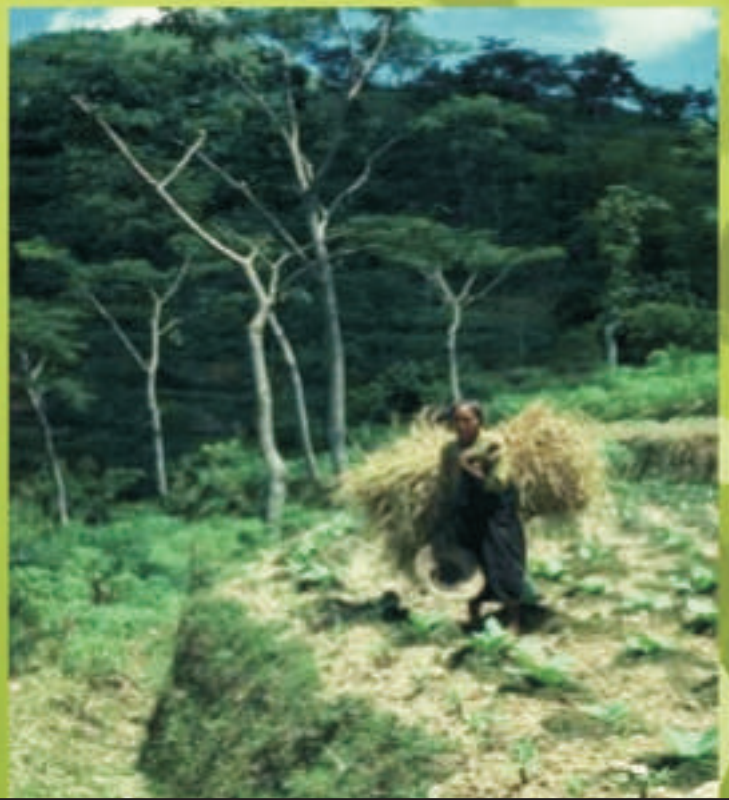


ELITE IAS

Current Affairs August - 2018

RURAL DEVELOPMENT



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The Editorial**SPACE TECHNOLOGY FOR RURAL DEVELOPMENT**

The Indian Space programme has the primary objective of developing space technology and application programmes to meet the developmental needs of the country. Space technology, as the powerful enabler, provides a variety of vital inputs for holistic and rapid development of rural areas, and villages in specific. India has been among the world leaders in developing end-to-end capability in both satellite remote sensing and communication.

Recognizing the key needs for rural employment sector, space technology application in the form of Web GIS was initiated in addressing decentralised planning through SIS DP programme and rendering it through Bhuvan Panchayat. This has been followed by successful initiatives of Watershed monitoring, geo-tagging of completed assets created under MGNREGA as well as geotagging the agricultural infrastructure created under Rashtriya Krishi Vikas Yojana (RKVY), a national level agriculture extension project) Three major department at national level concerning agriculture, land resources and rural employment have adopted the collation of flagship initiatives under PMKSY so as to achieve a linked execution, to benefit the farmer through the cascade of developmental programmes.

Harvesting rainfall and conserving it locally forms the core idea of a national flagship scheme, Pradhan Mantri Krishi Sinchayee Yojana for irrigating rainfed tracts using convergence of rural development programmes aiming to ameliorate rural landscape through soil and water conservation. PMKSY aims to achieve high degree of effective water availability and use for Indian farms especially in water scarce regions. Integrated Watershed Management Programme (IWMP), Mission Water Conservation (MGNREGA), Har Khet to Pani (HKKP, Water for Every Farm) and Per Drop More Crop (PDMC) are four major pillars of PMKSY which in turn, are linked by principle of water to be delivered preferably for dry land farming. All four programmes are being monitored by ISRO using integrated web GIS based solutions including smart phone apps. Monitoring IWMP and GeoMGNREGA has substantial relevance for the current perspective since it involves a sizeable investment in plantations of both horticulture and forestry crops as well as additional agriculture achieved due to them.

In view of such an ambitious flagship initiative, application of space technology is being developed at much higher capacity. Villages spread across wide variety of terrain and access are being monitored, assessed and assisted using geospatial technology for achieving best possible development rooted in conservation of soil and water. NRSC/ISRO developed Geo-Spatial solutions for monitoring and evaluation of IWMP, MGNREGA, PMGSY, Assets mapping under RKVY, Waste Land development, Space based information Support for Decentralised Planning (SIS-DP).

Monitoring Impact of Watershed Management Programmes :

Watershed Development Programme is one of the major initiatives in the country towards conservation of soil and water resources in the rain fed area for enhancing agricultural production, ensuring livelihood security to rural people besides halting the depletion of natural resources. Over the years, space applications have been adapted to respond to integrated development of land and water resources, and assess the improvements of the treated watershed. The developmental plans drawn at micro-watershed level, using thematic maps on resource status viz., improvement in cropping intensity & crop yield, decrease in fallow lands, increase in irrigated crops.

Integrated Watershed Management Programme (IWMP) initiated by MORD has been implemented across India where in each cluster of micro-watersheds called projects are treated through various bio-physical measures. Watershed Development Component is critical component of PMKSY, where as other components address network of irrigation at farm level (HKKP : Har Khet Ko pani, water to individual Farm) as well as micro irrigation (PDMC – Per Drop More Crop).

IWMP aims to bring in ecological stability through conservative utilization of soil and water resources for all IWMP identified watershed projects. Implementation of IWMP ensures that more micro level water sources are created as well as ground water is replenished by controlling run off.

IWMP projects across the country were monitored initially in 10 states and 50 districts for special projects under PMO focus. Buoyed by the reliability and success, after about 15 months of the initiation of the project, Department of Land Resource allotted all IWMP projects to NRSC for monitoring. Monitoring involves observing 8200 projects (covering about 8100 micro-watershed) every year for five years beginning from 2013–14 period which is about 3.5–4 years after the first allocation of IWMP. By virtue of its innovative convergence of high resolution satellite data, of high resolution to detect changes brought in due to watershed interventions as well as non-treatment reasons across varied agro-climatic contexts makes it unique. Especially the scope of integrating land cover alterations effected due to other projects as inducing changes in surface and subsurface hydrology is far reaching.

Remote sensing technology can play a major role in monitoring such activities. The high resolution satellite data (images) gives large perspective view of the ground situation and it can be monitored at periodic time intervals. A Web based GIS application (Srishti) enabling the monitoring and evolution of IWMP watersheds was developed using satellite remote sensing and sample field data. A mobile smart phone application (Drishti) has been developed for field data collection.

Field data collection using smart phone is integrated as complementary data. The collected field attributes with photographs information's can be overlaid over the satellite data (geotagged) to give a good perspective of activities in the field. Till data, a total of 8.71 lakh geotags have been collected (accepted 7.6 lakhs) for various activities executed on the ground. Each geotag is coded automatically in Bhuvan server following specific structure to identify the asset (activity) done on the field), which Department of Land Resources uses for official purposes. National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD) is providing the financial support to the watershed development activities with an aim to increase incomes through enhanced agricultural production and to improve sustainability of natural resources through better watershed management among the people living in selected micro-watersheds. The web based monitoring and sustainability of 108 watershed projects is implemented in Gujarat (28), Rajasthan (31), Madhya Pradesh (13) and Telangana (36). Project has been upscaled and another 394 projects are taken up for monitoring & evaluation in second phase of project across additional 14 states. A Bhuvanportal is developed using satellite data as per the requirements of NABARD (<http://bhuvan.nrsc.gov.in/projects/nabard/index.php>) and a mobile app for NABARD's requirements for field data collection.

Impact of IWMP :

The impact of water conservation efforts has been clearly evident in bi-temporal satellite images during the implementation period. Observations and interactions during field visits, confirm the irrigation potential of structures created under IWMP. Since the entire process is available as geospatial database comprehending the results of the watershed management, indicators of sustainability can be derived from the time series satellite imaging even in periods beyond project schedules. Illustration of changes brought about in watersheds due to construction of check dams, farm ponds as well as vegetation establishment provided herewith demonstrates the potential of web enabled GIS portal for rendering the most transparent monitoring of development activity including access to citizens.

GeoMGNREGA : Geospatial Applications for cataloguing, monitoring and planning Rural Employment Generation Activities

GeoMGNREGA which is a space technology based component of MGNREGA of Ministry of Rural Development aims to implement geographic information system for entire range of activities implemented under the scheme. National Remote Sensing Centre (NRSC), ISRO developed and implemented Web portal on Bhuvan integrating smart phone app and GIS. Further to its initial geotagging exercise, MoRD is implementing activities realigned to water conservation based on ridge to valley principles and has made role of remote sensing, GIS and GPS technologies central to their planning, implementing and monitoring.

Geo-MGNREGA, developed by NRSC, is a geo-information enabled web service/portal that assists the planning and management of activities of MGNREGA ranging from support functions to the delivery of work to the end-users. It has been developed through integrating NREGASOFT with the ISRO's BHUVAN portal. Database of completed assets residing on "NREGASoft" is also pushed to Bhuvan, which in turn is served to each data collector under Gram Panchayats through GeoMGNREGA. Collected data is moderated for quality by approved authorities at block level. Thus, Bhuvan facilitates an inclusive geographic information storage, retrieval, analysis and reporting for completed assets, with a high resolution Indian Remote Sensing Satellite in the backdrop for rural development planning. The major application of GeoMGNREGA is primarily in operational monitoring of the assets

MGNREGA is monitored through Bhuvan Geoportal involving geotagging of completed assets through smart phone application across the country. Of targeted 2.72 crore assets created under NREGA, 1.57 crore assets were geotagged, with persistent support of Ministry of Rural Development. Bhuvan portal for field level geotagging demonstrates the utilization of Geo-Spatial technologies for governance and enables mutual benefit to all stakeholders involved.

Realising the need to orient it through a scientific basis, especially in the context of PMKSY, Department of Rural Development has remodelled the rural employment paradigm on Natural Resource Management (NRM) principles and adapted it as mission water conservation. In this renewed approach, ridge to valley principles will be used for deciding the MGNREGA works under NRM category. NRM category consists of 111 out of 153 activities being carried out under MGNREGA. The approach would employ remote sensing images, existing information on assets of villages and spatial database on various themes such as rocks, geomorphology, water, land, forest and disaster proneness.

Geospatial Technology for Rashtriya Krishi Vikas Yojana (RKVY) :

Department of Agriculture and Cooperation and Farmers Welfare, Ministry of Agriculture, has implemented Rashtriya Krishi Vikas Yojana (RKVY), as a special Additional Central Assistance (ACA) Scheme by DACFW, MAFW. Project started from 2007–2008 covering 5768 projects in broad categories of agriculture and allied sectors, viz., horticulture, natural resources management., agricultural mechanization, marketing and post-harvest management, animal husbandry, dairy development, fisheries, extension etc.

A Bhuvan portal has been developed for mapping assets under RKVY. A smart phone based mobile app was developed by NRSC/ISRO for capturing the assets spread across country. This app is location specific and has features like locating the Asset on Bhuvanmap, capturing the latitude/longitude along with photos, attribute information by field official/enumerator. As of now more than 62000 assets have been geotagged, of which about 12000 have been accepted after verification.

Prime Minister Gram Sadak Yojana (PMGSY) :

The Conventional data source for rural roads such as cadastral maps, SOI topomaps provide useful information. But this information needs to be updated periodically for effective monitoring and evaluation. In this context, high resolution satellite data will provide reliable information on the status of rural roads as on the data of satellite imagery. For the first time, an attempt was made to create spatial database on rural roads in the year 1999 on a pilot basis for IchodaMandal in Adilabad district, Telangana State where in it demonstrated the use of IRS 1C PAN data. Subsequently, the study was extended to the districts of Jhalawar, Baran and Dhaulpur in Rajasthan on operational basis at the behest of Ministry of Rural Development, Govt. of India, executed a pilot project covering 10 districts in 5 states. Further, for three selected blocks of erstwhile Mahabubnagar district, Telangana state, similar studies were undertaken by NRSC. The resultant geospatial information was ported on Bhuvan for visualization.

In light of the above mentioned efforts on using Geo-informatics in rural road projects, Ministry of Rural Development approached NRSC and CGRAD in coordination with NRRDA to jointly undertake the activity in project mode. Hence, a project is being initiated to monitor the rural road activity under PMGSY.

Development of Waste Lands :

Department of Land Resources under the Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD), requested NRSC/ISRO, to generate spatial information on wastelands, using remote sensing techniques, with respect to their distribution, extent, nature, degree of degradation and temporal behaviour to facilitate the planning and implementation of development strategies for reclamation of wastelands. NRSC had prepared wastelands map and atlases since 1986 and monitored them from 2005–06 onwards.

According to National Wastelands Development Board, waste land is defined as “degraded land that can be brought under vegetative cover’ with reasonable effort and which is currently under-utilized and land which is deteriorating due to lack of appropriate water and soil management or on account of natural causes. “NRSC prepared the wasteland maps of all the states and union territories on 1 : 1 million scale in the year 1985. An eight fold classification system was adopted for mapping of wastelands in the country. Based on this study, the total area under wastelands in the country was estimated to be 53.3 million hectares or 16.20 per cent of the total geographical area of the country. The maps generated in this exercise provided gross estimation of wastelands and their spatial distribution.

Waste Land mapping was carried out during the period 1986–2000 adopting 13 fold classification system. A final consolidated atlas on wastelands was published in May, 2000. Subsequently, at the request of Department of Land Resources (DoLR), NRSC mapped the waste lands adopting 28 fold classification and updated the earlier Atlas. The extent of wastelands in the country was estimated as 55.27 m. ha. (17.45% of Total Geographical Area).

To understand the spatial and temporal changes in wastelands, a project on National Wastelands Monitoring was initiated in 2006 with the objective of assessing the status of wastelands and to monitor its changes. The satellite data of three seasons viz kharif, rabi and zaid of 2005–06 had been used to derive information on wastelands. This exercise enabled to improve the delineation of wasteland categories due to use of three season satellite data. An area of 47.22 m. ha (14.91% of TGA) was recorded as wastelands. In the year 2010, DoLR has again requested to undertake wasteland mapping using satellite data of 2008–09 and to bring out changes in wastelands with reference to 2005–06. The wasteland classes of 2005–06 were updated using satellite data of 2008–09 and the change areas were identified. These changes were later confirmed using limited ground checks.

National Wastelands Change Analysis is unique in the entire wastelands mapping since it facilitates objective comparison of wastelands between 2005–06 and 2008–09. An area of 46.70 m. ha (14.75%) have been recorded as wastelands. The decrease in wastelands of 3.2 million hectares was observed, spread over 112057 locations, while simultaneously an increase in wastelands of 2.7 million hectares in 42886 locations, while simultaneously an increase in wastelands of 2.7 million hectares in 42886 locations was observed. Thus, the net result was decrease in wasteland area to the tune of 0.5 million hectares in 2008–09 as compared to 2005–2006, when aggregated for the entire country. Recently at NRSC/ISRO, Hyderabad Wastelands mappings for entire country was taken up using ortho-rectified satellite data acquired during 2015–2016 of three seasons (kharif, rabi and zaid). The mapping exercise is in the final stage of completion. shows how wastelands are utilized for the development of solar parks. Waste lands data base is hosted on Bhuvan Web portal of NRSC and also DOLR web site.

Space based information Support for Decentralized Planning (SIS–DP):

Reliable information on land & water resources and their optimal management is vital for developmental planning at grass root level. Space based information is being utilized for support decentralized planning by empowering the local bodies (Panchayats) to prepare development plans. It encompasses geo-referenced images, state level data repository on natural resources at 1 : 10000 scale coupled with stakeholder data sets. A geo-portal ‘BhuvanPanchayat’ has also been deployed for visualization, asset mapping, activity planning and monitoring of the schemes at Panchayat level. Under this initiative, it is planned to carryout mapping of assets in about 2.5 lakh panchayats in the country. BhuvanPanchayat Geoportal will be further augmented to enable preparation of locale specific action plans for developmental planning.

Bhuvan incorporated variety of legacy layers essential for taking up a planning since inception and keeps them updated subject to the availability of appropriate database. Major thematic database serving rural development is land Use and Land cover database at 1:10000 scale

created under ISRO's flagship programme SIS-DP (Space based Information Support for Decentralised Planning) along with drainage and road layers at same scale based on high resolution ortho-rectified multispectral database. Digital elevation model available thereupon also acts a pivotal physical determinant of the planning. Latter aids the terrain perception and clarifies the ridge and valley contexts precisely for planning purpose. Land use land cover database has 27 classes and characterizes landscape for micro level planning.

Space Applications in Agriculture and Water Resources Sectors :

NRSC developed following Geo-Spatial solutions in Agriculture and Water Resources sectors, which contribute to the development of Rural areas in terms of flood production, farmer's income, water availability for localized irrigation and aqua culture. These Geo-Spatial solutions have immense value for the sustainable development of Rural India.

- Crop Insurance Decision Support System (CIDSS) – A Web – enabled Integrated package for implementing Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana (PMFBY) ;
- Crop Intensification–Bringing Green Revolution to Eastern India–Satellite–based mapping of post kharif rice fallows (National Food Security Mission):
- Mapping & Evolution of High Value Crops;
- Agricultural Drought Vulnerability;
- Mapping Horticulture Crops;
- Fibre Crop Information System;
- Water Body Information System.

Benefits of Geo-Spatial Solutions:

- Enhanced ease of governance with improved monitoring and evolution for integrated development activity.
- This Geo-Spatial solution is transparent and efficient compared to traditional approach with manual surveys in the field.
- Linking management information system to geo-spatial visualization.
- Comprehensive planning and development at local level as it provides an opportunity to spatially analyze the impact of having assets by combining the data from multiple projects.
- It also aids in qualifying the need for having an asset at a particular location and knowing if there is any damage caused to the assets due to human or natural causes.

Bhuvan Geo-Portal :

Bhuvan, an Indian Geo-Platform of ISRO, provides a host of services covering satellite data visualization, free data download, thematic map display, download and analysis, timely information on disaster and project specific GIS applications since August 2009. The thematic Services offered by Bhuvan have the facility to select, browse and query the thematic Datasets consisting of LULC map to 1:10,000 scale and several other themes. It has the options of getting state and district wise statistics, Area of Interest (AOI) based analysis, URL for WMS/WMTS services, view based print and adding external WMS layers thus making it easy for the Scientific and research community as well the government machineries to use the Geoinformatics inputs for various applications.

Bhuvan currently hosts multi-temporal, multi-sensor and multi-resolution satellite imageries, thematic maps of 12 natural resources, 10 million Point of Interest data, 53 geo-physical products for downloads, 6200+OGC Services and provides major services including Bhuvan 2D/3D, NRSC Open Data Archive, Thematic services, Disaster Services, Crowd Sourcing applications, Online mapping applications. It provides platform to create, visualize, share and analyze geospatial data and services towards spatial mash-ups. There are around 75 applications developed in collaboration with states, central ministries, NGOs for utilizing Bhuvan as a platform for governance activities like natural resources management, disaster management, monitoring & evolution.

Since inception of Bhuvan, there had been a rapid growth of Bhuvan services and large number of users from government, academic, private sector are using Bhuvan. Bhuvan has now more than 70,000 registered users spread all over India and also from other countries. Recent years have seen good collaborations with state government and ministries. The applications that are rolled out have various aspects of governance like planning and development, inventory of government assets, program monitoring and evolution etc.

Conclusion :

Governance of rural areas especially for improving employment potential has received a welcome boost through initiatives which have enabled geo-tagging of all created assets, bringing in unprecedented level of transparency and verification by functionaries and citizens alike. Improving capability of remote sensing and positioning in terms of spatial and temporal resolutions can bring in huge advantage of addressing micro-level concerns fully and satisfactorily. Web enabled GIS applications can serve information to every corner of the country, hence throwing open the technology for use by common man. Affordable mobile telephones embedded with operationally compliant positioning device as well as photography coupled with internet connectivity have added another dimension of digital access to every rural dweller. In such context, it is timely that ISRO has initiated web based geospatial information systems at the behest of Departments dealing with Rural Development in a comprehensive manner.

The Geo-spatial solutions contribute to development of rural areas to realize the objective of creating Digital India by minimizing the space between Technology and common man.

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Art and Culture, Heritage, Society, Social and National Issues

100th year of the Montagu-Chelmsford Report

Why in news?

- ☞ July 2018 marks the 100th year of the publication of the ‘Report on Indian constitutional reforms’, commonly known as the Montagu-Chelmsford Report (MCR).

About the Montagu–Chelmsford Reforms:

- The Government of India Act of 1919 was thus enacted, which came into force in 1921.
- This Act is also known as Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms (Montagu was the Secretary of State for India and Lord Chelmsford was the Viceroy of India).

Genesis of this act:

- The 1919 reforms did not satisfy political demands in India.
- The British repressed opposition, and restrictions on the press and on movement were re-enacted through the Rowlatt Acts introduced in 1919. The act allowed certain political cases to be tried without juries and permitted internment of suspects without trial.
- These measures were rammed through the Legislative Council with the unanimous opposition of the Indian members. Several members of the council including Jinnah resigned in protest. These measures were widely seen throughout India of the betrayal of strong support given by the population for the British war effort.

Features of the Act

Central and Provincial Subjects

- It relaxed the central control over the provinces by demarcating and separating the central and provincial subjects.
- The central and provincial legislatures were authorised to make laws on their respective list of subjects. However, the structure of government continued to be centralised and unitary.
- It separated, for the first time, provincial budgets from the Central budget and authorised the provincial legislatures to enact their budgets.

Dyarchy: Transferred and Reserved list

- It further divided the provincial subjects into two parts—**transferred and reserved**.
- The transferred subjects were to be administered by the governor with the aid of ministers responsible to the legislative Council.

- The reserved subjects, on the other hand, were to be administered by the governor and his executive council without being responsible to the legislative Council.
- This dual scheme of governance was known as ‘dyarchy’—a term derived from the Greek word di-arche which means double rule. However, this experiment was largely unsuccessful.

Upper and Lower House and Direct elections

- It introduced, for the first time, bicameralism and direct elections in the country.
- Thus, the Indian Legislative Council was replaced by a bicameral legislature consisting of an Upper House (Council of State) and a Lower House (Legislative Assembly). The majority of members of both the Houses were chosen by direct election.

More representation

- It required that the three of the six members of the Viceroy’s executive Council (other than the commander-in-chief) were to be Indian.
- It extended the principle of communal representation by providing separate electorates for Sikhs, Indian Christians, Anglo-Indians and Europeans.
- It granted franchise to a limited number of people on the basis of property, tax or education.

Further Political and Administrative reforms

- It created a new office of the High Commissioner for India in London and transferred to him some of the functions hitherto performed by the Secretary of State for India.
- It provided for the establishment of a public service commission. Hence, a Central Public Service Commission was set up in 1926 for recruiting civil servants.
- It provided for the appointment of a statutory commission to inquire into and report on its working after ten years of its coming into force.

Why this act is known as Magna Carta of Modern India?

- The 1919 Act went on to become the basis for the Government of India Act, 1919 and 1935, and, ultimately, the Constitution. The key principles of responsible government, self-governance and federal structure grew out of these reforms.
- The Act on Indian constitutional reforms along with the Montagu Declaration are, thus, worthy claimants of the title of the Magna Carta of Modern India.

Source: The Hindu, Wiki, Britannica

Centre constitutes high-level committee to deal with mob lynching incidents

Why in news?

- ☞ The government has set up a high-level committee headed by Union Home Secretary Rajiv Gauba to suggest measures and legal framework to effectively deal with incidents of mob violence and lynching.
- ☞ The panel will submit in four weeks its recommendations to a Group of Ministers, headed by Home Minister Rajnath Singh, which in turn will present its recommendations to Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

What is the rationale behind this move?

- The move comes after a number of mob lynching incidents were reported in several areas, stemming from fake social media rumours of child kidnappers as well as cow vigilantism.
- Recently, the Supreme Court condemned mob lynching incidents across the country and urged the Parliament to enact a new law to deal with the crime that threatens rule of law and the country's social fabric.
- The apex court also made the Centre and the state governments accountable for mob violence and lynching, and asked them to take steps to curb and stop dissemination of irresponsible and explosive messages and videos on social media platforms which incite such incidents.

