risen dramatically in the recent past. While the Indian government had stressed a great deal about deregulating the sector, it has been largely inconsistent with its actions.

World-wide trend in oil prices

- ❑ Tensions in West Asia and the recent US attack on Syria have also added to the market uncertainty that has been pushing the prices upwards.
- ❑ But it is important to separate short-term volatility in oil prices owing to geopolitical tensions from longer-term trends in the oil market.
- ❑ Even without the recent uncertainties, the price of Brent crude has risen to \$72 a barrel (highest since 2014) from about \$62 just a month ago.
- ❑ Through coordinated action – “Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries” (OPEC) seems to have succeeded in ending the market surplus.
- ❑ Notably, OPEC cut production by around “201 thousand barrels” a day in March compared to February.
- ❑ But despite this, oil supply rose by “180 thousand barrels” a day in March, as non-OPEC countries (like US) have jacked up their output to meet demand.
- ❑ Additionally, experts have stated that the persistent high in oil prices might usher in the next wave of shale explorations to enhance supply.

How has India’s oil policies been?

- ❑ **Buyer Cartel** - India had mooted the idea of allying with other Asian oil buyer countries like China to bargain better prices with the OPEC members.
- ❑ But this wasn’t followed up with supporting actions by the government.
- ❑ **Liberal Market** - Global oil prices came crashing in 2014, but the government increased tax rates to keep the prices high.
- ❑ It was started as a way to make up for the subsidies and under-recovering that the oil PSU endured during the times of peak prices.
- ❑ Subsequently, a pro-market reformist aura was constructed around the oil pricing policy, and the government completely deregulated prices.
- ❑ Recently, PM Modi had again stressed the need for more ‘responsible’ oil pricing to ensure smooth and sustainable businesses and markets.
- ❑ **Inconsistency** – But the recent increase in international crude oil prices have failed to push local petrol and diesel prices upwards in equal measures.
- ❑ There has in fact been minimal increase in prices, which is probably due to the political pressure due to the crucial elections in Karnataka.

- ❑ Such dilly-dallying due to a short-sighted vision is beneficial to none, and has also impacted the credibility of the government's commitment to reforms.
- ❑ Notably, this lack of trust is visible from the fact that stocks of oil PSU haven't gained despite they being granted autonomy in fixing oil prices.

Source: The Hindu

India's Currency Practices – US Signals Caution

Why in news ?

- ❑ US Treasury Department's recent semi-annual report has warranted India to be placed on the 'Monitoring List' for currency practices.
- ❑ The move is largely unjustified as RBI interventions were on account of a surplus capital account and not for undervaluing the Rupee.

Why has India intervened in foreign exchange markets ?

- ❑ India has been frequently intervening in foreign exchange markets through RBI – which means that it is purchasing more foreign exchange lately.
- ❑ RBI pumps in Indian Rupee and buys foreign currency from the international markets – which increases rupee supply internationally.
- ❑ This reduces the demand for rupee and thereby reduces the rupee exchange rate, which helps in arresting any upswing in rupee value.
- ❑ It is to be noted that a strong currency would make exports costlier and create losses for export dependent local businesses.
- ❑ Contrarily, when there is a big depreciation of rupee, India's imports will become expensive and lead to domestic inflation.
- ❑ In such a scenario, the RBI sells its foreign exchange reserves and drains out rupee liquidity internationally, which will push the exchange rates upwards.
- ❑ Thus, the interventions are buffer mechanisms in RBI's arsenal to ensure that the currency neither gets overvalued nor gets undervalued.
- ❑ Net annual purchases of foreign exchange reached \$56 billion in 2017, which is equivalent to 2.2% of the GDP.
- ❑ These interventions were to ease a strong Rupee Rally (appreciation) in the backdrop of a massive inflow of FDI and portfolio investments.
- ❑ But despite these intervention, rupee appreciated by over 6% against the dollar and by more than 3% on a real effective basis in 2017.
- ❑ Significantly, India's Forex reserves have been continuously rising (presently \$424.86 billion) due to frequent intervention since 2013.

- ❑ Value of free-floating currency isn't supposed to be tampered with except in exceptional cases (rapid fluctuations), because appreciation and depreciation are balancing mechanisms in international trade.
- ❑ IMF would've usually deemed the currency of countries that undertake such interventions as undervalued, but it has refrained currently as India has a 'Current Account Deficit' (CAD) that is as high 1.5% of its GDP.
- ❑ Notably, RBI maintains that the value of the rupee is broadly market-determined and that interventions are only when there is undue volatility.

What does the US report say ?

- ❑ India had a significant bilateral goods trade surplus with the US, which totals to \$23 billion in 2017.
- ❑ US has 3 criteria based on which it placing a country in the 'Monitoring List' for currency practices. They are -
 - ❑ Bilateral trade surplus of over \$20 billion with the US
 - ❑ Frequent interventions in the Forex Market
 - ❑ IMF's contention of that the currency is being undervalued
- ❑ Hence, as India meets 2 of the 3 stated aspects, the US Treasury Department has warranted placing India on the aforementioned "Monitoring List".
- ❑ Notably, 5 other countries namely - China, Germany, Japan, Korea and Switzerland are already on the list.
- ❑ The US has maintained that the list is to aid in monitoring and combating unfair currency practices and encourage policies to address trade imbalances.

Is the US move justified ?

- ❑ India does indeed have a trade surplus with the US, but unlike China, it still has a large trade deficit overall – which implies that Rupee is still overvalued.
- ❑ A recent assessment by the IMF has also held that the rupee is actually moderately overvalued and 'closely aligned to its fair value over the long term'.
- ❑ The accumulated foreign exchange reserves were largely due inflows into the capital markets and hence India doesn't qualify as a currency manipulator.
- ❑ Also, RBI is projected to merely purchase 0.6% of GDP as Forex, which is well below the IMF ceiling (2% of GDP) for being labeled a currency manipulator.

The Way Ahead

- ❑ RBI's forex reserves now covers only 11 months of imports, which is actually below pre-2008 (global financial crisis) level of maintaining a 14 month buffer.
- ❑ Also, the Current Account Deficit (CAD) is set to rise to 1.9% of the GDP.
- ❑ More significantly, share of portfolio investments has jumped to 120% of forex reserves from pre-crisis level of 70% - which calls for jacking up reserves.

- US listing has currently caused the rupee to fall sharply by 29 paise against the US dollar to close at 65.49 in one day.
- However, forex dealers don't expect a sharp fall as the RBI then props up the rupee by selling dollars from its reserves.
- Hence, experts opine that RBI will continue with its interventionist approach at appropriate times, despite being placed on the US watch list.

Source: Indian Express

Fugitive Economic Offenders Ordinance

Why in news ?

- ☞ The President recently promulgated the Fugitive Economic Offenders Ordinance.

The key features

- ❑ The ordinance seeks to confiscate properties of economic offenders who have left the country to avoid facing criminal prosecution.
- ❑ **Offender** - A fugitive economic offender is a person against whom an arrest warrant has been issued for committing offence like
 - I. Counterfeiting government stamps or currency, cheque dishonour for insufficiency of funds
 - II. Money laundering
 - III. Transactions defrauding creditors
- ❑ A fugitive economic offender is one who has left the country to avoid facing prosecution, or refuses to return to face prosecution.
- ❑ **Provisions**- The provisions of the ordinance will apply for economic offenders with following conditions:
 - I. Who refuse to return
 - II. Persons against whom an arrest warrant has been issued for a scheduled offence
 - III. Wilful bank loan defaulters with outstanding of over Rs.100 crore
- ❑ It provides for confiscating assets even without a conviction.
- ❑ It also provides for paying off lenders by selling off the fugitive's properties.
- ❑ Such economic offenders will be tried under Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA).

What is the procedure ?

- ❑ **Application** - A director or deputy director, appointed under the PMLA, 2002, may file an application.
- ❑ This is to declare a person as a fugitive economic offender.
- ❑ It can be filed before a special court, designated under the 2002 Act.

- ❑ It will contain the reasons to believe that an individual is a fugitive economic offender.
- ❑ Besides, it will have information about
 - The whereabouts of the offender
 - List of properties believed to be proceeds of a crime for which confiscation is sought
 - List of benami properties or foreign properties for which confiscation is sought
 - List of persons having an interest in these properties
- ❑ Upon receiving the application, the special court will issue a notice to the individual.
- ❑ It requires the person to appear at a specified place within 6 weeks.
- ❑ If the person appears at the specified place, the special court will terminate its proceedings under the provisions of the Bill.
- ❑ Property belonging to the offender may provisionally be attached without the prior permission of the special court.
- ❑ This is, provided that an application is filed before the court within 30 days.
- ❑ Appeals against the orders of the special court will lie before the high court.

What are the concerns?

- ❑ A series of instances with absconding offenders has pressurised the government to take immediate action.
- ❑ They include liquor baron Vijay Mallya's, IPL commissioner Lalit Modi, diamond merchants Nirav Modi and Mehul Choksi.
- ❑ Government agencies have attached the diamond merchant duo's assets in India.
- ❑ But an American court has disallowed the sale of their assets in other jurisdictions.
- ❑ It's because India is yet to pass a model law mooted by the UN for cross-border insolvency cases.
- ❑ It is not clear whether this ordinance can make up for this shortfall.
- ❑ The ordinance route reflects the urgency to react to recent offences.
- ❑ But the government needs to present a coherent vision about its plans to bring back those fugitives who have already got away.
- ❑ The government has to plug many more legal loopholes in the whole system.

Source: The Hindu



Environment and Ecology

Plastic Waste Management Rules 2018

Why in news ?

- ☛ The Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change has notified the Plastic Waste Management (Amendment) Rules 2018.

About the amendment

- In 2016, Union government implemented the Plastic Waste Management Rules and Solid Waste Management Rules. But the rules faced various challenges.
- Based on representations received from various stakeholders, MoEF&CC had constituted a committee to resolve such issues.
- The amendments are based on recommendations submitted to the Ministry.

What are the highlights ?

- ❑ The phasing out of Multi-layered Plastic (MLP) is now applicable only to MLP that are “non-recyclable or non-energy recoverable or have no alternate use”.
- ❑ MLP is most widely used in food packing Industries.
- ❑ The amended Rules prescribe a central registration system for the registration of the producer/importer/brand owner.
- ❑ The system will be evolved by the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB).
- ❑ National registry has been prescribed for producers with presence in more than two states.
- ❑ A state-level registration has been prescribed for smaller producers/brand owners operating within one or two states.
- ❑ Any mechanism for the registration should be automated.
- ❑ It should take into account ease of doing business for producers, recyclers and manufacturers.

