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Current Affairs January 2019



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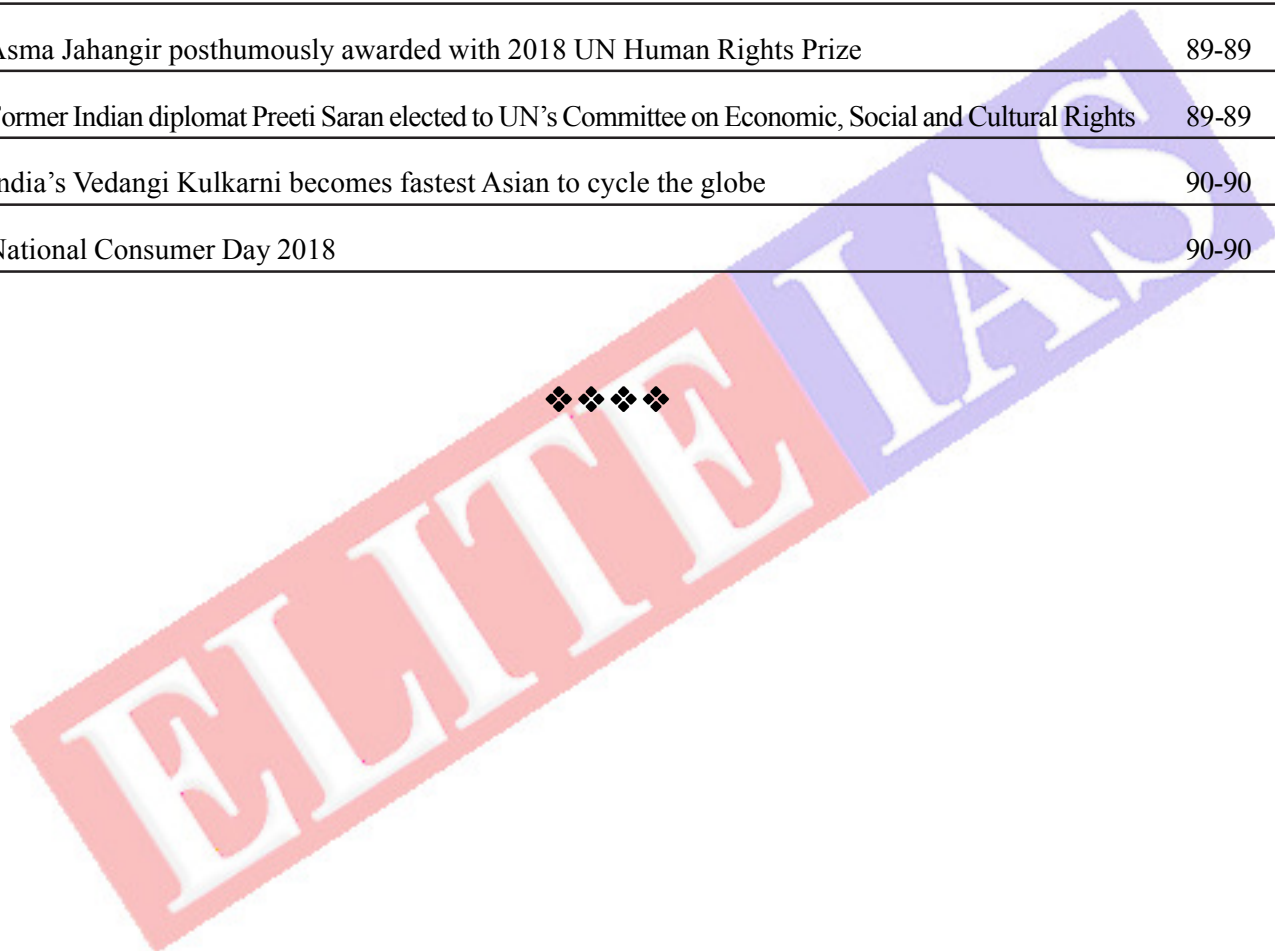
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Editorial

After the inevitable exit

Despite the White House's spirited denial of reports that it has issued no orders for the pullout of U.S. troops, the course seems set for a thinning of American presence in Afghanistan. U.S. President Donald Trump had promised this during his campaign, and several advisers have said since then that he is keen to bring back most, if not all, troops before his re-election bid in 2020. If anything, Mr. Trump's ill-judged remarks this week only underline his desire to leave: he suggested that regional players like Russia, India and Pakistan should be more involved in stabilising the situation, and mocked India for not doing enough.

As a result, the U.S. war in Afghanistan, that began as revenge for the 9/11 attacks, evolved into a mission for ensuring democracy and prosperity in Afghanistan. In recent years, challenged by the resurgence of the Taliban, it has now become a mission mainly to ensure an honourable exit. This isn't the first time the U.S. has sought to do this: President Barack Obama had faced similar challenges in 2010, just before he announced the big drawdown. As Mr. Trump now moves to cutting American presence to a few well-guarded military bases, India must consider the consequences closely.

Shift in policy

To begin with, it is time to recognise that the U.S.'s South Asia Strategy for Afghanistan, as announced by Mr. Trump in August 2017, has been discarded. Mr. Trump had defined the strategy with three features: that U.S. troops would remain involved in the country until "conditions", not a timeline, mandated their return; that the U.S. would put Pakistan on notice for its support to the Taliban and a political settlement with the Taliban would only follow "after an effective military effort"; and that the policy would hinge on further developing the strategic partnership with India

Sixteen months later, it is easy to see that each element of the U.S.'s policy on the ground has shifted, if not been entirely reversed. The appointment of special envoy Zalmay Khalilzad in September to lead talks with the Taliban after a particularly brutal year shows that the U.S. is no longer waiting for military operations to take effect. According to the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) report to the U.S. Congress, casualties of Afghan National and Defence Security Forces (ANDSF) in May-September 2018 were the "greatest it has ever been" compared to corresponding periods since 2001, and the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan "documented more civilian deaths in the first nine months of 2018 than they had during the same nine-month reporting period since 2014".

Mr. Khalilzad's direct talks with the Taliban that cut out the National Unity government (NUG) in Kabul reportedly didn't even have President Ashraf Ghani in the loop until after the first talks were held in Qatar — this reversed the previous U.S. position not to engage the Taliban until it engages the NUG. Far from the tough talk on Pakistan for support to the Taliban, Mr. Trump wrote a letter to Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan thanking him for his efforts. Afghanistan's High Peace Council members also disclosed that Mr. Khalilzad was on a deadline: Mr. Trump has reportedly given him six months to show results with the talks process, failing which the pullout may be speeded up.

The departure from the avowed U.S. position on an "Afghan-owned, Afghan-led" process has clearly ruffled feathers in Kabul. In December, Mr. Ghani appointed two aides of former President Hamid Karzai known for their hardline position on the Taliban and Pakistan as his Defence and Interior Ministers. Putting the seal on the clear drift in the U.S. Afghanistan and South Asia policy from the past was the exit of Defence Secretary James Mattis, author of the South Asia policy. Mr. Mattis had pushed most strenuously to keep India in the Afghan game by swinging a waiver for India on Chabahar and Iran oil purchases. It remains to be seen whether Mr. Trump will continue those waivers past May this year.

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The internal situation in Afghanistan is aggravated now by the uncertainty of the democratic process. Parliamentary elections were held in October after being delayed by more than two years, but even their preliminary results haven't yet been declared, casting doubt on the government's ability to conduct elections. Presidential elections have been postponed till July, despite the constitutional clause that they were to be completed by April 22, 2019. Meanwhile, Mr. Ghani has been unable to keep his commitment to hold a Loya Jirga (grand council of representatives) to turn Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah's post in the NUG into an executive Prime Ministership.

The way forward for India

For India, these developments may appear discouraging, but a more pragmatic view is necessary to deal with all possible outcomes. The U.S.'s eventual pullout as Afghanistan's peacekeeper is inevitable, and it would make more sense to prepare for it than to deny it will happen. New Delhi was caught off guard in 2010 when Mr. Obama planned the drawdown and discouraged India from a stake in projects there in an effort to placate Pakistan.

Mr. Trump's administration has no doubt been much more welcoming of Indian investment in Afghanistan, but that itself is symptomatic of his desire to pare down "Pax Americana" in every part of the world. The removal or reduction of the U.S. presence from most theatres of action has created space for regional players: leaving Syria to Iran and its allies; Yemen to Saudi Arabia; Afghanistan to players like Russia, Pakistan and Iran; and Pakistan to China.

Some other hard truths must be faced: India cannot replace Pakistan's position geographically, nor can it ever offer the U.S. or any other force what Pakistan has offered in the past, including bases and permission for U.S. forces to bomb its own territory. The decision to abandon the SAARC in favour of groupings like BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation), BBIN (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal) and IORA (Indian Ocean Rim Association) may have provided some short-term returns in "isolating Pakistan", but it has had the effect of cutting Afghanistan loose from Indian leadership of South Asia as well. India's best course with Afghanistan remains its own regional strategy, not becoming a part of any other country's strategy. Close bilateral consultations like this week's visit to Delhi of National Security Advisor Hamdullah Mohib may not always yield dramatic headlines, but are the basis of India's ability to help Afghanistan according to its needs, not India's ambitions, and the reason for the immense popularity and goodwill India continues to enjoy in Afghanistan.

Finally, it is necessary to recognise the cyclical nature of interventions in Afghanistan, which has been called the "graveyard of empires" for forcing all world powers to retreat at some point or the other. The words of Rev. George Gleig, a soldier who survived the First Anglo-Afghan War (1839-42), are worth remembering: "A war begun for no wise purpose, carried on with a strange mixture of rashness and timidity, brought to a close after suffering and disaster, without much glory attached either to the government which directed, or the great body of troops which waged it." Greig's description of the British retreat could ring true for Soviet forces in the 1980s, and American forces post-9/11 as well.



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Art and Culture, Society, Social and National Issues

Mukhyamantri Tirth Yatra Yojana

Why in news?

- ☛ Delhi Government on December 5, 2018 launched the 'Mukhyamantri Tirth Yatra Yojana' which offers free travel packages for senior citizens from Delhi to five religious circuits. 1,100 senior citizens from every constituency of Delhi will be able to avail this facility at one go.
- ☛ Under this free pilgrimage scheme, a Delhi resident above 60 years will be eligible to take free pilgrimage along with his or her spouse.
- ☛ The scheme was approved by the Delhi Government on July 9, 2018. Earlier, the Delhi Cabinet had on January 8, 2018 approved the Revenue Department's proposal to begin with the Mukhyamantri Tirth Yatra Yojana.

Keys facts and figures

- ◆ 1100 senior citizens from each Assembly Constituency would now undertake free pilgrimage every year, the expenses for which will be borne by the government.
- ◆ A total of 77000 pilgrims will be able to avail this facility every year.
- ◆ On an average, the scheme will incur a cost of Rs 7000 per pilgrim.
- ◆ The pilgrimage duration will be of 3 days and 2 nights.

Eligibility for availing of the scheme

- ◆ Any resident of Delhi above 60 years of age will be eligible for the scheme.
- ◆ The applicant can also take along an attendant above the age of 20 years, if the he or his spouse is above 70 years. The expenditure of the attendant will also be borne by the Delhi government.
- ◆ There is no income criterion but preference will be given to those from economically weaker sections on first-come-first-serve basis.
- ◆ Employees of central, state and local government or autonomous bodies are not eligible for the scheme.
- ◆ Those selected for pilgrimage will be covered with an insurance of Rs 1 lakh each.
- ◆ The applicant will have to give a self-certificate that all information being given by them is correct and they have not availed the scheme in the past.

Selection of pilgrims

- ☛ The selection of pilgrims will be done through draw of lots and respective area MLAs will certify whether the intended beneficiaries belong to Delhi or not.

Travel Partner

- ◆ The journey will be performed through Indian Railways. To facilitate a seamless coordination for the scheme, the Delhi Tourism and Transportation Development Corporation Ltd (DTTDC) had signed an MoU with the Indian Railways and Catering Tourism Corporation (IRCTC), Ministry of Railways.
- ◆ The facility provided under the scheme would be non-AC trains with 15 coaches that will have a government doctor and paramedical staff on board. To provide security, there will be one unarmed security guard and one tour escort.
- ◆ The package offers accommodation, meals and insurance for all participating senior citizens. All trains will leave from Safdarjung railway station.

Source: The Hindu

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Tamil Nadu launches toll-free helpline '181' for domestic violence victims

Why in news?

- ☞ The Tamil Nadu government on December 9, 2018 launched a 24-hour toll-free helpline '181' for women facing domestic violence and sexual harassment. The initiative was launched by the state's Chief Minister K Palaniswami.

Key Facts

- ◆ The move will enable women facing domestic violence and sexual harassment at home or workplaces to contact the toll-free helpline to get emergency assistance such as police help, legal aid or medical services including an ambulance.
- ◆ The helpline initiative has been developed at a cost of Rs 62.70 lakh.
- ◆ The service will be available for 24 hours on all days of the week.
- ◆ Besides providing government aid to victims of domestic violence, the helpline would assist women in getting information on welfare schemes aimed at their benefit.

Other Details

- ◆ On the occasion, the Tamil Nadu Chief Minister also gave away gold and cash to seven beneficiaries of a government scheme aimed at women.
- ◆ The scheme called 'gold for mangalsutra' scheme is a flagship initiative of the ruling Tamil Nadu government.
- ◆ It aims to provide an allowance of eight grams of gold and cash assistance to women from economically backward families for their marriage.
- ◆ The state has allotted amount worth Rs 724 crore for the scheme for the year 2018-19.
- ◆ The scheme is aimed at benefitting around 1.11 lakh beneficiaries.
- ◆ Besides this, the Chief Minister launched many other initiatives through video conferencing. He laid the foundation stone for various projects to be implemented at an estimated sum of Rs 96 crore in various parts of the state by the Public Works Department (PWD). He also inaugurated projects worth Rs 34 crore.

Source: The Hindu

National Pension System streamlined: Government's contribution to NPS hiked to 14 percent

Why in news?

- ☞ The Union Cabinet on December 6, 2018 approved the proposal to streamline the National Pension System (NPS).
- ☞ The NPS was implemented in May 2009 to provide a pension option to 360 million informal sector workers and provide them with old-age income security. NPS is being implemented and regulated by the Pension Fund Regulatory and Development Authority (PFRDA).

Changes approved in the National Pension System

- ◆ Mandatory contribution by the Central Government enhanced by 4 percent from the existing 10 percent to 14 percent for employees covered under NPS Tier-I
- ◆ Central government employees will be provided with freedom of choice for selection of Pension Funds and pattern of investment.
- ◆ Payment of compensation for non-deposit or delayed deposit of NPS contributions during 2004-2012

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- ◆ Contribution by Government employees under Tier-II of NPS will now be covered under Section 80 C for deduction up to Rs 1.50 lakh for the purpose of income tax at par with schemes such as General (PF), Contributory PF, Employees PF and Public PF, with lock-in period of 3 years.
- ◆ The entire withdrawal will now be exempt from income tax as the tax exemption limit for lump sum withdrawal on exit has been enhanced to 60 percent.
- ◆ Under the NPS, the subscriber is eligible to withdraw 60 percent of the corpus and remaining 40 percent of the accumulated fund goes towards annuity. Out of 60 percent of the accumulated corpus withdrawn by the NPS subscriber at the time of retirement, 40 percent is tax exempt and balance 20 percent is taxable.

When will these changes be implemented?

- ☞ The proposed changes to NPS would be made applicable immediately once time critical decisions are taken in consultation with the other concerned Ministries and Departments.

Expenditure involved

- ✱ The impact of these changes on the exchequer is estimated to be to the tune of around Rs 2840 crores for the financial year 2019-20 and it will be a recurring expenditure.

Number of beneficiaries

- ✱ Approximately 18 lakh central government employees covered under NPS would be benefitted from the streamlining of the National Pension System.

Impact

- ◆ Increase in eventual accumulated corpus of all central government employees covered under NPS
- ◆ Greater pension payouts after retirement without any additional burden
- ◆ Freedom of choice for selection of Pension Funds and investment pattern
- ◆ Benefit to approximately 18 lakh central government employees covered under NPS
- ◆ Old-age security will be augmented in a time of rising life expectancy

Who recommended these changes?

- ◆ The new entrants to the central government service on or after January 1, 2004 are covered under the National Pension System (NPS).
- ◆ The Seventh Pay Commission (7th CPC), during its deliberations, examined certain concerns regarding NPS and made recommendations in the year 2015 such as setting up of a Committee of Secretaries in this regard.
- ◆ Accordingly, a Committee of Secretaries was constituted by the Government to suggest measures for streamlining the implementation of NPS in the year 2016.
- ◆ The Committee submitted its report in the year 2018. Accordingly, based on the recommendations of the Committee, these changes were placed before the Cabinet for its approval.

Source: The Hindu

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Lok Sabha passes Triple Talaq Bill 2018

Why in news?

- ☞ The Lok Sabha has recently passed the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Marriage) Bill, 2018, also known as, Triple Talaq Bill. Two hundred forty-five members of the Lok Sabha voted in favour of the bill, while 11 voted against it.

Key Facts

- ☞ The Bill makes instant triple talaq void and illegal. It seeks to make the practice of instant triple talaq a punishable offence with imprisonment of up to three years.
- ☞ The Bill was introduced in Lok Sabha by the Minister of Law and Justice, Ravi Shankar Prasad on December 17, 2018. The Bill will replace the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Marriage) Ordinance-2018, promulgated on September 19, 2018.

Withdrawal of 2017 Bill

- ✳ Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Marriage) Bill, 2017 is currently listed in the parliament for withdrawal. It was introduced and passed in Lok Sabha on December 28, 2017.

Provisions of the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Marriage) Bill, 2018

- ◆ The bill says that “any pronouncement of talaq by a person upon his wife, by words, either spoken or written or in electronic form or in any other manner whatsoever, shall be void and illegal.”
- ◆ It makes instant triple talaq or talaq-e-biddat illegal and void, be it in any form- spoken form, in writing or by electronic means such as email, SMS and WhatsApp or in any other manner whatsoever.
- ◆ It defines ‘talaq’ as ‘talaq-e-biddat’ pronounced by a Muslim man resulting in instant and irrevocable divorce. Talaq-e-biddat refers to the practice under Muslim personal laws where pronouncement of the word ‘talaq’ thrice in one sitting by a Muslim man to his wife results in an instant and irrevocable divorce.
- ◆ It makes declaration of talaq a cognisable and non-bailable offence. A husband declaring talaq can be imprisoned for up to three years along with a fine. The offence will be cognisable only if information relating to the offence is given either by the woman against whom talaq has been declared or by any person related to her by blood or marriage.
- ◆ Any offence committed under the Code of Criminal Procedure, 1973 will be treated as cognisable and non-bailable.

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Powers of magistrate

- ◆ The magistrate can decide on releasing the husband on bail only after hearing the woman against whom talaq has been pronounced, and only if the Magistrate is satisfied that there are reasonable grounds for granting bail.
- ◆ The offence of instant triple talaq “compoundable”, where a magistrate can use his powers to settle the dispute between a husband and his wife. It allows a wife to drop the case, if husband returns to her later and they arrive at a compromise.

Allowance and custody

- ◆ It envisages entitling divorcee Muslim women for maintenance. It gives power to wife, upon whom talaq is pronounced, to approach a magistrate seeking subsistence allowance for herself and her minor children.
- ◆ A married Muslim woman will be entitled to custody of her minor children in the event of pronouncement of talaq by her husband, which will be determined by the Magistrate.

Significance

- ✿ The Bill will help in ensuring gender justice and gender equality of married Muslim women and will help them in practising their fundamental rights of non-discrimination and empowerment.

Supreme Court’s ruling on instant Triple Talaq

- ◆ The Supreme Court on August 22, 2017 held the Islamic practice of ‘instant’ triple talaq’ as unconstitutional.
- ◆ The verdict was delivered by a 5-judge bench led by the then Chief Justice J S Khehar. All the 5 judges belonged to 5 different religions.
- ◆ The verdict came out in a ratio of 3:2, as two judges including the Chief Justice voted to uphold the practice saying that it cannot be declared illegal, while others called it unconstitutional and banned it for a period of 6 months till the government introduced a new law.
- ◆ The court also held that the practice of instant triple talaq was violative of Article 14 and Article 21 of the Indian Constitution. It also goes against Shariat and the basic tenets of the Quran.

What is the concept of Triple Talaq as per Islamic Law?

Among Muslims, marriage is treated as a social contract and the Muslim Sharia (Islamic Law) provides the ways to terminate marriage in the form talaq. The term ‘talaq’ means ‘freeing or undoing the knot’, referring to a divorce.

Triple talaq is basically a process of Divorce wherein the husband pronounces three talaqs upon wife, one in each menstrual cycle, only to ensure that she is not pregnant.

Source: The Hindu, Indian Express

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Bill to make marital rape a crime introduced in Lok Sabha

Why in news?

- ☞ A private bill titled the Women's Sexual, Reproductive and Menstrual Rights Bill 2018 has been introduced in the Lok Sabha by Congress MP Dr Shashi Tharoor. The bill proposes to make marital rape a crime and gives more decisional autonomy to women in termination of pregnancy.
- ☞ While introducing the bill, Tharoor explained that the bill's central idea was the "agency of women". The Minister stated that the existing laws fail to recognise 'woman' as an individual capable of making her own choices, specifically her sexual choices as a wife and her reproductive choices when pregnant.

The Bill: Key Provisions

- ✳ The bill proposes the deletion of exception 2 to Section 375 of Indian Penal Code, which states that sexual intercourse by a man with his own wife is not rape.
- ✳ The bill also adds a provision to explanation 2 that "the women's ethnicity, religion, caste, education, profession, clothing preference, entertainment preference, social circle, personal opinion, past sexual conduct or any other related grounds shall not be a reason to presume her consent to the sexual activity."

Abortion rights

- ◆ The bill proposes amendments to the Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act 1971. The bill proposes renaming of the act to 'Legal Termination of Pregnancy Act'.
- ◆ The change of name of the act has been proposed on the ground that the usage of the word 'medical' in the title of the Bill created ambiguity, which mainly impacted rural areas as the doctors there feared to interpret the law in case of an arrest under Section 312 of the Indian Penal Code.
- ◆ Section 312 punishes anyone who causes a voluntary miscarriage including the woman herself.
- ◆ The bill grants women an absolute right to termination of pregnancy where they may terminate pregnancy merely by request until the 12th week of pregnancy.
- ◆ The bill also grants women the conditional right to terminate their pregnancy until the 20th week.
- ◆ This right is conditional on risk to the life of the pregnant woman or of grave injury to her physical or mental health, or if there is a substantial risk of physical, mental or genetic abnormality of the foetus after being certified by at least one Registered Medical Practitioner.
- ◆ The pregnancies caused by rape or by the failure of birth control methods are deemed to constitute a grave injury to the mental health of a woman.
- ◆ The bill also grants a limited right of abortion until the 24th week of pregnancy.
- ◆ The Act limited termination of pregnancy to the 20th week of pregnancy unless the survival of the woman was at risk.
- ◆ However, this led to vulnerable women like victims of rape and disabled women who had no risk of injury, a threat to their life or foetus with an abnormality be embroiled in a legal dispute for their right to abort.
- ◆ Hence, in order to avoid an added trauma for these vulnerable women, the bill proposes an extension of the limit to the 24th week.
- ◆ It is not indefinite, as around 22-24th week a foetus becomes viable and it has the ability to live outside the womb of the mother, upholding the foetus's right to life over the choice of the mother.

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Free distribution of sanitary napkins

- ✳ The bill further proposes an amendment to Right to Education Act to make provision for free distribution of sanitary napkins by schools.
- ✳ It also mandates that all public authorities should ensure the availability of sanitary napkins, free of cost, at offices.

Source: The Hindu, PRS, Daily Hunt

SC bars media, police from revealing identities of victims of rape, sexual assault

Why in news?

- ☞ The Supreme Court has directed the print and electronic media not to reveal the identity of victims of rape and sexual assault even in a remote manner.
- ☞ The SC bench comprising Justices Madan B Lokur and Deepak Gupta stated that it was not necessary to disclose the identity of victims of rape and sexual assault to “arouse public opinion and sentiment” as these issues need to be dealt with sensitively.