'Police' and 'Public Order' are State subjects:

- As per the Constitutional scheme, 'Police' and 'Public Order' are State subjects.
- State Governments are responsible for controlling crime, maintaining law and order, and protecting the life and property of the citizens.
- They are empowered to enact and enforce laws to curb crime in their jurisdiction.
- Thus, it is the duty of States to control the incidents of mob lynching.

Accordingly, from time to time, the Union Ministry of Home Affairs has issued advisories to States and UTs for maintenance of public order and prevention of crime in their areas of jurisdiction.

Directions of the Supreme Court on the issue of mob violence:

Recently, the apex court passed a slew of directions to deal with the mob lynching. They are:

- There shall be a "separate offence" for lynching and the trial courts must ordinarily award maximum sentence upon conviction of the accused person to set a stern example in cases of mob violence.
- The state governments will have to designate a senior police officer in each district for taking measures to prevent incidents of mob violence and lynching.

- The state governments need to identify districts, sub-divisions and villages where instances of lynching and mob violence have been reported in the recent past.
- The nodal officers shall bring to the notice of the DGP about any inter-district co-ordination issues for devising a strategy to tackle lynching and mob violence related issues.
- Every police officer shall ensure to disperse the mob that has a tendency to cause violence in the disguise of vigilantism or otherwise.
- Central and the state governments shall broadcast on radio, television and other media platforms about the serious consequences of mob lynching and mob violence.
- Despite the measures taken by the State Police, if it comes to the notice of the local police that an incident of lynching or mob violence has taken place, the jurisdictional police station shall immediately lodge an FIR.
- The State Governments shall prepare a lynching/mob violence victim compensation scheme in the light of the provisions of Section 357A of CrPC within one month from the date of this judgment.
- If a police officer or an officer of the district administration fails to fulfill his duty, it will be considered an act of deliberate negligence.

Source: The Hindu, Times of India

8M people live in ‘modern slavery’ in India: slavery Index 2018

Why in news?

- ☞ The Global Slavery Index 2018 estimates that on any given day in 2016 there were nearly 8 million people living in modern slavery in India.

About the index:

- Global slavery Index 2018 is published by the Australia-based human rights group Walk Free Foundation.
- The estimation data were drawn from 54 surveys conducted in 48 countries which included a module on Modern Slavery, with a total sample of 71,158 individual interviews.

Highlights of the report:

Definition of ‘Modern Slavery’:

- The term ‘Modern Slavery’ is used as an umbrella term which refers to situations of exploitation that a person cannot refuse or leave because of threats, violence, coercion, deception, and abuse of power.
- In the context of this report, modern slavery covers a set of specific legal concepts including forced labour, debt bondage, forced marriage, slavery and slavery-like practices, and human trafficking.

Major external drivers:

- Findings from the Index highlight the connection between modern slavery and two major external drivers – **highly repressive regimes**, in which populations are put to work to prop up the government, and **conflict situations** which result in the breakdown of rule of law, social structures, and existing systems of protection.

Global scenario:

- North Korea is at the top of the list with 104.6 per 1,000.
- Japan registering the lowest prevalence rate of 0.3 per 1,000.
- Globally, nearly three-quarters (71 percent) of modern slavery’s victims are women and girls.
- There are more female than male victims across all forms of modern slavery.
- The 10 countries with the largest number of absolute numbers of people in modern slavery include India, China, Pakistan, North Korea, Nigeria, Iran, Indonesia, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Russia and the Philippines. These 10 countries account for 60% of people living in modern slavery.

India’s performance:

- Among 167 countries, India ranked 53. However, in absolute numbers, India topped the list on prevalence.
- In terms of prevalence, there were 6.1 victims for every thousand people.

India’s responses on this report:

- The Indian government questioned the definition of modern slavery used in the research and also the sample size for interviews and the questions posed to those surveyed.
- Ministry of Women and Child Development termed the index flawed in its interpretations and as the terminology used is very broad based and words like “forced labour” need a more detailed elaboration in the Indian context where the socio-economic parameters are diverse and much nuanced.

Source: Times of India

❑ Lok Sabha passes RTE amendment Bill to end no detention policy in schools**Why in news?**

- ☞ Lok Sabha has passed The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (Second Amendment) Bill, 2017 to abolish the ‘no detention policy’ in schools.
- ☞ The Bill amends the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009. The Act was having provision of no detention policy.

Highlights

- The Bill amends provision related to no detention policy in the parent Act to empower central or state government to allow schools to hold back child in class 5, class 8, or in both classes. It mandates conducting, regular examination in class 5 and class 8 at end of every academic year.
- In case, child fails class 5, class 8 examinations, he will be given additional instruction and opportunity for a re-examination (within two months from the declaration of the result). If child fails again in re-examination, he may be held back in class 5, class 8, or in both classes.
- The Bill empowers Union and State governments to decide whether to not hold back child in any class till completion of elementary education. Further, Union or State governments will decide manner and conditions subject to which child may be held back.

What is no detention policy?

- The no-detention policy was introduced as a part of the Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation (CCE) under the Right to Education Act (RTE) in 2010.
- Under this policy, students up to class 8 are automatically promoted to the next class without being held back even if they do not get a passing grade.
- The no-detention policy under the RTE Act was to ensure that no child admitted in a school shall be held back in any class or expelled from school until the completion of elementary education.

Criticism of the policy:

- The policy was path-breaking but, unfortunately, it ended up being completely opposite to its original objective. There have been plenty of arguments on both sides of this policy.
- The provision had attracted criticism with several states and schools complaining that it compromised on academic rigour and learning levels and quality at schools.

Subramanian committee:

- The TSR Subramanian committee for formulation of the National Policy on Education has also suggested that 'no detention' policy should be discontinued after Class V. It had recommended restoration of detention provision, remedial coaching and two extra chances to each student such to move to a higher class.
- A sub-committee of the Central Advisory Board of Education also studied the issue closely and recommended a provisional detention clause at Classes V and VIII. In 2013, a parliamentary panel had also asked the ministry to 'rethink' on its "policy of automatic promotion up to Class VIII".

Background:

- Twenty-five States had recently agreed with the idea of doing away with or tweaking the no-detention policy — wherein a child is not detained till Class 8 — to give a boost to levels of learning.
- The Centre has thus decided to allow States to take the call and to tweak the RTE Act to enable them to do so.
- The Bill is expected to permit States to introduce exams in Classes 5 and 8.

Source: The Hindu

Ministry set to move cabinet to make child marriages invalid**Why in news?**

- ☞ The Women and Child Development (WCD) Ministry is set to move a proposal before the Cabinet to make all future child marriages in the country “void ab initio” (invalid from the outset).
- ☞ The ministry seeks to amend section 3 of the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, under which a child marriage is only voidable at the option of the contracting parties.

Present scenario of child marriages in India:

- The legal age for marriage in India is 18 for a woman and 21 for a man.
- According to a study based on Census 2011, there are 2.3 crore child brides in the country. The National Family Health Survey (NFHS) 2015-16 also showed that 26.8 per cent women were married off before they turned 18.
- According to the NFHS 2015-16, nearly eight per cent girls in the 15-19 age group had already become mothers or pregnant at the time of the survey.

Are child marriages valid in India?

- Currently, child marriages are valid in India, but can be annulled if a case is filed in a district court by either of the two contracting parties within two years of becoming adult, or through a guardian in case of minors.
- In October 2017, the Supreme Court had ruled that “sexual intercourse with a minor wife amounts to rape, as under no circumstances can a child below 18 years give consent, express or implied, for sexual intercourse.

Concerns related to child marriages:

- Expressing dismay over the alarming number of child brides in the country, the Supreme Court had said that “The World Health Organisation, in a report dealing with the issue of child brides, found that though 11 per cent of the births worldwide are among adolescents, they account for 23 per cent of the overall burden of diseases. Therefore, a child bride is more than doubly prone to health problems than a grown up woman.”

Source: The Hindu, Economic Times

❑ Ministry of Women and Child Development directs state govts to ensure registration of child care institutions

Why in news?

☞ Union Ministry of Women and Child Development (WCD) has directed state governments to ensure that all the child care institutions should be registered and linked to Central Adoption Resource Authority (CARA) within the next one month.

What is the issue?

- Instructions were issued by taking cognizance of the recent cases of illegal adoptions carried out by Missionaries of Charity in Jharkhand.
- The mandatory registration of CCIs and linking to Central Adoption Resource Authority (CARA) has been provided in Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015 which came into force more than two years ago but some orphanages had challenged the validity of this clause.
- ☞ Now, WCD has instructed the states to get child care homes run by Missionaries of Charity all over the country inspected immediately.

Central Adoption Resource Authority (CARA):

- CARA is statutory body of Ministry of Women & Child Development established under Juvenile Justice Act, 2015.
- It is a **nodal body for adoption of Indian children**.
- It is mandated to monitor and regulate in-country and inter-country adoptions.
- **CARA primarily deals with adoption of orphan, abandoned and surrendered children** through its associated /recognised adoption agencies.
- It deals with inter-country adoptions according to Hague Convention on Inter-country Adoption, 1993 ratified by India in 2003.
- CARA is designated as the Central Authority to deal with inter-country adoptions in accordance with the provisions of the Hague Convention on Inter-country Adoption, 1993, ratified by Government of India in 2003.

Hague Convention

- The Hague Convention on the Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Inter country Adoption (Convention) is an international agreement to safeguard intercountry adoptions.
- It protects children and their families against the risks of illegal, irregular, premature or ill-prepared adoptions abroad.

- To do this, the Hague Convention puts (a) safeguards in place to make sure that all intercountry adoptions are in the best interests of the child and respects their human rights, (b) a system in place of cooperation among countries to guarantee that these safeguards are respected, and to prevent the abduction of, sale of, or traffic in children.
- For Hague adoptions, the authorities in both countries must agree to go ahead with the adoption. For non-Hague adoptions, requirements may vary from one country to another.
- The Hague Convention does not allow private adoptions in the child's home country.
- Adoption is handled by the provinces and territories, and they all have and follow laws implementing the Hague Convention.

Source: The Hindu

❑ Kerala stands as the best state as per survey of Public Affairs Index 2018

Why in news?

- According to Public Affairs Index (PAI) 2018, Kerala tops the list as best-governed state in the country followed by Tamil Nadu.

Key Facts

- The index was released by the think tank Public Affairs Centre (PAC).
- 2018 PAI also included separate index on children of India, giving measure of how child-friendly each of the states are.

Highlights of the survey:

- Kerala has topped PAI as the best-governed state for the third consecutive year since 2016 among large states.
- Kerala is followed by Tamil Nadu, Telangana, Karnataka and Gujarat.
- Madhya Pradesh, Jharkhand and Bihar ranked the lowest, indicating higher social and economic inequalities in the states.
- Himachal Pradesh topped the list followed by Goa, Mizoram, Sikkim and Tripura. Nagaland, Manipur and Meghalaya were ranked at bottom of the index among small states (with population less than two crore).
- In the index on children of India, Kerala, Himachal Pradesh and Mizoram topped the index.

About the index:

- The Public Affairs Index (PAI) is released since in 2016 by Bengaluru base Public Affairs Centre (PAC), a not for profit think tank which aims to improve governance in India.
- It is based on 10 themes, 30 focus subjects and 100 indicators, relying solely upon government data.
- It covers wide range of themes such as support to human development, social protection, essential infrastructure, women and children, crime, law and order, delivery of justice, transparency and accountability, environment, fiscal management and economic freedom

Source: Indian Express, The Hindu

President approves Bill against witch hunting in Assam**Why in news?**

- ☞ President has recently approved Assam Witch Hunting (Prohibition, Prevention and Protection) Bill, 2015 passed by State Assembly in August 2015.

Key facts

- The law aims to reign in rising incidents of witch hunting cases across the state.
- It was prepared in lines with spirit of universal declaration of human rights, crimes in witch hunting cases cause gross violation of basic human rights.

Highlights of the Bill:

- The law aims to eliminate superstition from society by making such offences under it as non-bailable, non-compoundable and cognizable.
- It prohibits any person from calling, identifying or defaming any other person as witch by words, signs, conducts or indications. State Government has already notified the Act.
- The Bill also contains provisions about various measures that the administration and police need to initiate along with NGOs and civil society to educate people about witch hunting.

Punishment:

- It prescribes stringent punishment, if anybody found guilty. It imposes up to 7 years of jail and fine up to 5 lakh rupees. This provision will come as per Section 302 (punishment for murder) of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) if someone is killed after being branded a witch.
- It also proposes sentence of 3 years imprisonment if anybody blames a person for natural disasters in a particular locality such as floods, droughts, illness or any death.
- According to the bill, the fine realised as punishment for an offence shall be paid to the victim or his/her next of kin as compensation by following the procedures.

Special courts:

- Cases and offences registered under this law will undergo trial in Special courts which will be set up in consultation with the high court.

Source: The Hindu

❑ 2nd meeting of National Council on India's Nutrition Challenges under POSHAN Abhiyaan held

Why in news?

☞ Union Ministry of Women and Child Development (WCD) had recently organized 2nd meeting of National Council on India's Nutrition Challenges under POSHAN Abhiyaan in New Dehli.

Highlights of Meeting:

- National Council approved inclusion of 32 new districts under POSHAN Abhiyaan in the current year. This will help to saturate all districts of Union Territories (UTs) that were left out under Phase-I and Phase-II.
- In-principle approval to guidelines for construction of anganwadi centres in urban areas and slums under aanganwadi services.
- Month of September will be celebrated as the National Nutrition Month every year.

About POSHAN Abhiyaan:

- POSHAN Abhiyaan was launched on International Women's day (March 8) in 2018 to boost nutrition among pregnant women, mothers and children.
- The target of the mission is to bring down stunting among children in the age group 0-6 years from 38.4% to 25% by 2022.
- It aims to reduce level of under-nutrition and other related problems by ensuring convergence of various nutrition related schemes.
- It also targets stunting, under-nutrition, anaemia (among young children, women and adolescent girls) reduce low birth weight by 2%, 2%, 3% and 2% per annum respectively.

Source: PIB

Trafficking of Persons Bill, 2018

Why in news?

☞ The Lok Sabha has recently passed the Trafficking of Persons (Prevention, Protection and Rehabilitation) Bill, 2018.

☞ The Bill provides for the prevention, rescue, and rehabilitation of trafficked persons.

Highlights of the Bill

- The Bill proposes establishment of NATB to investigate trafficking cases and implement provisions of Bill.
- NATB will comprise of police officers and any other officers as required.
- It will take over investigation of any offence under Bill referred to it by two or more states.
- Further, it may request state government to co-operate in investigation or transfer the case to state government for investigation and trial, with approval from central government.

Functions of NATB:

- Coordinate and monitor surveillance along known trafficking routes, facilitate surveillance, enforce and take preventive steps at source, transit and destination points, maintain coordination between law enforcement agencies and NGOs and other stakeholders and increase international cooperation with authorities abroad for intelligence sharing and mutual legal assistance.
- The Bill mandates state government to appoint State Nodal Officer.
- The officer will be responsible for follow up action as per provisions of Bill and as per instructions of State Anti-Trafficking Committee and provide relief and rehabilitation services.
- It also mandates state government to appoint Police Nodal Officer at state and district levels.
- The state government will also designate Anti-Trafficking Police Officers for each district to deal with all matters related to trafficking in the district.

Anti-Trafficking Units:

- The Bill provides setting up of Anti-Trafficking Units (ATUs) at district level.
- They will deal with prevention, rescue and protection of victims and witnesses and for investigation and prosecution of trafficking offences.
- In districts where ATU is not functional, this responsibility will be taken up by local police station.

Anti-Trafficking Relief and Rehabilitation Committee:

- The Bill provides for establishment of these committees (ATCs) at all three levels viz. national, state, and district levels.
- These committees will be responsible for providing compensation, repatriation and re-integration of victims in society, among others.

➤ The Bill empowers Anti-Trafficking Police Officer or ATU to rescue persons, if they are in imminent danger. They will be produced before Child Welfare Committee or Magistrate for medical examination.

➤ The district ATC will provide relief and rehabilitation services to rescued persons.

Protection and rehabilitation :

➤ The Bill mandates central and state government to set up Protection Homes to provide shelter, food, counselling, and medical services to victims.

➤ It also mandates central or state government will maintain Rehabilitation Homes in each district to provide long-term rehabilitation to victims.

➤ In all cases, rehabilitation of victims will not be dependent on criminal proceedings being initiated against accused or outcome of proceedings.

➤ Union Government will also create Rehabilitation Fund which will be used to set up these Protection and Rehabilitation Homes.

➤ The Bill provides for setting up designated courts in each district to complete trial within year.

Penalties :

➤ The Bill specifies penalties for various offences including for promoting trafficking, trafficking of persons, disclosing identity of victim and aggravated trafficking such as trafficking for bonded labour and begging.

➤ For trafficking it prescribes rigorous imprisonment of 10 years up to life imprisonment, along with minimum fine of Rs. 1 lakh.

➤ For publishing of any material it prescribes imprisonment between 5 to 10 years, and fine between Rs 50,000 to Rs.1 lakh.

Govt cuts minimum yearly deposit for Sukanya Samridhi account

Why in news?

➤ The government has slashed the minimum annual deposit requirement for accounts under the Sukanya Samridhi Yojana from Rs 1,000 to Rs 250.

➤ The move will enable more number of people to take advantage of the girl child savings scheme.

➤ For this, the government amended the Sukanya Samridhi Account Rules – 2016.

About Sukanya Samridhi Yojana (SSY):

- Launched in 2015, Sukanya Samridhi Yojana (SSY) is a small deposit scheme for the girl child launched as a part of the 'Beti Bachao Beti Padhao' campaign.
- Under the scheme, a parent or legal guardian can open an account in the name of the girl child until she attains the age of ten years.
- The account can be opened in any post office branch and designated public sector banks.
- A parent can open only one account per girl child, and a maximum of two such bank accounts in the name of two girl children. In case of twin girls as second birth, or if the first birth itself results in the birth of three girl children, three bank accounts can be opened in the name of three girl children.
- After the recent change, the minimum deposit that needs to be made every year is Rs 250 and the maximum amount that can be deposited in a year is Rs 1.5 lakh.
- There is no limit on the number of deposits either in a month or in a financial year.
- The account opened under the scheme will be valid for 21 years from the date of opening, after which it will mature and the money will be paid to the girl child in whose name the account is opened.
- If the account is not closed after maturity, the balance amount will continue to earn interest as specified for the scheme from time to time.
- The account will also automatically close if the girl child gets married before the completion of the tenure of 21 years.
- Deposits can be made up to 14 years from the date of opening of the account. After this period the account will only earn interest as per applicable rates.
- Premature withdrawal – withdrawing money before the completion of the maturity period of 21 years – can only be made by the girl child in whose name the account has been opened after she attains the age of 18 years.
- This withdrawal will also be limited to 50 per cent of the balance standing at the end of the preceding financial year, and will only be allowed for the purpose of higher education or if the girl intends to get married. In order to make a withdrawal, the account should have a deposit of at least 14 years or more.

About the BBBP scheme:

- Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP) Scheme was launched on 22nd January, 2015 at Panipat in Haryana.
- It is a tri-ministerial effort of Ministries of Women and Child Development, Health & Family Welfare and Human Resource Development.

- The scheme aims at improving the trend of declining child sex ratio (CSR) in the country—which, according to Census 2011 data, has plummeted from 945 in 1991 to 927 in 2001 and 918 in 2011—and promoting gender equality.
- The scheme focuses on challenging mindsets and deep rooted patriarchy in the societal system, strict enforcement of PC&PNDT Act, advancing education of the girl child: focus is on issues of women empowerment on a life cycle continuum.

Source: The Hindu

MHRD Announces ‘Padhe Bharat- Badhe Bharat’ Initiative

Why in news?

- ☞ The Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) has announced ‘Padhe Bharat- Badhe Bharat’ an initiative to promote the reading culture among students.
- ☞ The initiative has been launched under ‘**Samagra Shiksha**’.

About ‘Padhe Bharat- Badhe Bharat’:

- Under this initiative, government will give an annual library grant to schools to allow students widen their ambit of learning.
- The grant will be given to Primary to Senior Secondary levels and will vary between Rs. 5000 and Rs. 20000.

About Samagra Shiksha scheme:

- The Department of School Education and Literacy under the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) has formulated the Samagra Shiksha – an Integrated Scheme for School Education as a Centrally Sponsored Scheme.
- The programme was introduced in the Union Budget 2018-19 and it is being implemented throughout the country with effect from the year 2018-19.
- It is an overarching programme for the school education sector extending from pre-school to class XII and aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education at all levels of school education.
- It envisages the ‘school’ as a continuum from pre-school, primary, upper primary, secondary to senior secondary levels.
- The main emphasis of the Scheme is on improving quality of school education and the strategy for all interventions would be to enhance the Learning Outcomes at all levels of schooling.

Source: PIB

Swachh Survekshan Grameen 2018

- ☞ Union Ministry of Drinking Water and Sanitation (MDWS) has launched Swachh Survekshan Grameen 2018 (SSG 2018).

What is SSG?

- Swachh Survekshan Grameen (SSG) is a rural cleanliness survey to rank all states and districts on basis of qualitative and quantitative evaluation.

Swachh Survekshan Grameen 2018:

- The objective of SSG 2018 is to undertake ranking of states and districts on basis of their performance attained on key quantitative and qualitative Swachh Bharat Mission-Grameen (SBM-G) parameters.

Criteria of SSG-2018

- The rankings will be based on taking into account set of comprehensive cleanliness parameters.
- The criteria of SSG-2018 include survey of public places, citizens' perspective of cleanliness, their recommendations and data from SBM-G.

Coverage of SSG-2018:

- As part of SSG-2018, total 6,980 villages in 698 districts across India will be covered.
- It will cover total 34,000 public places namely schools, anganwadis, public health centres, haat/bazaars/religious places in these villages.

Weightage:

- The SSG 2018 will assign 65% weightage to findings and outcome and 35% to service level parameters to be obtained from Integrated Management Information System (IMIS) of the MDWS.
- The weights to different elements of SSG are direct observation of sanitation in public places (30%), citizen's feedback on sanitation parameters (35%), service level progress on sanitation progress in the country as per SBMG-MIS (35%).

Who will conduct this survey?

- The SSG 2018 will be conducted by independent survey agency in all districts from 1st to 31st August 2018.
- It will also take feedback from over 50 lakh citizens on SBM related issues through direct interaction as well as online feedback.

The top performing states and districts are expected to be awarded on 2nd October 2018.

Source: The Hindu, PIB

❑ Govt launches ‘technology challenge’ aiming to bring an end to manual scavenging

Why in news?

- ☞ With an aim of eliminating human entry into septic tanks and drains for cleaning, the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs (MoHUA) has launched a “Technology Challenge: Identifying solutions for cleaning of sewerage systems and septic tanks” seeking suitable solutions from individuals and NGOs.
- ☞ The challenge will be a part of the **Mahatma Gandhi International Sanitation Convention** to be held on 2 October, will remain open till 14 August.

About the ‘technology challenge’:

- Elimination of human entry into sewer drains and cleaning of the septic tank is the ultimate goal of this challenge.
- Proposals have been invited by the ministry from interested innovators, individuals, consortium partners, companies, academic institutions, research and development centers, NGOs and municipal bodies to provide innovative technical solutions which eliminate the need for human entry into septic tanks and sewers.
- The ‘technology challenge’ will be conducted for two separate categories — ‘Technological solutions for cleaning and maintenance of sewerage systems that eliminate need for human entry’ and ‘Technological solutions for cleaning and maintenance of septic tanks that eliminate need for human entry’.