What are the shortfalls?

- ❑ **Dilution** - Many significant provisions of the earlier plastic waste management policy, 2016 have been discarded or diluted now.
- ❑ The Plastic Waste Management Amendment Rules 2018 has omitted the explicit pricing of carry bags mentioned in 2016 rule.
- ❑ **MLP** - Multi-layered plastics are supposed to be phased out.
- ❑ But these have been given a fresh lease of life by easing the norms concerned.
- ❑ Only MLP that are “non-recyclable or non-energy recoverable or have no alternate use” are to be phased out.

- ❑ This leaves hardly any category of multi-layered plastics to be phased out.
- ❑ Any product can be claimed to have some alternate use to escape the bar.
- ❑ **Producers** - The new norms seem to have been crafted with an eye on ease of doing business.
- ❑ This seems to be happening at the cost of the environment and public health due to plastic use.
- ❑ “Extended producer responsibility” bound plastic producers, importers and brand owners.
- ❑ They are required to ensure environmentally sound management of their products till the end of their useful life.
- ❑ The new policy is soft on “extended producer responsibility”.

Plastic toxicity in India

- ❑ India is reckoned to generate over 25,000 tonnes of plastic waste every day.
- ❑ The residues can stain the environment and natural resources for hundreds of years.
- ❑ Plastic toxicity is known for its enduring adverse effects on territorial and aquatic life.
- ❑ In food, it can alter human hormones to cause major life-threatening diseases.
- ❑ Plastic materials, especially bags and bottles strewn on roads, have been noticed to cause flooding by blocking drains.
- ❑ They also kill stray cattle by choking.

The way forward

- ❑ Plastics are not totally dispensable as their use seems desirable in certain situations.
- ❑ In fields like agriculture and automobiles, packaging, information technology and biomedical industries, they are relevant.
- ❑ But their non-degradability and emission of toxic gases on combustion and incineration are growing concerns.
- ❑ It is thus imperative to manage plastic debris appropriately.
- ❑ It would be advisable to reassess the new set of rules and switch back to the 2016 plastic waste management norms.

Source: PIB, Business Standard

Delhi's Green Budget

Why in news ?

- ☞ Recently, Delhi released its first Green budget to improve quality of air in the National Capital Region.

Significance of the green budget

- ❑ Under the green budget Delhi has announced many new programmes under four Departments namely Environment, Power, Transport and PWD.

- ❑ Some of the initiatives include 1,000 new fully electric buses, subsidies for electric vehicles, LED street lamps and incentives for residential and agricultural users who install solar panels.
- ❑ The government has proposed to give incentive to industries to switch over to piped natural gas and subsidies to firms to switch over to clean fuel-based power generators.
- ❑ Apart from these, first comprehensive city-wide inventory of greenhouse gas emissions will also be carried out.
- ❑ Dedicated information system showing levels of pollution will be set up inside all government buildings.
- ❑ Government has also planned for an innovative scheme named Agriculture-cum-Solar Farm scheme.

Challenges in implementing these programmes

- ❑ The Delhi Transport Corporation has 6,000 buses, but it needs to maintain a fleet size of 11,000 buses.
- ❑ An addition of 1,000 new electric buses may mean lesser emissions, but it does little to address the overall supply gap.
- ❑ This means more private vehicles on the street and consequently a greater dose of pollution.
- ❑ The primary sources of pollution vary seasonally like in winter; it is the crop burning in neighboring Uttar Pradesh, Punjab and Haryana that affects Delhi's air quality.
- ❑ And in summer, it is dust from construction, storms, roads, etc.

What measures needs to be taken in this regard?

- ❑ Tackling the existing problems needs coordination between different states bordering the national capital, and also with the Union government.
- ❑ Thus synchronizing with the efforts of neighbouring governments is needed to tackle these issues effectively.

Source: Indian Express

Forest Survey of India” Report

Why in news ?

- ❑ The latest “Forest Survey of India” report has changed the calculation method for India's forest cover to include plantations on private lands.
- ❑ This is not just naive but also deceptive and runs the risk of seeing conservation funds being diverted to satiate private interests.

Why is the recent change in the classification problematic?

- ❑ It is common knowledge that private plantations of teak, eucalyptus and poplar are undertaken to earn incomes.
- ❑ Such plantations can't be substitutes for natural forests with their wildlife and immense biodiversity.

- ❑ Natural forests have multiple ecosystem functions, none of which can be provided by commercial plantations.
- ❑ Classifying tree plantations as forests is hence a fallacy that ignores the reams of research and evidence which show otherwise.
- ❑ Hence, there is suspicion that the move is intended to aid private profits by relaxing restrictions and siphoning off conservation funds.

How does the ecological conservation scenario look?

- ❑ Data shows that there is a clear increase in average global temperatures due to the rising levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere.
- ❑ Frequency of heat-waves, floods, droughts, and unseasonal rainfall is also increasing – all of which are thought to be the effects of global warming.
- ❑ Protecting and restoring natural forests (not plantations) is one of the best ways to mitigate climate change.
- ❑ Some argue that private funds can be mobilised by classifying plantations as forest, but they seem to be ignoring the ecological cost of such a move.
- ❑ Besides, more than \$7 billion of public “Compensatory Afforestation Fund” (CAF) is lying unused currently – which needs to be used up effectively.

The way ahead

- ❑ Multiple peasant and tribal communities have for long worked for the conservation of their neighbourhood forests.
- ❑ Tribal claims of ownership over the use of sustainable forest resources have now been legally recognized by under the “Forest Rights Act of 2006”.
- ❑ Bettering the implementation of the act and strengthened cooperation with grassroots institutions are vital to further conservation efforts.
- ❑ Governments should consider devolving afforestation funds to the gram sabhas and build a sustained movement for conserving forests.

Source: The Hindu

Draft Coastal Regulation Zone (CRZ), 2018

Why in news?

- ☛ The draft Coastal Regulation Zone (CRZ), 2018 was recently released by the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF).

What is a Coastal Regulation Zone?

- ❑ Under the Environment Protection Act, 1986, the MoEF issues notification for regulation of activities in the coastal area.

- ❑ Coastal land up to 500m from the High Tide Line (HTL) comes under the Coastal Regulation Zone (CRZ).
- ❑ Also, a stage of 100m along banks of creeks, estuaries, backwater and rivers subject to tidal fluctuations is called CRZ.
- ❑ CRZ along the country has been placed in four categories:
- ❑ **Category I (CRZ -I)** - Areas that are ecologically sensitive and important, areas between the Low Tide Line and High Tide Line.
- ❑ **Category II (CRZ -II)** - Areas that have already been developed up to or the shoreline.
- ❑ **Category III (CRZ -III)** - Areas that are relatively undisturbed and those which do not belong to either Category I or II.
- ❑ **Category IV (CRZ-IV)** - Coastal stretches in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Lakhadweep and small islands, except those designated as CRZ I, CRZ II and CRZ III.

Highlights

- ❑ **HTL** - The High Tide Line (HTL) shall be demarcated by the National Centre for Sustainable Coastal Management (NCSCM).
- ❑ This shall be reckoned as a universal standard for the HTL for all regulatory purposes under notification, 2018.
- ❑ **Hazard line** - Hazard line mapping will be carried out by Survey of India.
- ❑ However, the Hazard Line has been delinked from the CRZ regulatory regime.
- ❑ It shall be used only as a tool for Disaster Management and planning of adaptive and mitigation measures.
- ❑ **CRZ** - CRZ limits on land along the tidal influenced water bodies has been proposed to be reduced.
- ❑ It would be reduced from 100 meters or the width of the creek to 50 meters or the width of the creek, whichever is less
- ❑ **NDZ** - A No Development Zone (NDZ) of 20 meters has been proposed.
- ❑ This will be stipulated for all Islands close to the main land coast and for all Backwater Islands in the main land.
- ❑ **CRZ-III** - For CRZ-III areas, two separate categories have been proposed.
- ❑ These are CRZ-III A and CRZ-III B.
- ❑ CRZ-III A comprises areas that have population density of 2161 per sq km as per 2011 Census.
- ❑ These will have NDZ of 50 meters from the HTL as against 200 meters stipulated in the CRZ Notification, 2011.
- ❑ CRZ-III B comprises rural areas with population density of below 2161 per sq km as per 2011 Census.
- ❑ CRZ-III B areas shall continue to have an NDZ of 200 meters from the HTL.
- ❑ **Procedure** - The procedure for CRZ clearances has been simplified.

- ❑ Delegations for recommending/according CRZ clearances to the projects/activities have been made at various levels.
- ❑ Only such projects/activities, which are located in the CRZ-I & IV areas, shall be dealt with for clearance by the MoEFCC.
- ❑ For all other project activities in CRZ-II/III areas, clearance would be at the level of the CZMA (Coastal Zone Management Act).
- ❑ **Floor Space Index** - As per CRZ, 2011 Notification, for CRZ-II areas, Floor Space Index (FSI) had been frozen at 1991 Development Control Regulation (DCR) levels.
- ❑ In the Draft CRZ, 2018 Notification, it has been proposed to de-freeze this.
- ❑ Permitting FSI for construction projects, as prevailing on the date of the new Notification is proposed.
- ❑ **Tourism** - Temporary tourism facilities have been proposed in Beaches.
- ❑ These include shacks, toilet blocks, change rooms, drinking water facilities etc.
- ❑ Such temporary facilities are also proposed to be permissible in the No Development Zone (NDZ) of the CRZ-III areas.
- ❑ These will be taken up on the seaward side of the roads where there is a National or State Level Highway passing through the NDZ.
- ❑ On the landward side, Resorts/Hotels and other tourism facilities have been proposed to be permitted.
- ❑ These will however be subject to the extant regulations of the concerned State.
- ❑ **Mangroves** - The draft proposes some compensatory measures in cases where roads are constructed through mangroves.
- ❑ A minimum 3 times the mangrove area affected/ destroyed during the construction shall be taken up for compensatory plantation.
- ❑ **Mining** - Regulated limestone mining will be permitted.
- ❑ This will be subject to strict Environmental safeguards, in areas adequately above the height of HTL.
- ❑ This would be based on recommendations of reputed National Institutes in the Mining field.