The Judgement: Key Details

- ◆ In its judgement, the SC bench said that the name and identity of victims of rape and sexual assault, including those who had died, cannot be disclosed “even in a remote manner”.
- ◆ The court said that it was “unfortunate” that such victims were being treated as “untouchable” by the society.
- ◆ The bench gave the ruling while refusing to agree with an argument that in certain matters, the victim’s name should be allowed to be disclosed as her name and face could become a “rallying point” to prevent other such sexual offences.
- ◆ It was argued before the court that when the victim’s name is disclosed, the victim becomes a symbol of protest or is treated as an iconic figure.
- ◆ However, the bench stated that it is not at all necessary to disclose the identity of the victim to arouse public opinion and sentiment. The bench said that it is a serious issue dealing with victims of heinous sexual offences and it needs to be dealt with sensitivity.
- ◆ The bench while referring to the infamous December 16, 2012 gangrape and murder case in Delhi, said: “All of us are fully aware that without disclosing her true identity ‘Nirbhaya’ became the most effective symbol of protest the country has ever known.
- ◆ Hence, it said that if a campaign has to be started to protect the rights of the victim and mobilise public opinion it can be done so without disclosing the victim’s true identity.
- ◆ The court also said that the police should ensure that the correspondence or memos exchanged or issued, where the name of the victim is disclosed, are kept in a sealed cover and are not disclosed to the public at large.
- ◆ The bench said that the names should not be disclosed to the media and they shall also not be furnished to any person under the Right to Information Act, 2015.

Exceptional Cases

- ◆ The apex court said there may be cases where the identity of such a victim, if not her name, may have to be disclosed and there may be cases also where the dead body of a victim, who was raped, was found.
- ◆ In such a case, the bench said that while the identity may be revealed but the fact that such victim has been subjected to a sexual offence need not be disclosed.
- ◆ However, the bench said that nobody can have any objection to the victim disclosing her name herself as long as she is a major and has taken the decision voluntarily.

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- ◆ Further, in relation to the in-camera proceedings in the court in such cases, the bench said that the media can report that some witnesses were examined but they “cannot report what transpired inside the court or what was the statement of victim or the witnesses. The evidence cannot be disclosed”.
- ◆ The bench also stated that in a case where the victim files an appeal under section 372 of the Criminal Procedure Code (CrPC) against either acquittal of accused or enhancement of sentence imposed upon him, it would not be necessary for him or her to disclose the identity.

Child-Friendly Courts

- ◆ The Supreme Court bench also stressed upon the need to have child-friendly courts across the country.
- ◆ The bench noted that children and women, especially those who have been subjected to sexual assault are virtually overwhelmed by the atmosphere in the courts. It stated that they are scared and so nervous that they, sometimes, are not even able to describe the nature of the crime accurately.
- ◆ Further, referring to the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, the bench said that its provision “enjoins” on the special court to ensure that there is child-friendly atmosphere in the court.
- ◆ It said that the special courts or child-friendly courts need not only be used for trying cases under the POCSO but can also be used as trial courts for trying cases of rape against women.

Background

- ✧ The Supreme Court had earlier agreed to examine the provisions of law that provide curbs and balances for media in reporting incidents of sexual assault, including that of minors, after a complaint that there have been “regular violation” of such provisions.
- ✧ The issue had cropped up when the court was hearing a batch of petitions filed after the rape and murder of a paramedic student on December 16, 2012 in New Delhi to support the initiatives on women’s safety across the country.

Source: The Hindu

Surrogacy (Regulation) Bill, 2016: Lok Sabha passes Bill prohibiting commercial surrogacy

Why in news?

- ☛ The Lok Sabha has recently passed the Surrogacy (Regulation) Bill, 2016 which is aimed at prohibiting commercial surrogacy and unethical practices relating to it.
- ☛ Once the Bill is enacted by the Parliament, the National Surrogacy Board will be constituted. The States and Union Territories will constitute the State Surrogacy Board and State Appropriate Authorities within three months of the notification by the Union Government.

Definition of Surrogacy

- ✧ As per the Bill, Surrogacy is defined as “*a practice whereby one woman carries the child for another with the intention that the child should be handed over after birth*”.
- ✧ Surrogacy may be altruistic or commercial in nature. Altruistic surrogacy involves an arrangement where the couple does not pay the surrogate mother any compensation other than the medical and insurance expenses related to the pregnancy. Commercial surrogacy includes compensation in cash or kind paid to the surrogate mother.

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Provisions of the Surrogacy (Regulation) Bill, 2016

- ◆ The intending couple must be Indian citizens and married for at least five years with at least one of them being infertile.
- ◆ It permits surrogacy only for couples who cannot conceive a child.
- ◆ The surrogate mother has to be a ‘close relative’ of the intending couple.
- ◆ No payment other than reasonable medical expenses can be made to the surrogate mother.
- ◆ The surrogate child will be considered as the biological child of the intending couple.
- ◆ Central and state governments will appoint appropriate authorities to grant eligibility certificates to the intending couple and the surrogate mother.
- ◆ The Bill prohibits commercial surrogacy, makes it a punishable offence.
- ◆ Eligibility conditions for surrogate mothers and intending couple
- ◆ The Bill specifies eligibility conditions that need to be fulfilled by the intending couple in order to commission surrogacy.
- ◆ The intending couple must be Indian citizens and married for at least five years with at least one of them being infertile. It permits surrogacy only for couples who cannot conceive a child.
- ◆ Surrogacy is not allowed in case of any other medical conditions which could prevent a woman from giving birth to a child.
- ◆ The surrogate mother has to be a ‘close relative’ of the intending couple who has been married and has had a child of her own. The Bill does not define the term ‘close relative’.
- ◆ The surrogate mother and the intending couple need eligibility certificates from the appropriate authority.
- ◆ The intending couple should have a ‘certificate of essentiality’ and a ‘certificate of eligibility’ issued by the appropriate authority. The surrogate mother too needs a ‘certificate of eligibility’.
- ◆ The Bill does not specify a time limit within which such certificates will be granted. It also does not specify an appeal process in case the application is rejected.

Provisions related to abortion

- ◆ For an abortion, the intending couple needs to comply with the Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act, 1971, and the approval of the appropriate authority along with the consent of the surrogate mother.
- ◆ The Bill does not specify a time limit for granting such an approval.
- ◆ The intending couple has no say in the consent to abort.

Appropriate authority and its functions

☞ The central and state governments will appoint one or more appropriate authorities. The appropriate authority comprises the Joint Director of the State Health Department, an officer of the State Law Department, a medical practitioner, and an eminent woman.

The functions of the appropriate authority include:

- (i) Granting, suspending or cancelling registration of surrogacy clinics;
- (ii) Enforcing standards for surrogacy clinics; and
- (iii) Investigating and taking action against complaints of breach of the Act.

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Registration of surrogacy clinics

- ◆ Surrogacy clinics cannot undertake surrogacy or its related procedures unless they are granted registration by the appropriate authority.
- ◆ Clinics must apply for registration within a period of 60 days from the date of appointment of the appropriate authority.
- ◆ This application will be accepted or rejected within 90 days.
- ◆ No human embryo or gamete can be stored by a surrogacy clinic for the purpose of surrogacy.

Offences and penalties

- ☞ The Bill prohibits commercial surrogacy; makes commercial surrogacy, its advertisement, and exploitation of the surrogate mother a punishable offence with imprisonment for 10 years and a fine of up to Rs 10 lakh.

Source: The Hindu, Indian Express

Three islands in Andaman and Nicobar renamed after Netaji Subash Chandra Bose

Why in news?

- ☞ Prime Minister Narendra Modi on December 30, 2018 renamed three islands of Andaman and Nicobar after Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose. These three islands are - Ross Island, Neil Island and Havelock Island.
- ☞ These islands were renamed during PM Modi's visit to Port Blair to mark the 75th Anniversary of hoisting of the National Flag at Port Blair by freedom fighter Subhash Chandra Bose.

Renaming of islands

Island	New Name
Ross Island	Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose Island
Neil Island	Shaheed Dweep
Havelock Island	Swaraj Dweep

- ☞ Bose had hoisted the flag at Port Blair on December 30, 1943, as he believed that Port Blair was the first territory to be freed from British rule. This was done after the Japanese captured that area during the time of the Second World War.

Netaji Subash Chandra Bose

- ◆ Born on January 23, 1897, Bose tried to free India from the British rule with the help of Imperial Japan and Nazi Germany but had failed in his attempt.
- ◆ In 1938 and 1939, Netaji served the Indian National Congress as its President. But later, he was ousted from the party due to his differences with Mahatma Gandhi.
- ◆ After expulsion from Congress, he was placed under house arrest by the British. Later in 1940, he escaped from India.
- ◆ In 1941, he went to Germany where he established Free India Centre and another Free India Centre in Berlin with the help of German funds.

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- ◆ During his stay in Germany, he formed a Free India Legion to aid in a possible future German land invasion of India. The group was formed with the participation of some 3000 people comprising of Indians who were captured by Erwin Rommel's Afrika Korps.
- ◆ Later in 1943, he moved to Japan and revamped the Indian National Army (INA) with Japanese support. INA was a group of Indian soldiers from the British-Indian army who were captured in the Battle of Singapore.
- ◆ As per reports, Bose died when his plane crashed in Taiwan. However, several Indians don't believe that he died in the crash or even the crash had occurred.

Source: The Hindu

Aadhaar not mandatory for admission in schools: UIDAI

Why in news?

- ☛ The Unique Identification Authority of India (UIDAI) has asserted that schools cannot make Aadhaar, the 12-digit biometric identifier a pre-condition for student admission. UIDAI warned that doing so will be against the recent order of the Supreme Court.
- ☛ The detail was shared by UIDAI CEO Ajay Bhushan Pandey in New Delhi on December 25, 2018. The clarification comes at a time when admissions to the nursery and entry-level classes have begun in over 1,500 private schools in Delhi.

Key Highlights

- ◆ UIDAI cleared that asking for Aadhaar cards for admissions is not as per the provisions of law and doing so will be against the recent order of the Supreme Court.
- ◆ However, there have been reports of certain schools insisting on Aadhaar as one of the documents required for student admission.
- ◆ The Aadhaar issuing body said that it is aware of such reports and has asked all the schools to ensure that no child is denied admission for not having the identification card.
- ◆ UIDAI CEO Ajay Bhushan Pandey said that in fact, schools should admit children without Aadhaar and ensure that children are given Aadhaar once they are in schools by arranging special camps for them.
- ◆ UIDAI cleared that despite this, should certain schools continue to insist on Aadhaar then, it would clearly be seen as a case of contempt of court.
- ◆ The word of caution from UIDAI comes at a time when admissions to the nursery and entry-level classes have just begun in over 1,500 private schools in Delhi.

Background

- ☛ In September 2018, the Supreme Court had upheld the constitutional validity of Aadhaar but clipped the scope of the biometric identity project, ruling that it was not mandatory for bank accounts, mobile connections or school admissions.
- ☛ The top court had held that Aadhaar would remain compulsory for the filing of Income Tax returns and allotment of Permanent Account Number, as well as welfare schemes.
- ☛ The SC verdict emphasised that it would not be mandatory for school admissions, as also for the examinations conducted by the Central Board of Secondary Examination, National Eligibility cum Entrance Test for medical entrance and the University Grants Commission.

Source: The Hindu

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‘Beti Bachao Beti Padhao’ field-level awareness campaign launched in three states

Why in news?

☞ A three-state field-level campaign on Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP) will be organised by the Union Government from the first week of January 2019.

Key Facts

- ◆ As a part of the campaign, over 900 cultural programmes across various districts of Maharashtra, 100 programmes in Goa and 30 programmes in UT of Dadra & Nagar Haveli would be held.
- ◆ The awareness and sensitisation drive is being organised by the Pune office of Regional Outreach Bureau (ROB) and the Union Ministry of Information & Broadcasting in coordination with Women and Child Development Departments of the respective states.

Highlights

- ◆ The campaign was launched by Gauri Gadgil, a Divyang child and an international swimmer, by placing her fingers on traditional instrument “Dholak”, symbolising the creation of reverberance about the scheme across the three states.
- ◆ She said on the occasion that girls are making their mark across the globe, giving name and fame to their families.
- ◆ As a prelude to the campaign, an orientation-cum-workshop on the flagship scheme was organised for the Private Registered Cultural Troupes (PRTs) in Pune on December 20, 2018.
- ◆ Inaugurating the workshop, former ADG, Ministry of I&B, Prabhavati Aakashi said that the cultural troupes of ROB have been doing a wonderful job in creating awareness and sensitising people on the importance of the initiative.
- ◆ The cultural troupes are an important bridge between the Government and the last mile at the grass root level, as they help create awareness about various schemes among the people through locally prevalent communication means such as drama, skits, songs and plays.

Beti Bachao Beti Padhao

- ◆ The trend of decline in the Child Sex Ratio (CSR) has been unabated since 1961. The decline from 945 in 1991 to 927 in 2001 and further to 918 in 2011 is alarming.
- ◆ Child Sex Ratio is defined as number of girls per 1000 of boys between 0-6 years of age. Hence, a decline in the CSR is a major indicator of women disempowerment.
- ◆ The ratio reflects both, pre-birth discrimination manifested through gender biased sex selection and post birth discrimination against girls.
- ◆ The social construct discrimination against girls on one hand, easy availability, affordability and subsequent misuse of diagnostic tools on the other hand, have been critical in increasing Sex Selective Elimination of girls leading to low Child Sex Ratio.
- ◆ The Government announced Beti Bachao Beti Padhao initiative, as coordinated and convergent efforts are needed to ensure survival, protection and empowerment of the girl child.
- ◆ The initiative is being implemented through a national campaign and focuses on multi-sectoral action in 100 selected districts low in CSR, covering all States and UTs.
- ◆ It is a joint initiative of the Ministry of Women and Child Development, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare and Ministry of Human Resource Development.

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The key objectives of the initiative are as follows:

- ◆ Prevention of gender biased sex selective elimination
- ◆ Ensuring survival & protection of the girl child
- ◆ Ensuring education and participation of the girl child

Source: PIB

National Commission for Women to support livelihood programmes for women in northeast

Why in news?

- ☞ The National Commission for Women (NCW) has decided to support northeast livelihood programmes for women, particularly for those falling under the younger age group, through skill development and specialised training.
- ☞ *Objective: The main aim behind the move is to empower the young women as individuals and enable them to earn a living for themselves.*

Significance

- ✧ Though the women in the northeast are quite unbound as far as their contribution in outdoor work is concerned, there is still scope for raising the levels of education among them, especially among women living in remote and rural areas.
- ✧ The livelihood programmes will impart skill training to these women in order to make them self-reliant.
- ✧ The DoNER Ministry has said that the National Commission for Women can supplement its efforts and resources in carrying forward several of the women-oriented projects that have already been undertaken by the Ministry and the North-Eastern Council.
- ✧ In this regard, the DoNER Minister of State made a special mention of a number of Self Help Groups (SHGs) of women doing a commendable work in the region.
- ✧ The DoNER Ministry also assured the NCW that the PSUs working under it will offer their collaboration and cooperation in women-oriented welfare programmes in the region.
- ✧ Besides, during the meeting between the NCW and the DoNER Ministry, the issue of Northeast women, particularly of younger age groups, living in metros like Bengaluru and Mumbai was also discussed.

Upcoming Projects

- ✧ An exclusive hostel is being built for the girl students from the northeast in Bangalore University campus. The entire project has been funded by the North Eastern Council and the DoNER Ministry.
- ✧ Another hostel is being built for the north east students in Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU). The hostel will include accommodation for 200 girl students.

Source: PIB



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Polity & Governance, Social Justice, Social Development

Cabinet approves amendment in POSCO Act, 2012 to protect children from sexual abuse

Why in news?

- ☞ The Union Cabinet chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi on December 28, 2018 approved the proposal for Amendment in the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012 to make punishment more stringent for committing sexual crimes against children.

POSCO Act

- ✳ The POCSO Act, 2012 was enacted to Protect the Children from Offences of Sexual Assault, Sexual harassment and pornography with due regard for safeguarding the interest and well-being of children.
- ✳ The Act defines a child as any person below eighteen years of age and regards the best interests and welfare of the child as a matter of paramount importance at every stage, to ensure the healthy physical, emotional, intellectual and social development of the child. The act is gender neutral.

Proposed Amendments

- ◆ The cabinet has approved the amendment in Section-4, Section-5, Section-6, Section-9, Section-14, Section-15 and Section-42 of the POSCO Act, 2012 to address the aspects of child sexual abuse in an appropriate manner.
- ◆ The modification has been proposed to address the need for stringent measures required to deter the rising trend of child sex abuse in the country.
- ◆ The Section-4, Section-5 and Section-6 of the Act are proposed to be amended to provide the option of stringent punishment, including the death penalty, for committing aggravated penetrative sexual assault crime on a child to protect the children from sexual abuse.
- ◆ The amendment is proposed in section-9 to protect children from sexual offences in times of natural calamities and disasters and in cases where children are administered, in any way, any hormone or any chemical substance, to attains early sexual maturity for the purpose of penetrative sexual assault.
- ◆ The Section-14 and Section-15 of the POCSO Act, 2012 have been proposed to be amended to address the menace of the child pornography. It is proposed to levy fine for not destroying or deleting or reporting the pornographic material involving a child.
- ◆ The person can be further penalised with jail term or fine or both for transmitting, propagating and administrating such material in any manner except for the purpose of reporting as may be prescribed and for use as evidence in court.
- The penal provisions have been made more stringent for storing or possessing any pornographic material in any form involving a child for a commercial purpose.

Significance

- ✳ The amendment is expected to discourage the trend of child sexual abuse by acting as a deterrent due to strong penal provisions incorporated in the Act.
- ✳ It may also protect the interest of vulnerable children in times of distress and ensure their safety and dignity. The amendment aims to establish clarity regarding the aspects of child abuse and punishment there of.

Source: PIB

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Parliament passes Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (Amendment) Bill, 2018

Why in news?

- ☞ The Indian Parliament has recently passed the **Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (Amendment) Bill, 2018** that seeks to do away with the no-detention policy in schools.
- ☞ The motion to pass the bill was accepted by voice vote in the upper house of the Parliament, the Rajya Sabha.
- ☞ Union minister for Human Resources Development Prakash Javadekar's motion to amend the name of the bill to reflect that it was passed in 2019 was also accepted by voice vote. The Lok Sabha had already passed the bill in July 2018.

Aim

- ✳ The key aim behind the move is to rebuild the education system of the country, which is at present broken, as per the Union HRD Minister. The Minister said many students have moved from private schools to government schools in some states, such as Sikkim, Kerala and Telangana.
- ✳ He added that teacher training, quality and accountability are most important and while stating that there is no shortage of teachers, he said that their deployment is not right.

Significance

- ✳ The legislation is significant as it brings accountability in the elementary education system. The proposal received the support of a majority of state governments.

RTE amendment Bill: Key Provisions

- ◆ The Bill seeks to amend the Right to Education (RTE) Act to abolish the “no-detention” policy in schools. Under the current provisions of the Act, no student can be detained up to class VIII.
- ◆ As per the amendment, it would be left to the states to decide whether to continue the no-detention policy. This Bill has been analysed by a Parliamentary standing committee, which also recommended bringing back the concept of detention in schools.
- ◆ The policy has been brought back as it was felt that compelling children to repeat a class was demotivating, often forcing them to abandon school.
- ◆ The bill provides for regular examination in classes V and VIII, and if a child fails, the amendment bill grants a provision to give her or him additional opportunity to take a re-examination within two months.
- ◆ Such children will be provided with two-month remedial teaching to perform better in the re-examinations.
- ◆ If the students still do not pass the exam, the state government may decide to detain them.

Right to Education (RTE) Act

- ◆ The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 (the Act) provides for free and compulsory education to all children of the age of six to fourteen years.
- ◆ The Section 16 of the Act provides that no child admitted in a school shall be held back in any class or expelled from school till the completion of elementary education.
- ◆ This provision was made in the said Act because examinations are often used for eliminating children who obtain poor marks, which compels children either to repeat the same grade or leave the school altogether.
- ◆ It was felt that compelling a child to repeat a class is both de-motivating and discouraging.

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Why the need for the amendment?

- ☞ In recent years, States and Union territories have been raising the issue of adverse effect on the learning levels of children as section 16 does not allow holding back of children in any class till the completion of elementary education.
- ☞ Therefore, the amendment to the section was proposed in order to improve the learning outcomes in the elementary classes and to empower the appropriate Government to take a decision as to whether to hold back a child in the fifth class or in the eighth class or in both classes, or not to hold back a child in any class, till the completion of elementary education.
- ☞ According to the Union HRD Minister, over 25 states favour abolishing the no-detention policy

Source: Indian Express

Cabinet approves high level committee to implement Clause 6 of Assam Accord

Why in news?

- ☞ The Union Cabinet chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi has approved the setting up of a high-level committee for the implementation of clause 6 of the Assam Accord and measures envisaged in the Memorandum of Settlement, 2003 and other issues related to the Bodo community.

Assam Accord

- ✳ Assam Accord was signed on August 15, 1985, after the Assam agitation of 1979-1985.
- ✳ The clause 6 of the Assam Accord envisaged that appropriate constitutional, legislative and administrative safeguards, shall be provided to protect, preserve and promote the cultural, social, linguistic identity and heritage of the Assamese people.
- ✳ However, it has been felt that the clause 6 of the Assam Accord has not been fully implemented even almost 35 years after the Accord was signed.

Responsibilities of the High-Level Committee

- ◆ The High-Level Committee has been approved to suggest constitutional, legislative and administrative safeguards as envisaged in Clause 6 of the Assam Accord.
- ◆ The Committee shall examine the effectiveness of actions since 1985 to implement Clause 6 of the Assam Accord.
- ◆ It will hold discussions with all stakeholders and assess the required quantum of reservation of seats in Assam Legislative Assembly and local bodies for the Assamese people.
- ◆ The committee will also assess the requirement of measures to be taken to protect Assamese and other indigenous languages of Assam, the quantum of reservation in employment under Government of Assam and other measures to protect, preserve and promote cultural, social, linguistic identity and heritage of Assamese people.
- ◆ The composition and terms of reference of the committee will be issued separately by the Ministry of Home Affairs.

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Significance

- ✿ The setting up of the Committee is expected to pave the way for the implementation of the Assam Accord in letter and spirit and will help fulfil longstanding expectations of the Assamese people.

Other Decisions

- ◆ The Cabinet also approved a number of measures to fulfil the outstanding issues related to the Bodo community.
- ◆ The Bodo Accord was signed in 2003 that resulted in the establishment of a Bodoland Territorial Council under Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India.
- ◆ However, there have been representations from different organisations of Bodos to fulfil various outstanding demands.
- ◆ The cabinet has approved the establishment of a Bodo Museum-cum-language and cultural study center.
- ◆ It has also approved modernisation of existing All India Radio Station and Doordarshan Kendra at Kokrajhar and naming a Superfast Train passing through BTAD as ARONAI Express.
- ◆ The State Government will also take necessary measures related to appropriate land policy and land laws, besides setting up of institutions for research and documentation of customs, traditions and languages of indigenous communities.

Source: Indian Express

Supreme Court dismisses all petitions alleging irregularities in Rafale Deal

Why in news

- ☞ The Supreme Court on December 14, 2018 dismissed a group of petitions that demanded an independent probe into the controversial Rafale fighter jet deal, stating that it was satisfied with the procurement process. The court stated that the perception of individuals cannot be a ground for the Court to interfere.

Petitioners

- ◆ The ruling was delivered on a batch of writ petitions filed against the central government's purchase of 36 Rafale fighters for Euro 7.85 billion. The court clarified that the examination has been primarily from the point of examination of jurisdiction under Article 32 of the Constitution.
- ◆ The petitions, alleging corruption and irregularities in the Rafale deal, were filed by lawyer Manohar Lal Sharma, Vineet Dhanda, AAP legislator Sanjay Singh and the trio of Yashwant Sinha, Arun Shourie and Prashant Bhushan.
- ◆ The petitions had raised questions over the procurement process and alleged last-minute inflation in the price of the fighter jets and also claimed there to be an impropriety in awarding the contract to Anil Ambani's Reliance Group.