About Mahatma Gandhi International Sanitation Convention:

- It will be launched at the 150th anniversary celebrations of Mahatma Gandhi.
- It will be a first-of-its-kind International Sanitation Convention.
- Ministers from over 70 countries will be invited and taken on a ‘Gandhi Trail’ in Gujarat.
- The government will use the occasion to “showcase its performance” and “success story” in have a face-to-face dialogue with the world leaders to share their experiences on sanitation programmes.

Source: The Hindu

Gujarat government grants religious minority status to Jews

Why in news?

- ☞ Gujarat Government has granted religious minority status to Jews living in the state.
- ☞ Now, Jews living in Gujarat will get religious minority rights envisaged in Constitution of India and various acts and rules of the state government.
- ☞ They will also get benefits of welfare schemes formulated for religious minority communities within the jurisdiction of Gujarat.

Key facts:

- Gujarat is third state in India to grant religious minority status to Jews after West Bengal and Maharashtra.
- The Jewish population in Gujarat is so minuscule that they didn't even figure separately in the Census 2011. Gujarat has small Jewish community with no more than 170 members and majority of them located in Ahmedabad.
- Constitution of India has not defined word 'Minority' and only refers to 'Minorities' but it speaks of those 'based on religion or language' and rights of minorities have been spelt out in Constitution in detail.
- Six religious communities, viz. Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists, Zoroastrians (Parsis) and Jains have been notified in Gazette of India as minority communities by Union Government all over India.

Jews in India:

- Jews have been living in India for over 2,000 years ever since they first landed on West coast of India.
- Indian Jews are known as a peace-loving community. They follow Hebrew calendar. They have special thanks giving ceremony known as Eliyahoo-ha-Nabior i.e. 'gratitude to Elijah the Prophet', on festive occasions.
- The Synagogue Judah Hyam Hall is the only place of worship in Delhi for Jews.

Main Jews groups in India:

- **Bene Israel**— meaning Children of Israel. Marathi speaking. Arrived in Maharashtra 2,100 years ago.
- **Cochin Jews**— arrived in India 2,500 years ago and settled down in Kerala as traders.

- **Baghdadi Jews**– Jews who came to India as traders from West Asia, mainly from Baghdad. They are settled mainly in Mumbai, Pune and Kolkata.
- **Bene Menashe**– The Manipur Jews constitute a community which sees itself as descendants of the Manasseh (Menashe) Tribe (which is one of the 10 lost tribes of Jews).
- **Bene Ephraim**– also called “Telugu Jews”. They are a small group who speak Telugu. Their observance of Judaism dates to 1981.

About Judaism:

- Evolved in Egypt about 3,700 years ago, Judaism is one of the oldest religions of the world.
- Judaism was founded by Moses, although Jews trace their history back to Abraham.
- It believes in the unity and oneness of universal Creator.
- Judaism is the religion, philosophy and way of life of the Jewish people.
- Judaism has a rich history of religious text, but the central and most important religious document is the Torah.
- Jewish traditional or oral law, the interpretation of the laws of the Torah, is called halakhah.
- Spiritual leaders are called Rabbis.

Source: The Hindu

❑ **Higher Education Financing Agency capital base enhanced to Rs. 10,000 crores**

Why in news?

- ☞ The cabinet has approved the proposal for expanding the scope of Higher Education Financing Agency (HEFA) by enhancing its capital base to Rs. 10,000 crore and tasking it to mobilise Rs. 1,00,000 crore for Revitalizing Infrastructure and Systems in Education (RISE) by 2022.

Significance of the move:

- This would enable addressing the needs of all educational institutions with differing financial capacity in an inclusive manner.
- This would enable HEFA to leverage additional resources from the market to supplement equity, to be deployed to fund the requirements of institutions.

About RISE scheme:

- RISE scheme was announced in Union Budget 2017-18.
- It aims to lend low-cost funds to government higher educational institutions.
- Under it, all centrally-funded institutes (CFIs), including central universities, IITs, IIMs, NITs and IISERs can borrow from a Rs 1,00,000 crore corpus over next 4 years to expand and build new infrastructure.
- It will be financed via restructured Higher Education Financing Agency (HEFA), a non-banking financial company.
- With introduction of RISE, all financing for infrastructure development at CFIs in higher education will be done through HEFA.

The objectives of RISE by 2022 are:

- Qualitatively upgrade the research and academic infrastructure in India to global best standards by 2022.
- Make India into an education hub by making available high quality research infrastructure in Indian higher educational institutions.
- To allow access of HEFA funding to institutions like Central Universities, AIIMS, IISERs and newly created Institutes of National Importance, without creating any additional burden to the students.
- To bring greater accountability and speed in execution of infrastructure projects and avoid all cost/time over-runs, moving from the block-grant mode to project-mode for all infrastructure projects.
- To cater to the requirements of the Kendriya Vidyalayas and Navodaya Vidyalayas, and medical institutions like AIIMs in a faster time frame.

About HEFA:

- The Union Cabinet had approved HEFA in September 2016 as a Special Purpose Vehicle with a public sector bank (Canara Bank).
- The HEFA would be jointly promoted by the identified Promoter and the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) with an authorised capital of Rs. 2,000 crore. The Government equity would be Rs. 1,000 crore.

- The HEFA would be formed as a SPV within a PSU Bank/ Government-owned-NBFC (Promoter). It would leverage the equity to raise up to Rs. 20,000 crore for funding projects for infrastructure and development of world class Labs in IITs/IIMs/NITs and such other institutions.
- The HEFA would also mobilise CSR funds from PSUs/Corporates, which would in turn be released for promoting research and innovation in these institutions on grant basis.
- The HEFA would finance the civil and lab infrastructure projects through a 10-year loan.
- The principal portion of the loan will be repaid through the ‘internal accruals’ (earned through the fee receipts, research earnings etc.) of the institutions. The Government would service the interest portion through the regular Plan assistance.
- All the Centrally Funded Higher Educational Institutions would be eligible for joining as members of the HEFA.
- For joining as members, the Institution should agree to escrow a specific amount from their internal accruals to HEFA for a period of 10 years. This secured future flows would be securitised by the HEFA for mobilising the funds from the market.
- Each member institution would be eligible for a credit limit as decided by HEFA based on the amount agreed to be escrowed from the internal accruals.

Source: PIB



Polity & Governance, Social Justice, Social Development

CJI is the 'Master of Roster': Supreme Court

Why in news?

- ☞ The Supreme Court in latest ruling once again has upheld Chief Justice of India (CJI) as 'Master of Roster'.

Key Facts

- ☞ According to this ruling, CJI is an individual judge and not the powerful collective of five senior-most judges of Supreme Court called the 'Collegium'.
- ☞ CJI has exclusive authority to allocate cases to fellow judges and is spokesperson of the court.

Key observations made by the SC:

- CJI is the master of roster in allocating cases to different benches and his power cannot be delegated to Collegium comprising of CJI and four senior most judges. Although the constitution is silent on the CJI's role as the master of the roster, his power is based on a healthy practice and "convention aimed at maintaining discipline and decorum." He is described as "first among equals."
- SC highlighted that the CJI owes a moral responsibility to his colleagues and the public at large while flexing his powers as 'Master of Roster' to allocate cases. "Absolute discretion" cannot be confined in just one man, the CJI.
- The court listed some of the qualities a CJI should possess as the Master of Roster, including balance, fortitude, moral courage and independence of mind. Also, as the court's spokesperson, it is the CJI's duty to usher in and administer reform as a continuous process.
- Undoubtedly, the chief justices enjoy a special status and they alone can assign work to a judge sitting alone and to the judges sitting in division bench or full bench. They have the jurisdiction to decide which case will be heard by which bench.

What is 'master of the roster'?

- The term – 'Master of the Roster' refers to the privilege of the Chief Justice to constitute Benches to hear cases.
- This privilege was emphasised in November last year, when a Constitution Bench, led by the Chief Justice of India Dipak Misra, declared that "the Chief Justice is the master of the roster and he alone has the prerogative to constitute the Benches of the Court and allocate cases to the Benches so constituted."

- It further said that “no Judge can take up the matter on this own, unless allocated by the Chief Justice of India, as he is the master of the roster.”
- The immediate trigger for this was a direction by a two-judge Bench that a petition regarding a medical college corruption case, involving an alleged conspiracy to bribe Supreme Court judges, be heard by a Bench for the five senior-most judges of the Supreme Court.

Source: The Hindu, Indian Express

Allow gambling in sports but regulate it: Law Commission of India

Why in news?

- ☞ The Law Commission of India has submitted a report to the government recommending “cashless” gambling in sports as a means to increase revenue and deal a blow to unlawful gambling.

Arguments in favour of ‘legalised gambling’

- Since it is impossible to stop illegal gambling, the only viable option left is to “regulate” gambling in sports.
- It will increase revenue and deal a blow to unlawful gambling. The money generated can be used for public welfare activities.

Arguments against the ‘legalised gambling’:

- A country as poor as India should not allow ‘legalised gambling’. Such a move would leave the poor poorer and only vested interests want legalisation of gambling.
- Socio-economic and cultural circumstances of the country are not pragmatic to accept legalised gambling activities as it is still treated as a social stigma.
- It may also prompt future generations to take unethical paths.

Recommendation made by the Law commission:

The Law Commission of India in its report made following recommendations:

- The revenue from gambling should be taxable under laws like Income Tax Act, the Goods and Services Tax Act.
- Transactions between gamblers and operators should be linked to their Aadhaar and PAN cards so that the government could keep an eye on them.
- There is a need for classification of ‘proper gambling’ and ‘small gambling.’ Proper gambling would be for the rich who play for high stakes, while small gambling would be for the low-income groups.

- The government should introduce a cap on the number of gambling transactions for each individual, that is, monthly, half-yearly and annual.
- Restrictions on amount should be prescribed while using electronic money facilities like credit cards, debit cards, and net-banking. Gambling websites should also not solicit pornography.
- Regulations need to protect vulnerable groups, minors and those below poverty line, those who draw their sustenance from social welfare measures, government subsidies and Jan Dhan account holders from exploitation through gambling.
- Foreign Exchange Management and Foreign Direct Investment laws and policies should be amended to encourage investment in the casino/online gaming industry. This would propel tourism and employment.

Menace of gambling:

- Because of gambling, families are rendered bankrupt and many people are behind bars.
- Online gambling and betting is another area which has become very difficult to curb.
- It is understood that a lot of money is involved in illegal gambling business, creating almost a parallel economy, converting legally earned money into black money that is drained to gambling operators in other countries online.

Laws preventing gambling in India:

- Gambling is covered under an archaic law, the Public Gambling Act of 1867.
- The Constitution has enabled the States to enact their own gambling legislation.
- Section 67 of the Information Technology Act of 2000 vaguely prohibits online transmission and publication of material which “corrupt” persons.

Need for a new law:

- ☞ However, there is no uniformity in the various State laws and most of these laws pertain to physical gambling and not online or virtual gambling, which is seen to be a route to crime, corruption and money laundering.

Law Commission of India:

- Law Commission of India is an executive body established by an order of the Government of India. Its major function is to work for legal reform.
- Its membership primarily comprises legal experts, who are entrusted a mandate by the Government.

- The Commission is established for a fixed tenure and works as an advisory body to the Ministry of Law and Justice
- The first Law Commission was established during the British Raj era in 1834 by the Charter Act of 1833.
- After that, three more Commissions were established in pre-independent India.
- The first Law Commission of independent India was established in 1955 for a three-year term.

Source: The Hindu

Privilege motion against Prime Minister

Why in news?

- ☞ The Congress has recently submitted a notice to Lok Sabha Speaker Sumitra Mahajan for a *privilege motion* against Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Defence Minister Nirmala Sitharaman recently.

What is the issue?

- ☞ Congress members had charged the prime minister and the defence minister with misleading the House on the purchase price of Rafale fighter aircraft contending that the matter was governed by a confidentiality clause in the inter-government agreement signed by India and France.

What is parliamentary privilege?

- ☞ Parliamentary privilege refers to rights and immunities enjoyed by Parliament as an institution and MPs in their individual capacity, without which they cannot discharge their functions as entrusted upon them by the Constitution.

Are these parliamentary privileges defined under law?

- According to the Constitution, the powers, privileges and immunities of Parliament and MP's are to be defined by Parliament.
- No law has so far been enacted in this respect. In the absence of any such law, it continues to be governed by British Parliamentary conventions.
- Rule No 222 in Chapter 20 of the Lok Sabha Rule Book and correspondingly Rule 187 in Chapter 16 of the Rajya Sabha rulebook govern privilege. It says that a member may, with the consent of the Speaker or the Chairperson, raise a question involving a breach of privilege either of a member or of the House or of a committee there of.

- The rules however mandate that any notice should be relating to an incident of recent occurrence and should need the intervention of the House. Notices have to be given before 10 am to the Speaker or the Chairperson.

What is breach of privilege?

- A breach of privilege is a violation of any of the privileges of MPs/Parliament. Among other things, any action 'casting reflections' on MPs, parliament or its committees; could be considered breach of privilege. This may include publishing of news items, editorials or statements made in newspaper/magazine/TV interviews or in public speeches.

What is the punishment in case of breach of privilege or contempt of the House?

- The house can ensure attendance of the offending person. The person can be given a warning and let go or be sent to prison as the case may be.
- In the case of throwing leaflets and chappal, the offending individuals were sentenced to simple imprisonment.
- In the 2007 case of breach of privilege against Ambassador Ronen Sen, the Lok Sabha Committee on privileges held that the phrase "headless chicken" was not used by Shri Sen in respect of MPs or politicians. No action was taken against him.
- In 2008, an editor of an Urdu weekly referred to the deputy chairman of Rajya Sabha as a "coward" attributing motives to a decision taken by him. The privileges committee held the editor guilty of breach of privilege. The committee instead of recommending punishment stated that, "it would be better if the House saves its own dignity by not giving undue importance to such irresponsible articles published with the sole intention of gaining cheap publicity."

Role of the Speaker/Rajya Sabha Chair:

- The Speaker/RS chairperson is the first level of scrutiny of a privilege motion.
- The Speaker/Chair can decide on the privilege motion himself or herself or refer it to the privileges committee of Parliament.
- If the Speaker/Chair gives consent under Rule 222, the member concerned is given an opportunity to make a short statement.

Privileges committee:

- In the Lok Sabha, the Speaker nominates a committee of privileges consisting of 15 members as per respective party strengths. A report is then presented to the House for its consideration.
- The Speaker may permit a half-hour debate while considering the report. The Speaker may then pass final orders or direct that the report be tabled before the House. A resolution may then be moved relating to the breach of privilege that has to be unanimously passed.
- In the Rajya Sabha, the deputy chairperson heads the committee of privileges, that consists of 10 members.

Source: The Hindu, Indian Express

Parliament passes Bill to punish bribe-givers, along with takers**Why in news?**

- ☞ The Parliament has passed Prevention of Corruption (Amendment) Bill 2018 to enhance transparency and accountability of the government and make anti-graft provisions under the law stringent.
- ☞ The Bill amends various provisions of Prevention of Corruption Act (PCA), 1988.

Key features of Bill :

- The Bill introduces offence of ‘giving a bribe’ as direct offence. Person who is compelled to give bribe who reports matter to law enforcement authorities within seven days will not be charged with this offence.
- It makes specific provisions related to giving a bribe to a public servant, and giving a bribe by a commercial organisation.
- The bill redefines provisions related to criminal misconduct to only cover two types of offences viz. illicit enrichment (such as amassing of assets disproportionate to one’s known income sources) and fraudulent misappropriation of property.
- It makes mandatory for taking prior approval of relevant Government or competent authority to conduct any investigation into offence alleged to have been committed by a public servant.
- Such approval will be not necessary in cases that involve arrest of person on spot on charge of taking a bribe.

Trial Time limit:

- The bill set trial time period within two if it is handled by special judge. In case of delays, reasons for it must be recorded for every extension of six months obtained.
- However, total period for completion of trial may not exceed four years.

Penalties for offences:

- The Bill modifies definitions and penalties for offences related to taking bribe, being habitual offender and abetting offence.
- It also introduces powers and procedures for attachment and forfeiture of property of public servants accused of corruption.

Protecting the honest:

- To empower honest public servants to perform their duty without fear or favour, as per laid down laws, policies and procedures; corrections have been made for protecting their bonafide decisions from malicious threats and harassment.

Source: The Hindu, Times of India

NITI Aayog nod to panel for denotified, semi-nomadic, nomadic tribes**Why in news?**

- ☞ The NITI Aayog has backed a proposal by **Idate Commission** constituted by the Ministry of Social justice and Empowerment to set up a permanent commission for Denotified (DNT), Semi-Nomadic (SNT), and Nomadic Tribes (NT).

What are denotified, semi-nomadic, nomadic tribes?

- ☞ **Denotified tribes** are those that were labelled as criminals through a legislation by British government and were denotified post-independence, the **Nomadic tribes** maintain constant geographical mobility while **semi-nomads** are those who are on the move but return to fixed habitations once a year, mainly for occupational reasons.

Proposals of the Idate Commission:

- Bhiku Ramji Idate Commission on DNT, SNT, and NT communities, in its report, had recommended to set up a permanent commission for the communities on the lines of similar commissions for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Other Backward Classes.

- In its report submitted to the social justice ministry in January 2018, the Idate Commission said such a permanent commission should have a prominent community leader as its chairperson, and a senior Union government bureaucrat, an anthropologist, and a sociologist as members.
- Other important recommendations of the panel include granting Constitutional protection to these communities under a separate third schedule after Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, making them eligible for reservation, and extending the protective cover of Prevention of Atrocities Act to them.

NITI Aayog's proposals:

- NITI Aayog has offered to set up a working group to come up with policy suggestions on many issues of these marginalised communities.
- It has also proposed lowering tuition fees and relaxing admission conditions for children from the communities, and easy allotment of land and housing for members of the community in which 90% or more are landless.
- The NITI Aayog has also supported the panel's suggestion to form a dedicated National Finance Development Corporation for DNT, SNT and NTs.

Background:

- The DNT, NT, SNT communities have been identified as the most marginalised by several commissions set up since Independence.
- The community has for long not been enumerated in the Census data. The Renke Commission report of 2008 had arrived at a rough estimate of their population being between 10-12 crore but none of its recommendations were implemented.

Source: Indian Express

West Bengal Assembly passes resolution to rename state as Bangla

Why in news?

- ☞ West Bengal state assembly has unanimously passed resolution to change state's name to 'Bangla' in all three languages – Bengali, Hindi and English. The name change will only become official when resolution gets approval from Union Home Ministry and Parliament passes Bill.

What is the concern?

- The main reason cited by State Government for changing name of West Bengal to Bangla is that whenever there is meeting of all states, West Bengal figures at bottom of the list, as it is prepared according to alphabetical order.
- With change in its Bangla, it will appear (or leap frog) to fourth place after Andhra Pradesh, Arunachal Pradesh and Assam in list of states in alphabetical order.

What is the procedure of renaming of the state?

- Process for changing the name of a state can be initiated by state itself. However, by virtue of article 3 of Constitution, Parliament has power to change name of state even if such proposal does not come from the concerned state.

If initiated by state assembly:

- If initiated by state assembly, it will first pass a resolution for such change and this passed resolution will be sent to Central government (Union Home Ministry). Then Union Home Ministry prepares note for Union Cabinet for amendment to Schedule 1 of Constitution.
- Thereafter, Constitution Amendment Bill is introduced in Parliament under Article 3 of Constitution, which has to be approved with simple majority, before President gives his assent to it. Thereafter name of state will be changed.

In case of initiated by Parliament:

- A bill for renaming a state may be introduced in the Parliament on the recommendation of the President.
- Before the introduction of the bill, the President shall send the bill to the respective state assembly for expressing their views within a stipulated time. The views of the state assembly are binding, neither on the President nor on the Parliament.
- On the expiry of the period, the bill will be sent to the Parliament for deliberation. The bill in order to take the force of a law must be passed by a simple majority.
- The bill is sent for approval to the President. After the approval of the said bill, the bill becomes a law and the name of the state stands modified.

Source: The Hindu

❑ **Women have the right to enter, pray in Sabarimala temple: Supreme Court**

Why in news?

- ☞ In a significant observation on the Sabarimala temple case, the Supreme Court said the right of a woman to pray is a constitutional right, and it should not be dependent on law.

What is Sabarimala temple case?

- The Ayyappa temple in Sabarimala, Kerala, prohibits women of menstruating age (between ten and 50 years of age) from entering it – a prohibition enforced under Rule 3(b) of the Kerala Hindu Places of Public Worship (Authorisation of Entry) Rules, 1965.
- The law states “Women who are not by custom and usage allowed to enter a place of public worship shall not be entitled to enter or offer worship in any place of public worship.”

- The Young Lawyers' Association filed a petition in the Supreme Court challenging this rule in 2006.
- After a long hiatus, finally in October 2017, a three-judge bench of the court referred the matter to a constitutional bench, which commenced hearings on the case on July 17, 2018.

Constitutional consideration:

- Under the constitution, women have a right to equality before law and the right against discrimination based on sex. To use the ideology of purity and pollution is a violation of the constitutional right against untouchability, i.e. Article 17.
- It also goes against the spirit of Articles 14, 15 and 21.

What Article 17 says?

- ☞ Article 17 of the constitution **provides an unprecedented protection against the practice of Untouchability:**
- ☞ “Abolition of Untouchability: Untouchability is abolished and its practice in any form is forbidden. The enforcement of any disability arising out of untouchability shall be an offence punishable in accordance with law.”

Key observations made by the SC:

- Every woman is also the creation of God and why should there be discrimination against them in employment or worship.
- All persons are equally entitled to freedom of conscience and the right freely to profess, practice and propagate religion.
- Article 25 (1) mandates freedom of conscience and right to practise religion. “All persons are equally entitled to freedom of conscience and the right freely to profess, practise and propagate religion”. This means right to pray is a constitutional right.
- The Constitution upholds the ideals of liberty of thought, expression, belief and faith, be it for man or woman.
- CJI also opposed the stand of the Kerala government that ceremonial rules pertaining to temples and method of worship are set by the temple and are protected under the right to worship saying, “A temple cannot claim denominational rights.”

Source: Indian Express, Live Mint

Special Category Status not feasible: Govt

Why in news?

- ☞ The Central government has filed a counter affidavit in the Supreme Court expressing its inability to give Special Category Status (SCS) to Andhra Pradesh and said all commitments under the A.P. Reorganisation Act (APRA), 2014 had been addressed.

What is the concern?

- Andhra Pradesh has been demanding a Special Category State (SCS) status from Centre ever since it was decided to carve out Telangana along with capital city Hyderabad.
- Following the bifurcation of A.P., Andhra lost a large volume of its revenue due to Hyderabad remaining the capital of Telangana.

Why can't the Centre grant Andhra special status?

- Under the 14th Finance Commission recommendations, the "special status" categorisation has been removed. It is now restricted only to the north-eastern and three hilly states.
- The recommendations were accepted in 2015, a year after the Andhra was bifurcated.

Economic rationale behind the demand:

- When the state was divided, Andhra not only lost a capital but also an important industry hub, which was in and around Hyderabad. The contribution of agriculture to state GDP is higher for Andhra than its neighbouring states.
- In fact, today it is arguably the highest in South. This is also a reflection of a lower level of industrialization and along with it a lower per capita income and again, the lowest in South.
- Much of this is because of Hyderabad, which political analysts argue has gone on to make Telangana, a city-centric state, with the city still an important growth engine and revenue source for Telangana. Today, the per capita income for Telangana is at par with states like Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu, and many see this as largely on account of Hyderabad.

Special Category State (SCS) status:

- Fifth Finance Commission introduced SCS in 1969 giving Jammu and Kashmir, Assam, and Nagaland additional Central assistance and tax concessions.
- Special category status is usually based on the recommendations of the National Development Council (NDC).
- The National Development Council (NDC) laid five guidelines to grant the status —

1. Hilly and difficult terrain;
2. Low population density or sizable share of tribal population;
3. Strategic location along borders with neighbouring countries;
4. Economic and infrastructural backwardness; and
5. Non-viable nature of State finances.

Which States are receiving it right now?