Concerns with the draft

- ❑ **Fisherfolk** - There are concerns that the draft has opened up fragile inter-tidal areas to real estate agents.
- ❑ It seems to be favouring the large-scale industry at the cost of fishing communities.
- ❑ This will affect how common areas used by fisherfolk are managed.
- ❑ **CRZ**- A major change pertains to the CRZ limits on land along “tidal influenced water bodies”.
- ❑ The proposed limit has been reduced from 100 metres to 50 metres or the width of the creek, whichever is less.
- ❑ This dilution will help builders and could make the coast more vulnerable to development.
- ❑ **Authority** - The draft seems to have shifted some of the powers already vested with the MoEF.

- ❑ It makes the National Centre for Sustainable Coastal Management (NCSCM) the final authority to lay down standards for HTL.
- ❑ Earlier the demarcation was carried out by one of the agencies authorised by MoEF, on recommendations of the NCSCM.
- ❑ Also, only those projects located in CRZ-I and CRZ-IV shall now require MoEF clearance.
- ❑ All other projects shall be considered by Coastal Zone Management Authorities (CZMAs) in the states and union territories.
- ❑ These are perceived as a dilution of regulation and control over the coastal areas.
- ❑ **Hazard Line** - The 2011 notification placed a lot of importance on the hazard line.
- ❑ The 2018 notification takes away the protection that the hazard line could provide.
- ❑ The hazard line has been delinked from the CRZ regulatory regime.
- ❑ It, instead, merely states that the hazard line should be used as a tool for disaster management.
- ❑ This means that one can build in these areas after preparing an environment assessment report.
- ❑ It has to just state that certain precautions have been considered.
- ❑ **Bifurcation of CRZ-III areas** - CRZ-III areas have now been divided into two categories.
- ❑ The accuracy of data that is used for classification is being questioned.
- ❑ As per 2011 Census [data], only state-wise population density is available.
- ❑ So the process of narrowing down to the coastal region population is unclear.
- ❑ Revenue records are not available of how many people live in some of the CRZ-III areas.
- ❑ Some of these common areas are used by fisherfolk to dry fish and park their boats.
- ❑ Opening these up would affect their livelihood related activities.
- ❑ **Strategic projects** - The draft allows for construction of roads and roads on stilts, “by way of reclamation in CRZ-1 areas”.
- ❑ This can only be in exceptional cases for “defence, strategic purposes and public utilities”.
- ❑ This is to be recommended by the CZMA and approved by the Ministry.
- ❑ However, it does not explicitly state what strategic projects are.
- ❑ **Implementation** - As per the National Green Tribunal, it has been 7 years since the deadline set by 2011 notification to submit CZMPs has passed.
- ❑ It is delayed due to opposition from fisherfolk, and some states have requested an extension.
- ❑ Given this, the fact that the new draft would come into force once the states update their CZMPs seems flawed

Source: PIB, Indian Express

Rhinoceros census in Kaziranga

Why in news ?

- ☞ The latest rhinoceros census in Kaziranga reported a gain of just 12 rhinos since 2015, a jump by barely half a percent.

What is the issue?

- ❑ Kaziranga lost over 500 rhinos in the last 2 decades of the twentieth century.
- ❑ The situation improved from the 2000s when an average annual loss to poaching came down to single digit.
- ❑ Kaziranga reported a population of 1,855 rhinos in 2006.
- ❑ But after 2006 it suffered a setback with poaching taking huge tolls.

Causes for Poaching of Rhinos

- ❑ Kaziranga and its rhinos still remain very much in the grip of both commercial and political interests.
- ❑ Rhino is far easier to poach than, say, a tiger or an elephant, and far more valuable in that sense.
- ❑ A carton of horns fetches as much as a carload of tiger derivatives or tusks would.
- ❑ These factors perpetuate the interest in rhino poaching, posing a challenge for controlling them.
- ❑ This interest had in the past made it easy for local insurgent groups to strike cashless arms deals with operators in Myanmar.

What are the contributing factors for increase in population?

- ❑ Poaching has been brought down considerably by concerted efforts.
- ❑ A group of **informers** earlier used by the civil administration, to get updates on poaching operations, started turning hostile.
- ❑ In tie up with their controllers, they were apparently protecting the poachers in return for big protection money.
- ❑ This group of hostile informers have now been identified and controlled.
- ❑ It has been a practice to offer **political patronage** to monetize Kaziranga's rhinos in exchange for varied electoral services.
- ❑ The ups and downs in poaching numbers, with peaks during the election times, clearly reflect this practice.
- ❑ This decade-long tradition which affected rhino population has now been done away with by the government.

About the Rhinos in the park

- ❑ Rhino population had a gain of 193 rhinos in just 3 years from 2006 to 2009.

- ❑ It increased by 353 between 2009 and 2015 period, despite worrying numbers on poaching.
- ❑ But since 2017, Kaziranga brought down the numbers on poaching and thus claims a healthy population gain.
- ❑ Kaziranga National Park (KNP) has counted 2,413 one-horned rhinos in the latest triennial population estimation.
- ❑ It comes closer to the goal of hitting the 3,000-mark in the Asian one-horned rhino population in Assam by 2020.
- ❑ Moreover among the female population now counted, a majority are breeding.

Source: Indian Express

Internal Climate Migration

Why in news ?

- ☞ There is presently an increased internal migration across the world due to political and economic instability. Beyond this, the internal migration due to climate change is potential of getting to be a major concern for nations.

What is the concern ?

- ❑ Some of the slow onset climate events would be droughts, effects from sea level rise and water shortages.
- ❑ These may certainly drive many more to leave their homes and move to safer places.
- ❑ Such migration may be a choice in the initial stages.
- ❑ However, as the stress becomes more severe, the decision to move may be forced.
- ❑ E.g. people are compelled to leave their island nations in the Pacific and Indian Oceans with gradual rise in sea levels
- ❑ These climate exiles are an ongoing process.
- ❑ Notably, it would likely increase out-migration over time.

Vulnerable Regions

- ❑ A recent report by the World Bank on internal climate migration highlights the possible migration reality.
- ❑ In Latin America, South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa over 140 million people would be forced to move within borders by 2050.
- ❑ This would be as a result of slow onset climate events alone.
- ❑ In the worst-case scenario, about 40 million of these migrants would be in South Asia.
- ❑ This is the most populous of the regions studied, with a number of climate change effects anticipated.

Impact on South Asian Region

- ❑ South Asia is characterised by rain-fed farmland in large parts of the region.
- ❑ Variability in the monsoons and warmer temperatures is sure to lead to crop failures.
- ❑ This will lead to migration from the Gangetic plains and from the rice-growing northeast of Bangladesh and the inundated coasts.
- ❑ The numbers on forced internal migration in South Asia could increase six-fold between 2020 and 2050.
- ❑ This will continue to rise beyond 2050 without appropriate climate action.
- ❑ But even with inclusive development and climate-friendly scenarios, tens of millions would still be forced to migrate.
- ❑ This normally makes people migrate to big cities.
- ❑ However, those along the coast such as Mumbai, Chennai, Chittagong and Dhaka will themselves be vulnerable.
- ❑ Storm surges and other effects from sea level rise make these coastal cities unfavourable.

What are the concerns?

- ❑ The poor would be the worst affected by these slow onset events.
- ❑ Most of them would migrate out of rural areas to nearby urban settlements such as cities and the peri-urban surroundings.
- ❑ Such “hotspots” of in and out migration would be stressed for natural resources, public services and livelihoods.
- ❑ In India, the areas between Chennai and Bengaluru could be the potential spots.
- ❑ In India, there are already signs of unplanned and frontier-led growth in peri-urban areas.
- ❑ Planning that ignores the ecosystem services provided by local natural resources generates further problems for the vulnerable.
- ❑ The implications of internal migrations will significantly affect development in these areas and the lives of vulnerable people.

Suggestive Measures

- ❑ Understanding migration patterns, getting socioeconomic data on migration and appropriate planning are essential.
- ❑ Current climate modelling methods are not accurate at high resolutions for local decision-making.
- ❑ Policies to reduce GHG emissions are of utmost urgency.
- ❑ The peri-urban areas, expected to be hotspots, already have many problems.
- ❑ These include water shortage, waste management, nutritional deficiency, limited services and poor infrastructure.

- ❑ Thus, integrating internal migration with ongoing development planning is vital.
- ❑ Ecosystems, part of the natural resources in peri-urban areas, ought to be protected as “special ecological zones”.
- ❑ This is crucial to ensure that as urban settlements expand, they don’t spoil the ecosystem services.
- ❑ Ignoring issues of social justice and equity in adaptation can lead to serious governance failure.
- ❑ Skill building, job training and education and job opportunities for locals and migrants thus have to become a focal point.
- ❑ Rights for those who are forced to migrate would be fundamental in these preparations.

Source: The Hindu

Conservation Efforts in Gir Forest

Why in news ?

- ☞ Gujarat government has taken conservation efforts taken to protect the endangered Asiatic lion population in Gir forest. In recent times, various policy stands of government in Gir forest have raised concern among wildlife conservationists.

Significance of Gir forest area

- ❑ The Government notified the large geographical extent of Sasan Gir as wildlife sanctuary in 1965, to conserve the Asiatic Lion.
- ❑ It covers total area of 1412 square kilometres of which 258 Km forms the core area of the National Park.
- ❑ Besides Africa, Gir National Park in Gujarat is the only place in the world where one can spot lions roaming free in the wild.
- ❑ The remarkable growth in the lion population in this landscape from about 300 in 1995 to over 500 in 2015 points to the success of conservation management over decades.

What are the recent policies being carried out in Gir forest?

- ❑ **Religious Tourism** - The state government in 2017 permitted night stays at a temple located in the core area of Gir National Park.
- ❑ This is severely affecting the landscape and altering the land-use pattern and profile of the forest region.
- ❑ **Reducing eco-sensitive zone** – According to the environment ministry guidelines, eco-sensitive zone can extend to min 10km around a Protected Area (PA), where certain development activities are prohibited.
- ❑ But for the Gir National Park, the government is taking measures to reduce the eco-sensitive zones to less than 1 km for mining and tourism.
- ❑ **Interpretation zone** – A safari park 15 km away from the PA has captive lions in enclosed natural environments.

- ❑ Government is planning to clear this zone which will result in habitat loss, change in landscape, and degradation through roads, resorts, traffic and pollution.