The Judgement: Key Highlights

1. Cost Irregularity issue

- ☞ The bench reiterated that it wasn't its job to examine minute financial details of the cost of the aircraft.
- ☞ It opined that it was not the job of the Court to go into issues of pricing and stated that the earlier deal was not forthcoming, while the new deal came with financial advantages.

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2. Off set Partner issue

- ☞ On the issue of offsets being awarded to Anil Ambani's Reliance Group, the court said that the choice of the Indian Offset Partner was to be of the vendor, in which the Union Government had no role to play.
- ☞ It also stated that there seemed to have been no commercial bias in the selection of the IOP.

3. Process and number of aircraft issue

- ☞ The bench, while observing that the country cannot afford to be lacking in any manner so far as defence is concerned, stated that it cannot decide on the wisdom to purchase 36 fighter jets in fly-away condition as against the earlier deal for 126.
- ☞ Expressing satisfaction with the process of procurement, the bench noted that the earlier deal in respect of the 126 jets had not been coming through.

Background

- ☞ The three-judge bench of the Supreme Court had heard all the pleas calling for a court-monitored probe into the multi-billion dollar deal for procuring 36 Rafale fighter jets in a fly-away condition from French aerospace company Dassault Aviation and had reserved its verdict on November 14.
- ☞ The first petitioner in the case was Advocate ML Sharma, followed by another lawyer Vineet Dhanda and Aam Aadmy Party leader Sanjay Singh.
- ☞ After the three pleas were filed, former Union ministers Yashwant Sinha and Arun Shourie and activist advocate Prashant Bhushan also moved the SC with a petition that the CBI should be directed to file an FIR seeking a probe into the alleged irregularities in the deal.

Key issues raised by the petitioners

- ☞ The petitioners contended that PM Narendra Modi announced the deal in April 2015 without following the Defence Procurement Procedure. It was argued that the negotiations for the deal started after the PM announced the deal and approval of the Cabinet Committee was obtained almost a year after the announcement.
- ☞ The petitioners also argued that the prices of aircraft were highly inflated in the new deal, and offset guidelines were manipulated to accommodate Reliance Defence, which had no experience in the sector.
- ☞ The petition had raised questions on the bypassing of the procedure for discontinuing the earlier process for acquiring 126 (18 in a ready-to-fly condition and 108 to be manufactured by HAL) fighter jets in favour of acquiring 36 aircraft in ready-to-fly condition and unloading HAL as an offset partner.

Centre's Defence

- ☞ The Centre had defended the deal on the grounds of 'urgent requirement' of national security and opposed public disclosure of the pricing details.
- ☞ The Attorney General KK Venugopal, while speaking on behalf of the Central government said that the secrecy regarding the deal is with respect to weaponry and avionics. The AG argued that if these are disclosed then the adversaries will be able to know about it.
- ☞ The Attorney General also argued that the government has disclosed to the court, total price along with weaponry. He said that what the bench should consider is whether the court is competent to judicially review this on the basis of what has been submitted (by the petitioners).

The Rafale Fighter Deal

- ✳ India and France had signed the agreement as part of the upgrading process of Indian Air Force equipment. The Rafale fighter is a twin-engine Medium Multi-Role Combat Aircraft (MMRCA) manufactured by Dassault Aviation.

Source: The Hindu

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SC approves Witness Protection Scheme 2018

Why in news?

- ☞ The Supreme Court on December 5, 2018 approved the Witness Protection Scheme 2018 and directed the Central and State Governments to enforce the same in letter and spirit.
- ☞ The bench comprising Justice AK Sikri and Justice S Abdul Nazeer held that the scheme will become ‘law’ under Article 141/142 of the Constitution till the enactment of parliamentary and state legislations on the subject.

Scheme framed in a response to PIL seeking protection for witnesses

- ☞ The Central Government had placed this scheme on record in response to a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) seeking protection for witnesses in rape cases involving offender self-styled **preacher Asaram Babu**.
- ☞ It was alleged that as many as 10 witnesses had already been attacked and three witnesses killed. The PIL was filed by four petitioners including a witness, father of a murdered witness, father of the child rape victim and a journalist.

Vulnerable Witness Deposition Complexes

- ◆ The Bench also directed the states and union territories to set up the vulnerable witness deposition complexes within a period of one year by the end of 2019.
- ◆ The bench observed that there is a paramount need to have witness protection regime in a statutory form. It also emphasised on the need to create Vulnerable Witness Deposition Complexes.
- ◆ One of the main reasons behind establishing these Vulnerable Witness Deposition Complexes was that a large percentage of acquittal in criminal cases is due to witnesses turning hostile and giving false testimonies, mostly due to lack of protection for them and their families.

Witness Protection Scheme 2018

- ✧ The Witness Protection Scheme 2018 was formulated by the Home Ministry on the inputs received from 18 States and Union Territories, five state legal services authorities and open sources including civil society, three high courts as well as from police personnel.
- ✧ The scheme was finalised in consultation with National Legal Services Authority (NALSA).
- ✧ The scheme aims to ensure that the investigation, prosecution and trial of criminal offences does not turn out to be biased as witnesses are intimidated or frightened to give evidence without protection from violent or other criminal recrimination.

Essential features

- ◆ Identifying categories of threat perceptions
- ◆ Preparation of a “Threat Analysis Report” by the head of the police
- ◆ Types of protection measures like ensuring that the witness and accused do not come face to face during investigation etc. protection of identity, change of identity, relocation of witness
- ◆ Confidentiality and preservation of records, recovery of expenses, etc.

Scheme categorises witnesses into three types:

- ◆ Where the threat extends to life of witness or his family members during investigation, trial or thereafter.
- ◆ Where the threat extends to safety, reputation or property of the witness or his family members, during the investigation, trial or there after.
- ◆ Where the threat is moderate and extends to harassment of the witness or his family member’s, reputation or property during the investigation, trial or there after.

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How witnesses can seek protection?

- ◆ The witnesses, categorised under the scheme, can file application for seeking protection order before the competent authority of the concerned district where the offence is committed.
- ◆ This competent authority will be chaired by District and Sessions Judge, with head of the police in the district as member and head of the prosecution in the district as its member secretary.
- ◆ The authority, when it receives an application, has to call for a Threat Analysis Report from the ACP/DSP in charge of the concerned Police Sub-Division.
- ◆ The authority is also empowered to order protection measures based on the Threat Analysis Report such as identity protection, change of identity and relocation of witnesses.

Source: The Hindu

Parliament passes National Council for Teacher Education (Amendment) Bill, 2018

Why in news?

- ☛ The Indian Parliament has recently passed the National Council for Teacher Education (Amendment) Bill, 2018, following the approval of the Rajya Sabha.

The Lok Sabha had already passed the Bill on July 23, 2018. The Bill seeks to amend the National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE) Act, 1993.

Significance

- ✧ The bill aims to grant retrospective recognition to Central and State institutions which had conducted teacher education courses without approval by the Council. This will ensure that the future of about 17 thousand students having degrees from such institutions is secured.
- ✧ All institutions running teacher education courses, such as B.Ed, have to obtain recognition from the Council. Around 23 State and Central universities and colleges offering B.Ed courses were found not recognised by the Council.

Retrospective recognition of certain teacher education institutions

- ◆ The Bill seeks to grant retrospective recognition to these institutions:
- ◆ Institutions notified by the central government
- ◆ Institutions funded by the central government or state/union territory government
- ◆ Institutions which do not have recognition under the Act
- ◆ Institutions which must have offered teacher education courses on or after the establishment of the NCTE until the academic year 2017-2018

Retrospective permission to start new courses

- ◆ The Bill also seeks to grant retrospective permission to start a new course or training in teacher education to these institutions:
- ◆ Institutions notified by the central government
- ◆ Institutions funded by the central government or state/union territory government
- ◆ Institutions which have satisfied certain conditions required for the conduct of a new course or training in teacher education
- ◆ Institutions which must have offered teacher education courses on or after the establishment of the NCTE until the academic year 2017-2018.

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National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE) Act, 1993

- ◆ The NCTE Act, 1993 came into force on 1 July 1995 and is applicable throughout the country, except the State of Jammu and Kashmir.
- ◆ The Act establishes the National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE).
- ◆ The NCTE plans and co-ordinates the development of the teacher education system throughout the country.
- ◆ It also ensures the maintenance of norms and standards in the teacher education system.
- ◆ In order to achieve the objectives of the Act, separate provisions have been made in the Act for recognising teacher education courses and to lay down guidelines for compliance by recognised Institutions/Universities.

Source: The Hindu



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International Relations, India & the World and International Affairs

Ukrainian to end two-decade-old friendship treaty with Russia

Why in news?

- ☞ Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko on December 10, 2018 signed a bill ending the two-decade-old treaty on friendship, cooperation and partnership between Ukraine and Russia.
- ☞ The treaty will be terminated on April 1, 2019 amid rising tensions between the two countries.

Key Highlights

- ◆ The Ukrainian leader said that the non-extension of the deal is a part of the Ukrainian strategy of reorientation towards Europe.
- ◆ The legislation was approved by the Ukrainian parliament on December 6, 2018 with the support of 277 votes, which is far more than the required majority of 226.
- ◆ The Ukrainian President had signed a decree in September to enforce a decision of the National Security and Defence Council to terminate the friendship treaty with Russia.
- ◆ The friendship treaty between Ukraine and Russia was signed in 1997 and brought into effect on April 1, 1999.
- ◆ Under the agreement, both the nations had pledged to respect each other's borders and peacefully settle disputes.
- ◆ The agreement includes a clause, which states that it would automatically get extended for another ten years each time if neither of the parties decides to take the required actions to end it.

Background

Annexation of Crimea

- ☞ The relations between Russia and Ukraine have taken a downward spiral since early 2014 when Russia annexed the Crimean peninsula in Ukraine.
- ☞ Russia formally incorporated Crimea as two federal subjects of the Russian Federation with effect from March 2014.
- ☞ The annexation was condemned by Ukraine, the United Nations as well as other leading nations, who considered it to be a violation of the International law and the Russian-signed agreements safeguarding the territorial integrity of Ukraine including the treaty of friendship, Belavezha Accords and Helsinki Accords.
- ☞ It led to the other members of the then G8 suspending Russia from the group and then introducing the first round of sanctions against the country.

Seizing of Ukrainian Ships

- ✳ The relations between the two nations further worsened this year on November 25, when three Ukrainian ships attempting to sail through the Kerch Strait from the Black Sea to the Sea of Azov were seized by the Russian forces for allegedly violating the Russian border.
- ✳ The Ukrainian Navy said that it had informed Russia in advance of the passage, while Russia said it had received no such report and that the ships ignored multiple warnings by the Russian border guards. In wake of the tension, Ukraine imposed martial law in 10 regions mainly bordering Russia for 30 days starting from November 26.
- ✳ The Ukrainian President Poroshenko clarified that the imposition of the martial law does not mean a declaration of war, but a step toward strengthening Ukraine's defence.

Source: The Hindu

US, Israel withdraw from UNESCO, accusing the cultural body of 'anti-Israel bias'

Why in news?

- ☞ The United States and its ally Israel officially withdrew from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) with the close of the year 2018. The two nations had announced their intention to quit the international organisation in October 2017, accusing it of anti-Israel bias.

Key Facts

- ◆ The decision comes as the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation is voting to choose a new director, intense balloting overshadowed by the agency's funding troubles and divisions over Palestinian membership.
- ◆ This is the second such instance when the US has withdrawn itself from a major multilateral commitment after President Donald Trump took charge, first being its withdrawal from the 2015 Paris climate change agreement. It underlines Trump's 'America First' policies.

Impact of the Withdrawal

- ✳ The withdrawal of the United States, which is meant to provide a fifth of UNESCO's funding, is a major blow for the Paris-based organisation.
- ✳ However, the US had already withheld much of its funding for UNESCO since 2011, when the body admitted Palestine as a full member. The United States and Israel were among the 14 nations out of the 194 UNESCO members that voted against admitting Palestine into the body.
- ✳ According to estimates, the unpaid dues of the United States reportedly run up to over \$500 million, while Israel owes an estimated \$10m.

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US has pulled out of UNESCO before?

- ◆ This is not the first time that the US has walked out of the UN body. The nation previously withdrew itself from the 195-member organisation once before in 1984 under former president Ronald Reagan's administration, as it viewed the agency as mismanaged, corrupt and used to advance Soviet interests.
- ◆ It was under President George W Bush that the US returned to the body in 2002, but relations soured again in 2011 when Barack Obama pulled the plug on funding to the body after its members voted to admit Palestine as a full member.
- ◆ Despite cutting its funding to the agency the US had continued to cooperate with UNESCO since 2011 on programmes of interest to the Americans, such as combating the rise of extremism and perpetuating the memory of the Holocaust.
- ◆ US is against any move by UN bodies to recognise the Palestinian territories as a state, believing that this must await a negotiated Middle East peace deal.

Why does the US recognise Israel and not Palestine?

- ◆ Firstly, the United States has recognised Israel since it was established. The State of Palestine declared independence in 1988 during six years of uprising.
- ◆ Most of the areas claimed by the State of Palestine have been occupied by Israel since 1967. Hence, neither the US nor Israel recognise Palestine as a state because recognition of statehood also implies a recognition of the state's borders.
- ◆ While Israel defined its borders as suggested by UNSCOP and then by the results of a war with a cease-fire and a cease-fire line (green line) agreement, Palestine does not have a defined border.
- ◆ Without a negotiated settlement between Israel and the Palestinian governments determining the borders, recognition of Palestine would, in effect, negate recognition of Israel or reject Israel's legitimate control over its present borders.
- ◆ The US supported a peace agreement and therefore it doesn't and will not recognise the State of Palestine until there is a peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians.

UNESCO

- ◆ It is a specialised agency of the United Nations that has its headquarters in Paris. It was co-founded by the United States after World War II to help protect cultural and natural heritage around the world.
- ◆ It is the successor of the League of Nations' International Committee on Intellectual Cooperation.
- ◆ The organisation's main objective is to contribute to peace and security by promoting international collaboration through educational, scientific, and cultural reforms.
- ◆ It also aims to contribute to the eradication of poverty, sustainable development and intercultural dialogue through education, the sciences, culture, communication and information.
- ◆ It is best known for its World Heritage program, which designates cultural sites and aims to preserve traditions such as the ancient city of Palmyra in Syria and the Grand Canyon National Park.
- ◆ It also works to improve education for girls, promote understanding of the Holocaust's horrors, and to defend media freedom.
- ◆ In total, UNESCO has 195 member states and 10 associate members and it pursues its objectives through five major programs: education, natural sciences, social and human sciences, culture and communication and information.

Source: The Hindu

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G20 Summit 2018 concludes: India to host G20 Summit in 2022

Why in news?

- ☞ The G20 Summit 2018 concluded on December 1, 2018 in the city of Buenos Aires, Argentina. Nineteen leaders of the world's biggest economies and representatives of the European Union held a meeting together as part of the G20 summit.
- ☞ It was the 13th meeting of Group of Twenty (G20) and the first G20 summit to be hosted in South America. President Mauricio Macri of Argentina assumed the presidency of G20 on November 30, 2017 for one year during an official ceremony in Kirchner Cultural Centre in Buenos Aires, Argentina.

Theme

- ☞ The theme of the summit was '*Building Consensus for Fair and Sustainable Development*'.
- ☞ The leaders of the Group agreed to fix the world trading system, however, only 19 agreed to support the Paris accord on fighting climate change with the United States holding onto its withdrawal.

G20 Leaders pledge to fight climate change

- ◆ In a joint declaration, the leaders of G20 nations, except for US President Donald Trump, reaffirmed their commitment to fight climate change by upholding the Paris Agreement.
- ◆ The United States reiterated its decision to withdraw from the Paris Agreement, and affirmed its strong commitment to economic growth, energy access and security, while protecting the environment.
- ◆ In fight against the climate change, the G20 leaders expressed their strong support for the countries that are signatories to the 2015 Paris Agreement, to implement their commitments set out in their nationally determined contributions.
- ◆ They took note of UN scientists' call for a more ambitious target of reducing the warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels. Experts say with only a single degree Celsius of warming so far, the world has already seen deadly wildfires, heatwaves and hurricanes.
- ◆ The declaration states that the leaders look forward to "successful outcomes" of the COP24 Climate Change Conference, which began in Katowice, Poland on December 3.
- ◆ G20 leaders also recognise the importance of a multilateral approach to trade and importance of the reform of the World Trade Organisation, and renew their commitment to a rules-based international order.

India's representation at the Summit: Prime Minister Modi represented 9-point agenda; held talks with various leaders

- ◆ Prime Minister Narendra Modi represented India at the Summit and met US President Donald Trump, Chinese President Xi Jinping, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, Argentina President Mauricio Macri, Chilean President Sebastian Pinera and German Chancellor Angela Merkel, on the sidelines of the summit.
- ◆ PM Modi presented a 9-point agenda to G20 Member Nations, calling for strong and active cooperation to deal with fugitive economic offenders. The agenda was presented during the second session of the G20 Summit 2018 on International Trade, International Financial and Tax Systems.

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Highlights of the 9-point Agenda

- ◆ The agenda reads as, “*Cooperation in legal processes such as effective freezing of the proceeds of crime, early return of the offenders and efficient repatriation of the proceeds of crime should be enhanced and streamlined*”.
- ◆ “*Principles of United Nations Convention Against Corruption (UNCAC), United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime (UNOTC), especially related to ‘International Cooperation’ should be fully and effectively implemented*”.
- ◆ The Financial Action Task Force (FATF) was called upon to assign priority and focus to establish international cooperation that leads to timely and comprehensive exchange of information between the competent authorities and financial intelligence units.
- ◆ FATF will formulate a standard definition of fugitive economic offenders and should develop a set of commonly agreed and standardised procedures related to identification, extradition and judicial proceedings of fugitive economic offenders and to provide guidance and assistance to G-20 countries.
- ◆ It advocated setting up of a common platform for sharing experiences and best practices including successful cases of extradition, gaps in existing systems of extradition and legal assistance, etc.
- ◆ The G-20 forum should consider initiating work on locating properties of economic offenders who have a tax debt in the country of their residence for its recovery.
- ◆ Prime Minister Narendra Modi also stressed on cooperation among G20 countries on issues related to global economy, trade tensions, crude oil prices and terrorism. He highlighted the flagship programmes like the Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojna, MUDRA and Start-up India undertaken by his government to modernise the economy and promote inclusive growth.
- ◆ On the sidelines of the G-20 summit, the Prime Minister met Chinese President Xi Jinping and discussed how to strengthen bilateral ties between the two neighbours. He also met Prince Mohammed bin Salman of Saudi Arabia who offered to supply oil to India.

India, Japan & US held trilateral meeting on G20 sidelines

- ◆ Prime Minister Narendra Modi, US President Donald Trump and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe held their first trilateral meeting on the sidelines of the G-20 summit to discuss major issues of global and multilateral interests.
- ◆ PM Modi quoted that, “The ‘JAI’ (Japan, America, India) meeting is dedicated to democratic values...’JAI’ stands for victory (in Hindi).” The JAI meeting was a convergence of vision between the three nations.
- ◆ All three leaders agreed on free, open, inclusive and rules-based order to maintain peace and prosperity in Indo-Pacific region.

India, Russia & China held trilateral meeting on G20 sidelines

- ◆ Prime Minister Modi, Russian President Vladimir V Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping held a Trilateral Meeting in Buenos Aires.
- ◆ The three leaders exchanged views on expanding mutual cooperation in international forums, and to encourage greater interaction among the three countries. They agreed on the importance of reform and strengthening of multilateral institutions which have benefitted the world, including the United Nations, WTO, and well-established and new financial institutions.

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Informal BRICS Leaders' Meeting

- ◆ The leaders of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa met on November 30, 2018 for the annual Informal BRICS Leaders' Meeting on the margins of the G20 Summit in Buenos Aires, Argentina.
- ◆ They exchanged views on international political, security and global economic-financial issues, as well as challenges facing sustainable development.
- ◆ They reaffirmed full support for the rules-based multilateral trading system, as embodied in the World Trade Organisation (WTO), to ensure transparent, non-discriminatory, open and inclusive international trade.
- ◆ The leaders advocated for a strong Global Financial Safety Net with an adequately resourced, quota-based International Monetary Fund (IMF) at its centre. They extended their support to Brazil which is going to host 11th BRICS Summit in 2019.

India to host G20 Summit in 2022

- ◆ India will host the G20 Summit in 2022, when the country celebrates its 75th year of Independence. The announcement was made by Prime Minister Narendra Modi during the ongoing meet of the G20 Leaders in Argentina.
- ◆ As India's 75th Independence Day in 2022 is coinciding with the G20 Summit, the Prime Minister had requested Italy if it can host the summit in 2021 and allow India to host the G-20 countries for their annual summit in 2022. All the G20 leaders including Italy accepted the request.
- ◆ Japan is scheduled to host the G20 Summit in 2019, followed by Saudi Arabia in 2020.

G20 or the Group of Twenty

- ◆ Formed in 1999, the G20 is an international forum of the governments and central bank governors from 20 major economies.
- ◆ Collectively, the G20 economies account for around 85 percent of the Gross World Product (GWP), 80 percent of world trade.
- ◆ To tackle the problems or the address issues that plague the world, the heads of governments of the G20 nations periodically participate in summits. In addition to it, the group also hosts separate meetings of the finance ministers and foreign ministers.
- ◆ The G20 has no permanent staff of its own and its chairmanship rotates annually between nations divided into regional groupings.
- ◆ The first G20 Summit was held in Berlin in December 1999 and was hosted by the finance ministers of Germany and Canada.

Objective

- ◆ The Group was formed with an aim of studying, reviewing, and promoting high-level discussion of policy issues pertaining to the promotion of international financial stability.
- ◆ The forum aims to preempt balance of payments problems and turmoil on financial markets by improved coordination of monetary, fiscal, and financial policies.

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- ◆ The forum seeks to address issues that go beyond the responsibilities of any one organisation.
- ◆ The members of the G20 consist of 19 individual countries plus the European Union (EU).
- ◆ The 19 member countries of the forum are Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, France, Germany, India, Indonesia, Italy, Japan, Mexico, Russia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, South Korea, Turkey, United Kingdom and the United States.
- ◆ The European Union is represented by the European Commission and by the European Central Bank.

Source: The Hindu

India, Japan sign Exchange of Notes and Loan Agreements on Japan's assistance Loan to India

Why in news?

- ☞ India and Japan on December 21, 2018 signed Exchange of Notes and Loan Agreements on Japan's Official Development Assistance Loan to India.

These 3 projects are:

- (i) Chennai Metro Project (Phase 2) (I) for Japanese Yen (JPY) 75.519 billion
- (ii) Program for Japan-India Cooperative Actions towards Sustainable Development Goals in India for JPY 15.000 billion
- (iii) Project for Dairy Development for JPY 14.978 billion.

For these three projects, Japan has committed JICA Official Development Assistance of around Rs. 6668.46 crore jointly.

Loan Agreements

- ☞ Both the sides also signed Loan Agreements for Chennai Metro Project (Phase 2) (I) and Project for Dairy Development.

Chennai Metro Project (Phase 2)(I)

- ◆ The Chennai Metro Project (Phase 2)(I) aims to meet growing traffic demand by building Mass Rapid Transit System.
- ◆ It will mitigate worsening road traffic and traffic pollution.
- ◆ Eventually, it will lead to balanced regional development and enhancement of metropolitan atmospheric environmental condition in Chennai Metropolitan Area.

Japan-India Cooperative Actions (JICA)

- ◆ The Program for Japan-India Cooperative Actions towards Sustainable Development Goals in India aims to contribute to promotion of SDGs in India especially in social development by supporting the efforts by the Union Government to strengthen policy framework and implementation mechanism to help India achieve SDGs by 2030.