☞ Apart from Jammu and Kashmir, Assam, and Nagaland, eight more States were added to the list — Arunachal Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Sikkim, Tripura and Uttarakhand.

Difference between Special Status and Special Category Status (SCS):

- Andhra Pradesh is asking for Special Category Status and not Special Status, there's a big difference between Special Status and Special Category Status.
- **Special Status** is guaranteed by the Constitution of India through an Act passed by the two-third majority in both houses of the Parliament (example – J&K)
- **Special Category Status (SCS)** is granted by the National Development Council, an administrative body of the government.

What are the benefits which states get under SCS?

☞ The Govt allocates funds to states through central assistance for state plans.

Central assistance can be broadly split into three components.

1. Normal Central Assistance (NCA)
 2. Additional Central Assistance (ACA)
 3. Special Central Assistance (SCA)
- NCA, the main assistance for state plans, is split to favor special category states: the 11 states get 30% of the total assistance while the other states share the remaining 70%.
 - The nature of the assistance also varies for special category states; NCA is split into 90% grants and 10% loans for special category states, while the ratio between grants and loans is 30:70 for other states.
 - For allocation among special category states, there are no explicit criteria for distribution and funds are allocated on the basis of the state's plan size and previous plan expenditures.

- Allocation between non special category states is determined by the Gadgil Mukherjee formula which gives weight to population (60%), per capita income (25%), fiscal performance (7.5%) and special problems (7.5%).
- Special category states also receive specific assistance addressing features like hill areas, tribal sub-plans and border areas.
- Beyond additional plan resources, special category states can enjoy concessions in excise and customs duties, income tax rates and corporate tax rates as determined by the government.

Source: The Hindu

Social media hub is like creating surveillance state: SC

Why in news?

- ☞ The Supreme Court took a strong note on a plea challenging the proposed move of the Information and Broadcasting Ministry to set up a social media hub for monitoring online data, observing that it will be “like creating a surveillance state”.

What is the issue?

- In January this year, the Information and Broadcasting Ministry had come up with the plan to set up a ‘Social Media Communication Hub’ that would help it keep a tab on trending news in districts and gather feedback on the Centre’s flagship schemes.
- The proposal to set up such a hub had turned controversial, as many called it an indirect measure to “snoop” on and influence voters.

What is ‘Social Media Hub’?

- The ‘Social Media Hub’ proposes to monitor social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and even email) handles at the very local level in multiple languages to carry out “sentiment analysis”, track down the influence-making social media users and to categorise the conversations on social media into positive, negative and neutral sections.
- The stated aim of the project was to enable the government to understand the impact of social media campaigns on welfare schemes and improve the reach of such campaigns.
- It also aimed to track real time the way social media receives news on government’s schemes and announcements and also political events.
- As per the proposal, the project is meant to strengthen the social media division and recruit social media managers to be deployed in 712 districts of the country.

Social media managers:

- Under this project, social media managers would be employed on a contractual basis in each district to be the “eyes and ears” of the government.
- These persons were supposed to provide real-time updates from the ground and take people’s feedback on the government’s policies.

Role of social media managers:

- Social media manager will be entrusted with the tasks of keeping a close eye on the regional and local media, collecting data of regional media and of local events, providing content for social media and supporting media units at the regional level for social media publicity.
- They will also monitor local editions of newspapers, local cable channels, local audio channels (FM) and key local social media handles for important local developments.
- They will make a daily analysis report incorporating local sentiments to be sent to region head in the PIB as well as the media hub (command centre).

Significance of ‘Social Media Hub’:

- ☞ Information received from this ‘Social Media Hub’ would help the government in formulating policies, schemes or rectify any flaws in their implementation at the ground level so that the ultimate beneficiary who is the common man is benefited and has a direct way to communicate any complaints regarding the same to the Government.

Concerns raised by the petitioner over the social media hub:

- The project had two aspects — “mass surveillance apparatus that aims at collecting and analysing huge volumes of data, and profiling people based on that” and “utilising this data to predict the mood of people online and issue responses, including those targeted at individuals or groups”. The social media analytical tool is expected to ‘listen’ to conversations on all major digital channels, including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, Tumblr, as well as blogs and news channels.
- Thus, the petition alleged that such intrusive action on the part of the government, is not only without the authority of law, but brazenly infringes her fundamental right to freedom of speech under Article 19(1)(a) of the Constitution. Such action of the government also violates her right of privacy.

Source: The Hindu, Indian Express

The draft National Register of Citizens (NRC) published in Assam

Why in news?

- ☞ The draft National Register of Citizens (NRC), published recently, includes only those able to prove they were in Assam before 1971.

Why is NRC being updated in Assam?

- ☞ Officially, the NRC process will address the issue of illegal migrants, specifically from Bangladesh. The National Register of Citizens was first published in 1951 to record citizens, their houses and holdings. Updating the NRC to root out foreigners was a demand during the Assam Agitation (1979-1985).

What is National Register of Citizens (NRC)?

- The NRC was introduced to identify illegal immigrants from Bangladesh and recognise the Indian citizens in Assam.
- It was first prepared in 1951 and Assam is the only state having this arrangement.
- Under NRC, immigrants who have documents proving that they entered Assam before 1971 will be considered Indian citizens and others have to show that their ascendants have lived in Assam even before 1971.

Who is a D-voter?

- Short for 'dubious' or 'doubtful', this is a category of voters disenfranchised by the government for alleged lack of proper citizenship documents.
- Some 2.48 lakh people got the D-voter tag during NRC process

Who is a declared foreigner?

- ☞ D-voters are tried by special tribunals under the Foreigners' Act and if they fail to defend their citizenship claim they are marked as declared foreigners and sent to any of six detention camps, which are within jails for criminals, for deportation. There were 91,206 declared foreigners as on December 31, 2017.

Why is March 24, 1971 the cut-off date?

- There have been several waves of migration to Assam from Bangladesh, but the biggest was in March 1971 when the Pakistan army crackdown forced many to flee to India. The Assam Accord of 1985 that ended the six-year anti-foreigners' agitation decided upon the midnight of March 24, 1971 as the cut-off date.

Who is a citizen in Assam?

- The Citizenship Act of 1955 was amended after the Assam Accord for all Indian-origin people who came from Bangladesh before January 1, 1966 to be deemed as citizens.
- Those who came between January 1, 1966 and March 25, 1971 were eligible for citizenship after registering and living in the State for 10 years while those entering after March 25, 1971, were to be deported.

What happens to the excluded 40 lakh?

- They will have to file for claims and objections and submit relevant documents for re-verification. The NRC office will issue claim forms from August 7 to 30, and these applicants would have to submit the forms from August 30 to September 28.
- The documents will be verified and accepted or rejected for the final NRC to be published on an unspecified date.
- The cases of those left out of the final NRC will be heard in the Foreigners' Tribunals, after which applicants can approach the High Court.

Source: The Hindu

Lok Sabha passes Criminal Law (Amendment) Bill, 2018

Why in news?

- Lok Sabha has recently passed Criminal Law (Amendment) Bill, 2018 to provide death penalty to those convicted of raping girls below the age of 12 years.
- The Bill replaces ordinance promulgated by President in April 2018 and amends Indian Penal Code (IPC), Criminal Procedure Code, Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act and Indian Evidence Act.

Key provisions of the Bill :

- It provides for stringent punishment of jail term of minimum 20 years or life imprisonment or death for rape of girl less than 12 years. It provides punishment with imprisonment for rest of life or death sentence in case of gang rape of girl below 12 years.
- It increases minimum punishment from 10 years to 20 years for crime of rape of girl less than 16 years, which can be extended to imprisonment for rest of life. It increases minimum punishment for rape of women from rigorous imprisonment of 7 years to 10 years, which can be extended to life imprisonment.

- It provides for speedy investigation and trial, which must be completed in two months. It proposes 6 months' time limit for disposal of appeals in rape cases. It provides dedicated manpower for investigation of rape cases in time bound manner.
- It provides no provision for anticipatory bail for person accused of rape or gang rape of girl less than 16 years. It has also been provided that court has to give notice of 15 days to Public Prosecutor and representative of victim before deciding bail applications in case of rape of a girl fewer than 16 years of age.
- It has provision for maintaining national database and profile of sexual offenders by National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB). This data will be regularly shared with States/UTs for monitoring, tracking and investigation including verification of antecedents by police.

Source: The Hindu, Economic Times

Manipur assembly passes inner line permit bill

Why in news?

- Manipur People's Protection Bill, 2018, passed by the state assembly recently, has been welcomed with protests across various districts in the state.

Key Facts

- The Manipur People's Protection Bill, 2018 seeks to regulate the entry and exit of "outsiders" on the lines of the British-era inner-line permit system prevalent in three other north-eastern states — Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram and Nagaland.
- The bill aims to grant the status of "natives" to Meitis, Pangal Muslims, scheduled tribes and others who moved to the state before 1951. The bill sets 1951 as the base year to identify locals and prevent an influx of outsiders.
- The rest, categorised as "Non-Manipuris", will have to register them within one month of the notification of the law. They will be issued a pass extendable up to six months. While those who have trade licences can get a pass extendable up to five years, which will have to be renewed every year. Any outsider visiting Manipur would need a pass.

Rationale behind the passage of the bill:

- The influx of foreign tourists has increased exponentially in Manipur, thus creating a demographic imbalance in the region.
- If this was not enough, illegal immigration from Bangladesh, Nepal and Myanmar has also contributed to the crisis. This has created fear among the locals over employment and availability of resources.
- At a time where there already exists stiff competition between the locals and outsiders over jobs, the outsiders mostly settle for low paid work. Hence, locals feel ILP fails to safeguard the interests of the indigenous people.

Why there is protest over the passage of the bill?

- The bill, if approved by the Governor and made an Act, people who came to Manipur after 1951 would be viewed as ‘foreigners’ and would have no voting or land rights.
- Bengali Muslims and Hindus from southern Assam’s Barak Valley have been migrating to Manipur, particularly Jiribam, for a long time.
- The protesters against the bill want the cut-off date to be January 1972, the year when Manipur attained statehood.

What is Inner Line Permit (ILP)?

- The Inner Line Permit (ILP) is an official travel document issued by the Government of India to grant inward travel of an Indian citizen into a protected area for a limited period.
- It is obligatory for Indians residing outside those states to obtain permission prior to entering the protected areas.
- It can be issued for travel purposes solely. Visitors are not allowed to purchase property in these regions. However, there might be a different set of rules for long term visitors, though they are not valid for central government employees and security forces.
- Currently, the Inner Line Permit is operational in Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram and Nagaland.
- The document has been issued under the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation, 1873 and the conditions and restrictions vary from state to state.

Source: The Hindu, Indian Express

Justice Srikrishna Panel Submits Data Protection Report

Why in news?

- ☞ A panel headed by Justice BN Srikrishna submitted its report to the government on suggestions for the Personal Data Protection Bill, 2018 that will cover everything from Aadhaar biometric database and consent.

About the B N Srikrishna committee:

- In August 2017, the Union Ministry of Electronics & Information Technology (MEITY) has constituted an expert Committee to study and identify key data protection issues and recommend methods for addressing them.
- The ten-member committee was headed by Supreme Court Judge (retired) Justice B N Srikrishna and comprise of members from government, academia and Industry.

Highlights of the Personal Data Protection 2018 Bill:

- The draft bill notes that “the right to privacy is a fundamental right and it is necessary to protect personal data as an essential facet of informational privacy.”
- The bill also notes that it is necessary to create trust between the individual who provide their data and those who process this.
- On the right to be forgotten, the bill notes that that ‘data principal’ which means the individual or the person providing their data, has a right to “right to restrict or prevent continuing disclosure.” But the bill does not allow for a right of total erasure like the European Union does.
- It also gives a data processor considerable leeway when it comes to deciding on this ‘right to be forgotten.’ The bill notes that “the data fiduciary may charge a reasonable fee to be paid for complying with requests.”
- The Bill also calls for privacy by design on part of data processors, and defines terms like consent, data breach, sensitive data, etc.
- Data Protection Authority of India (DPA): It proposes setting up of a DPA, an independent regulatory body responsible for the enforcement and effective implementation of the law, consisting of a chairperson and six full-time members.
- In case of any appeal against an order of the DPA, an appellate tribunal should be established or an existing appellate tribunal should be granted powers to hear and dispose of any appeal.

HOW DOES THE CODE COMPARES TO OTHER LEGISLATIONS**EUROPE (EUROPEAN UNION)**

- Has an all-encompassing law ‘General Data Protection Regulations,’ which came into effect on may 25,2018.
- User consent needs to be explicit.
- Right to be forgotten, a concept that arose in the EU
- Applies to businesses anywhere in the world who handle European data
- Penalties for non-compliance are up to 4 percent of the company’s global turnover, or 20 million Euros, whichever is higher

UNITED STATES

- Data protection fragmented in various federal and state laws
- Each sector will deem what is private or personal data
- A movement to pass a new law on consumer privacy protections failed in the Congress in 2017.
- California, with “Shine the Light Law,’ was one of the first states in the US to implement privacy laws

AUSTRALIA

- The Privacy Act of 1988 regulates the handling of personal information of individuals
- Privacy is not a fundamental right
- Does not apply to government agencies

Source: The Hindu

Fugitive Economic Offenders Bill 2018 passed by Lok Sabha

Why in news?

- Lok Sabha has recently passed Fugitive Economic Offenders Bill, 2018.
- The bill aims to tighten the noose on the wilful defaulters who tends to abscond the nation to evade the clutches of the law.
- The bill will replace an ordinance promulgated by President in April 2018.

Highlights

- The bill defines fugitive economic offender (FEO) as any individual against whom warrant for arrest in relation to scheduled offence (enlisted in the this law) has been issued by any court in India, but he leaves or has left India to avoid criminal prosecution or refuses to return to India to face criminal prosecution.
- The onus is on authorities to prove that an individual is a fugitive economic offender. It gives government right to confiscate property of such economic offenders in India and abroad. Its provisions are also be applicable on proxy-owned properties of economic offenders.
- It is applicable in cases where total value involved in such economic offences is Rs.100 crore or more. It keeps banks and other financial institutions at Centre and provide help to them recover amount.
- It establishes Special Court under the Prevention of Money-laundering Act (PMLA), 2002 to declare a person as FEO.
- The special court will also appoint ‘administrator’ to oversee confiscated property. It will be responsible for disposing of confiscated property and t property will be used to satisfy creditors’ claims.
- It debars fugitive economic offender from defending any civil claim at the discretion of any court including High Court. If prior to the declaration, the alleged FEO returns to India and submits to the appropriate jurisdictional court, proceedings under this Act will cease by law.

Need for such law:

- There have been several instances of economic offenders fleeing country to evade clutches Indian law to remain outside jurisdiction of Indian courts.
- The absence of such offenders from Indian courts has several deleterious consequences. It hampers investigation in criminal cases, wastes precious time of courts of law, undermines rule of law in India.
- Further, most such cases of economic offences involve non-repayment of bank loans thereby worsening financial health of banking sector.

- Moreover, existing non-coherent civil and criminal provisions in law are not entirely adequate to deal with severity of problem.

Significance of the Bill:

- The bill will provide effective, expeditious and constitutionally permissible deterrent legal teeth to enforcing agencies to ensure that such actions of FEO are curbed.
- The Bill is expected to re-establish the rule of law with respect to the fugitive economic offenders as they would be forced to return to India to face trial for scheduled offences.
- This would also help the banks and other financial institutions to achieve higher recovery from financial defaults committed by such fugitive economic offenders, improving the financial health of such institutions.
- It is expected that the special forum to be created for expeditious confiscation of the proceeds of crime, in India or abroad, would coerce the fugitive to return to India to submit to the jurisdiction of Courts in India to face the law in respect of scheduled offences.

Source: PIB, Economic Times

❑ Prevention of Corruption (Amendment) Bill, 2013 passed by Rajya Sabha

Why in news?

- ☞ The Prevention of Corruption (Amendment) Bill, 2013 that amends certain provisions of a 30-year-old anti-corruption law (Prevention of Corruption Act, 1988), was passed by the Upper House (Rajya Sabha) unanimously with voice vote.
- ☞ The bill has many provisions to ensure speedy trial of corruption cases.

Why amendment is needed?

- ☞ The amendment to the Prevention of Corruption Act, 1988 was necessitated from the obligation of India to review the existing provisions of the Act so as to bring it in line with the United Nations Convention against Corruption (UNCAC).

Background:

- ☞ The Bill which was originally proposed during 2013 was then referred to a Select Committee of Rajya Sabha, which submitted its report on August 12, 2016.

Suggested changes by Rajya Sabha Select Committee:

☞ Major changes suggested in the PC Act, 1988 as reported by the Rajya Sabha Select Committee, 2016 include:

Giving a bribe as punishable offence:

☞ The Bill introduces the offence of ‘giving a bribe’ as a direct offence. However, a person who is compelled to give a bribe will not be charged with the offence if he reports the matter to law enforcement authorities within seven days.

Redefining the Criminal misconduct:

☞ The Bill redefines the provisions related to criminal misconduct to only cover two types of offences: (i) fraudulent misappropriation of property; and (ii) illicit enrichment (such as amassing of assets disproportionate to one’s known sources of income).

Prior approval for investigation alleged to have been committed by a Public Servant:

➤ Before a police officer conducts any investigation into an offence alleged to have been committed by a public servant, prior approval of the relevant government or competent authority should be taken. Such approval would not be necessary in cases which involves the arrest of a person on the spot on the charge of taking a bribe.

Time limit for trial of cases:

➤ As per the Bill, trial by special judge should be completed within two years. If not, reasons for the delay must be recorded, for every six months of extension of time obtained. However, the total period for completion of trial may not exceed four years.

Source: Business Standard

Delhi LG has no independent decision-making power: SC

Why in news?

☞ In a moral victory for Delhi Chief Minister in his power tussle with Lieutenant Governor, the Supreme Court has ruled that the Lieutenant Governor (LG) has no independent power to take decisions and is bound by the elected government’s advice.

What is the issue?

☞ The judgment came on appeals filed by the NCT government against an August 4, 2016, verdict of the Delhi High Court, which had declared that the L-G has “complete control of all matters regarding the National Capital Territory of Delhi, and nothing will happen without the concurrence of the L-G”

SC judgment:

- Governor is bound by the aid and advice of the Council of Ministers.
- Lt Governor has not been entrusted with any independent decision making power.
- Lt Governor has to either act on the 'aid and advice' of Council of Ministers or he is bound to implement the decision taken by the President on a reference being made by him.
- The Centre has exclusive executive power over land, police, law and order.
- The executive power of Delhi government is co-extensive with the legislative powers of the Delhi Assembly.
- The executive power of the Council of Ministers spans over all the subjects covered under the concurrent list and the State list of the Constitution except land, police, law and order.
- By no stretch of imagination, National Capital Territory of Delhi can be accorded the status of State under the present constitutional scheme.
- The status of Lt Governor of Delhi is not that of a Governor of State.
- Lt Governor is an Administrator in a limited sense.
- Parliament has the power to make laws for the NCT Delhi on any matter under the State list and the concurrent list.
- Delhi Assembly too has the powers to enact laws on the all the subjects covered under the concurrent list and the State list minus land, police, law and order.
- The executive action of the State must conform to the law made by the Parliament on certain subject falling under concurrent and State lists.
- Lt Governor should not act in a mechanical manner without due application of mind so as to refer every decision of the Council of Ministers to the President.
- The difference of opinion between the Lt. Governor and the Council of Ministers should have sound rationale and should not be the phenomenon of an obstructionist.
- The Lt Governor and the Council of Ministers must attempt to settle any point of difference by way of discussion and dialogue.
- Lt Governor must work harmoniously with his Ministers and must not seek to resist them every step of the way.
- The decision of the Council of Ministers that has to be communicated to the Lt. Governor does not mean that the concurrence of the Lt. Governor is required.

- Our Constitution is a constructive one. There is no room for absolutism. There is no space for anarchy.

Source: The Hindu, Indian Express



International Relations, India & the World and International Affairs

10th edition of Delhi Dialogue took place in New Delhi

Why in news?

- ☞ The 10th edition of Delhi Dialogue (DD X) was held in New Delhi.

Key Facts

- The theme for this edition was “Strengthening India-ASEAN Maritime Cooperation”.
- This was the first major event organised after ASEAN-India Commemorative Summit, which was held in New Delhi in January 2018.

About Delhi Dialogue:

- Delhi Dialogue is premier annual event to discuss politico-security, economic and socio-cultural engagement between India and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).
- It has been held annually since 2009 and political leaders, policy makers, senior officials, diplomats, think tanks and academicians from both sides participate in the discussions pertaining to ASEAN-India relations.
- It is aimed at finding a common ground and expanding the scope of cooperation between India and ASEAN nations.
- The ninth edition of dialogue had marked the 25th anniversary of ASEAN-India Partnership.

About ASEAN:

- The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is a regional organisation comprising ten Southeast Asian states which promotes intergovernmental cooperation and facilitates economic integration amongst its members.
- It came into existence on August 8, 1967 after ASEAN declaration (also known as Bangkok declaration).
- Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, Philippines and Thailand were founder countries.
- Later 5 more countries Brunei Darussalam, Lao PDR, Cambodia, Myanmar and Vietnam were added.
- Its headquarters is in Jakarta, Indonesia.

Its principal aims are:

1. To accelerate economic growth, social progress, and sociocultural evolution among its members.
2. To protect of regional stability and the provision of a mechanism for member countries to resolve differences peacefully.

Source: PIB

Invest India and Business France sign MoU to promote investment**Why in news?**

- ☞ Invest India and Business France has signed a MoU to promote investment facilitation and cooperation between startups of the two countries.

Highlights

- Invest India and Business France will collaborate to promote business and startup ecosystem cooperation through joint activities and exchange experiences to strengthen institutional knowledge.
- The goal will be to facilitate direct foreign investment by providing practical investment information to enterprises and support the companies pursuing those opportunities, which contribute positively to economic growth of the two countries.

Significance of this MoU:

- The MoU will facilitate direct foreign investment by providing practical investment information to enterprises.
- It will also support companies pursuing those opportunities which contribute positively to economic growth of two countries.

Invest India:

- It is official Investment Promotion and Facilitation Agency of Central Government.
- It acts as the first point of reference for investors in India.
- Operationalized in early 2010, it is first stop for potential global investors in country.
- It is non-profit venture under Department of Industrial Policy and Promotion (DIPP), Ministry of Commerce and Industries.

Invest India is a joint venture:

Invest India is set up as a joint venture company between

- The Department of Industrial Policy & Promotion (DIPP) (35% equity),
- Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI) (51% equity)
- State Governments of India (0.5% each)
- The core mandate of Invest India is investment promotion and facilitation.
- It provides sector-specific and state-specific information to a foreign investor, assists in expediting regulatory approvals, and offers hand-holding services.
- Its mandate also includes assisting Indian investors to make informed choices about investment opportunities overseas.

Source: PIB

10th BRICS Summit 2018**Why in news?**

- The 10th BRICS Summit 2018 was held in South Africa recently. The theme for the 10th BRICS Summit is: "BRICS in Africa: Collaboration for Inclusive Growth and Shared Prosperity in the 4th Industrial Revolution".
- The theme is intended to align and ensure strategic continuity with the approved themes for South Africa's Chairmanship of both the South African Development Community (SADC) and the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA).

New areas of BRICS cooperation:

The new areas of BRICS cooperation as proposed by South Africa are as follows:

- Establishment of a Working Group on Peacekeeping;
- Establishment of a Vaccine Research Centre for Collaboration with BRICS vaccine innovation and development partners – this is intended to be a physical research centre focused on research and development and vaccine innovation;
- Establishment of a BRICS Gender and Women's Forum – intended as a dedicated track for gender and women's issues, given the economic benefit to be derived from the socio-economic empowerment of women, particularly in developing countries;

- Leveraging the Strategy for BRICS Economic Partnership towards the pursuit of Inclusive Growth and Advancing the 4th Industrial Revolution – this is intended to foster discussions to addresses opportunities provided by the Fourth Industrial Revolution, as a means of leapfrogging development stages and bridging the digital divide; and
- Establishment of a BRICS Tourism Track of Cooperation.