Concerns of wildlife conservationists

- ❑ Asiatic lions are venturing out of the Protected Area (PA) and are living in wide range of habitats such as hilly tracts, coasts, pastures and farmlands.
- ❑ This is resulting in incidents of livestock depredation and of attacks on people by lions.
- ❑ There are also various reports of lions dying due to unnatural causes like railway and road accidents, electrocution, drowning in open wells.
- ❑ There is also an increasing distress due to the unregulated wildlife **tourism** around the Protected Area.
- ❑ Tourists are ready to pay huge amounts to watch lions and videos of bikes and cars chasing lions at night are being widely shared on social media.

Measures required to conserve the Gir forest better

- ❑ Decisions taken in the recent times relating to decreasing eco-sensitive zones, promoting tourism, etc. has to be rolled back.
- ❑ Agro-pastoral landscape around the sanctuary is as important as dedicated management government should take measures in this regard.
- ❑ Political will, people's tolerance and the lion's resilience is also required for the future of healthy lion population.

Source: The Hindu

Draft National Forest Policy 2018

Why in news ?

- ☞ Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC) recently released the draft National Forest Policy 2018.

What are the highlights ?

- ❑ **Objective** - The draft forest policy, 2018 will be an overarching policy for forest management.
- ❑ It aims at bringing a minimum of one-third of India's total geographical area under forest or tree cover.
- ❑ It seems to address the concern of decline in forest productivity.
- ❑ **Concepts** - The draft has introduced some new concepts such as:
 - I. Economic valuation of ecosystem services
 - II. Forest certification
 - III. National forest ecosystem management information system
- ❑ **Approach** - The 1988 forest policy had a local community- and ecology-centric approach.

- ❑ From this, the new draft shifts the focus to timber and forest-based industries.
- ❑ It identifies “production forestry” and plantations as the new thrust area.
- ❑ **Tribal to Timber** - The importance offered to the rights of local, forest-dependent communities are being diluted.
- ❑ It is substituted by the demand for raw material from forest-based industries.
- ❑ The draft aims to use degraded land available with forest corporations to produce “quality timber”.
- ❑ This goes against the emphasis on “fuelwood and fodder development” as in 1988 policy.
- ❑ **Production forestry** - The 1988 policy had sections called ‘Rights and Concessions’ and ‘Tribal People and Forests’.
- ❑ These are replaced by ideas of ‘Production Forestry’, increasing the productivity of forest plantations and facilitating forest industry interface.
- ❑ **Industry** - The draft stresses the need to stimulate growth in the forest based industry sector.
- ❑ It encourages forest corporations and industrial units to step up growing of industrial plantations.
- ❑ **Livelihood** - The current draft mentions about the livelihoods of local communities -
 - I. As passive recipients of benefits accruing from wildlife tourism
 - II. As labour for forest-based industries
 - III. In relation to non-timber forest produce (NTFP)
- ❑ **PPP**- The draft proposes a public-private partnership model for afforestation and reforestation activities.
- ❑ This will be in “degraded forest areas and forest areas available with Forest Development Corporations and outside forests”.
- ❑ **Plantation choice** - The draft recommends ‘commercially important species’ like poplar and eucalyptus.
- ❑ Both of these are non-indigenous plantation species.
- ❑ **Protection measures** - The policy proposes to restrict schemes and projects which interfere with forests that cover steep slopes.
- ❑ Catchments of rivers, lakes, and reservoirs, geologically unstable terrain and such other ecologically sensitive areas are also covered.
- ❑ The ecologically sensitive catchment areas shall be stabilized with suitable soil and water conservation measures.
- ❑ Planting suitable trees and grass like bamboo in these areas is also suggested.
- ❑ **Mechanism** - It suggests setting up of two national-level bodies for better management of the country’s forests.
- ❑ These are the National Community Forest Management (CFM) Mission and the National Board of Forestry (NBF).
- ❑ NBF will have to be headed by the central minister in charge of forests.

- ❑ The state boards of forestry will have to ensure inter-sectoral convergence, simplification of procedures, conflict resolution, etc.
- ❑ The state boards of forestry will have to be headed by state ministers in charge of forests.
- ❑ Besides, efforts will be made to achieve harmonization between policies and laws like Forest Rights Act (FRA) 2006.
- ❑ **Community participation** - Efforts to ensure synergy between gram sabha & JFMC (Joint Forest Management Committee) will be taken up.
- ❑ This is for ensuring successful community participation in forest management.
- ❑ The CFM mission will address participatory forest management.
- ❑ **Financing** - The compensatory afforestation fund which is being transferred to the states will provide for management of forests.
- ❑ It will source afforestation and rehabilitation works in degraded forest areas and for bringing new areas under forest and tree cover.
- ❑ Efforts for tapping funds from other national sectors will be taken up.
- ❑ This may include rural development, tribal affairs, national highways, railways, coal, mines, power, etc.
- ❑ **Forest fire** - The draft policy includes measures to safeguard ecosystems from forest fires, which include:
 - I. Mapping the vulnerable areas
 - II. Developing and strengthening early warning systems
 - III. Remote sensing technology to control fire
 - IV. Improved community participation
- ❑ **Climate change** - Forests are natural carbon sinks, assisting in climate change mitigation.
- ❑ Climate change concerns will be factored in all forest and wildlife areas working/management plans and Community Ecosystem Management Plans.
- ❑ Wildlife rich areas and corridors outside protected areas would be identified and maintained for ensuring ecological and genetic continuity.
- ❑ **Human-wildlife conflict** - Quick response, dedicated teams of well equipped and trained personnel would be developed.
- ❑ Health and veterinary services, rescue centres, speedy assessment of damage and quick payment of relief to the victims are other short term actions.
- ❑ Monitoring and management of population of wildlife would be adopted as part of long-term measures.

Concerns with the new draft forest policy

- ❑ **Production forestry** - In the past, production forestry has led to replace the following

- I. Natural oak forests with pine monocultures in the Himalayas
 - II. Natural sal forests with teak plantations in central India
 - III. Wet evergreen forests with eucalyptus and acacia in the Western Ghats
- All this had significantly affected forest diversity.
 - It has dried up streams and undermined local livelihoods.
 - The stress on commercially important species like eucalyptus and poplar raises concerns for the ecology.
 - These species are known to be water-demanding, with deep root systems that deplete groundwater.
 - Also, poplar and eucalyptus have negative allelopathic properties i.e. they do not encourage vegetative growth under their cover.
 - Non-indigenous plantation species to meet afforestation targets and timber requirements would be counterproductive to public investments in such initiatives.
 - An estimated 350-400 million people depend directly on these forests for sustenance, involving in management and protection.
 - The new policy fails to acknowledge this symbiotic relationship between the tribal people and forests.
 - Community Participation** - There is little about decentralised governance in the draft policy.
 - Local communities would have challenged the production forestry model if they had had a say in forest governance.
 - PPP** - The 1988 policy clearly states that the requirements of the local communities should not be sacrificed for the sake of forest based industries.
 - However, the PPPs in the new policy go against this and will entail more forest destruction.
 - It is a way of granting the private sector access to public resources.
 - The profits and benefits are also thus likely to end up in corporate hands.
 - Mechanism** - The draft policy talks of “ensuring synergy” between gram sabhas and JFM committees.
 - But the actual need is to replace JFM committees with statutorily empowered gram sabhas.
 - Harmonization with other laws like the FRA could certainly leave scope for concern in administrative jurisdictions.
 - It may put environmentalists and bureaucracy at loggerheads as the former may see it as an attempt to weaken the role of gram sabhas.
 - In all, the new Policy seems to be falling back to the practice of state-managed forestry of the 1950s as well as shifting focus from community and ecology to industry and raw materials.

Source: The Hindu, Live Mint, Indian Express

Making Way for Elephants

Why in news ?

- ☛ Elephants making news for dying on rail tracks is on the rise in recent days. The incidents remind of the duty of protecting the forests where elephants thrive.

The casualty scenario

- ❑ **Tracks** - More than 100 elephants had died on the tracks during 2001-10.
- ❑ The frequency and number of train kills have, in fact, been rising.
- ❑ Across India, average annual casualties jumped from 9 during 2000-09 to 17 over the next 7 years.
- ❑ Poisoning, poaching, and electrocution together kill more than four times as many elephants.
- ❑ During 2009-16, more than 500 elephants died this way as against 120 killed on the tracks.

What is the threat ?

- ❑ Only the richest and widest of forests can support elephants.
- ❑ Elephants migrate long distances along 'corridors' that are usually marked by similar vegetation.
- ❑ Once-contiguous elephant habitats are now fragmented by mines, rail lines and human settlements.
- ❑ This largely interrupts their transit zones and lead to clashes and casualties.
- ❑ Elephants thus pay a heavy price as one of the worst victims of India's development.

Limitations with protection

- ❑ India's 668 **Protected (forest) Areas** cover less than 5% of the country's area.
- ❑ India's 32 **elephant reserves** (ERs) are spread over 65,000 sq km.
- ❑ But only less than 30% of this area is legally protected forests.
- ❑ Centre's **Elephant Task Force** recommended declaring the entire ER area as ecologically sensitive under the Environment Protection Act.
- ❑ This would make another 46,000 sq km out of bounds for miners and developers.
- ❑ The Task Force also recommended setting up of 10 **elephant landscapes** around the 32 ERs.
- ❑ This would require **judicious land** use in another 45,000 sq km.
- ❑ But there is reluctance to treat the Protected Areas as sacrosanct.
- ❑ Attempts to make these stretches as **no-go zones** are seen as an impediment to growth by many.

What are the other concerns?

- ❑ National Highways run through 40 of India's 88 identified elephant corridors.
- ❑ Putting **curbs** on speed or night traffic along the ever-expanding linear network makes little economic sense.

- ❑ **Speed restrictions** are feasible only in short, singular stretches. E.g.
 - 11km near Berhampore in Odisha
 - 8-km segment through Jharkhand's Palamu
 - 4-km in the Palghat Gap in the Western Ghats that connects Kerala's Palakkad and Tamil Nadu's Coimbatore
- ❑ However, speed restriction is not an option on **steep gradients**.
- ❑ E.g. in Assam's Karbi Anglong, where to climb, trains must accelerate
- ❑ In North Bengal, the night speed limit once applied to a total of around 17 km.
- ❑ It was applied for a **series of short stretches** of 1-3 km each, in an 80-km segment between Siliguri and Alipurduar.
- ❑ But since 1-3 km does not cover even the **braking distance**, trains ran slowly over the entire segment.
- ❑ Slowing down trains for hours at a stretch would disrupt **rail traffic** over a large part of the network.