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Project for Dairy Development

- ◆ The Project for Dairy Development aims to increase sales of milk and dairy products by increasing farmers' access to organised market.
- ◆ It also aims to upgrade dairy processing facilities and marketing infrastructure and enhance the capacity of producers owned institutions, thereby contributing to increase in returns to milk producers in the project area.

Source: PIB

UN members adopt Global Compact on Refugees

Why in news?

- ☞ The UN member states on December 17, 2018 voted in favour of the Global Compact on Refugees, affirming international solidarity and cooperation for refugee protection and host community development.
- ☞ The Global Compact on refugees received 181 votes in favour in the 193-member assembly, days after a UN conference in Morocco adopted a similar compact on migration. The United States and Hungary were the only two nations that voted against the agreement, while 181 countries voted in favour and the Dominican Republic, Eritrea and Libya abstained.
- ☞ According to an official press release, the new global deal would provide more robust support to those fleeing their countries and for the countries that take them in.

Global Compact for Migration

- ◆ The global compact on refugees establishes the architecture for a stronger, more predictable and more equitable international response to large refugee situations.
- ◆ The agreement aims to guide the international community in supporting refugees and countries and communities hosting large numbers through the mobilisation of political will, broadening of the base of support and the activation of arrangements for more equitable and predictable burden and responsibility sharing.

Four key objectives of the Global Compact:

1. Ease pressures on countries that host large numbers of refugees;
2. Build self-reliance of refugees.
3. Expand access to third-country or refugees through resettlement and other pathways of admission.
4. Support conditions that enable refugees to return to their countries of origin.

Background

- ◆ In the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants, adopted in September 2016, the UN General Assembly decided to develop a global compact for safe, orderly and regular migration.
- ◆ The declaration gave birth to two compacts: one on refugees and one on migrants. The global migration pact, known as the 'Global Compact for Safe, orderly and Regular Migration', was formally adopted by 164 Governments at an international conference in Marrakech, Morocco on December 10 in a bid to support safe, orderly and regular migration.

- ◆ The global migration pact and global compact on refugees are both, voluntary in nature and not legally binding instruments.
- ◆ Although both are groups of people who live outside of their countries of origin, there are crucial distinctions between the terms ‘refugee’ and ‘migrant’.

Refugees Migrants

- ◆ Refugees are people who are forced to leave their country of origin under the fear of persecution, conflict, generalised violence or other circumstances that have seriously disturbed public order and, as a result, require international protection. Migrants are people who change their countries of usual residence, irrespective of the reason for migration or legal status. Migrants make a conscious choice to leave their country to seek a better life elsewhere.
- ◆ There are more than 25 million refugees worldwide and just 10 countries host around 60 percent of them. Most host countries are middle- or low-income ones and the compact seeks to more equitably distribute the burden-sharing and help make refugees more self-reliant.

Source: The Hindu

India, Maldives sign four MoUs, release Joint Statement

Why in news?

- ☞ India and Maldives released a Joint Statement on December 17, 2018 after warm and friendly talks between Maldives President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, during the former’s first official state visit to India from December 16-18, 2018.
- ☞ This is President Solih’s first visit abroad after assuming the office of President of the Republic of Maldives on November 17, 2018. The President of Maldives is accompanied by his wife First Lady Fazna Ahmed and a high-level delegation comprising of ministers and industry leaders.

The nations also agreed to work together to create institutional linkages and to establish a framework of cooperation in the following areas:

- ◆ Health cooperation issues particularly cancer treatment
- ◆ Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters
- ◆ Investment promotion
- ◆ Human Resource Development
- ◆ Tourism

Highlights of the Joint Statement

‘Neighbourhood-First’ Policy

- ◆ Prime Minister Modi reiterated India’s assurance of all possible support to the Maldives in realising its aspirations for socio-economic development, and strengthening of democratic and independent institutions.
- ◆ In this regard, the Prime Minister announced the provision of financial assistance up to US\$ 1.4 billion in the form of budgetary support, currency swap and concessional lines of credit to fulfil the socio-economic development programmes of the Maldives.

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India-First Policy

- ◆ President Solih reaffirmed his government’s “India-First Policy”, and commitment to working together closely with India.
- ◆ He appreciated the generous assistance provided by the Indian Government to the Maldives and identified various areas for developmental cooperation, including private sector involvement in development of housing and infrastructure, water and sewerage systems in the outlying islands, healthcare, education and tourism.

Connectivity

- ✧ The two leaders emphasised the need to improve connectivity between the two countries through the establishment of enabling infrastructure that would promote the exchange of goods and services, information, ideas, culture and people.

Visa Facilitation Agreement

- ◆ Recognising the importance of facilitating people-to-people exchanges and travel, the two leaders welcomed the new agreement on Visa Facilitation.
- ◆ Prime Minister Modi noted that the new agreement will address the common concerns and ensure that people-to-people contacts are enhanced. The Maldives is one of the very few countries with which India has a visa-free arrangement.
- ◆ President Solih observed that the agreement will facilitate many Maldivians who send their children to school in India, to be able to accompany them. The agreement will also facilitate easier visa arrangements for Maldivian citizens and their families, to come to India for medical treatment.
- ◆ Both leaders emphasised the need to ensure seamless movement of people between both countries.

Indo-Pacific Region

- ◆ The two leaders agreed on the importance of maintaining peace and security in the Indian Ocean Region. They reiterated their assurance of being mindful of each other’s concerns and aspirations for the stability of the region and not allowing their respective territories to be used for any activity inimical to the other.
- ◆ The two leaders agreed to strengthen cooperation to enhance maritime security in the Indian Ocean Region through coordinated patrolling and aerial surveillance, exchange of information and capacity building.

Terrorism

- ◆ The two leaders reaffirmed their unwavering commitment and support for increased cooperation in combating terrorism in all its forms and manifestations both within the region and elsewhere.
- ◆ They also agreed to enhance bilateral cooperation on issues of common concern such as piracy, terrorism, organised crime, drugs and human trafficking. They also agreed to intensify cooperation in the areas of training and capacity building of Maldives Police Service and Maldives National Defence Force.

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Bilateral Trade

- ◆ The two leaders reviewed efforts to promote bilateral trade and investment ties between the two countries. The Indian Prime Minister welcomed the expanding opportunities for Indian companies to invest in the Maldives in different sectors for the mutual benefit of both countries.
- ◆ The two leaders also agreed to promote closer economic cooperation in sectors such as fisheries development, tourism, transportation, connectivity, health, education, information technology, new and renewable energy and communications.

Global Issues

- ◆ The two leaders reiterated the importance of an effective multilateral system as a key factor in tackling global challenges. They recognised the need to pursue reform of the main UN bodies, including the revitalisation of the UN General Assembly and expansion of the UN Security Council.
- ◆ The Maldives President reiterated his country's support for India's candidature for permanent membership of an expanded and reformed UN Security Council. The Maldives also reiterated support for India's candidature for a non-permanent seat for the year 2020-21.
- ◆ India welcomed Maldives' decision to re-join the Commonwealth. The Prime Minister also welcomed the Maldives as the newest member of the Indian Ocean Rim Association.

Climate Change

- ◆ The two leaders agreed on the importance of combating the impacts of climate change, especially detrimental to developing countries and Small Island Developing States and the need to work towards strengthening the global response to climate change, through the UNFCCC and the Paris Agreement.

Economy

- ✧ The two leaders underscored the need for strengthening and reforming of multilateral financial institutions and enhancing the voice and participation of developing countries in international economic decision-making.

Conclusion

- ✧ The talks concluded with the Maldives President extending his cordial invitation to the President and Prime Minister of India to make a state visit to the Maldives, which Prime Minister Modi accepted.
- ✧ In an important gesture demonstrating the close ties between India and Maldives, President Solih was staying at the Rashtrapati Bhawan as a special guest of the Indian President during his stay in India.

Source: PIB

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Qatar to withdraw from OPEC in January 2019

Why in news?

Qatar's Energy Minister Saad Sherida al-Kaabi on December 3, 2018 announced that the country will withdraw from the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) in January 2019.

Key facts

- ◆ This decision to quit OPEC was confirmed by Qatar Petroleum, the state oil company.
- ◆ The move came just days ahead of the OPEC meeting that is scheduled to take place on December 6, 2018.
- ◆ Qatar is the first Gulf country to leave the OPEC, the bloc of 15 oil-producing countries that account for a significant percentage of the world's oil production.
- ◆ Qatar joined OPEC in 1961, one year after its establishment.

Qatar is world's biggest supplier of LNG: The reason behind Qatar's withdrawal from OPEC

- ◆ Qatar's pure strength is the production of Gas. Qatar is the world's biggest supplier of Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG), producing almost 30 percent of the world total.
- ◆ Qatar also shares the world's largest known natural gas field, the 'North Field' with Iran.
- ◆ The country plans to increase the supply of natural gas by developing a future strategy based on growth and expansion, both in its activities at home and abroad.
- ◆ It requires focused efforts, commitment and dedication to maintain and strengthen Qatar's position as the leading natural gas producer.
- ◆ In September 2018, Qatar announced to increase its production of natural gas by adding a fourth production line to raise capacity from the North Field to 110 million tonnes a year.
- ◆ Most of Qatar's annual LNG supplies, almost 80 million tonnes, are shipped in tankers to different countries, including the UAE, one of the countries imposing the blockade on Qatar.

Impact on oil prices

- ◆ Of OPEC's 15 members, Qatar ranks 11th in oil production and is the fifth smallest producer after Ecuador, Congo, Gabon and Equatorial Guinea.
- ◆ Qatar's withdrawal from the bloc would have limited impact on oil prices and markets as the major countries are maintaining the demand and supply stability.

Will the withdrawal intensify Qatar's isolation?

- ◆ The move may intensify Qatar's isolation in its crisis with its Arab neighbors. In June 2017, OPEC members Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, Yemen, Libya and Egypt had cut trade and transport ties with Qatar, putting diplomatic blockade on Qatar and accusing the country of supporting terrorism. However, Qatar denied the claims.
- ◆ The cut off included withdrawal of ambassadors and imposing trade and travel bans. The Qatari channel Al Jazeera also faced a lot of flak for its Islamic bent and critical reporting of the regressive regimes in the region.

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- ◆ Besides this, the nation was also accused of maintaining good relations with Iran and supporting the Muslim Brotherhood.

Qatar's removal from GCC

- ◆ There is a Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), comprising Arab States of the Gulf, which meets ahead of OPEC meetings to discuss the policies. Qatar too had a voice in the council. However, the country was shut out of the council and it is hardly consulted now.

Impact of Qatar's withdrawal on India

- ◆ Qatar is India's major LNG supplier and a major Foreign Portfolio Investor (FPI) in Indian equities markets. It has committed over Rs 40000 crore to the Bharatmala road projects in India and is open to further investments.
- ◆ In this case, what is good for Qatar is good for India. Once Qatar pulls itself out of the OPEC, it will have freedom to decide and fix the prices of LNG without any pressure of the Gulf nations. This would directly benefit India.
- ◆ Petronet LNG is India's biggest gas importer. It buys 8.5 million tonnes of Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) every year from Qatar under a long-term contract, accounting for 44 percent of India's LNG imports.

Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC)

- ◆ OPEC was founded in 1960 by Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Venezuela, five major oil-producing countries.
- ◆ OPEC is an organisation of 15 oil-exporting countries and has its headquarters in Vienna.
- ◆ It hosts regular meetings among the oil ministers of its member nations.
- ◆ Mohammed Barkindo of Nigeria is currently the Secretary-General of the OPEC.

Source: The Hindu

Five nations assume charge as Non-Permanent Members of UN Security Council

Why in news?

- ◆ Five nations, namely, Belgium, Dominican Republic, Germany, Indonesia and South Africa assumed the charge as the Non-Permanent Members of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC).

Key Facts

- ◆ These five countries will hold a two-year term in the Council with effect from January 1, 2019. This will be the Dominican Republic's first time on the Security Council. The other four countries have previously served on the body.
- ◆ They will fill the seats vacated by Bolivia, Ethiopia, Kazakhstan, the Netherlands and Sweden on December 31, 2018, after serving two-year term on the 15-member Security Council. The Netherlands occupied the seat during the course of 2017 in an unusual arrangement, sharing the seat with Italy.
- ◆ Other 5 non-permanent members

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- ◆ The other five non-permanent members in the UN Council are Cote d'Ivoire, Equatorial Guinea, Kuwait, Peru and Poland.

United Nations Security Council (UNSC)

- ◆ Under the UN Charter, the UNSC has primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security.
- ◆ The council is the only UN body that makes decisions and has the power to impose sanctions and authorize the use of force.
- ◆ The 15-member Security Council has five Permanent Members - China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States, and 10 non-permanent members.
- ◆ Each member of the Security Council has one vote.

Election of non-permanent members of UNSC

- ◆ The General Assembly elects the non-permanent members of the Security Council as stipulated by Chapter V, Article 23 of the Charter of the United Nations.
- ◆ The non-permanent seats are allocated according to a rotation pattern set by the Assembly back in 1963, to ensure a proportionate representation over time from the different parts of the world.
- ◆ The ten non-permanent seats are distributed on a regional basis:
 - ◆ Five for African and Asian countries
 - ◆ One for Eastern European countries
 - ◆ Two for Latin American and Caribbean countries
 - ◆ Two for Western European and other countries
- ◆ Every year, the General Assembly elects five non-permanent members.
- ◆ The non-permanent members are elected for two-year term.
- ◆ To be elected to the UN Security Council, a country must win support from two thirds of the UN General Assembly members, or 129 votes.

Source: The Hindu

Sri Lankan President reinstates ousted PM Ranil Wickremesinghe

Why in news?

- ☞ Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena on December 16, 2018 reappointed Ranil Wickremesinghe as the Prime Minister of the country, after suddenly dismissing him from the post nearly two months ago.
- ☞ The President clarified that his move to terminate the Prime Minister was done in “good faith” and the reinstatement was done to uphold parliamentary traditions and democracy. A new cabinet comprising 30 lawmakers is also expected to be sworn in soon.

Highlights

- ◆ October 26: President Maithripala Sirisena announced the dismissal of Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe through a live television address.

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- ◆ The President announced that Ranil Wickremesinghe, with whom he had governed in a fragile coalition since 2015, had been dismissed and in his place, he had decided to appoint former president Mahinda Rajapaksa, the same man he had joined forces with Wickremesinghe in 2015 to defeat.
- ◆ Despite warnings of a possible breakout of extreme violence, President Sirisena suspended Parliament to give Rajapaksa time to muster enough support to survive any no-confidence vote.
- ◆ October 29: 12 Cabinet ministers including one state minister and deputy minister were sworn in.
- ◆ The decision created a wedge in the country's politics with parliamentarians showing more favour towards Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, who termed the sacking as illegal and stood his ground despite attempts to replace him with Rajapaksa.
- ◆ November 9: The President dissolved the Parliament and called for fresh elections on January 5 amid a deepening political crisis.
- ◆ December 13: Sri Lanka's Supreme Court ruled unanimously that President Maithripala Sirisena's order to dissolve Parliament and hold new elections was unconstitutional.
- ◆ The seven-member judge bench in a unanimous verdict observed that it was illegal to dissolve Parliament before its four and half year term limit.
- ◆ December 15: Following the top court's verdict, Rajapaksa gave his resignation, paving the way for the return of 69-year-old Wickremesinghe.

Background

- ◆ Sri Lanka, one of Asia's oldest democracies plunged into a huge constitutional crisis when Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe was suddenly ousted from his post by President Maithripala Sirisena and replaced with Mahinda Rajapaksa.
- ◆ The entire development had left Sri Lanka with two Prime Ministers, as even though Rajapaksa took control of the prime ministerial office and started naming a new cabinet, Wickremesinghe continued to occupy his official residence.
- ◆ It also created a huge divide among the parliamentarians, as the move countered the promises made by President to investigate Rajapaksa-led government's actions during the country's long civil war.
- ◆ Rajapaksa oversaw the end of the 27-year Sri Lankan civil war in 2009 through a series of brutal military offensives in which up to 40,000 Tamil civilians died.
- ◆ During his 10 years in power, Rajapaksa's government was accused of authoritarianism, corruption and human rights abuses, especially against the country's Tamil minority.

- ◆ His tenure was also marred by accusations his security forces were forcibly disappearing, torturing and murdering opposition politicians, aid workers, activists, journalists and dissidents.

Source: The Hindu

UAE reopens its embassy in Syria, after 6 years of suspension

Why in news?

- ☞ The United Arab Emirates on December 27, 2018 resumed its diplomatic services at its embassy in Damascus in Syria after six years of suspension. The move signals a thaw in the relations between the two countries, as also with the Arab world.

Key Facts

- ◆ The Charge d’ Affaires of the UAE Embassy began discharging his duty on December 27, 2018. The decision follows a careful reading of the latest developments and a conviction that the next phase requires Arab involvement to protect Syria’s sovereignty and territorial integrity.
- ◆ Following suit is Bahrain, as the nation announced on December 28, 2018 that it will resume operations at its embassy in Syria, reflecting new efforts by Gulf Arab states to improve relations with President Bashar Assad as the civil war cools down.
- ◆ The UAE had closed its Embassy in the early years of the Syrian conflict.

Significance

- ◆ The UAE Ministry said in a statement that the move underscores the UAE government’s keenness to restore relations between the two brotherly countries to their normal course.
- ◆ The resumption of relations will enhance and implement the Arab role in supporting the independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic. It will also prevent the dangers of regional interference in Syrian affairs.

Why did UAE close its embassy in Syria?

- ☞ Till almost a decade back, both Syria and UAE shared a friendly bilateral relationship. In fact, the leaders of the two nations, Syria’s Bashar Al Assad and UAE President Sheikh Khalifa shared a highly cordial relationship.
- ☞ Bashar Al Assad also shared a warm relation with Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed, the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi and Deputy Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces.
- ☞ Around the time, trade between the two countries was valued at about \$254 million and was only expected to increase.

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- ☞ However, the political landscape across the Middle East changed with the beginning of Syrian uprising in 2011.
- ☞ The UAE was among the several countries that chose to recall their ambassadors and close their embassies in Damascus, as the crisis worsened and security deteriorated in Syria.

Syrian Civil War

- ◆ In March 2011, pro-democracy demonstrations grown out of discontent with the Assad government erupted in the southern Syrian city of Deraa, inspired by the “Arab Spring” in neighbouring countries.
- ◆ The Syrian Government responded aggressively and the army of President Bashar al-Assad opened fire on the protestors, killing four people.
- ◆ At first, the protesters just wanted democracy and greater freedom but after the government forces opened fire on peaceful demonstrations, people began demanding the resignation of President Bashar al-Assad.
- ◆ However, Assad only hardened his resolve and by July 2011 the Syrian uprising had developed into a full-fledged civil war.
- ◆ Currently, it is a multi-sided armed conflict being fought between the Ba’athist Syrian Arab Republic led by President Bashar al-Assad, along with domestic and foreign allies and various domestic and foreign forces opposing both the government and each other in varying combinations.
- ◆ The armed conflict has grown so huge that a number of countries in the region and beyond are involved either directly or providing support to one or another faction.
- ◆ While Iran and Russia have shown support to the Syrian Armed Forces led by President Bashar al-Assad, the US-led international coalition has targeted the Syrian government and pro-government forces.
- ◆ Turkey also became deeply involved since 2016, actively supporting the Syrian opposition and occupying large swaths of north-western Syria.
- ◆ The international organisations have accused the Syrian government, ISIL, opposition rebel groups, and the US-led coalition of severe human rights violations and massacres.
- ◆ The armed conflict has caused a major refugee crisis, with many Syrians including women and young children attempting to flee the country through land and water routes and many dying as a result.

UAE’s relations with Syria during civil war

- ◆ Despite the outbreak of the war, Syrian consular services continued to operate in the UAE, indicating relations were not completely cut off.
- ◆ UAE also showed its dedication to support the Syrians and their aspirations to return security and stability to their country. However, the nation made it clear that it did not support Assad’s government.
- ◆ Despite this, the UAE remained steadfast in its humanitarian support for the Syrian people. Since 2012, it has provided more than \$530m in humanitarian aid and development assistance.

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- ◆ In 2018, the UAE’s political perspective on Syria began to change and the nation’s Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Dr. Anwar Gargash, said that it was no longer possible to stabilise the country with a military response.
- ◆ While many countries had previously stated that there would be no end to the Syrian conflict if Al Assad remained in power, reopening the UAE embassy in Damascus, with more countries expected to follow suit, shows that governments have accepted that the Assad regime is here to stay.

Background

- ◆ At the beginning of the civil war, Gulf Arab states like Saudi Arabia and Qatar had backed the Sunni fighters battling Assad’s forces.
- ◆ Syria was expelled from the 22-member Arab League in 2011 and the Arab countries sanctioned the nation and condemned its use of military force against civilians.
- ◆ In October 2018, President Assad had revealed that Syria had reached a “major understanding” with Arab states after years of hostility. He had said that Arab and Western delegations had begun visiting Syria to prepare for the reopening of diplomatic and other missions.
- ◆ Recently, US President Donald Trump announced his intention of withdrawing the US troops from Syria. Trump also cut funding to the nation.
- ◆ However, Saudi Arabia has come forward and pledged around \$100 million to help in the reconstruction of the war-torn nation.

Source: The Hindu

Palestine to apply for full UN membership in January 2019

Why in news?

- ☞ Palestinian Foreign Minister Riyad al-Malki declared on December 26, 2018 that Palestine would initiate an application to gain full state membership at the United Nations in January 2019.

Key Facts

- ◆ The application to upgrade Palestine’s status from an observer state to a full-member state will be filed to the UN Security Council (UNSC) during the state Foreign Minister’s visit to New York next month. The decision has been taken upon Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas’ instructions.
- ◆ To secure full state membership, the Palestinians would require the support from at least nine out of the UNSC’s 15 member states.
- ◆ Besides this, the Palestinian Minister said that he would demand the UNSC implementation of Resolution 2334 and ask the International Criminal Court (ICC) to open an official inquiry into Israeli settlement construction.
- ◆ According to UNSC Resolution 2334, the UN Secretary General should present the Security Council with a progress report every three months on Israeli settlement activities in the occupied Palestinian territories.

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- ◆ Palestine has been recognised by the UN as a non-member observer state since 2012.

Background

- ◆ The Palestine Liberation Organisation was granted observer status as a "non-member entity" in November 1974.
- ◆ Acknowledgement by a vote of 138 to 9, with 41 abstentions.

United Nations

- ◆ The United Nations is an intergovernmental organisation that was established as the successor of the largely ineffective League of Nations on October 24, 1945.
- ◆ The organisation is the largest, most familiar, most internationally represented and most powerful intergovernmental organisation in the world. It is financed by assessed and voluntary contributions from its member states.
- ◆ Its main task is to maintain international peace and security, develop friendly relations among nations, achieve international co-operation and be a centre for harmonising the actions of nations.
- ◆ Other objectives of the organisation include protecting human rights, delivering humanitarian aid, promoting sustainable development and upholding the international law.

How does a state become a full member of the UN?

- ◆ The membership in the United Nations is open to all peace-loving states which accept the obligations contained in the present Charter and, in the judgement of the organisation, are able and willing to carry out these obligations.
- ◆ The admission of any state to membership in the United Nations is effected by a decision of the General Assembly upon the recommendation of the Security Council.
- ◆ A recommendation for admission from the Security Council requires affirmative votes from at least nine of the council's fifteen members, with none of the five permanent members using their veto power.
- ◆ The Security Council's recommendation must then be approved in the General Assembly by a two-thirds majority vote.

Source: Indian Express

India, ADB sign USD 60 Million loan agreement to reduce floods in Assam

Why in news?

- ☞ India and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) on December 13, 2018 signed a USD 60 million loan agreement to reduce floods and the riverbank erosion in Assam.
- ☞ This Tranche 2 loan is part of the USD 120 million multi-tranche financing facility (MFF) of the ADB for the Assam Integrated Flood and Riverbank Erosion Risk Management Investment Program. The program was approved by the ADB Board in October 2010.

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Objective

- ✿ The loan agreement aims to continue financing riverbank protection works, renovation of flood embankments, and community-based flood risk management activities in critically flood-prone areas along the Brahmaputra River in Assam.