About BRICS:

BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) is an association of five major emerging national economies.

- BRICS comprises 43% of the world population, having 30% of the world GDP and 17% share in the world trade.
- It was established in 2009.
- The acronym BRIC was first used in 2001 by Goldman Sachs in their Global Economics Paper, “The World Needs Better Economic BRICS” on the basis of econometric analyses projecting that the economies of Brazil, Russia, India and China would individually and collectively occupy far greater economic space and would be amongst the world’s largest economies in the next 50 years or so.
- In 2011, South Africa joined this informal group and BRIC became BRICS.
- The first formal summit was held in Yekaterinburg, Russia.
- The BRICS members are all developing or newly industrialised countries.
- It is important to note that all five BRICS nations are G-20 members.
- They are distinguished by their large, fast-growing economies and significant influence on regional and global affairs.

BRICS Leaders’ Summit:

- The BRICS Leaders’ Summit is convened annually with discussions representing spheres of political and socio-economic coordination, in which member countries have identified several business opportunities, economic complementarities and areas of cooperation.

Chairmanship:

- The Chairmanship of the forum is rotated annually among the members, in accordance with the acronym B-R-I-C-S. Cooperation among members is predicated on three levels or “tracks” of interaction, namely:

- **Track I:** Formal diplomatic engagement between the national governments.
- **Track II:** Engagement through government-affiliated institutions, e.g. state-owned enterprises and business councils.
- **Track III:** Civil society and “people-to-people” engagement.

Source: The Hindu, Times of India

Prime Minister’s recent visit to Uganda and Rwanda

Why in news?

- ☞ During PM Modi’s visit to Uganda, India and Uganda signed four MoUs in various fields.
- ☞ Prime Minister Modi’s official engagement in Rwanda and Uganda included bilateral meetings with the presidents of both the nations, delegation-level talks and meetings with the business and the Indian communities respectively.

MoUs signed in the areas:

1. Defence cooperation,
 2. Visa exemption for official and diplomatic passport holders,
 3. Cultural exchange programme and
 4. Material testing laboratory.
- ☞ India also announced two Lines of Credit worth nearly 200 million US dollars to Uganda in energy, infrastructure, agriculture and dairy sectors.

During his Rwanda visit, Prime Minister Narendra Modi gifted 200 cows to villagers from Rweru villages as part of Rwandan Government’s Girinka Programme.

What is Girinka Programme?

- Under this programme, poorest residing in region gets cows from Government and gift first female calf to neighbour to promote brotherhood.
- The programme was initiated by President Paul Kagame in response to alarmingly high rate of childhood malnutrition and as way to accelerate poverty reduction and integrate livestock and crop farming.
- The programme is based on premise that providing dairy cow to poor, transforms livelihoods, reconciles communities improving agricultural productivity through use of manure as fertilizers.

- The program has contributed to increase in agricultural production in Rwanda – especially milk production and products and has reduced malnutrition and increased incomes.

An assessment

- Both President Xi Jinping of China and Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India were on their first visits to Rwanda and both signed a clutch of pacts in Kigali in a bid to shore up ties.

The reasons for this courtship are not difficult to fathom.

- Rwanda under President Paul Kagame has left behind memories of a horrific genocide in 1994 which saw majority Hutus ethnic group target the minority Tutsis leaving hundreds of thousands dead.
- Buoyed by better farm incomes, since 2000, Rwanda has notched up growth rates of 8% a year, making it one of the fastest-growing economies in the world (though still one of the poorest). Many talk of a “Rwandan miracle, and look to it for lessons in development.”
- The International Monetary Fund in an assessment in April said that while Africa would clock an economic growth of 3.8% in 2018, Rwanda’s economy is likely to expand at 7.2 %. Agriculture, mining and quarrying are the key economic activities.
- The country is one of the largest producers of tin, tantalum, and tungsten besides good quality silica sands.
- Seemingly buoyed by its economic success, Rwanda is also increasingly playing a role in African affairs.
- In March, Kigali hosted the Assembly of the African Union where the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AFCTA) establishing the African Continental Free Trade Area was signed.
- Forty-four members of the African Union signed the agreement. When ratified, the agreement would be the largest free trade area in terms of participating countries since the formation of the World Trade Organization.
- Rwanda is the third largest troop contributor for peacekeeping in Africa and plays an important role in the UN Mission in the Central African Republic.
- Rwanda is also looking for funds to build rail lines—one linking Kigali to Tanzanian capital Dar es Salaam and another to Mombasa in Kenya besides a third to the Ugandan capital Kampala. “Given China’s strategy in Africa, Rwanda could well get funding from China.
- *While China has opened an embassy in Kigali, New Delhi appointed its first ambassador to Rwanda recently.*

The Way Ahead

- India shares close, warm and friendly relations with Africa which are cemented by robust development partnership and a large presence of the Indian Diaspora. Africa has been the top priority of India's Foreign Policy. The visit of the Prime Minister to Rwanda and Uganda will further strengthen our relations with the African continent
- Over the last few years, there has been a significant intensification of India's engagement in various fields with African countries and there have been as many as 23 outgoing visits to Africa at the level of President, Vice President and Prime Minister in the last four years.

Source: The Hindu, Live Mint, The Wire

❑ **India becomes regional head of Asia Pacific at World Customs Organisation**

Why in news?

- India has become the Vice-Chair (Regional Head) of the Asia Pacific Region of World Customs Organisation (WCO) for a period of two years, from July, 2018 to June, 2020.
- Being the Vice Chair of AP Region of WCO will enable India to take on leadership role.

About World Customs Organisation (WCO):

- WCO is an independent intergovernmental body whose mission is to enhance effectiveness and efficiency of Customs administrations.
- It was established in 1952 as Customs Co-operation Council (CCC).
- It is the only international organization with competence in Customs matters and is considered as voice of international Customs community.
- WCO represents 182 Customs administrations across the globe that collectively process approximately 98% of world trade.
- It is headquartered in Brussels, Belgium.

Organisational Structure:

- WCO has divided its membership into six regions whereby each region is represented by elected vice-chairperson to WCO Council.

Functions of WCO:

- It offers range of Conventions and other international instruments, as well as technical assistance and training services to its members.
- It also actively supports its members in their endeavours to modernize and build capacity within their national Customs administrations.

- It also plays vital role in stimulating growth of legitimate international trade and combats fraudulent activities.
- It also promotes emergence of honest, transparent and predictable Customs environment, thus directly contributing to economic and social well-being of its members.

Source: PIB

UNSC adopts Resolution 2427 to protect children in armed conflict

Why in news?

- ☞ The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) has adopted Resolution 2427 recently. The resolution has won unanimous approval of the 15 members of the council.

What is Resolution 2427?

- The resolution is aimed at further crystalizing the protection of children in armed conflicts, including by combating their recruitment by non-State armed groups and treating formerly recruited children primarily as victims.
- It strongly condemns the recruitment and use of children by parties to armed conflict as well as their re-recruitment, killing and maiming, rape and other forms of sexual violence, and abductions.
- It also condemns attacks against schools and hospitals and the denial of humanitarian access by parties to armed conflict and all other violations of international law committed against children in situations of armed conflict.
- It demands that all relevant parties immediately put an end to such practices and take special measures to protect children.
- It also emphasizes the responsibility of all states to put an end to impunity and to investigate and prosecute those responsible for genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes and other egregious crimes perpetrated against children.
- The resolution reiterates the Security Council's readiness to adopt targeted and graduated measures against persistent perpetrators of violations and abuses committed against children.
- It calls on member states and the United Nations to mainstream child protection into all relevant activities in conflict prevention, conflict and post-conflict situations with the aim of sustaining peace and preventing conflict.

Background:

- According to an annual report of the UN secretary-general on children and armed conflict that was released recently:
- Over 21,000 cases of grave violations of children's rights in armed conflict have been verified by the United Nations for 2017, a drastic increase from the previous year with 15,500 violations.
- Among the violations in 2017, some 15,000 were perpetrated by non-state armed groups and about 6,000 were committed by government forces.

About United Nations Security Council (UNSC):

- The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) is one of the organs of the United Nations and is charged with the maintenance of international peace and security.

Powers:

- Its powers include the establishment of peacekeeping operations, the establishment of international sanctions, and the authorization of military action through Security Council resolutions.
- It is the only UN body with the authority to issue binding resolutions to member states.

Members:

- The Security Council consists of **fifteen members**.
- **Russia, the United Kingdom, France, China, and the United States**—serve as the body's **five permanent members**. These permanent members can veto any substantive Security Council resolution, including those on the admission of new member states or candidates for Secretary-General.
- The Security Council also has **10 non-permanent members**, elected on a regional basis to serve two-year terms. The body's presidency rotates monthly among its members.

Source: The Hindu

India-Korea Technology Exchange Centre Inaugurated

Why in news?

- ☞ The India-Korea Technology Exchange Centre was inaugurated at National Small Industries Corporation (NSIC) premises in New Delhi recently.

India-Korea Technology Exchange Centre: Objectives

- The purpose of centre is to create platform for MSMEs of India and South Korea where they can be assisted to identify and exchange latest technologies, share management expertise, product development and technology applications for product development.
- The centre will work towards identifying Indian technologies which can be exported to Korea and find suitable Korean partners for the same.
- It will initiate various cooperative MSME projects complimenting each other's strengths in MSME sector.
- It will also create Technology Data Bank from each side to encourage technology transfers, production of high quality products in India.

Importance of this centre:

- Korea has strong industrial base with well-developed small and medium enterprises (SME) sector, especially in advanced manufacturing technologies such as machinery & equipment, electronics, electrical machinery & equipment and robotics.
- With this platform, SMEs of both the countries can learn from each other to enhance their comparative advantages and be competitive in the world.

About National Small Industries Corporation Limited (NSIC):

- ▶ NSIC is a Mini Ratna PSU established by the Government of India in 1955.
- ▶ It falls under Ministry of Micro, Small & Medium Enterprises of India.
- ▶ NSIC is the nodal office for several schemes of Ministry of MSME such as Performance & Credit Rating, Single Point Registration, MSME Databank, National SC ST Hub, etc.
- ▶ NSIC facilitates Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises with a set of specially tailored scheme to enhance their competitiveness.

Source: PIB



Indian Economy and Economic Development

❑ Multi Commodity Exchange of India (MCX plans to enter the currency derivatives segment)

Why in news?

- The Multi Commodity Exchange of India (MCX), the country's largest commodity bourse in terms of market share, is planning to enter the currency derivatives segment.

What are currency derivatives?

- Currency derivatives are exchange-based futures and options contracts that allow one to hedge against currency movements.
- Simply put, one can use a currency future contract to exchange one currency for another at a future date at a price decided on the day of the purchase of the contract.
- In India, one can use such derivative contracts to hedge against currencies like dollar, euro, U.K. pound and yen. Corporates, especially those with a significant exposure to imports or exports, use these contracts to hedge against their exposure to a certain currency.
- While all such currency contracts are cash-settled in rupees, the Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI), early this year, gave a go-ahead to start cross currency contracts as well on euro-dollar, pound-dollar and dollar-yen.

How can one trade in currency derivatives?

- The two national-level stock exchanges, BSE and the National Stock Exchange (NSE), have currency derivatives segments.
- The Metropolitan Stock Exchange of India (MSEI) also has such a segment but the volumes are a fraction of that witnessed on the BSE or the NSE.
- One can trade in currency derivatives through brokers. Incidentally, all the leading stock brokers offer currency trading services too.

Why were such derivatives introduced on exchange platforms?

- Prior to the introduction of currency derivatives on exchanges, there was only the OTC – over the counter – market to hedge currency risks and where forward contracts were negotiated and entered into. It was kind of an opaque and closed market where mostly banks and financial institutions traded. Exchange-based currency derivatives segment is a regulated and transparent market that can be used by small businesses and even individuals to hedge their currency risks.

Multi Commodity Exchange Ltd (MCX):

- The MCX is the country's largest metals and energy commodity bourse.

- It began functioning in November 2003 and operates within the regulatory framework of the Forward Contracts Regulation Act, 1952 (FCRA, 1952).
- It is country's first listed commodity futures exchange that facilitates online trading, and clearing and settlement of commodity futures transactions, thereby providing a platform for risk management.
- It offers futures trading in bullion, ferrous and non-ferrous metals, energy, and a number of agricultural commodities (mentha oil, cardamom, potatoes, palm oil and others).
- Globally, MCX ranks first in silver, second in natural gas, and third in crude oil and gold in futures trading.

Source: The Hindu, Business Standard

Andhra Ranks highest on DIPP's Ease of Doing Business Index

Why in news?

- ☞ Andhra Pradesh scored the top position in the DIPP (Department of Industrial Policy and Promotion) and World Bank's jointly released ease of doing business index for states, leaving behind industry-focused states such as Gujarat, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, and Karnataka.

Key facts:

- The next two spots for ease of doing business were grabbed by Telangana and Haryana respectively.
- Delhi is placed at 23rd among 34 states and Union territories. Its rank also worsened from 18th in 2016.
- Karnataka has occupied the eighth spot, against 13th in 2016.
- The rankings are in accordance with the third edition of DIPP's Business Reforms Action Plan (BRAP 2017).
- The final rankings were arrived at after combining "reform evidence score" and "feedback score".

About the BRAP 2017:

- DIPP, Ministry of Commerce and Industry in collaboration with the World Bank conducted an annual reform exercise for all States and UTs under the Business Reform Action Plan (BRAP).
- The aim of this exercise is to improve delivery of various Central Government regulatory functions and services in an efficient, effective and transparent manner.
- BRAP 2017 includes two new sectors i.e. Healthcare and Hospitality.

- The reform plan includes 372 recommendations for reforms on regulatory processes, policies, practices and procedures spread across 12 reform areas including labour regulation enablers; contract enforcement; registering property; inspection reform enablers; single window system; land availability and allotment; construction permit enablers etc.

Background:

- ☞ This year, it is for the first time that the DIPP carried out a comprehensive business-to-government (B2G) feedback exercise, whereby feedback was taken from businesses on the quality of implementation of the reforms claimed by the states and Union territories (UTs).

Source: PIB

❑ Banks, financial institutions sign an agreement to speed up resolution of bad loans

Why in news?

- ☞ Nearly two dozen Banks and Financial Institutions, including SBI and LIC, have signed the inter-creditor agreement (ICA) framework to speed up the resolution of stressed assets which are under the 500-crore rupee bracket.

What is Inter-Creditor Agreement (ICA)?

- The inter-creditor agreement is aimed at the resolution of loan accounts with a size of Rs 50 crore and above that are under the control of a group of lenders.
- It is **part of the ‘Project Sashakt’** approved by the government to address the problem of resolving bad loans.
- The agreement is based on a recommendation by the Sunil Mehta committee that looked into resolution of stressed assets.

How it works?

- The agreement says if 66% of lenders by value agree to a resolution plan, it would be binding on all lenders. The dissenting creditors will, however, have the option to sell their loans to other lenders at a discount of 15% to the liquidation value, or buy the entire portfolio paying 125% of the value agreed under the debt resolution plan by other lenders.
- The agreement says each resolution plan would be submitted to an overseeing committee comprising experts from the banking industry.

- For dissenting creditors, the agreement says the “lead bank has the right, but not the obligation, to arrange the buyout of the loan facilities at a value that is equal to 85% of the liquidation or the resolution value —whichever is lower.”
- Dissenting creditors can also exit by selling their loans to any entity at a price mutually arrived at between the lender and buyer.
- The agreement has a standstill clause wherein all lenders are barred from enforcing any legal action against the borrower for recovery of dues. During the standstill period, lenders are barred from transferring or assigning their loans to anyone except a bank or finance company.
- The standstill provision will be operative for 180 days from the reference date — the RBI had asked lenders to resolve their restructured loans within 180 days beginning March 1 or refer those to the bankruptcy court.
- However, the provision would not prevent lenders from acting against borrowers or directors for criminal offence. Lenders are in the process of getting this inter-creditor agreement approved by their boards.

Significance of ICA:

- The agreement is a “huge step forward” in tackling the bad loan issue as it is drawn up by banks themselves and is a reflection of bankers’ resolve to collectively find a solution to stressed asset mess.
- Almost the entire banking system and prominent NBFCs like REC, PFC are joining the ICA which has held back fast and effective resolution of stressed assets for decades in the past.

What is Project Sashakt?

- ‘Project Sashakt’ is a five-prong strategy to deal with non-performing assets unveiled by Finance Minister of India in July 2018.
- It has been announced to address the problem of NPAs of non-performing assets of government banks in the country.
- It aims to strengthen the credit capacity, credit culture and credit portfolio of public sector banks and to create a vibrant market which includes online trading of these stressed assets.
- The policy has been prepared based on the report of the committee formed under the chairmanship of Sunil Mehta.
- The committee has set a five-prong strategy towards resolution of stressed assets.
- An independent **Asset Management Company (AMC)** would be set up to focus on asset turn around, job creation and protection.

- AMC will be fully market based and more than one AMC can be formed in the country. It can also include foreign-foreign companies.
- This independent body would be aligned with **Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code (IBC)** process and IBC laws.
- The AMC will be set up by state-run banks for resolution of loans above Rs 500 crore.
- The government will not interfere in the resolution process; it would entirely be led by banks.
- The benefit of this scheme will be that the hassles of collecting the loans from these customers will not remain on the banks.

Key Features of ‘Sashakt’ Project:

- A steering committee will be constituted in every bank for disposal of stranded loan accounts up to 50 million rupees. The advantage will be to the small and medium companies that they have NPAs up to Rs 50 crore.
- The committee will decide about these accounts within 90 days that they need to pay more or they need to close their accounts.
- It has been decided for NPA account of Rs 50 to 500 crores that a decision will be taken to settle the debts of Lead Bank headed by them.
- More than one bank lenders to the account holders of this category, hence a settlement will be made between the lending banks.
- Other NPA accounts of more than Rs 500 crores, which will not be settled through AMC, will be settled only under Bankruptcy Act.
- To implement this, a screening committee of these banks will also be constituted which will see whether the rules are being followed in a transparent manner or not.

Source: The Hindu, Indian Express, Business Standard

❑ **India becomes newest shareholder of European Bank for Reconstruction and Development**

Why in news?

- India was formally inducted as 69th shareholder of European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD).

Key Facts

- The EBRD’s board of governors, which represents all existing shareholders, voted unanimously in favour of the country’s application in March 2018.

- India being shareholder, will only take shareholding in EBRD and will not be recipient of EBRD financing. But it may benefit India indirectly through EBRD projects or if Indian companies invest alongside the bank.

How this membership is significant for India?

- This development will pave way for more joint investment with Indian companies across EBRD's regions of operation.
- It opens up further joint investment prospects for India in markets such as Central Asia, Egypt and Jordan.
- The membership of EBRD will enhance India's international profile and promote its economic interests.
- It will give India access to EBRD's Countries of Operation and sector knowledge.
- It will boost India's investment opportunities and also improve investment climate in country.
- The membership of EBRD will help to increase scope of cooperation between India and EBRD through co-financing opportunities in manufacturing, services, energy and Information Technology.
- It will also help India leverage technical assistance and sectorial knowledge of EBRD for benefit of development of private sector.
- The membership of EBRD will also enhance competitive strength of Indian firms and provide enhanced access to international markets in terms of business opportunities, procurement activities, consultancy assignments etc.
- It will open up new vistas for Indian professionals on one hand and give fillip to Indian exports on other.
- It will also have positive impact on employment generating potential due to increased economic activities.
- It will also enable Indian nationals to get employment opportunity in EBRD.

About EBRD:

- The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) is an international financial institution that supports projects in over 30 countries, from eastern Europe to central Asia and the southern and eastern Mediterranean.

- Investing primarily in private sector clients whose needs cannot be fully met by the market, the EBRD promotes entrepreneurship and fosters transition towards open and democratic market economies.
- The EBRD is owned by 65 countries and two intergovernmental institutions: the European Union and the European Investment Bank (EIB).
- The EBRD provides project financing for banks, industries and businesses, both new ventures and investments in existing companies.
- It also works with publicly owned companies, to support privatisation, restructuring state-owned firms and improving municipal services.
- It uses close relationship with governments in the region to promote policies that will bolster the business environment.
- The powers of the EBRD are vested in the Board of Governors to which each member appoints a governor, generally the minister of finance.
- The Board of Governors delegates most powers to the Board of Directors, which is responsible for the EBRD's strategic direction.
- The President is elected by the Board of Governors and is the legal representative of the EBRD. Under the guidance of the Board of Directors, the President manages the EBRD's work.

Source: The Hindu, World bank.org

India slips 3 ranks in FDI Confidence Index 2018

Why in news?

- ☞ According to recently released 2018 Kearney FDI Confidence Index, India has fallen out of top 10 destinations for Foreign Direct Investments (FDI) in terms of its attractiveness.

Highlights of the report:

- The United States (US) topped the index, followed by Canada at 2nd and Germany at the 3rd place.
- China falls three spots to 5th place this year, the lowest ranking of the country in the history of the Index.
- Switzerland and Italy entered the top 10 for the first time in more than a decade, pushing out India and Singapore to 11th and 12th spots, respectively.

- Only four emerging markets appear among the top 25 countries for FDI intentions China, India, Mexico and Brazil.
- The newcomers to the Index are all European countries- Denmark (20th), Portugal (22nd) and Norway (23rd).
- The countries, that appeared on the 2017 Index but do not appear this year, are all emerging markets: Thailand, the United Arab Emirates and South Africa.

Indian Context:

- India was ranked 11th, down from 8th in 2017 and 9th in 2016.
- Fall in India's rankings may be due to teething troubles in implementation of goods and services tax (GST) and Government's demonetisation decision in 2016.
- These policies may have deterred investors in the short term as they have disrupted business activity and weighed on economic growth
- Several of India's reforms such as removing Foreign Investment Promotion Board (FIPB) and liberalising FDI limits in key sectors such as retail, aviation, and biomedical industries have maintained India's high rankings in terms of FDI attractiveness.

About FDI Confidence Index:

- The index was released by global consultancy firm A T Kearney.
- Created in 1998, the index is an annual survey of the business executives that ranks countries which are likely to attract the most FDI in the next three years.
- The Index is calculated as a weighted average of the number of low, medium and high responses to questions on the possibility of making a direct investment in a market over the next three years.
- Companies participating in survey have annual revenues of \$500 million or more.

Way ahead:

- ☞ In future, potential investors are likely to be cautious as they are monitoring political risks such as China abolishing presidential term limits and upcoming general election in India. But sheer size of Chinese and Indian markets, will continue to be draw for investors and they will remain highest-ranking emerging markets on the index.

Source: The Hindu, Economic Times

India surpasses France to become world's 6th largest economy

Why in news?

- ☞ According to updated World Bank figures for 2017, India has become the world's sixth-biggest economy, pushing France into seventh place.

Highlights of the report :

- The United States continue to be the world's biggest economy.
- US is followed by China (second place), Japan (third place) and Germany (fourth place)
- Britain was still the world's fifth-biggest economy.

India's performance:

- Manufacturing and consumer spending were the main drivers of the Indian economy last year, after a stutter blamed on demonetisation and implementation of Goods and Services Tax (GST).
- India has doubled its GDP within decade and is expected to power ahead as key economic engine in Asia, even as China economy is slowing down. In near future India is also expected to surpass fifth largest economy United Kingdom.

India Vs France GDP comparison:

- India's gross domestic product (GDP) amounted to \$2.597 trillion at the end of last year, against \$2.582 trillion for France.
- India, with population of around 1.34 billion is poised to become world's most populous nation, whereas France's population stands at 67 million. This means India's per capita GDP will continue to amount to just fraction of that of France which is still roughly 20 times higher.

Predictions for India:

- According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), India is projected to generate growth of 7.4 per cent this year and 7.8 per cent in 2019, boosted by household spending and a tax reform. This compares to the world's expected average growth of 3.9 per cent.
- The London-based Centre for Economics and Business Research, a consultancy, said at the end of last year that India would overtake both Britain and France this year in terms of GDP, and had a good chance to become the world's third-biggest economy by 2032.