Suggestive Measures

- ❑ **Speed restrictions** - This could work better when guided by real-time inputs on elephant movements.
- ❑ A protocol put in place in Rajaji National Park (Uttarakhand) helped avert elephant casualties for many years.
- ❑ Followed rigorously, it can be replicated in short stretches elsewhere.
- ❑ **Realignment** - There are places where a track, or road, cuts across several wildlife corridors over a longer stretch.
- ❑ The solution for these junctions could be realignment.
- ❑ Where realignment is not possible, tracks have to be elevated with underpasses for elephants.
- ❑ **Railways** - Not all forest routes can be realigned or elevated overnight.
- ❑ The Railways must thus prioritise, and balance efficiency and safety while planning projects or expanding existing ones.
- ❑ Expertise and experience available to find site-specific, science-based solutions for key corridors should be made use of.
- ❑ **Political will** - The test lies in the will to implement those remedies irrespective of the cost.
- ❑ It will take a lot more to secure the elephant's fragmented and shrinking home, such as giving up on sizeable coal reserves.
- ❑ **Provisions** - Elephants mostly travel for water.
- ❑ Periodic de-siltation of their watering holes will keep them in their areas.
- ❑ **Besides**, WTI (Wildlife Trust of India) is testing an automated solar-powered device, **EleTrack**.
- ❑ This can detect large animals near the tracks and issue a loud, flashing warning for train drivers.

Source: Indian Express

Science and Technology, Defense, Health

Remove Debris Mission

Why in news?

- ☛ RemoveDebris system, a UK-led experiment to tackle space junk is set to head into orbit. The system is going to the International Space Station where astronauts are expected to set the experiment running in late May.

About the RemoveDebris mission:

- ✓ RemoveDebris is an EU (European Union) research project to develop and fly a low cost in-orbit demonstrator mission that aims to de-risk and verify technologies needed for future ADR (Active Debris Removal) missions.
- ✓ RemoveDebris is aimed at performing key ADR technology demonstrations (e.g., capture, deorbiting) representative of an operational scenario during a low-cost mission using novel key technologies for ADR. The project is based on and aimed at contributing to global/European ADR roadmaps.

How it works ?

- ☛ A microsatellite called here RemoveSAT, will release, capture and deorbit two space debris targets, called DebrisSats, in sequence using various rendezvous, capture and deorbiting technologies thus demonstrating in orbit, key ADR technologies for future missions in what promises to be the first ADR technology mission internationally.

What is the issue ?

- ☐ Space junk is an ever-growing problem with more than 7,500 tonnes of redundant hardware now thought to be circling the Earth.
- ☐ Ranging from old rocket bodies and defunct spacecraft through to screws and even flecks of paint – this material poses a collision hazard to operational missions.

Source: The Hindu

Cryptojacking and Cryptocurrency Mining

Why in news ?

- ☐ The ever increasing attractiveness for cryptocurrency mining is leaving way for new threats in the cyber space.
- ☐ Cryptojacking has become the latest threat to computers worldwide.

How do cryptocurrencies work?

- ☐ Cryptocurrencies like Bitcoin are based on the **blockchain technology**.

- ❑ The blockchain technology involves maintaining a **digital ledger** to publicly record transactions.
- ❑ A blockchain is reliant on the **network of computers** that run the software for the cryptocurrency.
- ❑ The computers participate in the relay of information regarding **transactions** made between holders of the currency.
- ❑ These computers in the network are called **nodes**.
- ❑ They can be operated by anyone who downloads the **bitcoin software** available for free online.
- ❑ When a transaction is initiated, **encrypted details** are transmitted among all nodes.

What is cryptocurrency mining?

- ❑ The money in cryptocurrency is not printed. It is rather discovered, or “mined”.
- ❑ Mining is used to confirm waiting transactions and then record it into a public ledger called blockchain.
- ❑ The web of nodes in blockchain technology includes those operated by **miners**.
- ❑ Miners’ objective is to group the outstanding transactions into blocks and then add them to the blockchain.
- ❑ A mining hardware competes with others on the network to earn cryptocurrencies.

How does mining work?

- ❑ Computers around the world “Mine” for bitcoins competing with each other.
- ❑ Adding encrypted transactions to the blockchain is accomplished by the miner’s cryptocurrency software.
- ❑ This involves solving a complex mathematical puzzle involving the numerical keys to the encryption.
- ❑ Once a node has hit upon the right combination, it conveys its success to other nodes.
- ❑ Subsequently, other miners drop processing that block and move on to the next.
- ❑ The winning node that registers a transaction by adding it to the blockchain is rewarded in Bitcoin.

What are the challenges ?

- ❑ The cost of mining is often highly expensive.
- ❑ High-end machines with substantial computing power are required to solve the puzzle in a timely manner.
- ❑ The electricity required to power the hardware also considerably adds to the cost.

Why is mining attractive ?

- ✓ Cryptocurrencies are a boon for individuals or corporations which seek financial anonymity.
- ✓ The lack of a central regulatory authority facilitates trade in illegal goods through the virtual currencies.
- ✓ Exchanges that trade bitcoin have witnessed massive hike in prices owing to speculation.
- ✓ The valuation of a single bitcoin was around Rs.65,000 in January, 2017.

- ✓ Its value had peaked at around Rs.12,60,000 in December 2017.
- ✓ The software for mining cryptocurrencies like bitcoin is open source and available online.
- ✓ But the hardware processing speed required to make mining feasible are found only in high-end workstations that are powered by GPUs.
- ✓ Leveraging hardware assets to mine for coins is another means to have a share in the process.

What is the latest cryptojacking threat?

- ❑ As said earlier, cryptocurrency mining is lucrative but still involves huge costs, diminishing the attractiveness.
- ❑ To balance the cost overruns, attackers have started employing malware.
- ❑ It is a way to force an entry into the computers of remote users, and then using their hardware to mine for coins, it is called cryptojacking.
- ❑ It is profitable since it eliminates the cost burden of owning a mining assembly with hundreds of processors.

Who are vulnerable ?

- ❑ The phenomenon is not restricted to the miniscule minority that trades in cryptocurrencies or uses their systems to mine for coins.
- ❑ All users who browse the internet are vulnerable to their systems being 'cryptojacked'.
- ❑ Desktops, laptops, tablets, or even mobile devices can be maliciously subverted without the knowledge of their owners.

How does crptojacking work?

- ❑ Cryptojackers usually target popular websites which draw audiences numbering in the millions every day.
- ❑ Once the malware patch has been embedded on a website, it infects the web browsers of visitors.
- ❑ It slows down their machines, often causing them to overheat.
- ❑ Websites and apps that do not charge a fee for consuming their content survive on revenue from digital advertising.
- ❑ However, websites like the file-sharing platform have been found to be employing code which hijacks users' system.
- ❑ It then uses it for mining cryptocurrency.
- ❑ Many websites view this as an alternative source of revenue, bypassing intrusive advertisements.

The way forward

- ❑ The transition to a digital economy has made financial services more dependent on technology.
- ❑ The emergence of cryptocurrencies has made it even more difficult to check hackers trying to access online finances.

- ❑ It is thus crucial to address the rising concern of cryptojacking.
- ❑ There are a range of applications that could protect computers from attacks by cryptojackers.
- ❑ Some of them include 'NoCoin', 'MalwareBytes', 'minerBlock'.
- ❑ While these tools are not completely infallible, they provide a first line of defence against potential security breaches.

Source: The Hindu

ODL - A New Class of Anti-biotic

Why in news?

- ❑ Researchers have reported the discovery of a new class of antibiotics called ODLs, whose operational mechanism is very unique. This also offers hope for overcoming the menace of drug resistance.

How does the new drug function ?

- ❑ This new class of anti-biotic is unique and promising on two fronts - its unconventional source and its distinct way of killing bacteria.
- ❑ Both of this suggests that the compound may be effective at treating drug-resistant or hard-to-treat infections.
- ❑ Odilorhabdin (or ODL) are antibiotics that are produced by special bacteria that are found inside the soil-dwelling "nematode worms".
- ❑ These bacteria live inside the said worms and are engaged in a symbiotic relationship with the insect for food.
- ❑ They are said to secrete antibiotics to keep competing bacteria away – of which, 80 cultured secretion strains were analysed by researches.
- ❑ Active compounds were also isolated and studied for engineering enhanced versions of the secretions for bettering their effectiveness.

The Mechanism

- ❑ ODLs were found to act on the ribosome of other bacteria, which is the molecular machine that makes the vital proteins.
- ❑ While many clinically useful antibiotics also target ribosome, ODLs are unique because they bind to a place on the ribosome that has never been used by other known antibiotics.
- ❑ When bound to the ribosome, ODL antibiotics disrupts the ribosome's ability to read, interpret and translate genetic code and thereby hinders reproduction.
- ❑ This leads to miscoding of proteins, which make newer bacterial off-springs to be born defective - thereby they die out soon and get annihilation.

How does its potency fare ?

- ❑ Researchers tested ODL compounds against bacterial pathogens, including many known to develop resistance.

- ❑ ODL compounds were found to cure mice infected with several pathogenic bacteria and demonstrated very positive results.
- ❑ Many antibiotics can slow bacterial growth, but antibiotics like ODL that kill bacteria are rare- thereby making this discovery a major breakthrough.

Source: Indian Express

GSAT-6A - Communication Lost

Why in news ?

- ☞ GSAT-6A was launched recently carrying a communication satellite. A day after launch, all communications with the satellite were lost, and the ISRO is working on restoring the link.

Where did the satellite fail ?

- ❑ The 2,000-kg-plus GSAT-6A was launched on the indigenous GSLV rocket recently, from the “Satish Dhawan Space Centre” at Sriharikota.
- ❑ The launch is said to have been as per plan.
- ❑ The controllers were subsequently involved in correcting the orbit into a circular one.
- ❑ This is a critical but frequently done exercise that lasts about a week.
- ❑ The first on-board motor firing for course correction lasted for about 36 minutes, and is said to have successfully achieved the desired maneuver.
- ❑ The communication from the satellite is said to have got disrupted after the second firing.
- ❑ It is believed that contact was lost due to a possible power glitch or a short circuit on the satellite.

The impact

- ❑ GSAT 6A is only a reserve for the already functional GSAT 6.
- ❑ So functional shortages are not expected currently even if contact is permanently lost.
- ❑ ISRO has also stated that its other missions would not be impacted by these developments.
- ❑ The navigation satellite IRNSS-1I's launch will proceed as per schedule.