Highlights of Loan agreement

- ◆ The loan will have a 20-year term, including a grace period of 5 years.
- ◆ It includes an Annual Interest Rate determined in accordance with ADB's lending facility based on the London Interbank Offered Rate (LIBOR), and a commitment charge of 0.15 percent per year.

Projects funded under this Tranche 2 facility

- ◆ It will fund a combination of structural and nonstructural measures in the three subproject areas of Palasbari-Gumi, Kaziranga, and Dibrugarh along the Brahmaputra River.
- ◆ It includes 20 km of riverbank protection works and upgrading of 13 km of flood embankments.
- ◆ The non-structural measures will cover community involvement and community-based flood risk management activities through establishing and training disaster management committees.
- ◆ It will continue to support the institutional capacity development of the autonomous bodies, namely, Flood and River Erosion Management Agency of Assam (FREMAA), and Assam State Disaster Management Authority (ASDMA), as the executing and implementing agencies for this Project.

Assam Integrated Flood and Riverbank Erosion Risk Management Investment Program

- ✿ The Program is aimed at increasing the reliability and effectiveness of flood and riverbank erosion risk management systems in flood-prone areas of Assam.
- ✿ It aims to strengthen the disaster preparedness of the communities, and developing institutional capacity and knowledge base for flood forecasting.

Source: PIB

India, Saudi Arabia sign bilateral annual Haj 2019 agreement

Why in news?

- ☞ India and Saudi Arabia on December 13, 2018 signed the bilateral annual Haj 2019 agreement at Jeddah. The agreement was signed by the Union Minister for Minority Affairs, Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi and Haj and Umrah Minister of Saudi Arabia, Dr. Mohammad Saleh bin Taher Benten.
- ☞ The agreement is a part of strengthened bilateral relations of the two countries. Both India and Saudi Arabia share strong cultural, historical, economic and political relations.

Highlights

- ◆ A large number of Muslim women are likely to go to Haj 2019 without "Mehram" (male companion). More than 2100 women have already applied.
- ◆ The Indian Government had lifted the ban on women going to Haj without a male companion for the first time in 2017.

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- ◆ As a result of the ban, around 1300 Indian Muslim women had gone to Haj in 2018 without any male companion. They had been exempted from the lottery system.
- ◆ To assist these women Haj pilgrims, for the first time, more than 100 women Haj Coordinators and Haj Assistants had been deployed in 2018.
- ◆ Currently, the Haj Committee of India has received more than 2 lakh 47 thousand applications for Haj 2019, among which 47 per cent are from women.
- ◆ For the first time after Independence, a record number of Muslims (1,75,025) from India performed Haj 2018 and that too without any subsidy and among them 48 per cent were women.
- ◆ The Indian Government has requested the Saudi Arabian Government to increase India's annual Haj quota for Haj 2019.

Other Details

- ◆ The process of making Haj applications and other services completely online and digital has helped to make the entire Haj process transparent and pro-pilgrims. For Haj 2019, about 1, 36,000 online applications have been received.
- ◆ The concerned agencies of both India and Saudi Arabia had completed preparations for Haj 2018 about two months before schedule to ensure smooth Haj pilgrimage.
- ◆ This time, preparations for Haj 2019 started 3 months before schedule to make the process more comfortable for the pilgrims.

Source: PIB

Japan announces withdrawal from IWC to resume commercial whaling

Why in news?

- ☞ Japan on December 26, 2018 announced its decision to withdraw from the International Whaling Commission and said that it will resume commercial whaling from July 2019. The withdrawal will come into effect by June 30, 2019.
- ☞ The announcement comes after Japan failed in a bid earlier this year to convince the IWC to allow it to resume commercial whaling. "We have decided to withdraw from the International Whaling Commission in order to resume commercial whaling in July next year," said a top Japanese government spokesman.

Key Highlights

- ◆ The withdrawal from the International Whaling Commission means that the Japanese whalers will be able to resume hunting of minke and other whales, which are currently protected by the IWC, in the Japanese coastal waters.
- ◆ Japan clarified that commercial whaling will be limited to Japan's territorial waters and exclusive economic zones and not in the Antarctic waters or in the southern hemisphere.
- ◆ The withdrawal, however, means that Japan will not be able to continue the scientific research hunts in the Antarctic that it has been exceptionally allowed as an IWC member under the Antarctic Treaty.
- ◆ The withdrawal also means that Japan will join Iceland and Norway in openly defying the IWC's ban on commercial whale hunting.

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- ◆ Japan would officially inform the IWC of its decision by the end of 2018, which will mean the withdrawal, comes into effect by June 30.

Background

- ◆ Japan has repeatedly threatened to pull out of IWC and has been regularly criticised for catching hundreds of whales a year for “scientific research” despite being a signatory to a moratorium on hunting the animals.
- ◆ Japan argues that whaling is an important part of Japan’s traditions and the withdrawal would allow fishermen to pass the country’s rich whaling culture onto the next generation. Japan has hunted whales for centuries and the meat was a key source of protein in the immediate post-World War II years when the country was desperately poor.
- ◆ However, the consumption of the meat declined significantly in recent decades, with much of the population saying they rarely or never eat whale meat.
- ◆ In September, Japan sought to convince the IWC to allow it to resume commercial whaling, arguing that stocks of certain species were now sufficient to support renewed hunting. But the bid failed, with strong opposition from anti-whaling nations led by Australia, the European Union and the United States.

About IWC

- ◆ The International Whaling Commission was established in December 1946 to conserve and manage the world’s whale and cetacean population and thus make possible the orderly development of the whaling industry”.
- ◆ In 1982 the IWC adopted a moratorium on commercial whaling. Currently, Japan, Russia and a number of other nations oppose this moratorium.
- ◆ The IWC allows non-zero whaling quotas for aboriginal subsistence and also member nations may issue ‘Scientific Permits’ to their citizens. Japan has issued such permits since 1986.
- ◆ Iceland and Norway object to the moratorium and continue to hunt whales commercially without relying on science as an excuse.
- ◆ The main duty of the IWC is to keep under review and revise as necessary the measures laid down in the Schedule to the Convention, which governs the conduct of whaling throughout the world.
- ◆ In September 2018, In September 2018, the majority of member nations at the IWC annual symposium in Brazil approved a non-binding resolution stating that commercial whaling was no longer a valid economic activity, or needed for scientific research.
- ◆ The IWC members agreed to safeguard the marine mammals in perpetuity and allow the recovery of all whale populations to pre-industrial whaling levels.

Source: The Hindu

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UN launches new framework to combat international terrorism

Why in news?

- ☞ The UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres on December 6, 2018 launched a new framework titled '*UN Global Counter-Terrorism Coordination Compact*' to combat international terrorism and coordinate efforts across the peace and security, humanitarian, human rights and sustainable development sectors.
- ☞ The framework is an agreement between the UN chief, 36 organisational entities, the International Criminal Police Organisation (INTERPOL) and the World Customs Organisation to better serve the needs of member states when it comes to tackling the scourge of international terrorism.

UN Framework: Key Highlights

- ◆ The Coordination Committee of the United Nations will oversee the implementation of the framework and monitor its implementation. The committee is chaired by UN Under-Secretary-General for counter-terrorism, Vladimir Voronkov.
- ◆ During the first meeting of the framework's Coordination Committee, the committee also discussed strategic priorities for the next two years, based on the sixth review of the Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, relevant Security Council resolutions and UN Counter-Terrorism Executive Directorate (CTED) assessments as well as the requests from member states for technical help.
- ◆ The committee also looked into the organisation of work and ways to improve the delivery of an 'All-of-UN' capacity-building support to the member states.
- ◆ The UN Global Counter-Terrorism Coordination Compact Task Force will replace the Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force, which was established in 2005 to strengthen UN system-wide coordination and coherence of counter-terrorism efforts.

Why do we need the framework?

- ☞ The new framework has been introduced keeping in mind the need to ensure full respect for international human rights standards and rule of law in countering terrorism.
- ☞ Speaking on the same, the UN Chief stated that the policies that limit human rights only end up alienating the very communities they aim to protect, which normally have every interest in fighting extremism and as a result, such policies can effectively drive people into the hands of terrorists and undermine prevention efforts.

Global terrorism threat

- ✱ Despite recent successes against the ISIS and its affiliates, the threat posed by returning and relocating fighters, as well as from individuals inspired by them, remains high and has a global reach.
- ✱ The 2018 Global Terrorism Index released by the Institute for Economic and Peace, indicates that despite a 27 per cent fall in the number of deaths from acts of terrorism worldwide, the impact of terrorism remains widespread, with 67 countries experiencing deadly attacks, which is the second highest recorded number of countries in the past twenty years.
- ✱ While terrorist organisations like Da'esh and Al Qaida continue their terror threats and activities, neo-Nazi and far-right groups have begun using the Internet as a platform to mobilise support across borders through hate speech and exploit economic anxieties, radicalize, recruit and carry out attacks against nations.

Source: Daily Hunt



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Indian Economy and Economic Development

Strategy for New India @75

Why in news?

- ☞ The NITI Aayog on December 19, 2018 released 'Strategy for New India @75', its comprehensive national Strategy for New India which defines clear objectives for 2022-23.
- ☞ The Strategy was released by the Union Finance Minister Arun Jaitley.
- ☞ It is a detailed account across 41 crucial areas that recognises the progress already made, identifies binding constraints, and suggests the way forward for achieving the objectives.
- ☞ The forty-one chapters in the document have been merged under four sections - Drivers, Infrastructure, Inclusion and Governance.

Objective

- ✿ The Strategy document aims to further improve the policy environment in which private investors and other stakeholders can contribute their fullest towards achieving the goals set out for New India 2022 and propel India towards a USD 5 trillion economy by 2030.

Highlights

- ◆ With 'Strategy for New India @ 752', Niti Aayog aims to accelerate growth to 9-10 percent and make India a USD 5 trillion economy by 2030.
- ◆ The development strategy includes doubling of farmers' income, boosting 'Make in India', upgrading the science, technology and innovation ecosystem, and promoting sectors like fintech and tourism.
- ◆ NITI Aayog prescribed reducing upper age limit to join the civil services to 27 years from the present 30 years for General Category candidates by 2022-23 in a phased manner and also to have one integrated exam for all civil services.
- ◆ It calls for successfully implementing the Ayushman Bharat programme including the establishment of 150000 health and wellness centres and rolling out Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana.
- ◆ The document outlines the need for creating agripreneurs, which implies creation of agro-processing industry at a much faster pace to enhance farmer participation through agro processing.
- ◆ It calls for participation of Private Sector in Indian Railways. From ownership of locomotives and rolling stocks to modernising stations, improvement of the railways hinges on private participation.
- ◆ It boasts of expanding the scope of Swachh Bharat Mission to cover initiatives for landfills, plastic waste and municipal waste and generating wealth from waste.
- ◆ The government will have to ease the tax compliance burden and eliminate direct interface between taxpayers and tax officials using technology.
- ◆ It suggests better compensation to banking correspondents, facilitating paperless banking and introducing financial literacy chapters in school curricula to spur financial inclusion.
- ◆ It recommends identification of the poorest among the minority communities through the socio-economic caste census data for proper targeting of various schemes.
- ◆ Key recommendations stated under four sections

Recommendations stated under Drivers

- ◆ Steadily accelerate the economy to achieve a GDP growth rate of about 8 percent on average during 2018-23. This will raise the economy's size in real terms from USD 2.7trillion in 2017-18 to nearly USD 4 trillion by 2022-23.
- ◆ In agriculture, shift the emphasis to converting farmers to 'agripreneurs' by further expanding e-National Agriculture Markets and replacing the Agricultural Produce Marketing Committee Act with the Agricultural Produce and Livestock Marketing Act.
- ◆ Give a strong push to 'Zero Budget Natural Farming' techniques that reduce costs, improve land quality and increase farmers' incomes.
- ◆ To ensure maximum employment creation, complete codification of labor laws; and upscale and expand apprenticeships.
- ◆ Launch a mission "Explore in India" by revamping minerals exploration and licensing policy.

Recommendations under Infrastructure

- ◆ Expedite the establishment of the Rail Development Authority (RDA), which is already approved.
- ◆ Double the share of freight transported by coastal shipping and inland waterways.
- ◆ Develop an IT-enabled platform for integrating different modes of transport and promoting multi-modal and digitised mobility.
- ◆ Deliver all government services at the state, district, and gram panchayat level digitally by 2022-23. With the completion of the Bharat Net programme in 2019, all 2.5 lakh gram panchayats will be digitally connected.
- ◆ The three themes in this section revolve around the dimensions of health, education and mainstreaming of traditionally marginalised sections of the population.

Recommendations under Inclusion

- ◆ Successfully implementing the Ayushman Bharat programme including the establishment of 150000 health and wellness centres across the country, and rolling out the Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Abhiyaan (PM-JAY).
- ◆ Create a focal point for public health at the central level with state counterparts.
- ◆ Upgrade the quality of the school education system and skills, including the creation of a new innovation ecosystem at the ground level by establishing at least 10,000 Atal Tinkering Labs by 2020.
- ◆ Conceptualise an electronic national educational registry for tracking each child's learning outcomes.
- ◆ As already done in rural areas, give a huge push to affordable housing in urban areas to improve workers' living conditions.

Recommendations under Governance

- ◆ Implement the recommendations of the Second Administrative Reforms Commission as a prelude to appointing a successor for designing reforms in the changing context of emerging technologies.
- ◆ Set up a new autonomous body 'Arbitration Council of India' to grade arbitral institutions and accredit arbitrators to make the arbitration process cost effective and speedy.
- ◆ Address the backlog of pending cases.
- ◆ Expand the scope of Swachh Bharat Mission to cover initiatives for landfills, plastic waste and municipal waste and generating wealth from waste.

Source: The Hindu

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Union Government to set up panel to look into tax issues faced by start-ups

Why in news?

- ☞ The Union Government has decided to set up an expert committee to look into all the taxation issues being faced by startups and angel investors. The information was shared by the Central Board of Direct Taxes (CBDT) on December 20, 2018.
- ☞ The decision was taken at a high-level meeting of Department of Revenue Secretary Ajay Bhushan Pandey, Department of Industrial Policy and Promotion (DIPP) Secretary Ramesh Abhishek, and Central Board of Direct Taxes (CBDT) Chairman Sushil Chandra.

Objective

- ✿ The key objective behind the move is the promotion of startups in India. The CBDT recognises that the Startups are going to bring lot of innovation to the country and therefore, have to be supported in every possible manner.

Key Highlights

- ◆ The CBDT shared that no coercive action or measures to recover the demands of completed assessment under income tax would be taken against such firms.
- ◆ It was decided that the issue of recognition of the startups including the issue of premium among others will be decided on the basis of recommendations of a committee comprising eminent experts drawn from institutions like IITs, IIMs.
- ◆ The committee, which will be set up by the DIPP, will primarily look into the grant of tax exemptions and other connected matters.
- ◆ It will make recommendations on individual cases of recognised startups.

Background

- ✿ The decision to set up the expert panel was taken after several startups raised concerns on the taxation of angel funds under Section 56 of the Income Tax Act, which provides for taxation of funds received by an entity.

Source: PIB

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NITI Aayog releases Second Delta Ranking under Aspirational District Programme

Why in news?

- ☛ NITI Aayog on December 27, 2018 released the Second Delta Ranking of the Aspirational Districts Programme (ADP). The rankings were released by NITI Aayog CEO Amitabh Kant.
- ☛ Virudhunagar District of Tamil Nadu was ranked as the most improved district in the Rankings. The ranking represented the incremental progress made by districts between June 1, 2018 and October 31, 2018.

Most improved districts

Rank	District	State
1	Virudhunagar	Tamil Nadu
2	Nuapada	Odisha
3	Siddharthnagar	Uttar Pradesh
4	Aurangabad	Bihar
5	Koraput	Odisha

Districts that saw Least Improvement

Rank	District	State
107	Kiphire	Nagaland
108	Giridih	Jharkhand
109	Chatra	Jharkhand
110	Hailakandi	Assam
111	Pakur	Jharkhand

'Fast Movers' Districts

District, State	June 2018 Rank	October 2018 Rank
Kupwara, Jammu and Kashmir	108	7
Ranchi, Jharkhand	106	10
Siddharthnagar, Uttar Pradesh	103	3
Jamui, Bihar	99	9
Fatehpur, Uttar Pradesh		82 25

Note: The districts which displayed a qualitative jump in their scores between June and October 2018 are dubbed as 'Fast Movers'.

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Aspirational District Programme

- ◆ The Aspirational District Programme was launched by the Prime Minister Narendra Modi on January 5, 2018.
- ◆ It aims to rapidly transform the districts that have shown relatively lesser progress in key social areas, thereby posing a challenge to ensure balanced regional development.
- ◆ The program focuses on the strength of each district, identifies low-hanging fruits for immediate improvement, measures progress, and ranks districts.
- ◆ It seeks to fulfil Union Government's Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas initiative that aims to raise the living standards of citizens and ensure inclusive growth for all.
- ◆ The broad features of the programme are:
 - Convergence (of Central & State Schemes)
 - Collaboration (of Central, State level 'Prabhari' Officers & District Collectors)
 - Competition among districts driven by a Mass Movement or a Jan Andolan

Source: The Hindu, Economic Times

SDG India Index 2018

Why in news?

- ☛ The NITI Aayog has recently released the Baseline Report of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) India Index 2018, documenting the progress made by India's States and Union Territories (UTs) towards implementation of the 2030 SDG targets.
- ☛ The SDG India Index was developed in collaboration with the Ministry of Statistics & Programme Implementation (MoSPI), Global Green Growth Institute and United Nations in India.

SDG India Index acts as a bridge between mandates of NITI Aayog

- ◆ NITI Aayog has the twin mandate to oversee the implementation of SDGs in the country, and also promote Competitive and Cooperative Federalism among States and UTs.
- ◆ The SDG India Index acts as a bridge between these mandates, aligning the SDGs with the Prime Minister's clarion call of 'Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas', which embodies the five Ps of the global SDG movement – People, Planet, Prosperity, Partnership and Peace.
- ◆ India's National Development Agenda is mirrored in the SDGs. India's progress in SDGs is crucial for the world as the country is home to about 17 percent of the world population.

Key Facts

- ◆ Himachal Pradesh ranked high on providing clean water and sanitation, in reducing inequalities and preserving mountain ecosystem
- ◆ Kerala's topped due to its superior performance in providing good health, reducing hunger, achieving gender equality and providing quality education
- ◆ Chandigarh led in UT category because of its exemplary performance in providing clean water and sanitation, affordable and clean energy, generating economic growth, and providing quality education.

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How was the SDG India Index computed?

- ◆ The SDG India Index tracks progress of all States and UTs on 62 Priority Indicators selected by NITI Aayog.
- ◆ The Index spans 13 out of 17 SDGs as the Progress on SDGs 12, 13 & 14 could not be measured due to non-availability of data and SDG 17 was left out as it focuses on international partnerships.
- ◆ A composite score was computed between the range of 0-100 for each State and UT based on their aggregate performance across 13 SDGs, indicating average performance of State/UT towards achieving 13 SDGs & their respective targets.
- ◆ If a State/UT achieves a score of 100, it signifies that it achieved the 2030 national targets. The higher the score of a State/UT, the greater the target achieved.



Source: The Hindu

Cabinet approves merger of Vijaya Bank, Dena Bank and Bank of Baroda

Why in news?

- ☛ The Union Cabinet, chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi has approved the ‘Scheme of Amalgamation’ for merger of Bank of Baroda, Vijaya Bank and Dena Bank.
- ☛ The amalgamation will be the first-ever three-way consolidation of banks in India. The merger of Bank of Baroda, Dena Bank and Vijaya Bank was proposed by the Union Finance Ministry on September 17, 2018.
- ☛ The amalgamated entity will be India’s second largest Public Sector Bank and India’s third largest bank with a total business of more than Rs 14.82 lakh crore. Post this merger, the number of PSU banks will come down to 19.

Alternative Mechanism

- ✿ The merger of these three state-owned banks is a part of the government’s agenda of consolidation of public sector banks. The amalgamation would be carried out under Alternative Mechanism. Finance Minister Arun Jaitley, who heads Alternative Mechanism, assured capital support to the merged entity.
- ✿ Other members of Alternative Mechanism included Railway Minister Piyush Goyal and Defence Minister Nirmala Sitharaman.

Key Highlights of the ‘Scheme of Amalgamation’

- ◆ Vijaya Bank and Dena Bank are the Transferor Banks and the Bank of Baroda is the Transferee Bank.
- ◆ The Scheme of Amalgamation will come into force on April 1, 2019.
- ◆ The undertakings of the transferor banks will be transferred to the transferee bank, including all business, assets, rights, titles, claims, licenses, approvals and all property, all borrowings, liabilities and obligations.
- ◆ Every permanent and regular officer or employee of the transferor banks will become an officer or employee of the transferee bank.
- ◆ The pay and allowances offered to the employees of transferor banks shall not be less favourable as compared to what they are drawing in their respective transferor bank.
- ◆ The Board of the transferee bank, that is Bank of Baroda, will ensure that the interests of all transferring employees and officers of the transferor bank are protected.
- ◆ The transferee bank will issue shares to the shareholders of transferor banks as per share exchange ratio.
- ◆ Shareholders of the transferee bank and transferor banks shall be entitled to raise their grievances, if any, in relation to the share exchange ratio, through an expert committee.

Who are Transferor and Transferee?

- ☞ Transferor is the party making a transfer to another party as part of a legal arrangement.
- ☞ Transferee is the party who receives the funds and assets or the benefits of a letter of credit by action of a transfer.

Strengths of the amalgamated bank

- ◆ The amalgamated bank will be better equipped to meet the credit needs of a growing economy, absorb shocks and capacity to raise resources.
- ◆ It would enable creation of a bank with scale comparable to global banks and capable of competing effectively in India and globally.
- ◆ The amalgamated bank will have access to a wider talent pool, and a large database that may be controlled through analytics for competitive advantage in a rapidly digitalising banking context.
- ◆ Public will be benefitted in terms of enhanced access to banking services through a stronger network and easy access to credit.

Significance

- ◆ The amalgamation will help create a globally competitive bank with economies of scale and enable realization of wide-ranging synergies.
- ◆ Leveraging of networks, low-cost deposits and subsidiaries of the three banks has the potential of yielding significant synergies for positioning the consolidated entity for substantial rise in customer base, market reach, operational efficiency, and improved access for customers.
- ◆ Dena Bank, with gross NPA ratio of 22 percent, is currently under the Prompt Corrective Action (PCA) framework and has been restrained from further lending. Dena bank would no longer be covered under PCA after amalgamation.
- ◆ Vijaya Bank is among the better performing public sector banks with a gross NPA ratio of 6.9 percent. The Bank of Baroda has a bad loan ratio of 12.4 percent.
- ◆ The Bank of Baroda has a wide spread network, while Dena Bank and Vijaya Bank are more regionally focused. The Global network strength of Bank of Baroda will be leveraged to enable customers of Dena Bank and Vijaya Bank to have global access.
- ◆ Dena Bank's strength in the Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSME) will further augment the strength of the other two banks to position the amalgamated bank for being an MSME Udyamimitra.
- ◆ Merged entity will benefit from Bank of Baroda's high Capital Adequacy Ratio; Vijaya Bank's strong asset quality position; and Dena Bank's strong CASA (Current Account Savings Account) base.

Source: The Hindu, Business Standard

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Cabinet approves Agriculture Export Policy 2018 to double farmer's income by 2022

Why in news?

- ☞ The Union Cabinet, chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, on December 6, 2018 approved the Agriculture Export Policy 2018, which aims to double farmer's income by 2022.
- ☞ The Cabinet has also approved the proposal for establishment of Monitoring Framework at Centre with Ministry of Commerce as the nodal Department with representation from various Ministries, agencies and representatives of concerned State Governments to oversee the implementation of the Policy.