Source: Economic Times

Mukhyamantri Kisan Aaye Badhotri Solar Yojna Launched in Delhi**Why in news?**

- ☞ Delhi government has recently announced the 'Mukhyamantri Kisan Aaye Badhotri Solar Yojna' which aims to increase the income of farmers by three to five times in the national capital.

About the scheme:

- Under the scheme, any farmer can rent out not more than one-third of his land to a private firm to set up solar panels at a rate of Rs one lakh per annum per acre.
- The panels will be set up at a height of 3.5 metres, so that the land can also be used for agriculture.
- The Delhi Government departments will buy solar power from the companies participating in the scheme.

Significance of the scheme:

- The annual income of the beneficiary farmers, which is estimated at present to be between Rs 30,000 and Rs 50,000 per acre per year, will increase to between Rs 1.30 lakh and Rs 1.5 lakh following the implementation of this scheme.
- Besides getting additional income, the farmers will also get 1,000 units of free solar power without any investment.
- The departments currently buy electricity at Rs 9 per unit but with the implementation of the scheme, the expense will come down to Rs 5 per unit, saving the department Rs 400 crore to Rs 500 crore annually.

Source: The Hindu

Five oil PSUs sign JV pact for gas pipeline project in Northeast**Why in news?**

- ☞ Five public sector oil and natural gas companies signed the joint venture agreement to implement the Rs 6000 Crore North-East Natural Gas Pipeline Grid.
- ☞ The five companies are Indian Oil Corporation Limited (IOCL), ONGC, GAIL, Oil India Limited and Numaligarh Refinery Limited (NRL).

North-East Natural Gas Pipeline Grid:

- It is a major initiative to connect all North-East States to National Gas Grid.
- It will be implemented under Centre's ambitious Urja Ganga Gas Pipeline Project.
- With the signing of the agreement, the joint venture company will develop, build, operate and maintain the natural gas pipeline grid connecting Guwahati to the major Northeast cities and major load centers like Numaligarh Refinery, spanning over an estimated length of 1,500 KM. The pipeline will also integrate feasible gas producing fields in the region.

- The joint venture company will have equal equity contribution from all the partners for development of the natural gas pipeline project.
- The schedule for commissioning the project will be four years, including one year pre-project activities.
- The project will connect state capitals of all eight North Eastern states- Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh.

About Pradhan Mantri Urja Ganga:

- The gas pipeline project aims to provide piped cooking (PNG) gas to residents of the eastern region of the country and CNG gas for the vehicles.

Key Facts:

- The project is being implemented by state-run gas utility GAIL.
- The ambitious 2,655 km long Jagdishpur-Haldia & Bokaro-Dhamra Natural Gas Pipeline (JHBDPL) project originates at Jagdishpur (Uttar Pradesh).
- The main trunk of pipeline ends to Haldia (West Bengal) and Dhamra (Odisha). The pipeline passes through Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, West Bengal and Odisha.
- The Urja Ganga project also augments existing GAIL's network of trunk pipelines covering the length of around 11,000 km by 2540 km.
- Besides, under this project work on 2540-km long Jagdishpur-Haldia and Bokaro-Dhamra Natural Gas pipeline project will begin and will be completed between 2018 and 2020.
- Seven East India cities Varanasi, Jamshedpur, Patna, Ranchi, Kolkata, Bhubaneswar, Cuttack – will be the major beneficiary of this network development.
- Besides, LNG terminal at Dhamra will provide clean fuel to the Industrial Development of the Eastern states of Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand, Bihar, West Bengal and Odisha.

Significance of the project:

- The project is considered as a major step towards collective growth and development of the Eastern region of India. Under it, overall 20 lakh households will get PNG connections.
- It will usher Industrial development in East India by supplying environmentally clean natural gas to fertiliser and power plant, refineries, steel plants and other industries.

- From Varanasi's perspective, 50,000 households and 20,000 vehicles will get cleaner and cheaper fuel PNG and CNG gas respectively.
- It will also help in revival of defunct fertilizer plants in Barauni in Bihar, Gorakhpur in UP, Sindri in Jharkhand and Durgapur in West Bengal by supplying gas.

Source: Business Standard

Parliament nod for merger of subsidiary banks with SBI

Why in news?

- ☞ Parliament has passed State Banks (Repeal and Amendment) Bill, 2017 to merge six subsidiary banks with State Bank of India after it was approved by Rajya Sabha.

Key features of the Bill:

- The bill repeals two Acts namely State Bank of India (Subsidiary Banks) Act, 1959, and State Bank of Hyderabad Act, 1956. These two acts had established State Bank of Bikaner, State Bank of Patiala, State Bank of Mysore, State Bank of Hyderabad and State Bank of Travancore. These banks were subsidiaries of SBI.
- By repealing these two acts, five subsidiary banks will be merged with SBI. The bill also seeks to amend State Bank of India (SBI) Act, 1955 to remove references to subsidiary banks and powers of SBI to act as an agent of the RBI for subsidiary banks.

Background:

- The Union Cabinet in February 2017 had approved merger of five associate banks along with Bharatiya Mahila Bank with SBI.
- The purposes of merger were rationalisation of public bank resources, reduction of costs, better profitability, lower cost of funds leading to better rate of interest for public at large and improve productivity and customer service of the public service banks.
- After the acquisition by SBI, the subsidiaries banks ceased to exist and, therefore, it was necessary to repeal two Acts. The merger had made SBI one of 50 biggest banks of world.

Source: PIB

New Exploration Licensing Policy (NELP)

Why in news?

- ☞ To increase domestic hydrocarbon production, the Union Cabinet approved the policy framework to streamline production sharing contracts signed in the pre-New Exploration Licensing Policy (NELP) and NELP periods.
- ☞ Key decisions under the framework include increasing the exploration period granted for blocks in the northeast, and easing the sharing of royalties with the developers of the blocks.

About New Exploration Licensing Policy (NELP):

- New Exploration Licensing Policy (NELP) is a policy adopted by Government of India in 1997 indicating the new contractual and fiscal model for award of hydrocarbon acreages towards exploration and production (E&P).
- NELP was applicable for all contracts entered into by the Government between 1997 and 2016.
- Its aim was to provide an equal platform to both Public and Private sector companies in exploration and production of hydrocarbons.
- It provided for establishment of Directorate General of Hydrocarbons (DGH) as a nodal agency for its implementation.
- It was introduced to boost the production of oil and natural gas and providing level playing field for both public and private players.
- Before implementation of the New Exploration Licensing Policy (NELP) in 1999, a mere 11% of Indian sedimentary basins were under exploration, which has now increased extensively over the years.

About Hydrocarbon Exploration & Licensing Policy (HELP):

- Launched in 2016, the Hydrocarbon Exploration & Licensing Policy (HELP) opens up India's entire sedimentary basin for investment from domestic and foreign players under a simplified, transparent and investor -friendly fiscal and administrative regime.
- HELP replaced the extant policy regime for exploration and production of oil and gas -New Exploration Licensing Policy (NELP), which has been in existence for 18 years.

Objectives of HELP:

- Enhance domestic oil and gas production

- Bring substantial investment
- Generate sizable employment
- Enhance transparency and
- Reduce administrative discretion

Four main elements of HELP:

1. Uniform license for exploration and production of all forms of hydrocarbon.
2. An open acreage policy.
3. Easy to administer revenue sharing model.
4. Marketing and pricing freedom for the crude oil and natural gas produced.

About Open Acreage Licensing Policy (OALP):

- Open Acreage Licensing Policy (OALP), a part of the government's Hydrocarbon Exploration and Licensing Policy (HELP), gives an option to a company looking for exploring hydrocarbons to select the exploration blocks on its own, without waiting for the formal bid round from the Government.
- The objective of OLAP is to increase India's indigenous oil and gas production by maximising the potential of already discovered hydrocarbon resources in the country.
- OALP offers single license to explore conventional and unconventional oil and gas resources to propel investment in and provide operational flexibility to the investors.

Source: The Hindu

RBI cautions states over cash for food scheme**Why in news?**

- ☞ Acknowledging that problems have been experienced by three Union Territories (UTs) in the implementation of direct benefit transfer (DBT) for food subsidy, the Reserve Bank of India has cautioned the states planning to shift from existing mechanism to DBT for food subsidies.

What are the problems cited by RBI in its report?

- In its report on State finances, the Bank referred to problems such as inadequacy of transfers to maintain pre-DBT consumption levels, insufficiency of last-mile delivery mechanisms and a weak grievance redressal system.

DBT Vs. PDS:

- On the question of whether cash transfer is an alternative to the public distribution system (PDS), the RBI has stated that
- Cash transfer mode reduces the need for large physical movement of food grains.
- Given the wide inter-State and intra-State variations in food consumption habits, the DBT provides “greater autonomy” to beneficiaries to choose their consumption basket, apart from enhancing dietary diversity.
- It also reduces the leakage in the PDS, as the Central government has to absorb a huge food subsidy bill under the existing system of distribution of food grains in fulfilment of provisions of the National Food Security Act (NFSA).

What is Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) scheme?

- With the aim of reforming Government delivery system by re-engineering the existing process in welfare schemes for simpler and faster flow of information/funds and to ensure accurate targeting of the beneficiaries, de-duplication and reduction of fraud Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) was started on 1st January, 2013.
- DBT Mission was created in the Planning Commission to act as the nodal point for the implementation of the DBT programmes. The Mission was transferred to the Department of Expenditure in 2013 and then placed in Cabinet Secretariat under Secretary (Co-ordination & PG) in 2015.
- **Aadhaar is not mandatory in DBT schemes.** Since Aadhaar provides unique identity and is useful in targeting the intended beneficiaries, **Aadhaar is preferred** and beneficiaries are encouraged to have Aadhaar.
- JAM i.e. Jan Dhan, Aadhaar and Mobile are DBT enablers. These provide a unique opportunity to implement DBT in all welfare schemes across country including States & UTs.

Categories of schemes covered under DBT:**Cash Transfer to Individual Beneficiary:**

- This category includes schemes or components of schemes wherein cash benefits are transferred by Government to individual beneficiaries. Example PAHAL, MGNREGA, NSAP etc. This transfer of cash benefits from Ministry/Department to beneficiaries happens through different routes, as given below:
- Directly to beneficiaries
- Through State Treasury Account to beneficiaries

- Through any Implementing Agency as appointed
- Centre/State Governments to beneficiaries

In-kind Transfer from Government to Individual Beneficiary:

- This category includes schemes or components of schemes wherein kind benefits are given by the Government to individuals through an intermediate agency.
- For example, in Public Distribution System (PDS), Food Corporation of India (FCI) is the Government agent responsible for procurement, movement, storage and distribution of food grains to Fair Price Shops.

Other Transfers:

- Apart from these two categories of schemes, there is another category of transfers from the government to different non-government functionaries who help in facilitation of various government schemes till the last mile.
- This category includes transfers made to the various enablers of government schemes like community workers, NGOs, in the form of honorarium, incentives, etc. for successful implementation of the schemes.
- For example, ASHA workers under NHM, Aanganwadi workers under ICDS, teachers in aided schools, sanitation staff in ULBs, etc. are not beneficiaries themselves but they are given wages, training, and incentives for their service to the beneficiaries/community.

Source: The Hindu

- ❑ **Cabinet approves extension of Scheme of Recapitalization of Regional Rural Banks upto 2019-20**

Why in news?

- The Union Cabinet has approved the extension of the scheme of recapitalization of Regional Rural Banks (RRBs) for the next three years i.e. upto 2019-20.

Impact:

- This will enable the RRBs to maintain the minimum prescribed Capital to Risk Weighted Assets Ratio (CRAR) of 9%.
- A strong capital structure and minimum required level of CRAR will ensure financial stability of RRBs which will enable them to play a greater role in financial inclusion and meeting the credit requirements of rural areas.

Regional Rural Banks (RRBs):

- RRBs were set up as government-sponsored, regional based rural lending institutions under Regional Rural Banks Act, 1976.
- A Regional Rural Banks Ordinance was promulgated in September 1975, which was replaced by the Regional Rural Banks Act 1976.
- They are **scheduled commercial banks (Government banks)** and are configured as hybrid micro banking institutions, combining local orientation and small scale lending culture of cooperatives and business culture of commercial banks.
- RRBs are **jointly owned by Central Government, concerned State Government and Sponsor Banks with the issued capital shared in the proportion of 50%, 15% and 35% respectively.**

Functions:

- RRBs provide banking facilities to rural and semi-urban areas, they carry out government operations like disbursement of wages of MGNREGA workers, distribution of pensions etc, they provide para-Banking facilities like locker facilities, debit and credit cards. They can also function as Small financial banks.
- They have been created with a view to serve primarily rural areas of India with basic banking and financial services.
- They fulfill credit needs of relatively unserved sections in rural areas-small and marginal farmers, agricultural labourers and socio-economically weaker sections and small entrepreneurs in rural areas for development of agriculture, trade, commerce, industry and other productive activities.
- RRBs can also set branches set up for urban operations and their area of operation may include semi urban or urban areas too.

Source: PIB



Environment and Ecology, Disaster management, Pollution

International Tiger Day: 29th July

Why in news?

- ☞ The **International Tiger Day** (also known as **Global Tiger Day**) is celebrated every year on 29 July to raise awareness for tiger conservation.

Key Facts

- The International Tiger Day was founded in 2010 at the St. Petersburg Tiger Summit. The summit had issued St. Petersburg Declaration on Tiger Conservation with an aim to double the big cat population by 2022.
- According to WWF, only 3,890 tigers are left in the world, of them, India with more than 2500 tigers has the highest number.
- India has one of the lowest per capita forest areas in the world.

Threats to tigers:

- Tigers face poaching for demand of every part of their body from whiskers to tail for traditional Chinese medicines. They fetch high prices in the illegal wildlife trades.
- Clearing of forests for various purposes for agriculture, timber, development activity etchas lead to loss of 93% of natural habitat of tigers.
- Its habitat has been fragmented, lowering chances of survival. It is also leading to conflict with humans, where both are competing for their own space.
- Rising sea level as result of climate change is wiping out Sundarbans, one of the last remaining habitats of majestic Royal Bengal tigers.
- Forests as carbon sinks are deemed to be a major mean of controlling climate change. Depletion of forests is responsible for reduction of tiger habitats.

Conservation efforts at a glance:

Project Tiger:

- ☞ It was launched way back in 1973. It has grown to more than 50 reserves amounting to almost 2.2% of the country's geographical area.

M-STripes:

- The National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) has launched the M-STripes (Monitoring System for Tigers – Intensive Protection and Ecological Status), a mobile monitoring system for forest guards.

Global Tiger Initiative Council (GTIC):

- At the St. Petersburg Tiger Summit in 2010, leaders of 13 tiger range countries resolved to do more for the tiger and embarked on efforts to double its number in the wild, with a popular slogan ‘T X 2’.
- The Global Tiger Initiative (GTI) program of the World Bank, using its presence and convening ability, brought global partners together to strengthen the tiger agenda.
- Over the years, the initiative has institutionalized itself as a separate entity in the form of the Global Tiger Initiative Council (GTIC), with its two arms – the Global Tiger Forum and the Global Snow Leopard Ecosystem Protection Program.

Source: The Hindu

Uttarakhand High Court declares the animal kingdom a legal entity**Why in news?**

- ☞ The Uttarakhand high court has declared the entire animal kingdom, including birds and aquatic animals, as a legal entity having rights of a “living person”.
- ☞ The move aims to ensure “greater welfare” of animals.
- ☞ The entire animal kingdom, including avian and aquatic ones, are declared as legal entities having a distinct persona with corresponding rights, duties and liabilities of a living person.

Previous living entities:

- ☞ Uttarakhand high court in March last year accorded the status of “living entity” to the Ganga and Yamuna rivers, a decision subsequently stayed by the Supreme Court.

What is Legal entity?

- ☞ A legal entity means an entity which acts like a natural person but only through a designated person, whose acts are processed within the ambit of law. This means the animal kingdom could be represented by a custodian.

Natural Vs. legal person:

- In common law jurisprudence, there are two types of persons, natural persons or human beings and artificial person, which are also known as juristic persons, juridical entity or legal person other than natural person.
- Legal or juristic persons are created by law and recognised as legal entity, having distinct identity, legal personality and besides duties and rights. They include private business firm or entity, non-governmental or government organisations, trusts and societies, besides others.

Article 21 and animal life:

- Invoking Article 21 of the Constitution, the court said: “Article 21 of the Constitution, while safeguarding the rights of humans, protects life and the word ‘life’ means animal world”.
- The court cited a 2014 Supreme Court judgment to say any disturbance from the “basic environment which includes all forms of life, including animals life, which are necessary for human life, fall within the meaning of Article 21 of the Constitution”.

Highlights of the judgement:

- The court gave directions to create an animal welfare committee in every district of the state.
- All citizens of Uttarakhand shall be “persons in loco parentis” (in the place of a parent). This gives them the responsibility to protect animals and ensure their welfare.
- The court also gave directions ranging from the amount of load allowed to be pulled by various animals in accordance with the kind of carriage being pulled to the amount of riders per carriage.
- Further banning the use of spike or other sharp tackle or equipment on the animal, the court also directed the state government to ensure that if temperature exceeds 37 degree Celsius or drops below 5 degree Celsius, no person be permitted to keep in harness any animal used for the purpose of drawing vehicles.
- The court also went into the aspect of animal safety, highlighting the need for fluorescent reflectors in carriages and animals, certificates of unladen weight of vehicles, compulsory shelter of suitable size for horses, bullocks and stray cattle and a direction to the veterinary doctors of Uttarakhand to treat any stray animals brought to them or by visiting them.
- The court said as the carts driven by animals have no mechanical devices, animal-drawn carriages have to be given Right of Way over other vehicles.

Background:

- The order came in response to a public interest litigation seeking directions to restrict the movement of horse carts/tongas between Nepal and India through Champawat district and highlighted that ailing, infirm and old horses were being abandoned by the owners in the Indian territory.

Way ahead:

- This order will go a long way in building a compassionate society as it was illogical to treat sentient creatures as inanimate objects.

Source: The Hindu

Climate change threatens the Nilgiri Tahr

Why in news?

- ☞ Scientists predicted in a latest study that climate change is threatening the Nilgiri tahr.
- ☞ It is estimated that the endangered wild goat could lose approximately 60% of its habitat.

Key Facts

- Scientists found that tahr strongholds such as Chinnar, Eravikulam and Parambikulam in Kerala will still be stable habitats under different climate change scenarios.
- However, other regions, including parts of Tamil Nadu's Kalakkad Mundanthurai Tiger Reserve and the wildlife sanctuaries of Peppara, Neyyar, Schenduruny and Srivilliputhur, could experience severe habitat loss in future.

Background:

- ☞ There are only around 2,500 tahrs left in the wild and their population — “small and isolated, making them vulnerable to local extinction” — shows a “decreasing” trend, as per the International Union for Conservation of Nature.

About Nilgiri tahr:

- The Nilgiri tahr is an ungulate (animal with hooves).
- It is endemic to the Nilgiri Hills and the southern portion of the Western Ghats in the states of Tamil Nadu and Kerala in Southern India.
- As per IUCN Red data list, it is listed as **Endangered**.
- The Nilgiri tahr is fully protected (Schedule I) by the Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act of 1972, although this protection is rarely enforced, and illegal hunting is a major threat.
- It is the state animal of Tamil Nadu.
- Currently, the only populations with more than 300 individuals are in Eravikulam National Park and in the Grass Hills in Anamalai.
- The creation of Eravikulam and Silent Valley National Parks, Mukurti, Anamalai, and Parambikulam Wildlife Sanctuaries, and Srivilliputhur Grizzled Giant Squirrel Sanctuary and the Kalakadu-Mundanthurai Tiger Reserve, together offer an important degree of protection to the Nilgiri Tahr.

Source: The Hindu

Golden jackal faces threat in its habitat

Why in news?

- ☞ Destruction of mangrove cover in the **Bandar Reserve Forest (in Andhra Pradesh)** is forcing the golden jackal (*Canis aureus*) out of its habitat, triggering a conflict with the local communities.
- ☞ In India, jackal populations achieve high densities in pastoral areas such as Kutch, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, and Haryana.

About Golden jackal :

- Golden jackal is a wolf-like canid that is native to Southeast Europe, Southwest Asia, South Asia, and regions of Southeast Asia.
- The conservation status of the animal is the **'least concern' on the IUCN Red List** due to its widespread distribution and high density in areas with plenty of available food and optimum shelter.
- It preys on wild crab and fish.
- Golden jackals are present in all protected areas of India except for those in the high elevation regions of the Himalayas.
- The species is included in CITES Appendix III (in India). **Jackals feature on Schedule III of the Wildlife Protection Act (1972) of India** and are afforded the least legal protection (mainly to control trade of pelts and tails). However, no hunting of any wildlife is permitted under the current legal system in India.
- The golden jackal could be considered as a "species requiring no immediate protection" with caution and knowledge that populations throughout its range are likely declining.
- Almost all zoos in India have golden jackals.

Source: The Hindu

Petroleum Ministry favours ban on petcoke import

Why in news?

- ☞ The Petroleum Ministry told the Supreme Court that it is in favour of a ban on the import of petroleum coke, a solid non-volatile carbon residue left after the distillation and cracking of petroleum.

Key facts:

- However, the environment ministry is yet to take the final call and will consult with all stakeholders before arriving upon a decision.
- Pet coke and furnace oil has been already banned in Delhi since 1996 as they have been blamed for releasing deadly sulphur dioxide (SO₂) and nitrogen oxide (NO) fumes into air and polluting air.

What is the issue?

- In December 2017, the apex Court had refused to lift the ban on the use of pet coke and furnace oil in many industrial units in Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and Haryana keeping in view the increasing level of pollution.
- It had also refused to give any relief to industrial units like the National Thermal Power Corporation Limited (NTPC) and Hindalco.

What is petcoke?

- Petroleum coke is the bottom-of-the-barrel leftover from refining Canadian tar sands crude and other heavy oils.
- It is cheaper and burns hotter than coal.
- But it also contains more planet-warming carbon and far more heart- and lung-damaging sulphur.

Environmental concerns:

- The petcoke burned in factories and plants is contributing to dangerously filthy air in India, which already has many of the world's most polluted cities.
- It contains 17 times more sulfur than the limit set for coal, and a staggering 1,380 times more than for diesel.

Why should the furnace oil and pet coke be banned?

- Automobile fuel — petrol and diesel — has 50 parts per million (PPM) of the highly dangerous sulphur. Comparatively, furnace oil has 15,000- 23,000 ppm sulphur and petcoke 69,000-74,000 ppm sulphur.
- They emit sulphur oxide and nitrogen oxide, which form particulate matter, tiny particles that can penetrate deep into the lungs.
- Although the DPCC had declared them as “unacceptable fuel” way back in 1996, but they are not banned outside Delhi borders and are being increasingly used by industries in the NCR, aggravating the pollution problem.
- Furnace oil being the last grade produced by refineries is extremely polluting and pet coke is even more polluting.

Source: The Hindu, Economic Times

Arsenic contamination in paddy is rising in Bengal

Why in news?

- ☞ According to recent study, arsenic contamination in paddy is rising from ground water in West Bengal.
- ☞ The study also reveals that concentration of 'arsenic accumulation' depends on the variety of paddy and its stage in the crop cycle.

Highlights of the study:

- The study was carried out on two commonly consumed rice varieties — Minikit and Jaya — and it was found that latter to be more resistant to arsenic. It shows processes and dependencies of arsenic trans-location in rice from contaminated irrigation water.
- It has found that arsenic contamination in paddy was higher than in previous studies.
- It shows that arsenic uptake in paddy plant reduces from root to grain and that its concentration is related to variety of rice cultivated.
- It was observed that highest concentration of arsenic was observed in initial or vegetative state in first 28 days. It reduced during reproductive stage (29-56 days) and again increased in ripening stage.
- The uptake of arsenic is faster in young roots in vegetative state than in older tissues with higher concentrations of iron in root soil in reproductive phase.
- It also raised concerns over disposal of contaminated rice straw which is used as animal fodder or burnt or sometimes left in field itself to serve as fertiliser.