Way Ahead

- ❑ ISRO has expressed hope of restoring communication.
- ❑ The systems on board seem to be in good health.
- ❑ Multiple ISRO teams are working through ground stations for restoration of communication.
- ❑ An expert committee has also been constituted to look into the issue and suggest possible recovery and other options.
- ❑ Notably, there are occasions when satellites have sprung alive after a few days.
- ❑ But given all these, chances appear to be dim in this case.

Source: The Hindu

Tiangong-1 Downing and Space Debris

Why in news ?

- ❑ The recent downing of Tiangong-1 ended concerns about where the debris from the space station would fall.
- ❑ It has however reignited the larger debate about space debris itself.

What is Tiangong-1 ?

- ❑ Tiangong-1 is China's space station.
- ❑ Launched in 2011, it made China just the third country to launch a space station.
- ❑ The Chinese used it to demonstrate spacecraft docking capabilities.
- ❑ Six astronauts visited Tiangong-1 in 2012 and 2013 in two crews.
- ❑ It included China's first woman astronauts, Liu Yang and Wang Yaping.

What is the issue ?

- ❑ Chinese lost control of the station in 2016.
- ❑ After losing control, China notified the United Nations Office for Outer Space Affairs and the Inter-Agency Space Debris Coordination Committee.
- ❑ Much of Tiangong burnt up in the atmosphere, until it finally splashed into the ocean.
- ❑ Weighing 8.5 tonnes, it dropped out of orbit and splashed into the South Pacific Ocean, just northwest of Tahiti.
- ❑ Tiangong-2 continues to be operational.
- ❑ This lab was launched the same year the Chinese lost control of the now-downed space station.

What are the concerns with space debris?

- ❑ At least 500,000 pieces of space debris, of various sizes, are orbiting the Earth.
- ❑ Nearly 7,500 tonnes of estimated amount of defunct, artificially created objects are currently in space.
- ❑ The speed up to which space junk travel is 28,000 kph.
- ❑ This is fast enough to destroy a spacecraft.
- ❑ Probability of an individual on Earth being hit by falling debris is 1 in 1 trillion.
- ❑ **ISRO** - PSLV-C19 had launched radar imaging satellite RISAT-1 in 2012.
- ❑ Recently, PSLV-C19's 4th stage burnt up over the Central Atlantic.

What is a spacecraft graveyard?

- ❑ There are larger space objects that may not entirely burn up before reaching the ground.
- ❑ Spacecraft operators can thus plan for the final destination of their old satellites to make sure that any debris falls into a remote area.

- ❑ A 1,500 sq km area in Southern Pacific Ocean is said to be the spacecraft graveyard or spacecraft cemetery.
- ❑ This is suitably far from any coast and human habitations thereby.
- ❑ Notably, more than 260 satellites were brought down there so far.

What could be done?

- ❑ Passivation - Satellite explosions are reduced by deactivating various systems.
- ❑ Design for demise - Designing with material that burn up on re-entry.
- ❑ Deorbiting systems - Under international guidelines, satellites are brought down within 25 years after mission life.
- ❑ Design for servicing - Grips or handles can be caught by a robotic arm or astronauts for repairs.
- ❑ RemoveDEBRIS - An innovation led by University of Surrey's Space Centre, UK.
- ❑ It was launched on a SpaceX flight to International Space Station recently.
- ❑ It will be released into low-earth orbit, where it will release a smaller satellite that will recapture space junk with a harpoon.
- ❑ ISRO - ISRO is looking to develop reusable launch vehicles.
- ❑ It had notably conducted a space capsule recovery experiment in 2007.

Source: Indian Express

European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) Law

Why in news?

- ☞ Recently, European Union has passed a General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) Law.

General Data Protection Regulation

- ☞ The GDPR redefines the understanding of the individual's relationship with their personal data.
- ❑ It relates to an identifiable living individual and includes names, email IDs, ID card numbers, physical and IP addresses.
- ❑ This law grants the citizen substantial rights in his/her interaction with
- ✓ **Data controllers** - Those who determine why and how data is collected such as a government or private news website.
- ✓ **Data processors** - Those who process the data on behalf of controllers, such as an Indian IT firm to which an E.U. firm has outsourced its data analytics.

What is the significance?

- ❑ Under the GDPR, a data controller will have to provide consent terms that are clearly distinguishable.
- ❑ The GDPR also requires data collectors to provide information on the 'who' and 'how.'

- ❑ Individuals will also have the right to have personal data deleted under certain conditions.
- ❑ The reporting obligations and enforcement are made stronger under the GDPR.
- ❑ By this, data breaches have to be reported within 72 hours and failure to comply with the new laws could result in a fine up to 4% of global turnover or maximum amount of fine 20 million Euros.

Implications for India

- ❑ The GDPR has global implications as it applies to those outside the E.U. who either monitors the behavior of EU residents or sell goods and services to them.
- ❑ The E.U. bloc is India's largest trading partner, with bilateral trade in services alone running upwards of •28 billion (Rs.2.2 lakh crore).
- ❑ Therefore it will have a significant impact on Indian IT firms and other service providers with E.U. business. But only a third of Indian IT firms are making arrangements for the GDPR and a third unaware of such a law.
- ❑ This will likely mean fines, loss of business and missed opportunities, as well as diplomatic wrangling in trade talks between India and the E.U.

Source: The Hindu

Draft Defence Production Policy, 2018

Why in news ?

- ☞ Ministry of Defence has released a new Draft Defence Production Policy (DProP), 2018.

What are the objectives of DProP, 2018?

- ❑ The DProP 2018 has embarked on an ambitious journey to mark India's position among the top defence production countries in the world.
- ❑ The DProP 2018 is focused on self-reliance.
- ❑ It seeks to change India's position from being the largest importer of arms in the world.

Highlights

- ❑ The policy targets 2025 for becoming self-reliant in 13 weapons platforms.
- ❑ It includes fighter aircraft, warships, tanks, missiles and artillery, which constitute the bulk of India's imports.
- ❑ The policy attempts for increased productivity and innovation.
- ❑ It thus calls for increased participation of MSMEs, start-ups and other players from the private sector in the defence industry.
- ❑ The policy would liberalise licences that will be provided to defence industries.
- ❑ Also, the requirements for renewal of licences will be pruned.
- ❑ The companies with a good track record will be given favourable consideration.

- ❑ The policy also liberalises the FDI regime in the defence sector.
- ❑ It aims at advancing and boosting the existing public sector defence production units.
- ❑ This is particularly aimed to be achieved through skill development and overall program management.
- ❑ The recent policy aims at fusing together technologies from Ordnance Factory Board, Defence Public Sector Undertaking and private players.
- ❑ For this, the policy plans on setting up Defence Export Organisation in partnership with the industry.
- ❑ This will facilitate for overseas marketing of domestically produced goods.

Expected outcomes of the policy

- ❑ If properly implemented the policy will reduce the **import** bill.
- ❑ It could increase the **export** earnings up to Rs 1, 70,000 crore by creating **employment** for more than 3 million people.
- ❑ This will make India a top destination for Research & Development (**R&D**) in the world.
- ❑ It can promote India as a hub for defence related **Intellectual Property** (IP).
- ❑ The broad policy will accelerate **domestic defence production** and thereby makes it feasible to have a market of our own.
- ❑ Indigenous defence production will attract more **investors** which eventually will lead to massive **market** creation.

Way ahead

- ❑ Realising the aims demands difficult changes. E.g. the military will have to abandon its insistence on imported, state-of-the-art weaponry.
- ❑ Several categories listed for complete indigenization are already available. However the military has traditionally insisted on inducting into service only cutting-edge, fully proven weaponry.
- ❑ There is a need for an overarching infrastructural, fiscal and legal environment, and essential testing and validating facilities that individual firms cannot cost-effectively create.
- ❑ The policy involves multiple ministries which could delay the establishment of defence production ecosystem within an optimistic time frame.

Source: Business Standard

World Health Day – Significance & Concerns

Why in news?

- ☞ April 7th of every year is celebrated as World Health Day under the sponsorship of WHO.

Significance of World Health Day

- ❑ World Health Day is one of eight official global health campaigns marked by WHO.

- ❑ Which include World Tuberculosis Day, World Immunization Week, World Malaria Day, World No Tobacco Day, World AIDS Day, World Blood Donor Day, and World Hepatitis Day.
- ❑ On World Health day WHO organizes international, regional and local events related to a particular theme.
- ❑ It primarily focuses on universal health coverage by fixing medical infrastructure.
- ❑ For the year 2018 the theme is “Universal Health Coverage (UHC): Everyone, Everywhere”.

Measures suggested by WHO towards UHC

- ❑ UHC ensures that all people get quality health services, where and when they need them, without suffering financial hardship and not having to make a choice between good health and other life necessities.
- ❑ WHO aims to
 1. Inspire – Policy makers by highlighting their power to transform health of the nation by driving policy change.
 2. Motivate – By providing examples of countries who have accomplished this goal and encourage them to find their own path.
 3. Guide - By providing tools for structured policy dialogue on how to advance UHC.

Status of UHC in India

- ❑ While India has done well on some indicators like immunisation of children for hepatitis B and Diphtheria-tetanus-pertussis.
- ❑ India’s health indicators such as Maternal Mortality Rate (MMR) and under-5 Mortality Rate are still on the higher side.
- ❑ There is also an increasing number of deaths due to TB and Malaria.
- ❑ The probability of an individual dying of the non-communicable diseases such as cancer between ages 30 - 70 is nearly 20 per cent.
- ❑ India has a long way to go as its healthcare infrastructure is inadequate and healthcare professionals are deficit particularly in the poorer parts of the country.

Source: Indian Express

Chemical Weapons and Use of Nerve Agents

Why in news ?

- ☞ Recently, nerve gas is allegedly used in ongoing Syria attack. It is imperative at this juncture to look into the status of chemical weapons, particularly nerve agents or nerve gases.

What are chemical weapons ?

- ❑ It is a toxic chemical in a delivery system such as bomb or artillery.

- ❑ Anything specifically designed for use in direct connection with the release of a chemical agent to cause death or harm is a chemical weapon.
- ❑ Each component of a chemical weapon is a chemical weapon, whether assembled or not, stored together or separately.
- ❑ E.g. choking agents - chlorine, phosgene, diphosgene and chloropicrin. Fluid builds up in lungs, choking victim.
- ❑ Blister agents - sulphur mustard, nitrogen mustard, phosgene oxime, Lewisite. Burns skin, mucous membranes and eyes; causes large blisters on exposed skin; blisters windpipe and lungs.
- ❑ Blood agents - Cyanide destroys ability of blood tissues to utilise oxygen, causing them to 'starve' and strangling the heart.
- ❑ Examples include hydrogen cyanide, cyanogen chloride, Arsine, VX.