Elements of Agriculture Export Policy

- ☞ The Agriculture Export Policy encompasses Strategic and Operational elements. These are:

Strategic

- ◆ Policy measures
- ◆ Infrastructure and logistics support
- ◆ Holistic approach to boost exports
- ◆ Greater involvement of State Governments in agri exports
- ◆ Focus on Clusters
- ◆ Promoting value-added exports
- ◆ Marketing and promotion of "Brand India"

Operational

- ◆ Attract private investments into production and processing
- ◆ Establishment of strong quality regimen
- ◆ Research & Development
- ◆ Miscellaneous

Agriculture Export Policy 2018

- ✳ The Agriculture Export Policy envisions to "harness export potential of Indian agriculture, through suitable policy instruments, to make India global power in agriculture and raise farmers' income."

Objectives

- ◆ To double agricultural exports from present approximate USD 30+ billion to approximate USD 60+ billion by 2022 and reach USD 100 billion in the next few years thereafter
- ◆ To diversify export basket, export destinations and boost high value and value added agricultural exports including focus on perishables
- ◆ To promote indigenous, organic, ethnic, traditional and non-traditional agricultural products exports.
- ◆ To provide an institutional mechanism for pursuing market access, tackling barriers and dealing with sanitary and phyto-sanitary issues.
- ◆ To double India's share in world agriculture exports by integrating with global value chain at the earliest.
- ◆ Enable farmers to get benefit of export opportunities in overseas market.

Significance

- ☞ The Policy will double the agricultural exports and integrate Indian farmers and agricultural products with the global value chains. Exports of agricultural products would play a crucial role in achieving the goal of doubling farmers' income by 2022.

Source: The Hindu

Logistics Development Committee constituted to suggest reforms for ease of doing trade

Why in news?

- ☞ The Economic Advisory Council to the Prime Minister (EAC-PM) has constituted a Logistics Development Committee under the Chairmanship of Dr. Bibek Debroy, Chairman of EAC-PM to assess key challenges and suggest reforms in logistics development and associated commerce.

Composition of the Committee

- * The committee comprises secretaries and heads of the concerned departments and ministries such as Revenue, Commerce, Logistics, DIPP, Civil Aviation, Shipping, Road Transport & Highways, Railways, Central Board of Indirect Taxes and Customs (CBIC).
- * It also included Dr. Jayanta Roy, a well-known trade policy expert specialising in trade and logistics facilitation.

Objective

- * The committee was tasked to assess key challenges in logistics development and associated commerce and suggest policy reforms for ease of doing trade in India.

Key Highlights

- ◆ The committee conducted several rounds of deliberations with various stakeholders that included senior officials from the Union and State governments, industry associations, trade and logistics sector representatives.
- ◆ Based on their review and assessments, the committee prepared a comprehensive logistics and trade facilitation reform agenda.
- ◆ The reform agenda comprises a number of specific policy actions covering the entire logistics value chain.
- ◆ It is designed to fundamentally re-engineer the existing business processes of the government and intended to facilitate an integrated “whole of the trade value chain” approach.
- ◆ Further, it proposes a new institutional framework to leverage co-operation from all stakeholders towards a common shared goal of transforming this space.
- ◆ The committee's report has been submitted to the Government for consideration.

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Significance

- ✿ It is hoped that implementation of the proposed agenda will push India's share in global trade and make India one of the simplest places for doing business in the near term.

Background

- ◆ Boosting trade and making India a simple and easy place for doing business are an integral part of the broader economic priorities of the Government.
- ◆ The Government is in the process of implementing a number of reform initiatives in this regard.
- ◆ Some reforms are designed to target the hardware aspects of trade, which includes augmenting and modernising the hinterland logistics and infrastructure connectivity, while some others are designed to target the software aspects, which are related to regulatory and procedural environment for trade.
- ◆ As a result of the reforms, though the broader trade and logistics ecosystem in the country has improved considerably, users still continue to face some challenges in this space.
- ◆ Therefore, the Government is determined to implement more reforms to create a smooth and efficient environment across the logistics value chain.

Source: The Hindu

Maruti Suzuki India, Ministry of Rural Development sign MoU for training rural youth under DDU-GKY

Why in news?

- ☞ The Union Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD) on December 19, 2018 signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Maruti Suzuki India Ltd for training rural youth for skill development under the flagship Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Grameen Kaushalya Yojana (DDU-GKY) The Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Grameen Kaushalya Yojana (DDU-GKY) is the flagship placement linked skill-training scheme of the Ministry of Rural Development.

Significance

- ◆ Considering the challenges faced by India's rural youth in getting employment such as the lack of formal education and employability skills, the Ministry decided to partner with Maruti Suzuki India, the leading industry from the automotive sector, under the DDU-GKY.
- ◆ DDU-GKY will bridge this gap by funding training projects with an emphasis on placement, retention, career progression and foreign placement of rural youth.
- ◆ Maruti Suzuki will provide training to atleast 5000 candidates in two years with assured placement to the rural youth of our country.

DDU-GKY's "Champion Employers" policy

- ◆ The mission of the Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Grameen Kaushalya Yojana is to ensure rural poor youth are skilled in market relevant trades and job-relevant competencies.
- ◆ One of the ways in which DDU-GKY aims to achieve this is through the "Champion Employers" policy.
- ◆ The Champion Employers are the industry leaders who have the potential to provide training and captive employment to the DDU-GKY candidates.
- ◆ The policy seeks a strategic alignment of objectives of DDU-GKY with the HR strategy of organisations, which have a large potential to absorb trained man power.

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Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Grameen Kaushalya Yojana

- ◆ The Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Grameen Kaushalya Yojana (DDU-GKY) was launched by the Union government on September 25, 2014.
- ◆ The Yojana was launched during the 98th birth anniversary of Pandit Deendayal Upadhyay. Earlier the Yojana was known as Aajeevika Skills Development Programme (ASDP).

Objective

- ◆ The Yojana aims at training 10 lakh (1 million) rural youths for jobs.
- ◆ Skill development training centres are being launched to address the unemployment problem in the rural area.
- ◆ The skills imparted under the Yojana are benchmarked against international standards and complement the Prime Minister's 'Make In India' campaign.
- ◆ The Kaushalya Yojana addresses the need for imparting training by involving in private players including international players to impart the skills to the rural youths.
- ◆ The minimum age for entry under the Yojana is 15 years compared to 18 years under the Aajeevika Skills Programme.

Source: PIB

FAO Council approves India's proposal to observe 2023 as International Year of Millets

Why in news?

The Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) Council of the United Nations approved India's proposal to observe the year 2023 as the International Year of Millets. The approval came during the 160th session of the FAO, which was held during December 3-7, 2018 in Rome.

Why India pressed for the need to observe International Year of Millets?

The Move came after the Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers' Welfare noted that the millet cultivation in India has declined due to change in dietary habits and unavailability of millets.

As a result of this, level of nutrients like proteins, Vitamin-A, iron and iodine have fell in women and children.

Significance

Such observance will enhance global awareness to bring back nutri-cereals to the plate for food and nutrition security, thus, increasing their production for resilience to challenges posed by climate change.

This international endorsement comes in the backdrop of India's observance of 2018 as the National Year of Millets for promoting cultivation and consumption of these nutri-cereals.

Millets and their prices

- ◆ Millets consists of Jowar, Bajra, Ragi and minor millets, together termed as nutri-cereals.
- ◆ The Minimum Support Prize (MSP) of Jowar has been increased to Rs 2450 per quintal from Rs 1725, Bajra to Rs 1950 from Rs 1425, and Ragi to Rs 2897 from Rs 1900 per quintal from 2018-19.
- ◆ Through the Department of Food and Public Distribution, the State Governments procure jowar, bajra, maize and ragi from farmers at MSP.
- ◆ FAO Council also approved India's membership to the Executive Board of the United Nations World Food Program (WFP) for 2020 and 2021.

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World Food Programme

- ◆ Established in 1961 after 1960 Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) Conference, the World Food Programme is the food-assistance branch of the United Nations.
- ◆ It is the world's largest humanitarian organisation addressing hunger and promoting food security.
- ◆ It provides food assistance to an average of 80 million people in 75 countries each year.
- ◆ It is headquartered in Rome.
- ◆ It is a member of the United Nations Development Group and part of its Executive Committee.

Source: PIB

RBI constitutes Expert Committee headed by Bimal Jalan on Economic Capital Framework

Why in news?

- ☞ The Reserve Bank of India (RBI), in consultation with the Union Government, on December 26, 2018 constituted an Expert Committee on Economic Capital Framework. The Committee will be headed by Bimal Jalan, while, former secretary Rakesh Mohan was named as the Vice Chairman.
- ☞ The panel will decide on the appropriate size of reserves that the RBI should maintain and the dividend it should give to the government.
- ☞ The decision regarding the constitution of the Committee was taken by the Central Board of Reserve Bank of India (RBI) in its meeting held on November 19, 2018.

Terms of Reference of the Committee

- ◆ Suggest an adequate level of risk provisioning that the RBI needs to maintain
- ◆ Determine whether the RBI is holding provisions, reserves and buffers in surplus or deficit of the required level of such provisions, reserves and buffers
- ◆ Propose a suitable profits distribution policy taking into account all the likely situations of the RBI, including the situations of holding more provisions than required and the RBI holding less provisions than required
- ◆ Any other related matter including treatment of surplus reserves created out of realised gains, if determined to be held

Major task of the Committee

The Committee has also been tasked to review the extant Economic Capital Framework considering the:

- (i) Statutory mandate under Section 47 of the RBI Act, 1934. As per the Section 47, the profits of the RBI shall be transferred to the Government, after making provisions 'which are usually provided by the bankers'
- (ii) Public policy mandate of the RBI, including financial stability considerations

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- ☛ Keeping the aforesaid considerations in mind, the Committee will:
- ◆ Review status, need and justification of various provisions, reserves and buffers presently provided for by the RBI
- ◆ Review global best practices followed by the central banks in making assessment and provisions for risks which central bank balance sheets are subject to
- ◆ The Expert Committee will submit its report within a period of 90 days from the date of its first meeting.

What is Economic Capital Framework (ECF)?

- ☛ The Economic Capital Framework (ECF) of the RBI handles the capital requirement for operation. The RBI holds ECF reserve of 27 percent.
- ☛ The ECF amount can be used at the time of economic depression in the country. It can push more liquidity in the market to handle capital requirement.

Source: The Hindu, Business Standard

States' Startup Ranking 2018 released

Why in news?

- ☛ The Department of Industrial Policy and Promotion (DIPP) on December 20, 2018 announced the results of the first ever States' Start-up Ranking 2018. DIPP began the exercise to review the Start-up ecosystem of the states from January 2016.
- ☛ Gujarat was ranked as the "Best Performer" in the States' Start-up Ranking 2018. Gujarat allocated Rs 100 Crore budget for Startups and provided assistance to 200 projects.

Categories under which states were scrutinized

- ✿ The DIPP examined the States as leaders across various categories such as Start-up policy leaders, incubation hubs, seeding innovation, scaling innovation, regulatory change champions, procurement leaders, communication champions, North-Eastern leader, and hill state leader.
- ✿ On the basis of performance in these categories, the States were recognised as the Best Performer, Top Performers, Leaders, Aspiring Leaders, Emerging States and Beginners.

States' Startup Ranking 2018

Category	States
Best Performer	Gujarat
Top Performers	Karnataka, Kerala, Odisha, and Rajasthan
Leaders	Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, and Telangana
Aspiring Leaders	Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Jharkhand, Uttar Pradesh, and West Bengal
Emerging States	Assam, Delhi, Goa, Jammu & Kashmir, Maharashtra, Punjab, Tamil Nadu, and Uttarakhand
Beginners	Chandigarh, Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland, Puducherry, Sikkim, and Tripura

Champions: 51 officers from States and Union Territories were identified as "Champions", who have made significant contributions towards developing their State's Start-up ecosystem.

Objective behind States' Start-up Ranking

- ◆ The key objective of the exercise was to encourage States and Union Territories to take proactive steps towards strengthening the Start-up ecosystems in their states.
- ◆ The entire exercise was conducted for capacity development and to further the spirit of cooperative federalism.
- ◆ The methodology behind the exercise was aimed at creating a healthy competition environment wherein States were encouraged further to learn, share and adopt good practices.

Activities undertaken by states to support Start-ups

- ◆ Awareness workshops in all States
- ◆ Knowledge workshops in leading incubators
- ◆ Pairing of States for intensive mentoring
- ◆ International exposure visits to US and Israel
- ◆ Intensive engagement between the States with Start-up India team
- ◆ Video conferencing

National Report on the States' Start-up Ranking 2018

- ◆ A comprehensive 'National Report on the States' Start-up Ranking 2018' was also released by the Department.
- ◆ The report details the journey of Start-up India, role of Central and State Governments, conceptualization of the ranking framework, evaluation methodology, capacity development of States, assessment process, feedback from stakeholders.
- ◆ It features the results of the States' Start-up Ranking 2018 along with the impact it created on the states and the future road map.

Source: The Hindu Economic Times

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Environment and Ecology

World Soil Day observed globally

Why in news?

- ☞ The World Soil Day was observed across the world on December 5, 2018. The day is observed annually to highlight the importance of healthy soil and advocate for the sustainable management of soil resources.
- ☞ **2018 Theme:** The theme of the day this year is '*Be the Solution to Soil Pollution*'. The campaign aims to raise awareness regarding soil pollution and call people to #StopSoilPollution.

Soil Pollution

- ◆ As pollution rises across the world, the soil is also getting affected. Around one-third of global soils have already degraded.
- ◆ Soil pollution can be invisible and seems far away but everyone everywhere is affected due to it.
- ◆ With the population expected to reach 9 billion by 2050, soil pollution is a worldwide problem that is not only leading to the degradation of soil across the globe but is also resulting in the poisoning of food, water and air.
- ◆ Soils have a great potential to filter and buffer contaminants, degrading and attenuating the negative effects of pollutants, but its capacity is finite.

Cause

- ◆ Most of the pollutants originate from human activities such as unsustainable farming practices, industrial activities and mining, untreated urban waste and other non-environmental friendly practices.
- ◆ With the evolution of technology, scientists have been able to identify previously undetected pollutants, however, these technological improvements have also led to the release of new contaminants into the environment.

How to combat the problem?

- ◆ In the Agenda for Sustainable Development 2030, the Sustainable Development Goals 2, 3, 12, and 15 have targets that commend direct consideration of soil resources, especially soil pollution and degradation in relation to food security.
- ◆ Combating soil pollution requires all nations to join forces and turn determinations into action. Hence the campaign- 'Be the solution to soil pollution'.

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Soil: A solution to combating climate change?

- ◆ According to the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations, the soil holds three times as much carbon as the atmosphere and can help meet the challenges of a changing climate.
- ◆ The organisation said that 815 million people are food insecure and 2 billion people are nutritionally insecure, but it can be mitigated through the soil, as 95 per cent of the food comes from soil and 33 per cent of the global soils are already degraded.

World Soil Day in India

- ◆ On the occasion, Indian Vice President M Venkaiah Naidu called upon all the citizens of the country to take a pledge to maintain the purity of soil.
- ◆ In a tweet, the Vice President said, it is the duty of every human being to protect the most critical component of nature. He said that it is time that people should move towards nature and organic farming and must learn to protect the purity of soil and mother earth.

What has India done to prevent soil pollution?

- ◆ The Union Government has launched nationwide the soil health card scheme to take care of soil health for the first time in a uniform manner to evaluate the soil fertility across the country.
- ◆ According to the Union Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers' Welfare, over 15 crore soil health cards have been distributed to the farmers across the country.
- ◆ The soil health card provides information to the farmers on the fertility status of their soil and enables them to apply soil health card based recommended dosages of fertilizers including micro-nutrients, bio-fertilizers, manures as well as soil ameliorants.
- ◆ The card is helpful in checking the declining fertility of agriculture land and improve the fertility of soils to increase productivity besides enhancing farmers income.

Background

- ◆ The dedicated international day to celebrate soil was recommended by the International Union of Soil Sciences (IUSS) in 2002.
- ◆ Under the leadership of the Kingdom of Thailand and within the framework of the Global Soil Partnership, the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) of the United Nations supported the formal establishment of WSD as a global awareness raising platform.
- ◆ The FAO Conference unanimously endorsed World Soil Day in June 2013 and requested its official adoption at the 68th UN General Assembly.
- ◆ In December 2013 the UN General Assembly responded by designating December 5, 2014 as the first official World Soil Day. The date, *December 5*, was chosen because it corresponds with the official birthday of *HM King Bhumibol Adulyadej*, the King of Thailand, who officially sanctioned the event.
- ◆ In 2016, the day was officially recognised in the memory of the monarch, who passed away in October 2016 after being the head of state of Thailand for the past seven decades.

Source: The Hindu

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Government launches Asiatic Lion Conservation Project to conserve their population

Why in news?

- ☞ The Union Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change on December 20, 2018 launched the “Asiatic Lion Conservation Project” to protect and conserve the population of Asiatic Lion and its associated ecosystem.
- ☞ The project activities are planned in such a manner that cause habitat improvement, scientific interventions, disease control and veterinary care, complemented with adequate eco development works for the fringe population in order to ensure a stable and viable Lion population in the Country

Objective

- ◆ The Asiatic Lion Conservation Project is aimed at conservation and recovery of Asiatic Lion with the help of up to date techniques, instruments, regular scientific research studies, disease management, modern surveillance and patrolling techniques.

Funding

- ◆ The total budget of the project for 3 years amounts to around Rs 9784 lakh. The project will be funded under the Centrally Sponsored Scheme- Development of Wildlife Habitat (CSS-DWH) with the Central and State share of 60:40 ratio.

Increase in population of Asiatic Lions

- ◆ Asiatic lions that once ranged from Persia (Iran) to Palamau in Eastern India were almost driven to extinction due to hunting and habitat loss.
- ◆ A single population of less than 50 lions persisted in the Gir forests of Gujarat by late 1890’s.
- ◆ With timely and stringent protection offered by the Government, Asiatic lions have increased to the current population of over 500 numbers.
- ◆ The last census of the year 2015 showed the population of 523 Asiatic Lions in Gir Protected Area Network of 1648.79 sq. km. that includes Gir National Park, Gir Sanctuary, Pania Sanctuary, Mitiyala Sanctuary adjoining reserved forests, Protected Forests, and Unclassed Forests.
- ◆ This increase in the number of lions is attributed to the wildlife conservation schemes, well-trained staff and vets as well as help from farmers.
- ◆ It’s population is currently growing at about two percent a year.

Asiatic Lions

- ◆ Asiatic lion are cousins of the African lion. It is believed that both got separated 100000 years ago.
- ◆ Asiatic lions are slightly smaller and have a distinctive fold of skin along their bellies.
- ◆ Asiatic lion once inhabited complete southwest Asia, but, in past few years, it got restricted to the 1400 square kilometre Gir Sanctuary in Gujarat state, leading to its listing as critically endangered in the year 2000.
- ◆ The species’ population was under threat due to hunting and human encroachment.
- ◆ They are a major tourist attraction in Gujarat. Earlier, they were only regarded as the target of poachers.

Source: The Hindu

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First International Conference on ‘Sustainable Water Management’

Why in news?

- ☞ The first International Conference on ‘Sustainable Water Management’ began on December 10, 2018 at Indian School of Business (ISB) in Mohali, Punjab.
- ☞ The conference is being organised by Bhakra Beas Management Board (BBMB) under the aegis of the National Hydrology Project of the Union Ministry of Water Resources, River Development and Ganga Rejuvenation. It will be held for two days till December 11.

Theme

- ◆ The theme of the international conference is ‘Sustainable Water Management’.
- ◆ The theme deals with promoting integrated and sustainable development and management of Water Resources.

Objective

- ✿ The main aim of the conference is to foster participation and dialogue between various stakeholders, including governments, scientific and academic communities, in order to promote sustainable policies for water management, create awareness of water-related problems, motivate commitment at the highest level for their solution and thus promote better management of water resources at local, regional, national and international levels.

Key Highlights

- ◆ The inaugural session of the conference was attended by Himachal Pradesh Governor Acharya Devvrat, who was the chief guest of the event and UP Singh, Secretary at the Union Ministry of Water Resources, who was the guest of honour.
- ◆ The conference is expected to witness participation from a number of experts and delegates from reputed organisations from both within India and other countries such as Australia, United Kingdom, USA, Spain, Netherlands, Republic of Korea, Canada, Germany and Sri Lanka.
- ◆ The experts will deliver their experience and expertise in the use of state of art technology to the stakeholders for sustainable development of water resources.
- ◆ The participation in the conference is by invitation and more than 400 delegates have been registered.
- ◆ Overall, around 20 companies and organisations will be putting up stalls in the exhibition to showcase their activities in the area of sustainable water resources management.
- ◆ The conference is the first in the series of conferences being organised in India under the aegis of the ongoing National Hydrology Project. The hydrology project is being implemented by the Bhakra Beas Management Board with financial assistance from the Ministry of Water Resources.

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National Hydrology Project

- ◆ In March 2017, the World Bank Board had approved the USD 175 million National Hydrology Project to strengthen the capacity of institutions to assess water situation in their regions in India.
- ◆ The project aims to scale up the successes achieved under Hydrology Project-I and Hydrology Project-II to cover the entire country including the states of Ganga and Brahmaputra-Barak basins.
- ◆ Apart from benefitting the states in further upgrading and completing their water monitoring networks, the project aims to help new states to better manage water flows from the reservoirs.
- ◆ The project includes setting up of national flood forecasting systems with an advance warning system and reservoir operation systems as well as water resources accounting in river basins.
- ◆ It will have the potential to help communities to build resilience against possible uncertainties of climate change.

Background

- ◆ Adopting sustainable water management practices is significant for the entire world, especially for India, in order to build a water secure future.
- ◆ According to the researchers, India's total water demand will increase 32 per cent from now by 2050. The industrial and domestic sectors will account for 85 per cent of the additional demand.
- ◆ The primary cause of the increasing water deficit is the contamination of water bodies with both bio and chemical pollutants. The increased amount of solid wastes in water systems such as lakes, canals and rivers are heavily polluting the water.
- ◆ In fact, around 21 per cent of India's diseases are water-related with only 33 per cent of the country having access to traditional sanitation.
- ◆ Besides this, the excessive use of groundwater for agriculture has also caused a strain in the resource. As India is one of the top agriculture producers in the world, the consumption of water for land and crops is also one the highest.
- ◆ Thus, while the demand for freshwater is increasing with the growing population, the decreasing amount of supply is failing to meet the needs of the people.
- ◆ However, this can be reversed if nations and their citizens start integrating water-efficient practices into their daily routine.

Source: The Hindu

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Ground Water Extraction: Government notifies revised guidelines; to levy fee

on water extraction from June 2019

Why in news?

- ☞ The Central Ground Water Authority of the Union Ministry of Water Resources, River Development and Ganga Rejuvenation on December 12, 2018 notified revised guidelines for ground water extraction.
- ☞ The guidelines were revised in the wake of the directions issued by the National Green Tribunal (NGT) to address various shortcomings in the existing guidelines of ground water extraction.
- ☞ The revised guidelines, which will be effective from June 1, 2019, aim to ensure a more robust ground water regulatory mechanism in the country.

Concept of Water Conservation Fee

- ◆ One of the important features of the revised guidelines is the introduction of the concept of Water Conservation Fee (WCF), the fee charged on extraction of ground water.
- ◆ The WCF payable varies with the category of the area, type of industry and the quantum of ground water extraction.
- ◆ The fee may progressively increase from safe to over-exploited areas and from low to high water consuming industries as well as with increasing quantum of ground water extraction.
- ◆ The high rates of WCF are expected to discourage setting up of new industries in over-exploited and critical areas as well as may limit large scale ground water extraction by industries, especially in over-exploited and critical areas.
- ◆ The WCF would also compel industries to adopt measures relating to water use efficiency and discourage the growth of packaged drinking water units, particularly in over-exploited and critical areas.