Arsenic Contamination:

- Arsenic is natural component in the earth's crust. It is widely distributed throughout the environment in the air, water and land. It is highly toxic in its inorganic form. Arsenic contaminated water used for drinking, irrigation of food crops and food preparation poses the greatest threat to public health from arsenic.
- Long-term exposure to arsenic from drinking-water and food can lead to chronic arsenic poisoning. It can cause cancer, skin lesions, developmental effects, cardiovascular disease, neurotoxicity and diabetes.

Arsenic Contamination in India:

- In India, Arsenic Contamination is a high-profile problem in the Ganges Delta, due to the use of deep tubewells for water supply. The groundwater in these tube wells have high concentrations of arsenic in deeper levels.
- Arsenic pollution is a big problem in West Bengal and neighbouring states. In West Bengal, there are 83 blocks in eight districts where groundwater is arsenic contaminated. Malda, Murshidabad and Nadia districts have higher levels of arsenic concentration.

Remedies:

- Technological options to combat arsenic menace, in groundwater, to ensure supply of arsenic free water, in the affected areas can be
- In-situ remediation of arsenic from aquifer system,
- Ex-situ remediation of arsenic from tapped groundwater by arsenic removal technologies,
- Use of surface water source as an alternative to the contaminated groundwater source,
- Tapping alternate safe aquifers for supply of arsenic free groundwater or combination of above techniques.

Source: The Hindu

India to give flash flood warning to Asian nations

Why in news?

- ☞ India has recently been designated as a nodal centre for preparing flash-flood forecasts by the World Meteorological Organization (WMO). Now India will have to develop a customised model that can issue advance warning of floods in Vietnam, Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Thailand.

Refusal of Pakistan:

- ☞ Though Pakistan was among the list of countries that would benefit from the forecast, it had refused to participate in the scheme.

Why we need flash-flood forecasts?

- Like India, several southeast Asian countries depend on the monsoon and are prone to its vagaries. The WMO says flash floods account for 85% of flooding incidents across the world, causing some 5,000 deaths each year.
- India's Central Water Commission, which monitors India's dams, warns of rising water levels in the reservoirs, which are usually taken to be signs of imminent floods.
- The proposed model would provide forecasts by computing the likelihood of rainfall and the soil moisture levels to warn of possible floods.

About World Meteorological Organization (WMO):

- WMO is a specialized agency of the United Nations (UN) with 191 Member States and Territories.
- It is the UN system's authoritative voice on the state and behaviour of the Earth's atmosphere, its interaction with the land and oceans, the weather and climate it produces and the resulting distribution of water resources.

Functions of WMO:

WMO programmes facilitate and promote

- The establishment of networks of observational stations to provide weather, climate and water-related data;
- The establishment and maintenance of data management centres and telecommunication systems for the provision and rapid exchange of weather, climate and water-related data;
- The creation of standards for observation and monitoring in order to ensure adequate uniformity in the practices and procedures employed worldwide and, thereby, ascertain the homogeneity of data and statistics;
- The application of science and technology in operational meteorology and hydrology to aviation, transport (air, land and maritime), water resource management, agriculture and other focus areas;
- Activities in operational hydrology as well as closer cooperation between National Meteorological and Hydrological Services in states and territories where they are separate; and
- The coordination of research and training in meteorology and related fields.

Source: The Hindu

☐ Gujarat, Rajasthan, Andhra top states with maximum capacity approved for solar parks

Why in news?

- ☞ Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh and Rajasthan have topped the list of states with maximum solar power generation capacity approved under solar parks in India.

Key facts:

- Gujarat's total capacity of 6,200 Mw is distributed across 3 solar parks.
- Rajasthan's 4,331 Mw capacity comes from 6 parks; while 4 solar parks account for Andhra's 4,160 Mw total approved capacity.
- Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh have 570 Mw and 2,570 Mw approved capacity, respectively.
- Also, 7 of the 45 parks have capacity exceeding 1,000 Mw.

What is a solar park?

☞ The solar park is a concentrated zone of development of solar power generation projects and provides developers an area that is well constructed, with proper infrastructure, access to amenities and by minimizing paper works for project implementation.

About Solar Park Scheme:

- The Ministry of New and renewable Energy (MNRE) along with its affiliate Solar Energy Corporation (SECI) have launched Solar Park scheme to encourage the construction of solar parks that can generate electricity above between 500 MW and 1000 MW.
- The Solar Parks/ Ultra Mega Solar Power Projects will be set up across various states for five years that is from 2014-15 to 2019-20.
- Objective of the government as per the revised policy is to create at least 50 solar parts with a capacity of 500 MW and above by 2019-20.
- The government will make a budgetary allocation of Rs 8100 crores for the project for providing financial assistance to the parks.
- SECI would be the implementation agency on behalf of Government of India (GOI). The states shall designate a nodal agency for implementation of the solar park.

How would States will get benefits from the scheme?

- At the state level, the solar park will enable the states to bring in significant investment from project developers in Solar Power sector, to meet its Solar Purchase Obligation (SPO) mandates and provide employment opportunities to local population.
- The state will also be able to reduce its carbon footprint by avoiding emissions equivalent to the solar park's generated capacity.
- They will also generate large direct & indirect employment opportunities in solar and allied industries like glass, metals, heavy industrial equipment etc.
- The solar parks will also provide productive use of abundant uncultivable lands which in turn facilitate development of the surrounding areas.
- The solar park scheme also provides for reduced number of statutory approvals to facilitate faster and easier development.

About SECI:

- Solar Energy Corporation of India (SECI) is a company of the Indian Ministry of New and Renewable Energy, established to facilitate the implementation of Jawaharlal Nehru National Solar Mission.
- It is the only Public Sector Undertaking dedicated to the solar energy sector.

- The company is responsible for implementation of a number of government schemes, major ones being the VGF schemes for large-scale grid-connected projects under JNNSM, solar park scheme and grid-connected solar rooftop scheme, along with a host of other specialised schemes such as defence scheme, canal-top scheme, Indo-Pak border scheme etc.
- SECI is the leading PSU in the rooftop solar segment, and has already commissioned over 54 MW capacity of rooftop solar projects under multiple government schemes.
- The company's mandate has recently been broadened to cover the entire renewable energy domain and the company renamed to Renewable Energy Corporation of India (RECI).

Source: Economic Times

❑ **Most advanced System of Air Quality and Weather Forecasting (SAFAR) inaugurated**

Why in news?

- ☞ Ministry of Earth Sciences has recently unveiled state-of-the-art Air Quality and Weather Forecast System– SAFAR (System of Air Quality and Weather Forecasting) .
- ☞ It is first of its kind and most advanced system in India.
- ☞ Such advanced are also proposed to be implemented in other three cities of India- Pune, Mumbai and Ahmedabad.

What is SAFAR?

- SAFAR was introduced by Union Ministry of Earth Sciences (MoES) for greater metropolitan cities of India to provide location specific information on air quality in near real time.
- It was developed by Indian Institute of Tropical Meteorology (IITM), Pune along with India Meteorological Department (IMD) and National Centre for Medium Range Weather Forecasting (NCMRWF).
- It is integral part of India's first Air Quality Early Warning System operational in Delhi.
- It will monitor all weather parameters like temperature, rainfall, humidity, wind speed and wind direction.
- It also will measure sun's UV-Index (UVI), PM1, Mercury and Black carbon in real time in addition to regular air quality and weather parameters like PM2.5, PM10, Sulfur Dioxide, Ozone, Nitrogen Oxides, Carbon Monoxide.
- It can also provide measurement of online automatic ultrafine particles PM1 and Mercury, both of which have direct relevance to human health.

- It will also monitor existence harmful pollutants of Benzene, Toluene and Xylene.
- SAFAR has giant true colour LED display which gives out real-time air quality index on 24×7 basis with colour coding alongwith 72-hour advance forecast.
- Based on Air Quality Index on particular day, health advisory and related precaution will be notified to prepare citizens well in advance.

Significance of SAFAR:

- The main objective of SAFAR project is to increase awareness among general public regarding the air quality in their city well in advance so that appropriate mitigation measures and systematic action can be taken up for betterment of air quality and related health issues.
- The World Meteorological Organization has recognised SAFAR as a prototype activity on the basis of the high quality control and standards maintained in its implementation.

Air Quality Index:

- Air Quality Index is a tool for effective communication of air quality status to people in terms, which are easy to understand.

Description	AQI	PM10 µg/m ³ 24 hr avg	PM2.5 µg/m ³ 24 hr avg	CO ppm 8 hr avg	O3 ppb 8 hr avg	NO2 ppb 24 hr avg
Good + Satisfactory	0-100	0-100	0-60	0-1.7	0-50	0-43
Moderate	101-200	101-250	61-90	1.8-8.7	51-84	44-96
Poor	201-300	251-350	91-120	8.8-14.8	85-104	97-149
Very Poor	301-400	351-430	121-250	14.9-29.7	105-374	150-213
Severe	401-500	431-550	251-380	29.8-40	375-450	214-750

- It transforms complex air quality data of various pollutants into a single number (index value), nomenclature and colour.
- There are six AQI categories, namely Good + Satisfactory, Moderately polluted, Poor, Very Poor, and Severe.
- Each of these categories is decided based on ambient concentration values of air pollutants and their likely health impacts (known as health breakpoints).

- AQ sub-index and health breakpoints are evolved for eight pollutants (PM10, PM2.5, NO2, SO2, CO, O3, NH3, and Pb) for which short-term (upto 24-hours) National Ambient Air Quality Standards are prescribed.

Source: PIB

Myanmar joins International Solar Alliance

Why in news?

- ☞ Myanmar has joined the India-initiated International Solar Alliance (ISA), thus, becoming the 68th signatory to the Framework Agreement of the ISA that aims for optimum utilisation of solar energy.

About International Solar Alliance (ISA):

- ISA is initiative jointly launched by India and France in November 2015 at Paris on side lines of COP21 UN Climate Change Conference.
- Its Framework Agreement came into force in December 2017. It celebrated its founding day on 11th March, 2018.
- It is headquartered at campus of National Institute of Solar Energy (NISE), Gurugram, Harayana, making it first international intergovernmental treaty based organization to be headquartered in India.

ISA presently has 4 ongoing programmes

1. Scaling Solar Mini Grids
2. Affordable Finance at Scale,
3. Scaling Solar Applications for Agricultural Use,
4. Scaling Solar Rooftop catering to the needs of solar energy in specific areas

Objectives of ISA

- Undertake joint efforts required to reduce the cost of finance and the cost of technology
- Mobilize more than US \$1000 billion of investments needed by 2030 for massive deployment of solar energy
- Pave way for future technologies adapted to needs of solar rich 121 countries lying fully or partially between Tropic of Cancer and Capricorn.

Source: PIB

Science and Technology, Defense, Health

❑ China successfully launches two satellites for Pakistan: PRSS-1 & PakTES-1A

Why in news?

- ☞ China successfully launched Pakistan's two remote sensing satellites PRSS-1 and PakTes-1A on board of Long March-2C rocket from Jiuquan Satellite Launch Centre.
- ☞ It was overall 279th mission for the Long March rocket series (mainly used to send satellites into low Earth or Sun-synchronous orbits) and first international commercial launch in nearly two decades after it carried Motorola's Iridium satellites into orbit in 1999.

PRSS-1:

- It is China's first optical remote sensing satellite sold to Pakistan.
- It can carry out day and night monitoring. It also has viewing capacity even in clouded conditions.
- It will be used for land and resources surveying, agriculture research, urban construction, monitoring of natural disasters and to provide remote sensing information for (CPEC) under China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).
- It is China's first optical remote sensing satellite sold to Pakistan and overall 17th satellite developed by China Academy of Space Technology (CAST) for an overseas buyer.

PakTES-1A:

- It is Pakistan's indigenously developed scientific experiment satellite developed by engineers from its space agency SUPARCO (Space and Upper Atmosphere Research Commission).

Source: The Hindu

Union Cabinet clears DNA profiling bill

Why in news?

- ❑ The Union Cabinet has approved The DNA Technology (Use and Application) Regulation Bill 2018.

Aim:

- ☞ The Bill aims at expanding application of DNA-based forensic technologies to support and strengthen justice delivery system of the country.

Highlights of the Bill:

- The bill allows law enforcement agencies to collect DNA samples, create “DNA profiles” and special databanks for forensic-criminal investigations. It states that all DNA data, including DNA samples, DNA profiles and records, will be only used for identification of the person and not for any other purpose.
- It creates DNA Profiling Board (DPB) that will be final authority that will authorise creation of State-level DNA databanks, approve the methods of collection and analysis of DNA-technologies. It makes accreditation and regulation mandatory for DNA laboratories.
- It allows government to set up DNA data banks across India to store profiles. These banks will maintain national database for identification of victims, accused, suspects, undertrials, missing persons and unidentified human remains.
- It also empowers government to impose jail term of up to 3 years and fine of up to Rs. 1 lakh on those who leak information stored in such facilities. It prescribes similar punishment for those who seek information on DNA profiles illegally.

Significance of the bill :

- Bill will ensure that with proposed expanded use of DNA profiling technology in the country, there will be also assurance that DNA test results are reliable and data remain protected from misuse or abuse in terms of the privacy rights of our citizens.
- It will also enable cross-matching between persons who have been reported missing on one hand and unidentified dead bodies found in various parts of the country on other, and also for establishing the identity of victims in mass disasters.
- It will set in place, an institutional mechanism to collect and deploy DNA technologies to identify persons based on samples collected from crime scenes or for identifying missing persons.

Significance of the DNA technology:

- The utility of DNA based technologies for solving crimes, and to identify missing persons, is well recognized across the world.
- DNA analysis is an extremely useful and accurate technology in ascertaining the identity of a person from his/her DNA sample, or establishing biological relationships between individuals.
- A hair sample, or even bloodstains from clothes, from a scene of crime, for example, can be matched with that of a suspect, and it can, in most cases, be conclusively established whether the DNA in the sample belongs to the suspected individual. As a result, DNA technology is being increasingly relied upon in investigations of crime, identification of unidentified bodies, or in determining parentage.
- But information from DNA samples can reveal not just how a person looks, or what their eye colour or skin colour is, but also more intrusive information like their allergies, or susceptibility to diseases. As a result, there is a greater risk of information from DNA analysis getting misused.

Need for such law:

- Forensic DNA profiling is of proven value in solving cases involving offences that are categorized as affecting the human body (such as murder, rape, human trafficking, or grievous hurt), and those against property (including theft, burglary, and dacoity). The aggregate incidence of such crimes in the country, as per the statistics of the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) for 2016, is in excess of 3 lakhs per year. Of these, only a very small proportion is being subjected to DNA testing at present. It is expected that the expanded use of this technology in these categories of cases would result not only in speedier justice delivery but also in increased conviction rates, which at present is only around 30% (NCRB Statistics).

Source: The Hindu

India's genetically modified crop area fifth largest in world

Why in news?

- ☞ According to the International Service for the Acquisition of Agri-Biotech Applications (ISAAA)'s latest 'Global Status of Commercialized Biotech/ GM Crops in 2017' report, India has the world's fifth largest cultivated area under genetically modified (GM) crops, at 11.4 million hectares (mh) in 2017.
- ☞ SAAA is a non-profit international organization that shares agricultural biotechnology, focusing on genetic engineering.

Highlights of the report:

- Unlike other big growers, India's entire GM crop area is under a single crop — cotton — incorporating genes from the *Bacillus thuringiensis* or Bt soil bacterium coding for resistance against heliothis bollworm insect pests.
- The country with the highest area under transgenic crops, at 75 mh, is the United States. It includes soyabean, maize (corn), cotton, alfalfa, canola, sugar-beet, potato, apples, squash and papaya.
- The report shows farmers across the world to have planted 189.8 mh under transgenic crops last year. This is as against 1.7 mh in 1996, the year when they were grown commercially for the first time. Total planted area grew particularly during the first decade of this century, while slowing down in the last five years.
- The report has estimated the highest share in the world's total 189.8 mh GM crop area for 2017 to be of soyabean (94.1 mh), followed by maize (59.7 mh), cotton (24.1 mh), canola (10.2 mh), alfalfa (1.2 mh) and sugar-beet (0.50 mh).

What is a Genetically modified crop?

- Genetically modified crops (GMCs, GM crops, or biotech crops) are plants used in agriculture, the DNA of which has been modified using genetic engineering techniques.
- In most cases, the aim is to introduce a new trait to the plant which does not occur naturally in the species.
- Examples in food crops include resistance to certain pests, diseases, or environmental conditions, reduction of spoilage, or resistance to chemical treatments (e.g. resistance to a herbicide), or improving the nutrient profile of the crop.
- Examples in non-food crops include production of pharmaceutical agents, biofuels, and other industrially useful goods, as well as for bioremediation.
- Potential benefits of GM plants include higher crop yields, reduced farm costs, increased farm profit, improvement in health and the environment.
- Potential risks of GM plants include the potential for pests to evolve resistance to the toxins produced by GM crops, the danger of unintentionally introducing allergens and other anti-nutrition factors in foods, the likelihood of transgenes escaping from cultivated crops into wild relatives, the risk of these toxins affecting non-target organisms.

GM crops in India:

- In India, the GM crops that are under regulatory consideration — apart from the already commercialised Bt/insect-resistant cotton — include glyphosate-tolerant cotton and biotech hybrid mustard.
- Both the Bollgard II-Roundup Ready Flex (BGII-RRF) cotton event of Monsanto (incorporating Bt as well as glyphosate-tolerant genes) and transgenic mustard developed by Delhi University's Centre for Genetic Manipulation of Crop Plants (harbouring three alien genes that enable higher yields through hybridisation) have undergone all the mandated bio-safety research and open field trials. Their commercial release has, however, been stuck due to opposition from environmental activists.

Source: The Hindu

India's supersonic cruise missile BrahMos test fired

Why in news?

- ☞ BrahMos, the supersonic cruise missile was successfully test-fired recently.
- ☞ The test-firing conducted from a Mobile Autonomous Launcher was part of service life extension programme for Indian Army under extreme weather condition.

Key features of BrahMos

- BrahMos Missile is the first supersonic cruise missile system known to be in service, developed as part of a joint venture between India and Russia.
- The missile derives its name from the names of two rivers, namely the Brahmaputra of India and the Moskva of Russia.

- The missile is capable of carrying a conventional as well as nuclear warhead of 300 kilograms.
- The BrahMos is a multi-stage missile having a solid propellant in the first stage and the ramjet liquid propellant in the second stage.
- It can be launched from land, sea, sub-seas and air.
- It operates on 'Fire and Forget Principle' by adopting varieties of flights on its way to the target.
- It approaches the enemy target with a top speed of Mach 2.8, which is about three times faster than the US subsonic Tomahawk Cruise Missile System.
- The missile has been developed by the BrahMos Aerospace Private Limited.
- It is a joint venture between the Russian Federation's NPO Mashinostroeyenia and India's Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO).
- While the navy and army versions of the missile were inducted in 2005 and 2007 respectively, the air version is still in the testing stage.

Source: The Hindu

New strain of Ebola virus found in Bombali Sierra Leone

Why in news?

- ❑ Researchers have discovered new strain of Ebola virus in bats in northern Bombali region of Sierra Leone.

Key Facts

- It has been named as Bombali virus strain, after district where it was found.
- The Bombali virus is overall sixth known virus strain Ebola virus. Others are Zaire, Sudan, Tai Forest, Bundibugyo and Reston.

About Ebola:

- Ebola virus disease (EVD), formerly known as Ebola haemorrhagic fever, is a severe, often fatal illness in humans.
- The virus is transmitted to people from wild animals and spreads in the human population through human-to-human transmission.
- The average EVD case fatality rate is around 50%. Case fatality rates have varied from 25% to 90% in past outbreaks.
- Community engagement is key to successfully controlling outbreaks. Good outbreak control relies on applying a package of interventions, namely case management, infection prevention and control practices, surveillance and contact tracing, a good laboratory service, safe burials and social mobilisation.
- Early supportive care with rehydration, symptomatic treatment improves survival.
- There is as yet no licensed treatment proven to neutralize the virus but a range of blood, immunological and drug therapies are under development.

Background:

- More than 11,000 people died in the Ebola outbreak in West Africa in 2014-2015, mainly in Guinea, Sierra Leone and Liberia.
- The last outbreak in the DRC was in 2014 and killed more than 40 people. The region affected lies 1,300 km north-east of Kinshasa, close to the border with the Central African Republic.

Source: The Hindu

India climbs to 57th position in Global Innovation Index Rankings**Why in news?**

- ☞ Global Innovation Index 2018 has placed India at the 57th position among 130 countries.

About Global Innovation Index (GII):

- The GII global ranking is published by World Intellectual Property Organisation (WIPO) – a specialized agency of United Nations in association with Cornell University and graduate business school INSEAD.
- It ranks nations based on 80 indicators, ranging from intellectual property filing rates to R&D, online creativity, mobile application creation, computer software spending, education spending, scientific & technical publications and ease of starting business.
- India's Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) is one of the knowledge partners which assists GII team in bringing out the annual ranking.
- GII is published annually since 2007 and is considered leading benchmarking tool for business executives, policy makers and others seeking insight into state of innovation around the world.
- It is being used by them to evaluate progress on continual basis.

GII 2018: Key facts

- The GII 2018 marks the 11th edition of the GII, and the beginning of its second decade providing data and insights gathered from tracking innovation across the globe.
- This year's edition, is dedicated to the theme of Energizing the World with Innovation. It analyses the energy innovation landscape of the next decade and identifies possible breakthroughs in fields such as energy production, storage, distribution, and consumption.
- It also looks at how breakthrough innovation occurs at the grassroots level and describes how small-scale renewable systems are on the rise.

Highlights of the GII 2018:

Performance by various countries:

- Switzerland is at the top followed by Netherlands and Sweden. Since 2011, Switzerland has been ranked at the top every year.
- The US drops down to sixth from fourth last year.
- Four of the top five innovation clusters are in Asia, based on patents and publishing. San Francisco is the only innovation cluster outside Asia among the top five.
- Tokyo is at the top, and two of the top five clusters are in China.
- China, at 17, broke into the world's top 20 most-innovative economies.
- On a new indicator – mobile-app creation – Cyprus, Finland and Lithuania emerged as global leaders in development of mobile apps relative to GDP.

India's performance:

- This year, India has moved up 3 places as compared to 60th rank in GII 2017 and emerged as top-ranked economy in Central and South Asia. It has consistently moving up on global ranking from 81st in 2015 to 57th this year.
- India is a top performer in the lower middle income group, where it is ranked at fifth position. It is the most innovative country in its region of central and southern Asia.
- In the indicators that capture the quality of innovation inputs and outputs, India is ranked second after China in the lower and upper middle income group combined.
- However, India has fared badly on indicators such as ease of starting business, political stability and safety, overall education and environmental performance.

Source: The Hindu

India plans to buy missile shield – NASAMS-II from U.S.

Why in news?

- ☞ India is in talks with United States to procure National Advanced Surface-to-Air Missile System-II (NASAMS-II).

About NASAMS-II:

- It is an advanced air defence system.
- It is highly adaptable mid-range solution for any operational air defence requirement.
- It provides tailorable, state-of-the-art defence system that can maximise the ability to quickly identify, engage and destroy current and evolving enemy aircraft, UAV or emerging cruise missile threats.
- It is part of the air defence network guarding US capital city Washington DC. It is also deployed in several NATO countries.

Significance for India:

- ▶ India's purchase of NASAMS-II will help in preventing 9/11-type on NCT Delhi.
- ▶ It will also complement India's other systems such as the medium and long-range surface-to-air missile (SAM) systems under procurement.
- ▶ With this, India will join League of Nations including US, Russia and Israel etc. who have their own missile defence systems to protect their national capital regions.

Source: The Hindu

□ NASA launches online toolkit to promote commercial use of satellite data**Why in news?**

- ▶ The National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) has launched 'Remote Sensing Toolkit' to promote commercial use of satellite data.
- ▶ The toolkit was launched as part of NASA's Technology Transfer program.