What is CWC?

- ❑ The Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) is a consortium of 192 countries as signatories.
- ❑ It seeks to limit the availability of chemicals that can be used as tools of mass destruction.
- ❑ However, it allows member states to retain rights to use some of these chemicals for peaceful purposes such as riot control.
- ❑ Teargas shells, for example, are frequently used for riot control.

How is chemical weapons possession status?

- ❑ Of the 192 CWC signatories, Albania, India, Iraq, Libya, Russia, Syria, and the US declared possession of chemical weapons.
- ❑ Of these, Albania, India, Libya, Russia and Syria declared completion of destruction of chemical weapons.
- ❑ Notably, by January 2016 the destruction of all chemical weapons declared by Syria has been completed.
- ❑ Despite these, there have been continuous instances of chemical weapons attacks in Syria.

What are nerve gases?

- ❑ Nerve gases are among the most lethal form of chemical weapons.
- ❑ They notably have no use other than in chemical warfare.
- ❑ The CWC lists chemicals under various degrees of manufacturing restriction.
- ❑ Under this, the nerve gases are among the most restricted.

How do nerve gases work ?

- ❑ Nerve gas weakens the mechanism within the body responsible for the conduction of nerve impulses.
- ❑ Acetylcholineesterase is a compound that catalyses the breakdown of the neurotransmitter acetylcholine.

- ❑ Nerve gas prevents acetylcholinesterase from performing its normal function of breaking down acetylcholine.
- ❑ It leads to the muscles going into a state of uncontrolled contraction, a sign of paralysis or a seizure-like state.
- ❑ Death usually happens because paralysis extends to the cardiac and respiratory muscles.
- ❑ Other symptoms could include dilation of pupils, sweating and gastrointestinal pain etc.
- ❑ Nerve agents can also be absorbed through the skin.

What is Novichok ?

- ❑ As restrictions on weapons are based on chemical formulae, newer molecules can bypass restrictions.
- ❑ Countries thus started to develop newer weapons to bypass the restrictions.
- ❑ This naturally led to the emergence of nerve agents and that is how Novichok evolved.
- ❑ Novichok is said to be 5-8 times more lethal than VX nerve agent.
- ❑ Also, its effects are rapid, usually within 30 seconds to 2 minutes.

Source: Indian Express

The National Family Health Survey-4

Why in news ?

- ☛ The National Family Health Survey-4 (NFHS-4) shows a drop in underweight and stunted children less than five years of age.

Key Facts

- ❑ NFHS data show several States performing worse than the national average.
- ❑ 'Nourishing India', NITI Aayog's recent report, refers to acute malnutrition levels of about 25% in some States.
- ❑ Around 35% children are underweight and 38% are stunted in that age group.
- ❑ Many children have died of malnutrition in India.
- ❑ The body mass index of around 22% women aged 15-49 indicates chronic energy deficiency.

Recent Proposal in this Regard

- ❑ Minister of Women and Child Development has recently made a proposal in this regard.
- ❑ It suggested replacing ready-to-eat food as take-home dry ration with energy-dense nutrient packets.
- ❑ It suggests offering packaged/processed fortified mixes to children.
- ❑ These can be in powdered form and mixed with food for anganwadi beneficiaries.
- ❑ Instead of take-home ration, 30 such packets could be dispatched to a beneficiary for a month through the postal department.

- ❑ However, hot-cooked meal is put forth by many as unsubstitutable to address poor child nutrition.
- ❑ These include the officials of the Ministry themselves.

What are the Nutrition Council's moves ?

- ❑ The National Council on Nutrition (NCN) has unanimously **rejected the proposal** to replace ready-to-eat food.
- ❑ Existing practice of hot cooked meals for children (3-6 years) age group would be continued.
- ❑ Take-home ration (THR) would be continued for children (6 months-3 years), and pregnant women and lactating mothers.
- ❑ This would be as decided by the State governments in conformity with
 1. the National Foods Security Act, 2013
 2. the Supplementary Nutrition Rules, 2017
- ❑ It was also agreed to involve mothers of anganwadi beneficiaries.
- ❑ They would take part in preparation of meals, to ensure quality and encourage public participation.
- ❑ The council has also directed that pilot projects be conducted in 10 select districts on cash transfers instead of take-home rations.
- ❑ The Minister has however opposed the idea saying that there is no guarantee that beneficiaries would use the money for food.

The Way Ahead

- ❑ Tinkering with the existing ICDS scheme (Anganwadi Services Scheme) is seen to be fraught with danger.
- ❑ Attempts to substitute meals or rations with factory-made nutrients will inject commercialisation into a key mission.
- ❑ This could upset the fundamental nutritional basis of the scheme.
- ❑ Instead, anganwadi workers have to be empowered to ensure proper delivery of existing services.
- ❑ Provision of physical infrastructure and funding, besides closer monitoring of anganwadi services, could be ensured.
- ❑ Local self-help groups could be engaged to ensure “region-location based recipe and dietary diversification.”
- ❑ Theoretically, the mission covers every child, but in practice it is not accessible to all, and this needs redressal.

Source: The Hindu

Ayushman Bharat Scheme

Why in news ?

- ☛ The centre has introduced “Ayushman Bharat” as an ambitious mass health insurance scheme, that intends to cover about 50 crore people.

What is the medi-care landscape in India ?

- ❑ A nation’s development and growth is gauged by the health of its population. But even after 70 years of independence, 80% of the Indian population is not covered under any health insurance scheme.
- ❑ Additionally, the cost of medi-care is very high in comparison with the average income of the population, which makes it unaffordable for many.
- ❑ Hence, the announcement of the ‘National Health Protection Scheme’ (NHPS) under ‘Ayushman Bharat Programme’, in the Union Budget 2018-19, is timely.
- ❑ While the government has intended to provide free care to about 40% of the population at one go, it is impossible to do this with the existing facilities.
- ❑ Notably, this has been touted as the world’s largest government-funded healthcare program and the sheer scale of the proposal is intimidating.

What is the scale of infrastructure enhancement required?

- ❑ Worldwide, most governments have achieved near universal coverage by spending somewhere between 5-12% of their GDP.
- ❑ For countries with large population, it takes a minimum of 5-10 years to achieve 100% coverage as health cover can’t be extended at a stretch.
- ❑ It has been estimated that to achieve universal health coverage by 2022, Indian government would need to allocate 3.7-4.5% of GDP for health.
- ❑ This is almost 4 times the present 1.4% and the also the bed-to-population ratio needs to be almost doubled from the current 0.9 (per 1000 people) to 1.7.
- ❑ It is to be noted that considerable improvements in primary care would also result in reduction of the hospitalisation rate.
- ❑ Also, we would need an additional 9 lakh graduate doctors for primary care and around 1.2 lakh specialist doctors for secondary and tertiary care services.

What are the challenges ?

- ❑ The hospital business, particularly the multi-speciality tertiary care business, is capital-intensive with a long gestation period.
- ❑ While infrastructure is already severely short (particularly in Tier II and Tier III cities), even existing operating assets aren’t delivering the expected returns.
- ❑ Hence, the government should provide adequate finances for the sector’s development and also provide incentives and tax benefits.

- ❑ Another challenge is that health is a state subject and hence requires states to contribute 40% of the expenditure for Ayushman Bharat.
- ❑ Notably, most states have a poor fiscal situation, and several operational state health schemes which will also have to be aligned with the central initiative.
- ❑ The model for empanelling providers would be critical to the success of NHPS and a shared space for both public and private care providers is ideal.
- ❑ Even in the previous public health insurance schemes of some states, the private healthcare providers have been facing huge challenges.
- ❑ Particularly, improper procedure for empanelment, cost fixing mechanisms and inordinate delay in reimbursement to hospitals are some issues.
- ❑ Also, a proper mechanism for standardisation of services across the spectrum is absent and the current 'National Accreditation Board for Hospitals' (NABH) certification covers only some hospitals.

Way ahead

- ❑ NABH needs to categorise hospitals into Entry level, Progressive level and Accreditation level to cover all hospitals.
- ❑ To improve clinical and operational efficiencies, standardisation in clinical practice and other processes needs to be implemented.
- ❑ National Costing Guidelines and a standard costing template should be used for calculating reimbursement packages.
- ❑ Framing of referral protocols, adoption of electronic health record standards and clinical audits in all hospitals are other aspects that need to be done.
- ❑ Successful medical claims management is also very important under any insurance programme and fraud control mechanisms should also be done.
- ❑ Integration of technology at each level of the healthcare continuum such as tele-medicine, health call-centres, tele-radiology etc, is needed.
- ❑ For strengthening the healthcare professionals, skilling, re-skilling and up-skilling programmes for existing as well as additional workforce can be done.
- ❑ A Grievance Redressal Forum should be created to ensure timely resolution of complaints without intervention of civil or consumer courts.
- ❑ The government should also encourage and recognise transparency, self-regulation and third party ratings and reward clinical outcomes.

Source: Business Standard



Internal Security

Decision on Red Corridor Region

Why in news ?

- ☞ Ministry of Home Affairs (MoHA) has redrawn the red corridor region which is affected by Left-wing extremism.

What is a red corridor region?

- ❑ Red corridor region is demarcated by the union government to notify the districts which are affected by left wing extremism.
- ❑ It is spanning across 106 districts in 10 States, namely Bihar, Jharkhand, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Odisha, Telangana, West Bengal, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Chhattisgarh.

What is the recent decision on red corridor region?

- ❑ A recent report of MoHA classifies the red corridor region with respect to the severity of the Naxal influence.
- ❑ The three main categories are -
 1. **Severely affected** - Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Odisha and Bihar
 2. **Partially affected** - West Bengal, Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh
 3. **Slightly affected** - Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh
- ❑ 44 districts have been removed from the list and eight new districts which could be slightly or partially affected has been added to the list.
- ❑ The recent decision is taken since only 30 worst affected districts account for 90% of the LWE violence.

What were the actions taken by government to tackle LWE?

- ❑ The National Policy & Action Plan constituted by the MoHA had been introduced to reduce the concentration of Naxal affected districts.
- ❑ All expenses incurred by the affected areas were covered under the Security Related Expenditure (SRE) Scheme.
- ❑ This provides funds for projects related to development such as infrastructure, transportation, communication, bridges and schools.
- ❑ Under which mobile towers, boarding schools and roads were installed in LWE affected areas.
- ❑ Government also aims for a multi-pronged strategy which primarily includes development and security aspects of affected districts.