Salient features of the revised guidelines

- ◆ Encourage use of recycled and treated sewage water by industries
- ◆ Provision of action against polluting industries
- ◆ Mandatory requirement of digital flow meters, piezometers and digital water level recorders, with or without telemetry depending upon quantum of extraction
- ◆ Mandatory water audit by industries abstracting ground water 500 m³/day or more in safe and semi-critical area and 200 m³/day or more in critical and over-exploited assessment units
- ◆ Mandatory roof top rain water harvesting except for specified industries
- ◆ Measures to be adopted to ensure prevention of ground water contamination in premises of polluting industries/ projects

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Exemptions under the revised guidelines

- ✿ The revised guidelines exempt the requirement of NOC for agricultural users, users employing non-energised means to extract water, individual households (using less than 1 inch diameter delivery pipe) and Armed Forces Establishments during operational deployment.
- ✿ Other exemptions have been granted to strategic and operational infrastructure projects for Armed Forces, Defence and Paramilitary Forces Establishments and Government water supply agencies.

Ground water extraction in India

- ◆ Ground water extraction in India is primarily for irrigation in agricultural activities, accounting for nearly 228 BCM (Billion Cubic Meter), which amounts to 90 percent of the annual ground water extraction.
- ◆ The remaining 10 percent of extraction that is 25 BCM is for drinking, domestic as well as industrial uses.
- ◆ The industrial use is estimated to account for only about 5 percent of the annual ground water extraction in the country.
- ◆ India is the largest user of ground water in the world, extracting ground water to the tune of 253 BCM per year, which is about 25 percent of the global ground water extraction.

Who regulates and manages ground water extraction in India?

- ◆ The Central Ground Water Authority (CGWA), constituted under the Environment (Protection) Act, 1986, has the mandate of regulating ground water development and management in the country.
- ◆ CGWA has been regulating ground water development for its sustainable management in the country through measures such as issue of advisories, public notices, granting No Objection Certificates (NOC) for ground water withdrawal.

Source: PIB

Cabinet approves submission of India's Second Biennial Update Report to UNFCCC

Why in news?

- ☞ The Union Cabinet chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi has approved Submission of India's second Biennial Update Report (BUR) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) towards the fulfilment of the reporting obligation under the Convention.

India's Biennial Update Report: Key Features

- ◆ The second biennial update report aims to provide an update to India's first biennial report to the United Nation's body on climate change.
- ◆ The report contains five major components including national circumstances, national greenhouse gas inventory, mitigation actions, finance, technology and capacity building needs and support received and domestic monitoring, reporting and verification arrangements.

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- ♦ The report has been prepared based on a range of studies conducted at the national level. It has undergone a multitier review process, through peer review, review by Technical Advisory Committee of Experts chaired by Additional Secretary (Climate Change) and by National Steering Committee chaired by Secretary.
- ♦ The biennial report was finalised after addressing all the relevant comments and modifications as per the multi-tier review process.

Report Findings

- ♦ In 2014, a total of 26, 07,488 Gigagram (Gg) CC-2 equivalent of Green House Gases (GHG) were emitted from all activities (excluding LULUCF) in India.
- ♦ The net national GHG emissions after including LULUCF were 23, 06,295 Gg CO₂e equivalent.
- ♦ Out of the total emissions, energy sector accounted for 73 per cent, IPPU 8 per cent, agriculture 16 per cent and waste sector 3 per cent.
- ♦ About 12 per cent of the emissions were offset by the carbon sink action of forestland, cropland and settlements.

A summary of India's national GHG inventory is provided in the table below:

Category	CO ₂ equivalent (Gg)
Energy	19,09,765.74
Industrial Process and Product Use	2,02,277.69
Agriculture	4,17,217.54
Waste	78,227.15
Land Use, Land Use Change and Forestry (LULUCF)	-3,01,192.69
TOTAL without LULUCF	26,07,488.12
TOTAL with LULUCF	23,06,295.43

Impact

- * The submission of India's second BUR will fulfil the obligation of India to furnish information regarding implementation of the Convention, being a Party.

Background

- ♦ India is a Party to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).
- ♦ The Convention, in accordance with its Article 4.1 and 12.1, enjoins upon all Parties, both developed country parties and developing country parties to furnish information, in the form of a national communication regarding the implementation of the convention.
- ♦ The Conference of Parties to the UNFCCC in its sixteenth session decided that developing countries, consistent with their capabilities and the level of support provided for reporting, should also submit biennial update reports containing updates of national greenhouse gas inventories and information on mitigation actions, needs and support received.

Source: The Hindu

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COP24: Member countries finalise ‘Katowice package’ rules to implement 2015 Paris Climate Agreement

Why in news?

☞ The UN Climate Conference (COP24) on December 14, 2018 saw the adoption of ‘Katowice package’, the rulebook for implementation of the 2015 Paris climate agreement.

Key Facts

- ◆ The Ministers of 200 nations reached consensus on rules after two weeks of intense negotiations during the 24th Conference of the Parties (COP24) to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) that took place during December 2-14, 2018 in Katowice, Poland. The meeting was presided by Polish President, Michal Kurtyka.
- ◆ The adopted guidelines package aims to encourage greater climate action ambition and benefit people from all walks of life, especially the most vulnerable.
- ◆ The UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres hailed the adoption of guidelines as a basis for a transformative process as this will require strengthened ambition from the international community.

Katowice package: Rulebook for implementation of 2015 Paris climate agreement

- ◆ One of the key components is a detailed transparency framework to promote trust among nations. It sets out how countries will provide information about Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), including the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions.
- ◆ They agreed on the procedure to uniformly count the greenhouse gas emissions.
- ◆ If poorer countries feel they cannot meet the standards set, they can explain why and present a plan to build up their capacity in that regard.
- ◆ The document sets a way to decide on ambitious funding targets from 2025 onwards from the current commitment to mobilise USD 100 billion per year as of 2020 in support of climate action in developing countries.
- ◆ Nations agreed on the methodology to collectively assess the effectiveness of climate action in 2023, and finalised the procedure to monitor and report progress on the development and transfer of technology.
- ◆ The concerns of developing nations including India and least developed nations on funding for carbon credit were finally addressed.
- ◆ The rich nations which are the main polluters agreed to pay for greening in the underdeveloped world.
- ◆ The agreed guidelines mean that countries can now establish the national systems that are needed for implementing the Paris Agreement by 2020.

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Issue of market mechanisms still needs to be resolved

- ◆ The main issues still need to be resolved such as the use of cooperative approaches, as well as the sustainable development mechanism. Resolution of these issues would allow countries to meet a part of their domestic mitigation goals through the use of “market mechanisms”.
- ◆ Market mechanisms provide flexible instruments for reducing the costs of cutting emissions, such as carbon markets.
- ◆ These negotiations will further be taken up for talks at the UN climate change conference, COP25, set to take place in Chile.

Fiji-led Talanoa Dialogue concluded

- ◆ The Fiji-led Talanoa Dialogue, a year-long inclusive dialogue that relates to the Paris Agreement, was also concluded at COP24, with the global warming of 1.5 degree Celsius report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) as a major input.
- ◆ There is a clear recognition of the IPCC’s role in providing scientific input to inform countries in strengthening their response to the threat of climate change.
- ◆ ‘Talanoa Call for Action’ calls upon all countries and stakeholders to act with urgency.
- ◆ Countries are encouraged to factor the outcome of the dialogue into efforts to increase their ambition and to update their nationally determined contributions in 2020.

Paris Agreement on Climate Change

- ✿ In December 2015, 195 countries pledged to slow the process of global warming in Paris by signing the Paris Agreement on Climate Change.

Objectives

- ◆ The primary objective is to limit the global average temperature to well below 2 °C above pre-industrial levels.
- ◆ Efforts will be made to limit the temperature increase to 1.5 °C above pre-industrial levels so that it will be possible to reduce the risks and impacts of climate change.
- ◆ Parties should take action to conserve and enhance, as appropriate, sinks and reservoirs of greenhouse gases including forests.
- ◆ With a view to contribute to sustainable development and to achieve the long term temperature goal of 2°C, the COP established the global goal on adaptation of enhancing adaptive capacity, strengthening resilience and reducing vulnerability to climate change.

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Mitigation

- ✳ Parties recognised the importance of averting, minimising and addressing loss and damage associated with the adverse effects of climate change, including extreme weather events and slow onset events, and the role of sustainable development in reducing the risk of loss and damage.

Technology Transfer

- ✳ Parties share a long-term vision on the importance of fully realising technology development and transfer in order to improve resilience to climate change and to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Financing

- ✳ Developed countries will raise finances to the tune of 100 billion US dollars per year by 2020 to help developing nations in both mitigation and adaptation activities. And, other nations are encouraged to provide funding voluntarily.

Implementation

- ✳ A mechanism to facilitate implementation of and promote compliance with the provisions of this Agreement is hereby established.

Review

- ✳ The Conference of the Parties serving as the meeting of the Parties to the Paris Agreement shall undertake its first global stock take in 2023 and every five years thereafter.

Enforcement

- ✳ This Agreement shall enter into force on the thirtieth day after the date on which at least 55 Parties to the Convention have deposited their instruments of ratification, acceptance, approval or accession.

Signing & Ratification

- ✳ As of June 2017, 195 UNFCCC members have signed the agreement, 148 of which have ratified it.

US Withdrawal

- ✳ On June 1, 2017, US President Donald Trump announced to withdraw the United States from the 2015 Paris agreement, stating that the Paris accord would undermine the U.S. economy, cost U.S. jobs, and weaken American national sovereignty.

Source: The Hindu, Indian Express

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India submits Sixth National Report to the Convention of Biological Diversity

Why in news?

- ☞ India on December 29, 2018 submitted its Sixth National Report (NR6) to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). The report was submitted online to the CBD Secretariat by Union Environment Minister Dr. Harsh Vardhan during the inaugural session of the 13th National Meeting of the State Biodiversity Boards (SBBs), which was organised by the National Biodiversity Authority (NBA) in the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC), New Delhi.
- ☞ The Minister also released the document ‘Progress on India’s National Biodiversity Targets: A Preview’ on the occasion.

Key Highlights

- ◆ India is among the first five countries in the world, the first in Asia and the first among the biodiversity-rich megadiverse countries to have submitted NR6 to the CBD Secretariat.
- ◆ The submission of the national report is a mandatory obligation on parties to international treaties, including CBD. The parties were required to submit their NR6 by December 31, 2018.
- ◆ The NR6 provides an update on the progress in the achievement of 12 National Biodiversity Targets (NBT) developed under the convention process, in line with the 20 global Aichi biodiversity targets.
- ◆ The report highlights that while India has exceeded or overachieved two of the NBTs, it is on track to achieve eight NBTs and in respect of the remaining two NBTs also, India is striving to meet the targets by the stipulated time of 2020.

The Report: Key Points

- ◆ While globally, biodiversity is facing increasing pressure on the account of habitat fragmentation and destruction, invasive alien species, pollution, climate change and overuse of resources, India is one of the few countries where forest cover is on the rise, with its forests teeming with wildlife.
- ◆ India is also on track to achieve the biodiversity targets at the national level and is also contributing significantly towards the achievement of the global biodiversity targets.
- ◆ With well over 20 percent of its total geographical area under biodiversity conservation, India has exceeded the terrestrial component of 17 percent of Aichi target 11 and 20 percent of corresponding NBT relating to areas under biodiversity management.
- ◆ India has also made noteworthy achievement towards NBT relating to access and benefit sharing (ABS) by operationalising the Nagoya Protocol on ABS.
- ◆ Having published the first internationally recognized certificate of compliance (IRCC) under the Protocol in 2015, India has since published nearly 75 per cent of the IRCCs published so far on ABS Clearing House.
- ◆ Thus, with respect to NBTs 6 and 9, the progress made by India has exceeded the targets.

Measures adopted by India

- ◆ India is a mega diverse country harboring nearly 7-8 per cent of the globally recorded species while supporting 18 per cent of the global human population on a mere 2.4 per cent of the world's land area. Biodiversity is an important thrust area in several programmes of the Government
- ◆ India's quest for inclusive economic development while maintaining the integrity of its natural capital is being pursued through various programmes and strategies.
- ◆ Several measures have been adopted for sustainable management of agriculture, fisheries and forests, with a view to provide food and nutritional security to all without destroying the natural resource base while ensuring intergenerational environmental equity.
- ◆ Programmes are also in place to maintain genetic diversity of cultivated plants, farms livestock and their wild relatives, towards minimising genetic erosion and safeguarding their genetic diversity.
- ◆ Further, mechanisms and enabling environment are being created for recognising and protecting the vast heritage of coded and oral traditional knowledge relating to biodiversity for larger human welfare while safeguarding the interests and rights of the local communities as creators and holders of this knowledge.
- ◆ India has also been investing a huge amount on biodiversity directly or indirectly through several development schemes of the Central and State Governments, to the tune of Rs 70,000 crores per annum as against the estimated annual requirement of nearly Rs 1, 09,000 crores.
- ◆ India has nearly two-thirds of the population of wild tigers in the world and their count has risen from 177 in 1968 to over 520 in 2015, while the number of elephants has risen from 12,000 in 1970s to 30,000 in 2015.
- ◆ The count of one-horned Indian Rhino, which was on the brink of extinction during the early 20th century, now stands at 2400.
- ◆ Further, while globally over 0.3 per cent of the total recorded species are critically endangered, in India only 0.08 per cent of the species recorded are in this category.

Acts/ Plans implemented by Government

- ❖ Some of the acts enforced by the Indian Government for the protection of biodiversity include National Forest Policy 1988, National Environment Policy, 2006, Wetlands (Conservation and Management) Rules, 2017, Water (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act, 1974, Biological Diversity Act, 2002, Environment (Protection Act), 1986, Forest Conservation Act, 1980, Wildlife Protection Act, 1972 and the Indian Forest Act, 1927.
- ❖ Some of the plans implemented by the government for ecological restoration include National Afforestation Plan (NAP), Green India Mission (GIM), creation of Eco-Sensitive Zones (ESZs) and Sacred Groves, India's National Action Plan for Conservation of Migratory Birds and National Marine Fisheries Policy, 2017.

Source: The Hindu



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Science and Technology, Defense, Health

India successfully test-fires nuclear-capable Agni-IV missile

Why in news?

- ☞ India on December 23, 2018 successfully test fired nuclear-capable long-range Inter Continental Ballistic Missile Agni-IV. The strategic surface-to-surface missile was flight tested from the Integrated Test Range (ITR) at Dr Abdul Kalam Island off Odisha coast.
- ☞ This was the 7th trial of Agni-IV missile. The test was part of a user trial by the Indian Army.
- ☞ The last trial was conducted by the Strategic Force Command (SFC) of the Indian Army from the same base on January 2, 2018.

About Agni-IV missile

- The Agni-IV missile was designed and developed by Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO). It has a strike range of 4,000 km.
- It is 20 metres long and weighs 17 tonnes and has many cutting-edge technologies which can meet global standards including Pershing missile of US.
- Agni-IV missile is equipped with advanced Avionics, 5th generation On Board Computer and distributed architecture.
- It has the latest features to correct and guide itself for in-flight disturbances.
- It encompasses most accurate ring laser gyro-based inertial navigation system (RINS) which is supported by highly reliable redundant micro navigation system (MINGS).

India has an armory of the Agni series missiles:

- ◆ Agni-1 with 700 km range
- ◆ Agni-2 with a 2,000-km range
- ◆ Agni-3 and Agni-4 with 2,500 km to more than 3,500-km range
- ◆ Agni-5 with a strike range of 5,000 km

Source; The Hindu, WIKI

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GSAT-11: India's heaviest communication satellite launched successfully from French Guiana

Why in news?

- ☞ India's heaviest and most-advanced communication satellite GSAT-11, also called the "Big Bird", was successfully launched into space on December 5, 2018 from the Spaceport in French Guiana, South America.
- ☞ The satellite will help provide satellite-based internet to remote places where cable-based internet cannot reach. The satellite, weighing 5854 kg, is the heaviest Indian-made equipment that has been put into the orbit.
- ☞ Developed by the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO), the GSAT-11 was launched on the Ariane 5 VA-246 rocket from Kourou Launch Base, French Guiana.
- ☞ The Ariane 5 also lifted off South Korea's GEO-KOMPSAT-2A satellites. Ariane 5 is one of three launch vehicles operated by Arianespace along with Soyuz and Vega.

GSAT-11: Boost the broadband connectivity

- ◆ The 5854-kg GSAT-11 will provide high data rate connectivity to Indian mainland and islands users through 32 user beams in Ku-band and 8 hub beams in Ka-band.
- ◆ With 32 Ku-band transponders and 8 Ka-band hubs on board, GSAT-11 would be three to six times more powerful than any other ISRO's satellite.
- ◆ GSAT-11 will boost the broadband connectivity to rural and inaccessible Gram Panchayats in the country under the Bharat Net Project, which is part of Digital India Programme. The Bharat Net Project aims to enhance the public welfare schemes like e-banking, e-health, e-governance, among others.
- ◆ The satellite will help meet India's growing mobile and internet usage in households, businesses and public organizations.

When GSAT-11 would become operational?

- ◆ After a 30-minute flight, GSAT-11 separated from the Ariane 5 in an elliptical Geosynchronous Transfer Orbit. The achieved orbit was very close to the intended one.
- ◆ Post-separation, ISRO's Master Control Facility in Karnataka took over the command and control of GSAT-11.
- ◆ The scientists will now undertake phase-wise orbit-raising manoeuvres to place the satellite in the Geostationary Orbit (36000 km above the equator) using its on-board propulsion systems.
- ◆ GSAT-11 will be positioned at 74-degree east longitude in the geostationary orbit.
- ◆ Two solar arrays and four antenna reflectors of GSAT-11 will be deployed in orbit.
- ◆ The satellite will be operational after the successful completion of all in-orbit tests.

Source: The Hindu

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ISRO launches communication satellite GSAT-7A

Why in news?

- ☞ The Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) on December 19, 2018 successfully launched geostationary communication satellite GSAT-7A onboard Geosynchronous Satellite Launch Vehicle GSLV-F11.
- ☞ The 26-hour countdown for the launch commenced on December 18 at 2.10 pm and the rocket blasted off at 4.10 pm from the second launch pad at Satish Dhawan Space Centre in Sriharikota, Andhra Pradesh.

Key Highlights

- ◆ The launch vehicle, GSLV-F11, which is in its 13th flight, will inject GSAT-7A into a Geosynchronous Transfer Orbit (GTO).
- ◆ The satellite with a mission life of eight years has been built to provide communication capability to the users in Ku-band over the Indian region.
- ◆ The satellite separated from the rocket after 19 minutes of the launch. It will be placed in its final Geostationary Orbit (GEO) using the onboard propulsion system.
- ◆ According to ISRO, GSAT-7A will take a few days after separation from the launcher to reach its orbital slot.
- ◆ GSLV-F11 is ISRO's fourth generation launch vehicle with three stages. The four liquid strap-ons and a solid rocket motor at the core form the first stage.
- ◆ While the second stage is equipped with a high thrust engine using liquid fuel, the cryogenic upper stage forms the third and final stage of the vehicle.

GSAT-7A

- ◆ GSAT-7A is the 35th communication satellite built by ISRO with a Gregorian Antenna and many other advanced new technologies.
- ◆ Most of the functional requirements of the communication payloads and the other systems have been derived from ISRO's earlier geostationary INSAT/GSAT satellites.
- ◆ The satellite is also the heaviest one being launched by GSLV with an indigenously developed cryogenic stage. The cryogenic stage of this vehicle has been modified to increase the thrust rate.
- ◆ Configured ISRO's standard I-2000 Kg (I-2K) Bus, the satellite weighs about 2,250 kg,

Background

- ◆ On December 5, 2018, India's next generation high throughput communication satellite, GSAT-11 was successfully launched from the Kourou launch base in French Guiana by Ariane-5 VA-246.
- ◆ The communication satellite, weighing about 5854 kg, is the heaviest satellite built by ISRO.
- ◆ The satellite is the fore-runner in the series of advanced communication satellites with multi-spot beam antenna coverage over Indian mainland and Islands.
- ◆ It is expected to play a vital role in providing broadband services across the country. It will also provide a platform to demonstrate new generation applications.

Source: The Hindu

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Gaganyaan Programme: Cabinet approves Indian Human Spaceflight Initiative; first manned flight to take place in 40 months

Why in news?

- ☞ The Union Cabinet, chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi has approved the Gaganyaan Programme, first Indian Human Spaceflight Initiative of the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO).
- ☞ The GSLV Mk-III rocket will be used to carry the orbital module which will have necessary provisions for sustaining a 3-member crew for the duration of the mission.
- ☞ The approval came following the demonstration of Indian Human Spaceflight capability to low earth orbit for a mission duration ranging from one orbital period to a maximum of seven days.

Gaganyaan Programme

- ◆ The Gaganyaan Programme is a national effort and will involve the participation of the Industry, Academia and National Agencies spread across the length and breadth of the country.
- ◆ The Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) will collaborate extensively with National agencies, laboratories, academia and industry to accomplish the Gaganyaan Programme objectives.
- ◆ The Gaganyaan Programme will require a total expenditure of around Rs 10,000 crore. This expense includes cost of technology development, flight hardware realisation and essential infrastructure elements.
- ◆ Two unmanned flights and one manned flight will be undertaken as part of Gaganyaan Programme.
- ◆ The first human space flight demonstration is expected to be completed within 40 months from the date of sanction. Prior to this, two unmanned flights in full complement will be carried out to gain confidence on the technology and mission management aspects.
- ◆ ISRO will be responsible for realising the flight hardware of the mission with the help of the Industry. National agencies, laboratories and Academia will participate in crew training, human life science technology development initiatives as well as design reviews.

Benefits

- ◆ It will establish a broader framework for collaboration between ISRO, academia, industry, national agencies and other scientific organizations.
- ◆ It will allow collaboration of diverse technological and industrial capabilities.
- ◆ It will enable broader participation in research opportunities and technology development benefitting large number of students and researchers.
- ◆ It is expected to generate employment and train human resources in advanced technologies.
- ◆ It will inspire large number of young students to take up science and technology careers for national development.

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Significance

- ◆ The programme is expected to spur research and development within the country in science and technology domains.
- ◆ It has huge potential for technology development in areas such as medicine, agriculture, industrial safety, pollution, waste management, water and food resource management etc.
- ◆ The manned mission will provide a unique micro-gravity platform in space for conducting experiments and test bed for future technologies.
- ◆ Human Spaceflight capability will enable India to participate as collaborating partner in future global space exploration initiatives with long term national benefits.

Key Take aways

- ◆ The Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO) on August 28, 2018 unveiled the details of the Gaganyaan mission.
- ◆ The Gaganyaan mission was announced by Prime Minister Narendra Modi during his 72nd Independence Day speech.
- ◆ India's first manned space mission 'Gaganyaan' will be launched by Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) by 2022.
- ◆ The mission will send a three-member crew to space for a period of five to seven days.
- ◆ Prior to the actual launch of this manned mission by 2022, the ISRO will launch two unmanned Gaganyaan missions.
- ◆ It weighs approximately 7 tonnes, and will be carried by a rocket.
- ◆ The crew module's size will be 3.7 meters and 7 meters.
- ◆ GSLV Mk-III launch vehicle will be used to launch Gaganyaan.
- ◆ The spacecraft will be placed in a low earth orbit of 300-400 km.
- ◆ The spacecraft will comprise of a crew module and service module that constitute an orbital module.
- ◆ After the take off, the manned flight will reach the orbit in 16 minutes.
- ◆ The crew will do microgravity experiment during the mission.
- ◆ The crew will be selected by Indian Air Force (IAF) and ISRO jointly after which they will undergo training for two-three years.
- ◆ The crew, while coming back to the Earth, could land in the Arabian Sea off the Gujarat coast or in the Bay of Bengal or even on land.
- ◆ The successful implementation of the programme will make India the fourth nation in the world to launch a Human Spaceflight Mission. So far, only the USA, Russia and China have launched human spaceflight missions.

Source: The Hindu

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PM Modi inaugurates Bogibeel Bridge in Assam

Why in news?

- ☞ Prime Minister Narendra Modi on December 25, 2018 inaugurated India's longest rail-road bridge 'Bogibeel Bridge' over the Brahmaputra River in Assam to boost defence along the border with China.
- ☞ This 4.94 kilometre long bridge over the Brahmaputra river took nearly two decades and over Rs 5900 crore to get completed.
- ☞ The bridge was inaugurated on the birth anniversary of former PM Atal Bihari Vajpayee, under whose government the work for the bridge began in 2002.