What is Remote Sensing Toolkit?

- ▶ It is an online toolkit that aims to make it easier for users to find, analyse and utilise relevant satellite data for their research, business projects or conservation efforts.
- ▶ It has been designed to help users search for data, as well as utilize ready-to-use tools and code to build new tools.
- ▶ It provides simple system that quickly identifies relevant sources based on user input. It makes finding and using NASA satellite data easier than ever before.
- ▶ It aims to spark innovation among entrepreneurial community and lead to further commercialisation of NASA technology.

About NASA's Technology Transfer program

- ▶ The program offers open remote-sensing data benefiting scientific community, other government agencies and non-profit organizations.
- ▶ The program ensures technologies developed for missions in exploration and discoveries are broadly available to the public, maximising the benefit to the nation.

Source: The Hindu

Agni-V to be part of nuclear arsenal soon

Why in news?

- ❑ India's longest-range ballistic missile, Agni-V, will be inducted into the nuclear arsenal very soon.

Key facts:

- The first missile of the series, Agni-I was developed under the Integrated Guided Missile Development Program and tested in 1989.
- At present India in its armoury of Agni missile series, possesses Agni-I (700 km range), Agni-II (2000 km range), Agni-3 (2,500 km range) and Agni-4 (more than 3,500 range).

About Agni-5:

- The Agni-5 is three-stage solid propellant nuclear-capable intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM).
- It has a range of over 5,000 km covering almost all of Asia including Pakistan and China and Europe.
- It is capable of carrying a nuclear warhead of more than one tonne.
- It is three-stage solid propellant ICBM indigenously developed by the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO).
- India describes the Agni – 5 missile system as a 'weapon of peace'.
- Unlike other missiles of Agni series, Agni-5 is the most advanced having new technologies incorporated with it in terms of navigation and guidance, warhead and engine.
- It carries Multiple Independently Targetable Re-entry Vehicles (MIRV) payloads. A single MIRV equipped missile that can deliver multiple warheads at different targets.
- It also incorporates advanced technologies involving ring laser gyroscope and accelerometer for navigation and guidance.

Significance:

- The missile will enhance India's strategic and deterrence capabilities.
- Once this missile is inducted in Services, India will join the super exclusive club of countries having ICBMs (missiles with a range of over 5,000-5,500km) alongside the US, Russia, China, France and the United Kingdom.

Source: The Hindu

Blueprint of the 'Deep Ocean Mission Unveiled

Why in news?

- ☞ The Union Earth Sciences Ministry has recently unveiled a blueprint of the 'Deep Ocean Mission (DOM)'.

Key features of the Mission :

- The mission proposes to explore the deep ocean similar to the space exploration started by ISRO about 35 years ago.
- For this mission, Centre has drawn up a five-year, Rs. 8,000 crore plans to explore deep recesses of the ocean.
- The focus of DOM is on deep-sea mining, ocean climate change advisory services, underwater vehicles and underwater robotics related technologies.
- Two key projects planned under it include **desalination plant** powered by tidal energy and **submersible vehicle** that can explore depths of at least 6,000 metres.

Significance of the Mission:

- The 'Deep Ocean Mission' plan will enable India to develop capabilities to exploit resources in the Central Indian Ocean Basin (CIOB).
- India's Exclusive Economic Zone spreads over 2.2 million square kilometres and in the deep sea, lies "unexplored and unutilized."
- India has been allotted a site of 75,000 square kilometres in the Central Indian Ocean Basin (CIOB) by the UN International Sea Bed Authority for exploitation of polymetallic nodules (PMN). These are rocks scattered on the seabed containing iron, manganese, nickel and cobalt.
- It is envisaged that 10% of recovery of that large reserve can meet the energy requirement of India for the next 100 years.
- It has been estimated that 380 million metric tonnes of polymetallic nodules are available at the bottom of the seas in the Central Indian Ocean.

What are Polymetallic Nodules?

- Polymetallic nodules (PMN) are also known as manganese nodules.
- They are potato-shaped, largely porous nodules found in abundance carpeting the sea floor in the deep sea of the world oceans.

- Besides manganese and iron, they contain nickel, copper, cobalt, lead, molybdenum, cadmium, vanadium, titanium.
- Of these metals nickel, cobalt and copper are considered to be of economic and strategic importance.

About ISA:

- The International Seabed Authority (ISA) is an autonomous international organization established under the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).
- Its headquarters are in Kingston, Jamaica.
- ISA governs non-living resources of the seabed lying in international waters.
- It was established to organize, regulate and control all mineral-related activities in the international seabed area beyond the limits of national jurisdiction, an area underlying most of the world's oceans.
- India actively contributes to the work of ISA. It was re-elected as a member of Council of ISA in 2016.

Source: The Hindu

National Viral Hepatitis Control Programme Launched

Why in news?

- ☞ Union Ministry of Health and Family Welfare in collaboration with the World Health Organisation (WHO) has launched National Viral Hepatitis Control Programme to control viral hepatitis C on the occasion of **World Hepatitis Day (July 28)**.
- ☞ The programme aims to combat viral hepatitis and reduce mortality and morbidity associated with it.

About National Viral Hepatitis Control Programme:

- The programme aims at both prevention and treatment of hepatitis which is among leading causes of liver cancer, cirrhosis of liver and acute liver failure.
- It aims to treat minimum of 3 lakh hepatitis C cases over a period of three years for eliminating deadly condition by 2030.
- The programme is part of National Health Mission.
- The programme also aims to build capacities at national, state, district levels and sub-district level up to Primary Health Centres (PHC) and health and wellness centres to scale program till lowest level of the healthcare facility in a phased manner.

Treatment:

- Under it, expensive antiviral for hepatitis B and C infections will be made available free of cost at all government hospitals.
- It will set up and upgrade facilities for diagnosis and treatment primarily of hepatitis B and C. These designated treatment centres will provide free anti-viral to hepatitis C patients.
- They will also provide hepatitis B vaccine to babies born to mothers carrying the virus within 24 hours of birth.

Key strategies under the Program:

- Preventive and promotive interventions with focus on awareness generation.
- Safe injection practices and socio-cultural practices, sanitation and hygiene, safe drinking water supply, infection control and immunization
- Increasing access to testing and management of viral hepatitis.
- Promoting diagnosis and providing treatment support for patients of hepatitis B and C through standardized testing and management protocols with focus on treatment of hepatitis B and C.
- Co-ordination and collaboration with different Ministries and departments.
- Building capacities at national, state, district levels and sub-district level up to Primary Health Centres (PHC) and health and wellness centres to scale program till lowest level of the healthcare facility in a phased manner.

Source: PIB

Blood Moon 2018: Longest Total Lunar Eclipse of Century**Why in news?**

- ☞ On 27-28 July 2018, there occurred Blood Moon 2018 or century's (2001 AD to 2100 AD) longest total lunar eclipse of 1 hour 43 minutes.
- ☞ It was majorly seen in Eastern Hemisphere including Central Asia, Eastern Africa and South East Asia.
- ☞ The rare celestial event was visible from all parts of India.

What is a Lunar eclipse?

- A lunar eclipse is a spectacular celestial show, during which the bright, pearly-white disc of the full Moon turns dark, and sometimes takes on the colour of dark copper, or even dried blood.
- A lunar eclipse occurs when the Sun, the Earth and the Moon are so aligned that for a period of time, the full Moon passes through the shadow of Earth in space (called Earth's Umbra).
- This typically happens up to three times a year.
- Unlike with solar eclipses, there's no need to wear protective eyewear when witnessing a lunar eclipse. In other words, these events can be viewed safely with the naked eye.

- The last lunar eclipse occurred on Jan. 31, an event that was dubbed a “super blue blood moon.”
- As the moon passes into Earth’s shadow, it will dim and darken. The moon will turn this copper, blood-red color. It will turn a deep, deep red when it’s at the greatest point in the eclipse.
- This dramatic coloring is actually caused by Earth’s atmosphere, which scatters light from the sun and casts it onto the face of the moon.

What’s the best time to view the lunar eclipse?

- The best time to see the eclipse depends on where you are in the Eastern Hemisphere.
- According to NASA, the best places to view the celestial event from start to finish are in eastern Africa, the Middle East, India and central Asia.

Why is this month’s lunar eclipse so long?

- Unlike solar eclipses, which have short-lived periods of totality, the peaks of lunar eclipses can be quite lengthy. This month’s lunar eclipse is particularly long because of the moon’s position as it slips into Earth’s shadow.
- When the sun, Earth and the moon are aligned, Earth casts a shadow that projects out into the shape of an imaginary cone.
- The longest lunar eclipses occur when the moon moves right down the center of this cone. In shorter eclipses, the moon won’t pass through most of that shadow.
- Coincidentally, the moon will also be at its most distant point from Earth (i.e. apogee) in its monthly orbit in late July, meaning the moon will appear smaller in the night sky and will take longer to completely pass through Earth’s shadow.

Why is it called Blood Moon or Copper Moon?

- During a total lunar eclipse, though the Moon gets shadowed by the Earth, sunlight passing through the Earth’s atmosphere, break down in its constituent colours and the red part gets scattered by the atmosphere and falls on the Moon’s surface, thereby making it take on a reddish copper hue. For this reason since antiquity, a totally eclipsed Moon is called a “Blood Moon”.
- It has no other special relevance other than the fact that the colour of the Moon looks blackish-red.
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Source: The Hindu, Live Mint

Govt widens petroleum's definition to cover more hydrocarbons

Why in news?

- ☞ The Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas has recently liberalised the definition of petroleum to bring more hydrocarbons such as coal bed methane and shale gas under its fold. In this regard, Petroleum and Natural Gas (Amendment) Rules, 2018 have been amended.

Need for this move:

- ☞ Prior to this, the definition excluded shale and therefore barred companies from exploiting it from fields that are producing conventional oil and gas or coal-bed methane.

Significance:

- The amendment of definition of petroleum will open up exploration of all hydrocarbons in existing fields which is line with new Hydrocarbon Exploration Licensing Policy (HELP).
- It will help in enhancing domestic exploration and production of hydrocarbons and increasing India's energy security and reducing dependency on imports.

What is the new definition?

- Petroleum will now mean naturally occurring hydrocarbons, whether in the form of natural gas, in a liquid, viscous or solid form, or a mixture of these.
- It, however, does not include coal, lignite and helium occurring in association with petroleum or coal or shale.

What is Coal Bed Methane?

- Coal Bed Methane is a form of natural gas extracted from coal beds.
- The term CBD refers to methane adsorbed into the solid matrix of the coal.
- It is an important source of energy in United States, Canada, Australia, and other countries.
- CBD is distinct from typical sandstone or other conventional gas reservoir, as the methane is stored within the coal by a process called adsorption.
- It contains very little heavier hydrocarbons such as propane or butane, and no natural-gas condensate.
- During the initial years of mining, CBM was vented out and wasted into the atmosphere as it was considered as serious safety hazard while conducting coal mining operations. However, later with advancement of technology it was possible to extract CBM, a precious energy resource and an unconventional form of natural gas.

Advantages of CBM as a fuel:

- It is environmentally safe and clean fuel which on combustion emits only carbon dioxide and water.
- It is not only considered as an efficient fuel but also reduces emission of greenhouse gas from coal mining.
- Its extraction prior to coal mining activities makes mining activities safer by degassing the coal seams.

What is Shale Gas?

- Shale gas is a natural gas formed from being trapped within shale formations.
- It is unconventional source of methane, like coal-bed gas (in coal seams) and tight gas (trapped in rock formations).
- It is colourless, odourless gas, lighter than air.
- It is cheaper than natural gas, releases 50% less CO₂, hence better source for generating electricity.
- It also provides feedstock for petrochemicals industry, which is turned into fertilizer, plastics and other useful stuff.

The Way Ahead

- The exclusion of natural gas from the purview of GST remains a deterrent to attracting large-scale investments as neither the producers nor the consumers are able to set off the taxes paid on their input and output.
- While the Goods and Service Tax (GST) was implemented from July 1, 2017, crude oil, natural gas, petrol, diesel, and jet fuel (ATF) were kept out of it for the time being. No date for their inclusion in GST regime has yet been announced.

Source: Economic Times

India sees major reductions in HIV infections: UN report**Why in news?**

- ☞ According to the Joint UN Agency on AIDS (UNAIDS) report, India saw a major reduction in the number of new HIV infections, AIDS-related deaths and people living with HIV from 2010 to 2017 on the back of sustained and focused efforts.
- ☞ The report is titled ‘Miles to go – closing gaps, breaking barriers, righting injustices’.

Highlights of the report:

- Asia and the Pacific regions have made strong inroads with its HIV response.
- In India, new HIV infections dropped from one lakh twenty thousand in 2010 to Eighty eight thousand in 2017, AIDS-related deaths reduced from one lakh sixty thousand to Sixty Nine Thousands and people living with HIV from Twenty three lakhs to Twenty one Lakhs in the same time period.

- India has an approved social protection strategy, policy or framework that is being implemented.
- Sustained and focused efforts to reach key populations have led to major reductions in HIV infections in Cambodia, India, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam between 2010 and 2017.
- The report, however, warned that the global new HIV infections were not declining fast enough.
- It also noted that the epidemics were expanding in Pakistan and the Philippines.
- The report also found that countries that had decriminalised at least some aspects of sex work have fewer sex workers living with HIV than countries that criminalise all aspects of sex work.

About UNAIDS:

- The UNAIDS is a UN program on human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS).
- It seeks to end AIDS as a public health threat by 2030 as part of the Sustainable Development Goals.
- Since its launch in 1996, UNAIDS has been providing the strategic direction, advocacy, coordination and technical support to deliver life-saving HIV services.

Steps taken by Indian authorities against HIV/AIDS:

National AIDS Control Programme IV

- The National AIDS Control Programme (NACP), launched in 1992, is being implemented as a comprehensive programme for prevention and control of HIV/AIDS in India.
- NACP has been busy in raising awareness about behaviour change and increasing involvement of NGOs and networks of PLHIV.

Avahan

- This initiative was started by Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation in 2003 in order to work towards reducing HIV/AIDS cases in India
- The main objective of Avahan is to fill the void between existing initiatives and people who are suffering from this fatal disease.
- Their main target is high-risk populations — including female sex workers, their clients, same-sex relations between men, transgenders and drug-injecting users.

National AIDS Control Organisation (NACO):

- NACO was set up by the government of India to introduce comprehensive strategies, and to realize the goal of HIV prevention and control among the high-risk populations.

Source: The Times of India

Govt approves net neutrality

Why in news?

- Telecom Commission (a group within India's Department of Telecom) has approved the recommendations made by the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) on net neutrality.
- The move aims to ensure that all web traffic is treated fairly, and that internet service providers won't block, throttle, or favor any content or services (with a few reasonable exceptions).

What is Net Neutrality?

- Net Neutrality is the internet's guiding principle: It preserves our right to communicate freely online.
- Net Neutrality means an internet that enables and protects free speech.
- It means that ISPs should provide us with open networks — and shouldn't block or discriminate against any applications or content that ride over those networks.
- Just as your phone company shouldn't decide who you call and what you say on that call, your ISP shouldn't interfere with the content you view or post online.
- Without Net Neutrality, cable and phone companies could carve the internet into fast and slow lanes.
- An ISP could slow down its competitors' content or block political opinions it disagreed with. ISPs could charge extra fees to the few content companies that could afford to pay for preferential treatment — relegating everyone else to a slower tier of service. This would destroy the open internet.

Approved principles of net neutrality:

Prohibition on preferential treatment:

- As per the net neutrality rules in India, mobile operators, internet providers and social-media and internet companies cannot engage in, or seek, preferential treatment as there will now be prohibition on any kind of interference in the treatment of content, including practices like blocking, degrading, slowing down or granting differential speeds or treatment to any content.

Zero-rated platforms:

- Any efforts to create zero-rated platforms have now been blocked. Zero-rated platforms, which had earlier been tried (by companies such as Airtel and Facebook) but barred, offer only a certain category of services and websites as free, thus creating paid layers and stifling competition and innovation.

Exceptions:

- Under net neutrality, online access is unrestricted and non-discriminatory. The only exceptions are new and emerging services such as autonomous driving, tele-medicine or remote-diagnostic services, which may require prioritised internet lanes and faster-than-normal speeds.

Committee

- A committee will look into the possible exceptions for “critical services” which will also be defined keeping in view the basic tenets of net neutrality.

Significance of the move:

- The government’s decision is being seen as progressive as it will not allow any mobile operator, internet service provider or online/social media giant to create monopolies on the internet by getting specialized treatment by paying for it. The rules of equal access will be maintained and no company can buy special treatment for itself or its services.
- It’s a huge win for those who favour free and fair internet access in the country. It also prevents programs like Facebook’s Free Basics, which granted free access to mobile sites on the zero-rated platform that were allowed in by the company.

Source: The Hindu

More News

Cvigil mobile app

- The Election Commission of India has launched Cvigil mobile application for citizens to report any violation of the Model Code of Conduct (MCC) during elections.
- The app aims at empowering people across the country to share evidence of malpractice by political parties, their candidates and activists directly with ECI.
- It will allow anyone in election-bound state to report violations of MCC. By using this app, vigilant citizens can immediately report on incidents of misconduct anonymously and in real-time by clicking picture or record video of upto two minutes and uploading it on the app.
- It will be active only in States where elections have been announced.

Justice Adarsh Kumar Goel appointed NGT chairperson

- The Appointments Committee of the Cabinet (ACC) has appointed Justice AK Goel as new Chairperson of National Green Tribunal (NGT).
- The NGT was established in 2010 under the National Green Tribunal Act, 2010 for effective and expeditious disposal of cases relating to environmental protection and conservation of forests and other natural resources.
- It is a specialized body equipped with the necessary expertise to handle environmental disputes involving multi-disciplinary issues.
- It also includes enforcement of any legal right relating to environment and giving relief and compensation for damages to persons and property and for matters connected therewith.
- It adjudicates matters relating to Water (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act, 1974; Air (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act, 1974; Environment (Protection) Act, 1986; Public Liability Insurance Act, 1991; Forest Conservation Act and Biological Diversity Act.
- The NGT is guided by principles of natural justice and not bound by the procedure laid down under the Code of Civil Procedure, 1908.
- It is mandated to make and endeavour for disposal of applications or appeals finally within 6 months of filing.
- New Delhi is the Principal Place of Sitting NGT. Bhopal, Pune, Kolkata and Chennai are other regional sitting of the Tribunal.

Members of the NGT:

- The tribunal shall consist of a full time chairperson, judicial members and expert members.
- The minimum number of judicial and expert member prescribed is ten in each category and maximum number is twenty in each category.

- Another important provision included in the law is that the chairperson, if find necessary, may invite any person or more person having specialized knowledge and experience in a particular case before the tribunal to assist the same in that case.
- A judge of the Supreme Court of India or Chief Justice of High Court are eligible to be Chairperson or judicial member of the Tribunal. Even existing or retired judge of High Court is qualified to be appointed as a Judicial Member.

First Indian to win gold in Gymnastics World Challenge Cup

- Dipa Karmakar became the first Indian gymnast to win gold at the FIG Artistic Gymnastics World Challenge Cup in Mersin, Turkey.
- This is Dipa's first medal in a World Challenge Cup.

11th July: World Population Day

- World Population day is an annual event, observed on July 11 every year, which seeks to raise awareness of global population issues.
- The event was established by the Governing Council of the United Nations Development Programme in 1989.
- It was inspired by the public interest in Five Billion Day on July 11, 1987-approximately the date on which the world's population reached five billion people.
- World Population Day aims at increase people's awareness on various population issues such as the importance of family planning, gender equality, poverty, maternal health and human rights.
- The theme for the year 2018 is: "**Family Planning is a Human right**".

Vikas Engine

- ISRO has successfully conducted ground test of its high thrust version of Vikas Engine at ISRO Propulsion Complex (IPRC) in Mahendragiri, Tirunelveli district of Tamil Nadu.
- Vikas Engine is the workhorse liquid rocket engine powering second stage of India's Polar Satellite Launch Vehicle (PSLV), second stage and four strap on stages of Geosynchronous Launch Vehicle (GSLV) and is part of first stage i.e. twin engine core liquid stage (L110) of GSLV Mk-III.
- It was conceptualized and designed by ISRO's Liquid Propulsion Systems Centre in the 1970s.

Exercise Pitch Black 2018

- For the first time, the Indian Air Force will be participating in Exercise Pitch Black 2018 (PB-18).
- Exercise Pitch Black is a biennial large force employment warfare exercise hosted by the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF).
- The aim of the exercise is to practice Offensive Counter Air (OCA) and Defensive Counter Air (DCA) combat, in a simulated war environment.
- It traditionally consists of a 'red team' and a 'blue team' based at separate locations, with one attacking the other.

July 30: World Day against Trafficking in Persons

- World Day against Trafficking in Persons is observed every year on July 30 to raise awareness of the plight of human trafficking victims, and promote and protect their rights.
- The theme chosen by United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) for 2018 is: 'responding to the trafficking of children and young people'.
- United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) had designated July 30 as the World Day against Trafficking in Persons by adopting resolution A/RES/68/192 in 2013.
- The resolution had declared that observance of day is necessary to raise awareness of the situation of victims of human trafficking and for promotion and protection of their rights.

Centenary celebration of Nelson Mandela International Day

- Nelson Mandela International Day 2018 marks 100 years since the birth of Nelson Mandela (18 July 1918).
- The Nelson Mandela Foundation is dedicating this year's Mandela Day to Action Against Poverty, honouring Nelson Mandela's leadership and devotion to fighting poverty and promoting social justice for all.

About Nelson Mandela International Day:

- In 2009, Mandela's birthday (July 18th) was declared Mandela Day, an international day to promote global peace and celebrate the South African leader's legacy.
- The event started after the Nelson Mandela Foundation and 46664, a concert series that benefits AIDS victims referencing Mandela's prison number 46664, first proposed the idea of a worldwide day honoring the work and legacy of Nelson Mandela in April 2009.
- This annual event is meant to encourage citizens worldwide to give back the way that Mandela has throughout his lifetime.

Two Indians win Ramon Magsaysay Award

- Two Indians Bharat Vatwani and Sonam Wangchuk are among six who have been declared winners of 2018 Ramon Magsaysay Award.

- Bharat Vatwani is a psychiatrist who works for mentally-ill people living on the streets and Sonam Wangchuk, known for his reforms in the education sector in Ladakh, started a movement to help poor village students clear examinations.

About Ramon Magsaysay Award:

- Established in 1957, the Ramon Magsaysay Award is considered Asia's highest honour.
- It celebrates the memory and leadership example of the third Philippine President after whom the award is named.
- It was established by trustees of the New York City based Rockefeller Brothers Fund and Philippine government in the memory of Philippines' third President Ramon Magsaysay.
- It is given every year to individuals or organisations in Asia who manifest the same selfless service and transformative influence that ruled the life of the late and beloved Filipino leader.
- It carries Medallion bearing the likeness of the late President Ramon Magsaysay, cash prize and a certificate.
- Many Indians have received the prestigious award in the past, including Mother Teresa, Jayaprakash Narayan, Satyajit Ray, Kiran Bedi, P. Sainath and current Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal.

'Paudhagiri' Campaign

- Haryana government has launched the 'Paudhagiri' campaign, aimed at increasing the green cover in the state.
- Under this campaign, 22 lakh students from class 6 to 12 of all government and private schools in Haryana will plant a sapling each during three months of monsoon — July, August and September.
- Haryana CM launched the 'Paudhagiri' campaign by planting a 'maulsari' sapling.

President nominates four members to Rajya Sabha

- ☞ In exercise of the powers conferred by Article 80 of the Constitution of India, and on the advice of the Prime Minister, the President of India has made the following four nominations to the Rajya Sabha:

1. Ram Shakal
2. Rakesh Sinha
3. Raghunath Mohapatra
4. Sonal Mansingh

- There were, currently, eight nominated members in the Rajya Sabha, and hence, four vacancies.