Source: The Indian Express

More News

Lalit Kala Akademi

- ❑ Recently, the President has appointed Ministry of Culture's Joint Secretary as Protem Chairman of the Lalit Kala Academy.
- ❑ The Akademi was inaugurated in New Delhi on 1954, by the then Minister for Education, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad.
- ❑ Lalit Kala Akademi is the Government's apex cultural body in the field of visual arts in India.
- ❑ It is an autonomous body, which is fully funded by the Ministry of Culture.
- ❑ It has substantial independence in making decisions related to national and international exhibitions, events and providing financial assistance to artists and art organisations through scholarships and grants.
- ❑ Its head quarter is at New Delhi.

Brahma Rathotsava

- ❑ Recently, Brahma Rathotsava (a twin car festival) was celebrated at Hampi.
- ❑ Hampi is a temple town in northern Karnataka that was once the capital of the historical Vijayanagara Dynasty.
- ❑ The magnificence of the ruins of temples and other structures of Vijayanagar in hampi is dating back to 1500 AD.
- ❑ It is located on the bank of the Tungabhadra River.

World Autism Awareness Day

- ❑ The United Nations General Assembly declared 2 April as World Autism Awareness Day.
- ❑ It is to highlight the need to help improve the quality of life of those with autism so they can lead full and meaningful lives as an integral part of society.
- ❑ Autism is a lifelong neurological condition that manifests during early childhood, irrespective of gender, race or socio-economic status.
- ❑ The term Autism Spectrum refers to a range of characteristics.
- ❑ It is mainly characterized by its unique social interactions, non-standard ways of learning, keen interests in specific subjects, inclination to routines, challenges in typical communications and particular ways of processing sensory information.
- ❑ The 2018 Autism Awareness Day observance at United Nations Headquarters New York will focus on the importance of 'Empowering women and girls with autism'.

27th Saraswati Samman- 2017

- ❑ On April 27, 2018, the famous Gujarati poet Sitanshu Yashaschandra was selected for the 27th Saraswati Samman for the year 2017.

- ❑ He will be given this honor for his poem collection ‘Vakhar’.
- ❑ This book was published in the year 2009.
- ❑ Sitanshu Yashaschandra is the president of Gujarati Sahitya Parishad.
- ❑ For his poetry collection ‘Jatayu’ he was awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award for Gujarati in the year 1987.
- ❑ He was also honored with the Padma Shri by the Central Government in the year 2006.
- ❑ Earlier, the 26th Saraswati Samman, 2016 was given to Konkani language litterateur Mahabaleshwar Sail for his novel ‘Hawthan’.
- ❑ It is known that in the year 1991, Saraswati Samman was established by the K.K Birla Foundation.
- ❑ This award is given every year to the outstanding literary work of Indian writers published in the last 10 years in any Indian language as described in the 8th Schedule of the Constitution.
- ❑ Under the Award prize money of Rs. 15 lakhs is given with a citation and memento.

2017 Shorenstein Journalism Award

- ❑ On 16th April, 2018 Siddharth Varadarajan, founding editor of *The Wire*, has been named the 2017 recipient of the Shorenstein Journalism Award.
- ❑ The award, given annually by Stanford University’s Walter H. Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center (APARC), is conferred upon a journalist who has produced outstanding reporting on Asia and has contributed significantly to Western understanding of the region.
- ❑ Varadarajan will headline a panel discussion on April 16, 2018, at Stanford.
- ❑ He was given this award as editor for his good research report and his comments in independent, web based journalism.
- ❑ The announcement for this award was made on March 1st, 2018.

Most Film Friendly State Award

- ❑ On April 19th, 2018, Madhya Pradesh state is elected as ‘Most Film Friendly State Award-2017’.
- ❑ The Most Film Friendly State Award was announced by the Chairman of the Jury, Shri Ramesh Sippy.
- ❑ Madhya Pradesh was selected unanimously by the Jury from among the 16 States that participated.
- ❑ Madhya Pradesh has been selected for this award for its efforts towards easing filming in the State by creating a well-structured web site, film friendly infrastructure, offering incentives, maintaining databases, undertaking marketing and promotional initiatives.
- ❑ Madhya Pradesh is offering a variety of incentives as well as setting up a well-established website and setting up film-friendly infrastructure.
- ❑ State of Uttarakhand is given a Special Mention Certificate to recognize the efforts made by the State of Uttarakhand towards creating a film friendly environment.
- ❑ The Most Film Friendly State Awards would be presented by Hon’ble President of India on May 3rd, 2018 during the presentation of the National Film Awards.
- ❑ It is the fact that the highest film-friendly state award of 2016 was given to Uttar Pradesh.

Begum Akhtar Award 2017-18

- ❑ Recently, the Begum Akhtar Awards were delivered by the Uttar Pradesh government for year 2017-2018.
- ❑ The Begum Akhtar Award for the year 2017-18 was awarded to the Harmonium player and sub-classical singer Pt Dharmanath Mishra and Ghazal singer Ustad Sakhawat Hussain.
- ❑ Whereas the year 2018 award was given to Ustad Sakhawat Hussain Khan.
- ❑ On this occasion Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath gave the Shawl, the citation and the amount of Rs 5 lakh each to the two people.
- ❑ It is worth mentioning that this award is given in the memory of Begum Akhtar (Akhtar Bai Faizabadi), popularly known as 'Mallika e-Ghazal'.
- ❑ This award is given to talented singers in Dadra, Thumri and Gazal genres.
- ❑ On this occasion, the Chief Minister awarded Uttar Pradesh Rani Lakshmi Bai Gallantry award to 129 women and children.
- ❑ They were awarded in the form of prize the shawl, citation and money worth Rs. 1 lakh.

P.P. Laxman

- ❑ On April 30th, 2018, Former honorary secretary of FIFA of All India Football Federation (AIFF), PP Laxman passed away. He was 83 years old.
- ❑ He served as the president of several football associations.
- ❑ He was the first Indian to become a FIFA appeals committee member.

Full-time Member of 15th Finance Commission

- ❑ Central Government has appointed former Chief Economic Advisor Dr. Ashok Lahiri appointed a full time member of the 15th Finance Commission.
- ❑ Currently he is working as a temporary member in the commission itself. As a permanent member, he will be given the status of Minister of State.
- ❑ It is known that the Central Government on November 27th, 2017, the full time member of the Planning Commission, A.K. Singh the 15th Finance Commission was constituted under the chairmanship of Singh.
- ❑ Satikant Das and Dr. Anoop Singh is other members of the Commission.
- ❑ Ramesh Chand, member of the Policy Commission, is a part-time member of the Commission.
- ❑ It is notable that the Finance Commission is set up under Article 280 (1) of the Indian Constitution.
- ❑ The 15th Finance Commission will be applicable from 1st April, 2020.

Ravi Thapar

- ❑ On April 20th, 2018, Senior Secretary of the Indian Foreign Service Ravi Thapar was appointed by the Central Government to be the next Ambassador of India to Nicaragua.

- ❑ He is the IFS officer of the year 1983 batch.
- ❑ Currently he is India's Ambassador to Panama.
- ❑ Managua is the capital of Nicaragua.
- ❑ Daniel Ortega is currently the President of this country.

Director General of National Testing Agency

- ❑ Central Government appointed Vineet Joshi, senior official of the Indian Administrative Service as the first Director General of the National Testing Agency (NTA).
- ❑ He is the 1992 batch IAS officer of Manipur cadre.
- ❑ His tenure will be for 5 years.
- ❑ He has Former Chairman of CBSE.
- ❑ India is that the Union Cabinet had approved the formation of the NTA in November 2017.
- ❑ This agency will organize entrance exams entrusted by any department or ministry.
- ❑ Initially, agency will conduct examinations from 2019 to present conducted by CBSE, NET, CTET and NEET.

World Immunization Week 2018

- ❑ Between April 24th-30th 2018, World Immunization Week was observed throughout the world.
- ❑ This year's theme is – 'Protecting Together from Immunization'.
- ❑ This week, the vaccine is celebrated to make people aware about the importance of vaccinating on time against preventable diseases.
- ❑ According to WHO, vaccination is a certified remedy to control diseases.
- ❑ Vaccination is a process through which the person is immunized, or immunization is usually developed by immunization resistant capacity for infectious diseases.
- ❑ Vaccination helps save the child from deadly diseases.
- ❑ It helps reduce the spread of disease among other people.
- ❑ It is notable that the World Vaccination Day is celebrated on 10th November every year.
- ❑ The Indian Government launched Mission Rainbow on December 25, 2014 with the aim of getting complete vaccination coverage for all children.
- ❑ The main objective of this program is to make sure that all children and pregnant women under 2 years of age are given full immunization through all available vaccines.

World Intellectual Property Day

- ❑ On April 26th, 2018; World Intellectual Property Day has been celebrated all over the world.
- ❑ In the year 2018, the theme of this day -Powering Change: Women in innovation and Creativity).

- ❑ The purpose of celebrating this day is to make people aware about intellectual property rights (patent, trademark, industrial design, copyright etc.).
- ❑ World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) announced the celebration of this day on April 26, in the year 2000.
- ❑ Significantly, WIPO is one of the 15 specific agencies of the United Nations.
- ❑ It was established on July 14, 1967.
- ❑ Its headquarters is in Geneva, Switzerland.
- ❑ Currently Francis Gurry is Director General of the WIPO.

World Malaria Day- 2018

- ❑ On April 25th, 2018 World Malaria Day was celebrated across the world.
- ❑ The main theme of this day in year 2018 was – ‘Ready to Beat Malaria’.
- ❑ According to the latest World Malaria Report, 2017, released in November 2017, there were 216 million cases of malaria in the year 2016.
- ❑ Which are more than 211 million cases in year 2015.
- ❑ The number of deaths from malaria in the year 2016 was 445,000.
- ❑ According to the report, in the year 2016, 90 percent of the total world affairs and 91 percent of total deaths were in the African region.
- ❑ Malaria transmission was running in 91 countries and regions in 2016.
- ❑ It is known that the infection of malaria spreads through female anopheles mosquito, which carries a parasite called Plasmodium from one body to the other.
- ❑ National strategic plan (2017-2022) for eradicating malaria has been prepared.
- ❑ India’s goal is to eliminate malaria by 2030.