Bogibeel Bridge

- ◆ Located just over 20 kilometres from the Assam-Arunachal Pradesh border, the Bogibeel Bridge will connect the south bank of the Brahmaputra river in Assam's Dibrugarh district with Silapathar in Dhemaji district, bordering Arunachal Pradesh, making travel to Pasighat easier.
- ◆ The bridge includes the main bridge, dykes on the north and south banks, road network of 30 kilometres, rail network of 74 kilometres and six new railway stations.
- ◆ The double-decker Bogibeel bridge has two railway lines on the lower deck and a three-lane road on the upper deck.
- ◆ The bridge is 32 metres above the water level of the Brahmaputra and is designed as the bridge linking Sweden and Denmark.
- ◆ It can bear the weight of India's heaviest 60 tonne battle tanks and so that fighter jets can land on it.
- ◆ The Bridge will have a serviceable period of around 120 years.
- ◆ It is India's only fully welded bridge for which European welding standards were adhered to. It is Asia's second longest rail-cum-road bridge.
- ◆ The superstructure of the bridge was built by the joint venture of Hindustan Construction Company, Germany-based DSD Brouckenbau and VNR Infrastructure.

Rail network on Bogibeel Bridge

- ◆ The Prime Minister also flagged off the Tinsukia-Naharlagun Intercity Express. The train will run five days a week.
- ◆ The rail journey from Dibrugarh to the Arunachal Pradesh capital Itanagar will now be cut by 750 kilometres.
- ◆ The rail line will be linked to Chowalkhowa, which is 5.83 kilometres from Dibrugarh, on the south bank and between Sisi Borgaon and Sirpani on the north bank.
- ◆ The work on the railway line is being undertaken by Northeast Frontier Railway.

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What are the benefits?

- ◆ While the journey from Dibrugarh to Delhi currently takes more than 37 hours, the new bridge is likely to reduce the commute by three hours.
- ◆ It will reduce travel time from Assam to Arunachal Pradesh to 4 hours (minus the 170-km detour via Tinsukia).
- ◆ It will also reduce the distance to the North East by 165 km, saving fuel worth Rs 10 lakh per day in the region.
- ◆ The bridge will enhance defence logistics along the China border; it will enable the military to speed up the dispatch of forces to Arunachal Pradesh, which borders China. India and China share around 4000-kilometre-long border, with almost 75 percent in Arunachal Pradesh.
- ◆ Bogibeel Bridge is part of infrastructure projects planned by India to improve logistics along the border in Arunachal Pradesh such as construction of a trans-Arunachal highway on the north bank of the Brahmaputra; and road-rail links over its major tributaries such as the Dibang, Lohit, Subansiri and Kameng.
- ◆ The 4.94 kilometre-long bridge will be the fourth rail-road bridge on the Brahmaputra River in Assam, the others being - Saraighat Bridge, Naranarayan Setu and the New Saraighat Bridge.
- ◆ Earlier in 2017, India opened its longest bridge 'Dhola-Sadiya', the 9.1 kilometre bridge over the Lohit River that too connects Assam and Arunachal Pradesh.

Source: The Hindu

Defence Minister inaugurates Indian Navy's Information Fusion Centre

Why in news?

- ☛ Defence Minister Nirmala Sitharaman on December 22, 2018 launched the Information Fusion Centre – Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) at Information Management and Analysis Centre (IMAC) in Gurugram.
- ☛ The inaugural event saw participation from officials belonging to different ministries and ambassadors and resident defence attaches of partner countries.

IFC-IOR Objective

- ✳ The Information Fusion Centre – Indian Ocean Region aims to engage with partner nations and multi-national maritime constructs to develop comprehensive maritime domain awareness and share information on vessels of interest.
- ✳ The key intention of this collaborative endeavour will be to secure the global commons for a peaceful, stable and prosperous region towards the well-being of all.

Key Highlights

- ◆ The IFC – IOR shall be a collaborative construct that will work with partners, countries as well as international agencies to enhance maritime security and safety.
- ◆ The centre would work towards capability building in the region, coordination of incident response and disaster relief, and in time, also share submarine safety information.

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- ◆ It will help nations interface and integrate, wherein, they would benefit from each other’s best practices and expertise.
- ◆ It would also help foster bonds of trust, camaraderie and partnership, ingredients that are vital for relationships between nations to transcend from being merely transactional to ones that are transformational”.
- ◆ The information exchange at the IFC-IOR would be initially undertaken by virtual means, using telephone calls, faxes, emails and video conferencing over internet.
- ◆ Subsequently, to enable better interaction, quicker analysis of information and provide timely inputs, the IFC-IOR would host Liaison Officers from partner countries.
- ◆ Additionally, towards enhancing capability building, the IFC-IOR would undertake conduct of exercises and training capsules in maritime information collation and sharing.

Background

- ✧ The Indian Ocean Region is vital to world trade and economic prosperity of many nations, as more than 75 per cent of the world’s maritime trade and 50 per cent of global oil consumption passes through the IOR.
- ✧ However, maritime terrorism, piracy, human and contraband trafficking, illegal and unregulated fishing, arms running and poaching pose myriad challenges to maritime safety and security in the region.
- ✧ Response to these challenges requires enhanced situational awareness of the maritime activities in the region so as to enable security agencies function effectively.
- ✧ However, the scale, scope and the multi-national nature of maritime activities, make it difficult for countries to address these challenges individually.
- ✧ Hence, collaborative efforts between maritime nations in the IOR, is essential.

Source: The Times of India

Government authorises 10 central agencies to monitor any computer

Why in news?

- ◆ The Union Government has authorised ten central intelligence, security and tax agencies to intercept, monitor and decrypt all the data contained in “any” computer system.
- ◆ The order was issued on December 20, 2018 by the ‘cyber and information security’ division of the Ministry of Home Affairs(MHA) under the authority of Home Secretary Rajiv Gauba.
- ◆ The move has set off a political storm with the opposition accusing the government of trying to create a “surveillance state”.
- ◆ The Union Government has, however, clarified that the rules for intercepting and monitoring computer data were framed in 2009 when the Congress-led UPA was in power and its new order only notified the designated authority, which can carry out such action.

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Key facts

- ◆ According to the order, the 10 central probe and snoop agencies are now empowered under the Information Technology (IT) Act for computer interception and analysis.
- ◆ The agencies, according to the order, have been authorised “for the purpose of interception, monitoring and decryption of any information generated, transmitted, received or stored in any computer resource under the said Act (section 69 of the IT Act, 2000)”.
- ◆ The 10 agencies notified under the new order include the Intelligence Bureau, Narcotics Control Bureau, Enforcement Directorate, the Central Board of Direct Taxes (for Income Tax Department), Directorate of Revenue Intelligence, Central Bureau of Investigation, National Investigation Agency, the Research and Analysis Wing, Directorate of Signal Intelligence (in service areas of J-K, North East and Assam) and Delhi Police commissioner
- ◆ However, the new order “does not confer any new powers” to any security or law enforcement agency.
- ◆ Each case of computer interception, monitoring and decryption will have to be approved by the competent authority, which is the Union home secretary or the state government.

Political Storm

- ◆ The opposition parties slammed the new order as unconstitutional, undemocratic and an assault on fundamental rights and an attempt by the ruling government to convert India into a “surveillance state” by resorting to “snooping”, inviting a sharp response from the ruling party.
- ◆ In a strong defence of the government order, the ruling government said it is legal with adequate safeguards and in the interest of national security. The centre also rejected the opposition’s charge of snooping. The MHA also issued a statement saying that the order was issued to prevent “any unauthorised use of powers”
- ◆ The issue of notification also rocked the Rajya Sabha where Leader of Opposition Ghulam Nabi Azad alleged that “undeclared Emergency has taken final shape” and “all federal agencies have been let loose”.
- ◆ The opposition parties, including the CPI(M), the Samajwadi Party, the Rashtriya Janata Dal and the Trinamool Congress, said they will collectively oppose the order.

Benefits

- ☞ The order is aimed at among other things ensuring that any interception, monitoring or decryption of any information through any computer resource is done in accordance with due process of law.

Source: The Hindu

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ISRO launches Samwad with students to engage them on space science activities

Why in news?

- ☞ The Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) launched a new platform called ‘Samwad with Students’ on January 1, 2019 in Bengaluru, as part of its enhanced outreach programme.
- ☞ Through the initiative, ISRO aims to constantly engage youngsters across India in activities concerning space science to capture their scientific temperament. The new conversation mission aims to inspire students cutting across schools and colleges.

Key Highlights

- ◆ During the inaugural event in Bengaluru, 40 students and 10 teachers from select schools interacted with ISRO Chairman Dr. K Sivan at the Anthariksh Bhavan.
- ◆ During the three-hour stay at ISRO HQ, the students were first briefed about Indian space programme and their benefits to the common man.
- ◆ The question and answer session that followed saw Dr. Sivan engaging students on a series of topics ranging from rockets, satellites, Chandrayaan, Gaganyaan and various space applications.
- ◆ On being asked whether ISRO was his first choice as a youngster, Dr. Sivan said that he was very shy when he was young and, as far as college and career went, he was always denied my first choice.
- ◆ To another query from a 10th Standard student, on how scientists cope up with failures, Dr. Sivan said that the biggest lessons in life are often derived when the plans go astray.
- ◆ He explained that space missions are very complex in nature and totally different from terrestrial systems, as they have to work in extreme environments more often.
- ◆ Upon asked how the students could contribute to ISRO’s missions, Dr. Sivan told the students that when they complete their studies with a focus on fundamentals of science, then they could get back to ISRO and help solve problems.
- ◆ On the sidelines, the students and teachers also interacted with ISRO scientists and engineers.

Significance

- ◆ The ISRO Chairman used the platform to explain to the students the importance of the Indian space programme and its benefits to the society at large.
- ◆ He wanted them to take up science and mathematics with absolute seriousness which would enable them to take up challenging careers.
- ◆ The Chairman said that they needed solutions to many complex problems and that the children could be giving answers to them in the future.

Source: The Hindu

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India successfully test-fires Agni-5 ballistic missile

Why in news?

- ☞ India on December 10, 2018 successfully test-fired nuclear-capable ballistic missile 'Agni-5' from Dr Abdul Kalam Island, off the Odisha coast.
- ☞ The missile was launched with the help of a mobile launcher from launch pad-4 of the Integrated Test Range (ITR) at Dr Abdul Kalam Island in the Bay of Bengal. It was a user associated trial and was conducted by the Strategic Force Command with DRDO scientists.
- ☞ This was the seventh trial of the indigenously-developed surface-to-surface missile.

Previous trials of Agni 5

- ◆ The first test launch of the missile was conducted on April 19, 2012. The missile was able to hit the target nearly at pin-point accuracy, within a few metres of the designated target point.
- ◆ India conducted the second test flight of Agni-V from the Wheeler Island on September 15, 2013. The missile hit the pre-designed target in the Indian Ocean with an accuracy of a few metres.
- ◆ The third successful test flight of the Agni-V was conducted on January 31, 2015. The test used a canisterised version of the missile, mounted over a Tatra truck.
- ◆ The fourth test of the missile was successfully conducted on December 26, 2018. This was the second canisterised test of the missile.
- ◆ The fifth test of the missile was successfully conducted on January 18, 2018. This was the third consecutive test of the missile on a road-mobile launcher and the first in its final operational configuration.
- ◆ The sixth trial was conducted in June 2018 during which the missile was fired from a mobile launcher. Several new technologies were successfully tested during the sixth trial

About Agni 5

- ◆ Agni 5 is an intercontinental ballistic missile developed by the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) of India.
- ◆ The missile is a part of the Agni series of missiles, one of the missile systems under the original Integrated Guided Missile Development Program.
- ◆ Agni-V is a three stage missile, 17 metres tall, two metres wide and capable of carrying 1.5 tonne of nuclear warheads.
- ◆ Unlike other Agni missiles, Agni-5 is the most-advanced in terms of navigation and guidance, warhead and engine.
- ◆ The missile has been designed to hit the designated target point accurately, guided by the on-board computer with the support of a Ring Laser Gyro-based Inertial Navigation System, the Micro Inertial Navigation System, fully-digital control system and advanced compact avionics

Source: The Hindu

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Noted writer Amitav Ghosh honoured with Jnanpith Award 2018

- ◆ Noted English writer Amitav Ghosh was on December 14, 2018 honoured with 54th Jnanpith Award, a literary award given to an author for “outstanding contribution towards literature”.
- ◆ The decision was taken during a meeting of Jnanpith Selection Board chaired by eminent novelist, scholar and Jnanpith laureate Pratibha Ray.
- ◆ As per Bharatiya Jnanpith, “Amitav Ghosh is a path- breaking novelist. In his novels, Ghosh treads through historical settings to the modern era and weaves a space where the past connects with the present in relevant ways...”
- ◆ Ghosh is known for a series of novels such as Shadow Lines, The Glass Palace, The Hungry Tide, and the Ibis Trilogy — Sea of Poppies, River of Smoke and Flood of Fire that chronicle the trade between India and China run by the then East India Company.

Farthest object in solar system ‘Farout’ discovered

- ◆ Scientists have discovered the most-distant body ever observed in our solar system, located over 100 times farther than Earth is from the Sun.
- ◆ The new object, discovered by Scott S Sheppard from Carnegie Institution for Science, David Tholen from the University of Hawaii and Chad Trujillo from Northern Arizona University in the US, has been given the provisional designation 2018 VG18.
- ◆ 2018 VG18, nicknamed ‘Farout’ by the team for its extremely distant location, is at about 120 astronomical units (AU), where 1 AU is defined as the distance between the Earth and the Sun.

Sonam Kapoor named PETA India’s Person of the Year for 2018

- ◆ Sonam Kapoor, a vegan, has been named People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) India’s Person of the Year for 2018.
- ◆ Sonam Kapoor has been known to be an advocate for animal rights. She is a vegan herself and keeps animal skin out of her handbag line for her fashion brand Rheson, apart from taking other action for the welfare of animals.
- ◆ In 2016, the actress was named PETA India’s Hottest Vegetarian Celebrity and she earned a Compassionate Business Award from the group a year later for her cruelty-free handbag line.

Good Governance Day 2018: Nation remembers former PM Atal Bihari Vajpayee; ‘Sadaiv Atal’ samadhi dedicated to nation

- ◆ India observed the Good Governance Day on December 25, 2018 to mark the birth anniversary of former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee who passed away on August 16, 2018 at the age of 93. The Good Governance Day was established in 2014 to honor former-Prime Minister Vajpayee.
- ◆ To mark the birth anniversary of Atal Bihari Vajpayee, his Samadhi ‘Sadaiv Atal’ was dedicated to the nation. President Ram Nath Kovind, Vice President M Venkaiah Naidu and Prime Minister Narendra Modi paid floral tributes at the Samadhi.

Train 18: India’s first locomotive-less train crosses 180 kmph mark during trials

- ◆ India’s first locomotive-less train ‘Train 18’ on December 2, 2018 crossed the 180 kmph speed limit during a test run in the Kota-Sawai Madhopur section. The major trials are now over with just some more remaining. Once Train 18 becomes operational, it will commence its commercial run from January 2019.
- ◆ Earlier on November 26, 2018, the Research Designs and Standards Organisation announced that the trial run of indigenously developed engineless train ‘Train 18’ was successfully conducted and the train ran up to 115 km per hour on tracks in Moradabad division of Northern Railway.
- ◆ The trials proved that the train has defined track geometry parameters, curved alignments of specific radius and station yard zones.

Legendary filmmaker Mrinal Sen passes away at 95

- ◆ Legendary filmmaker Mrinal Sen passed away on December 30, 2018 in Kolkata, West Bengal after a prolonged battle with age-related ailments. He was 95. He is survived by his son. His wife, actor Geeta Sen, passed away in 2017.
- ◆ The Padma Bhushan and Dada Saheb Phalke awardee was known primarily for paving the way for the reign of parallel cinema in the country with films such as Ek Din Achanak, Padatik, Mrigaya, Akaler Sandhane, Chorus, Kharij, Kandahar, Bhuwan Shome, Akash Kusum and Calcutta 71.
- ◆ His demise brings the end of legends of the golden era of Parallel cinema, who crossed boundaries in placing Indian cinema into the global platform.

Veteran Bollywood actor-writer Kader Khan passes away

- ◆ Veteran Bollywood actor-director and scholar, Kader Khan passed away on January 1, 2019 following a prolonged illness in Toronto, Canada. He was 81. He is survived by his wife Hajra, son Sarfaraz, daughter-in-law, and grandchildren.
- ◆ He was known for his comic roles in films like Dulhe Raja, Aakhein, Coolie No. 1, Haseena Maan Jayegi, and several others. Despite being an actor, he was also a prolific writer. He wrote the story or dialogues for more than 250 films in Hindi and Urdu, beginning with Randhir Kapoor - Jaya Bhaduri starrer ‘Jawani Diwani’ (1972)

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Justice T B N Radhakrishnan sworn in as first Chief Justice of Telangana HC

- ◆ Justice Thottathil Bhaskaran Nair Radhakrishnan was on January 1, 2018 sworn in as the first Chief Justice of the Telangana High Court.
- ◆ The oath to the office was administered to Justice Radhakrishnan by Telangana and Andhra Pradesh Governor ESL Narasimhan at a ceremony held at Raj Bhavan. The ceremony was attended by Telangana Chief Minister K Chandrasekhar Rao and other judges, lawyers and senior government officials. With this, the state of Telangana will have its first independent high court.

Bangladesh Elections 2018: Sheikh Hasina wins third consecutive term as prime minister

- ◆ Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina secured her third consecutive term and fourth overall with a landslide victory in the nation's general elections. The results were announced by the Election Commission on December 31, 2018.
- ◆ Sheikh Hasina's ruling party Bangladesh Awami League and its allies won 288 of the 299 parliamentary seats contested, surpassing its previous election win when it had won 234 seats. This is an unprecedented feat in the country's political history as no other leader in Bangladesh has been able to win a third consecutive term.

Smriti Mandhana named ICC Women's Cricketer of the Year

- ◆ India's left-handed opener Smriti Mandhana has won the Rachael Heyhoe Flint Award for the ICC Women's Cricketer of the Year. Mandhana was also adjudged as the ICC Women's ODI Player of the Year. The announcement was made by the International Cricket Council on December 31, 2018.
- ◆ The 22-year-old, who has also been named in the ICC Women's ODI Team of the Year and the ICC Women's T20I Team of the Year, scored 669 runs at an average of 66.90 in 12 ODIs and 622 runs at a strike-rate of 130.67 in 25 T20Is during the voting period, which ran from January 1 to December 31, 2018.
- ◆ The cricketer had played a crucial role in India's semi-final appearance at the ICC Women's World T20 in the West Indies, scoring 178 runs in five matches at a strike-rate of 125.35.

Urjit Patel resigns as Governor of Reserve Bank of India

- ◆ Urjit Patel on December 10, 2018 resigned as the Governor of the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) with immediate effect, citing personal reasons. Urjit R Patel was appointed as the 24th Governor of Reserve Bank of India (RBI) on August 20, 2016 and took charge on September 4, 2016 for tenure of three years. He succeeded Raghuram Rajan.
- ◆ He was previously serving as the Deputy Governor of RBI. He mainly looked after monetary policy, economic policy research, statistics and information management, deposit insurance, communication and Right to Information.
- ◆ With his resignation, Patel became the first RBI governor since 1990 to resign before the completion of the term. Patel's three-year term was to end in September 2019.
- ◆ Shaktikanta Das, Member of the 15th Finance Commission, on December 13, 2018 assumed charge as the 25th Governor of the Reserve Bank of India (RBI).

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Miss Philippines Catriona Gray crowned Miss Universe 2018

- ◆ Miss Philippines Catriona Gray was crowned Miss Universe after she won the final round of the Miss Universe 2018 pageant, held in Bangkok, Thailand on December 17, 2018. Outgoing Miss Universe Demi Leigh Nel Peters from South Africa crowned her successor.
- ◆ Miss Philippines made it to the Top 5 along with Miss Puerto Rico, Vietnam, Philippines, South Africa and Venezuela. The top five were then asked questions that were crafted by fellow contestants and had to answer it in 30 seconds or less. This determined the Top 3.
- ◆ The final three contestants included Miss Philippines, South Africa and Venezuela. During the final round, each contestant was asked the same question.

PV Sindhu claims maiden BWF World Tour Finals Title

- ◆ Olympic silver medallist PV Sindhu made history on December 16, 2018 by becoming the first Indian to win the BWF World Tour Finals.
- ◆ Sindhu claimed the coveted gold medal with a win over 2017 world champion Nozomi Okuhara in straight sets of 21-19, 21-17. With this, Sindhu won her 14th title overall and the first for this year, which had followed up with a series of disappointments after she was unable to win even a single tournament.
- ◆ Sindhu had lost out on the gold and had to settle for silver in many championships in 2018 including the World Championships, Asian Games, Commonwealth Games, Thailand Open and India Open.

Asma Jahangir posthumously awarded with 2018 UN Human Rights Prize

- ◆ Asma Jahangir passed away on February 11, 2018 due to cardiac arrest. She was known for her outspoken nature and unrelenting pursuit for human rights. This year, the award coincided with the 70th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.
- ◆ With this win, Asma Jahangir became the fourth Pakistani woman to be awarded with the UN Human Rights Prize. Earlier winners were Begum Ra' Ana Liaquat Ali Khan (1978), Benazir Bhutto (2008) and Malala Yousufzai (2013).

Former Indian diplomat Preeti Saran elected to UN's Committee on

Economic, Social and Cultural Rights

- ◆ A former senior Indian diplomat, Preeti Saran was on December 6, 2018 elected unopposed to an Asia Pacific seat on the United Nation's Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR).
- ◆ The UN's Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) elected Saran to the 18-member committee 'CESCR' for a four-year term beginning on January 1, 2019. Saran will begin her term at CESCR after another former Indian diplomat Chandrashekhara Dasgupta completes his third term on the CESCR by the end of December 2018.

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Sudhir Bhargava takes oath as Chief Information Commissioner

- ◆ Sudhir Bhargava on January 1, 2019 took oath as the Chief Information Commissioner in the Central Information Commission (CIC).
- ◆ Bhargava was administered the oath of office by President Ram Nath Kovind. Prior to this, Bhargava was working as the Information Commissioner in the CIC.

Swearing-in of four Information Commissioners

- ◆ Following the swearing-in of Bhargava, newly-appointed Information Commissioners Yashvardhan Kumar Sinha, Vanaja N Sarna, Neeraj Kumar Gupta and Suresh Chandrawere administered the oath of office of the Information Commissioner of CIC by the Chief Information Commissioner Sudhir Bhargava.
- ◆ Yashvardhan Kumar Sinha is a 1981-batch Indian Foreign Service (retired) officer who served as the Indian high commissioner in the United Kingdom. On the other hand, Neeraj Kumar Gupta is a 1982-batch IAS officer who retired as a Secretary from the Department Of Investment and Public Asset Management.
- ◆ Vanaja N Sarna is the only woman to be a part of the CIC. Sarna is a 1980-batch retired Indian Revenue Service (Customs and Central excise) officer.

India's Vedangi Kulkarni becomes fastest Asian to cycle the globe

- ◆ India's Vedangi Kulkarni has become the fastest Asian to cycle the globe. The 20-year-old Indian completed the 29,000 kilometers' distance required to qualify as bicycling across the globe on December 23, 2018.
- ◆ Overall, Kulkarni spent 159 days peddling up to 300 km a day in 14 countries. Starting off from Perth in July, she will now be flying back to the Australian city to complete the record by cycling a 15 km distance to reach the same place from where she started.

National Consumer Day 2018

- ◆ The National Consumer Day was observed across India on December 24, 2018 with the theme "*Timely Disposal of Consumer Complaints*".
- ◆ On this day, the Consumer Protection Act, 1986 had received the assent of the president. The enactment of the Act is considered as a historic milestone in the consumer movement in the country.
- ◆ The day provides an opportunity to highlight the importance of the consumer movement and the need to make every consumer more aware of their rights and responsibilities.



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