VAJIRAM & RAVI
Institute for IAS Examination

the recitals

CURRENT AFFAIRS - May 2024

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- SC terms Arrest of News Click Founder under UAPA as "Illegal"
- Digital Arrest
- Concerns Regarding ECI's Voter Turnout Data
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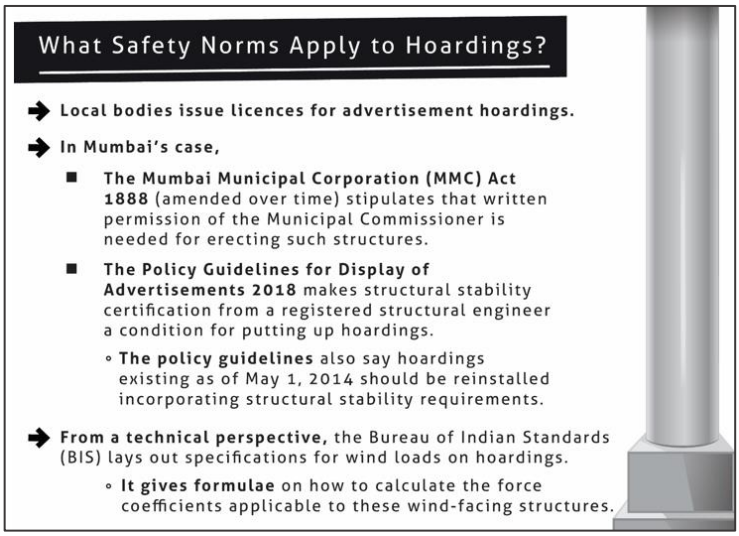
Mumbai Hoarding Tragedy

At least 16 people were killed when a massive 250-tonne advertisement hoarding (on Government Railway Police land) in Mumbai's Ghatkopar collapsed during a dust storm.

What Led to Ghatkopar Incident



- The **massive hoarding did not meet size norms:** But was not brought down by official agencies in spite of being a highly visible hazardous structure.
- **Safety norms were apparently liberalized -**
  - This was done through the *Policy Guidelines for Display of Advertisements 2018* to tap the city's full financial potential.
  - Also, the MMC Act 1888 provides some regulatory exemptions to hoardings on railway land.
- **Administrative lethargy:** The Government Railway Police cited an ongoing dispute with the Corporation for not enforcing the safety laws on hoardings.
- **No database of permits** could be located on the BMC website in the hoardings section.
- **Extreme weather events:** The Ghatkopar disaster demonstrates that extreme weather, such as high winds or a cyclone sweeping a city, quickly exposes the weakest infrastructure links, with deadly consequences.

Who is Legally Responsible for the Ghatkopar Incident

- **The government & the owners of the private structures** are legally responsible for the incident.
- **The Right of passage on a public pathway** makes several connected individuals liable for negligence in the Ghatkopar case, including
  - The owners of the land,
  - The agency that put up the structure and the line officials responsible for enforcement,
  - The civic officials and police who witnessed flagrant violation of rules but took no action, etc.
- **In 2022**, the Delhi HC, after fixing the liability of a public sector bank (BoB), granted compensation in a case where a man was struck by a sign board and the head injury led to his death.

What Needs To Be Done To Avoid Such Incidents

- **Governments have to show due diligence** to avert harm to citizens from official actions.
- **Capacity building** of the administrative machinery and **reducing corruption** at the administrative level.
- **Advent of digital boards** has brought with it the possibility of **moving displays**, opening up avenues for different advertisers to use the same screens to show messages, raising rents for hoardings companies.
- **The focus should be on strengthening disaster management** practices of municipalities to deal with the fallout in crowded cities.
  - **In the Mumbai incident**, the presence of a petrol pump prevented personnel from using gas cutters, thus reducing the efficiency of disaster management expertise.
- **As climate change is becoming a challenge**, the city governments need to review conventional ideas on giant outdoor open-sky hoardings put up close to human activity.

SC Terms Arrest of News Click Founder Under UAPA As "Illegal"

The Supreme Court (SC) invalidated the arrest of Newsclick founder-editor Prabir Purkayastha in a terror case and ordered his release as the Delhi Police failed to inform Purkayastha the grounds of his arrest before taking him into custody.

Background

- **The Arrest-** The Special Cell of Delhi Police arrested Purkayastha in October 2023 alleging violations of the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) and accusing Newsclick of receiving funds for "pro-China propaganda".
  - ✓ UAPA is the primary counter-terror law in India enacted in 1967 to outlaw and penalize unlawful and terrorist activities like aiding and abetting terrorists, funding terrorist activities, inciting anti-national feeling among masses, and other unlawful activities which pose a threat to the integrity and sovereignty of India.
- **Charges-** The Delhi Police charged him with following offences in the FIR: Sections 13 (unlawful activities), 16 (terrorist act), 17 (raising funds for terrorist acts), 18 (conspiracy), and 22(C) (offences by companies, trusts) of the UAPA, and Sections 153 A (promoting enmity between different groups) and 120B (criminal conspiracy) of the Indian Penal Code (IPC).
- **Remand Order**- Purkayastha was taken to a special judge's residence for a remand hearing without prior notice to him and his lawyers and an unsigned copy of the remand application was sent to his lawyers via WhatsApp without mentioning the time or grounds of arrest.
- **Petition against Remand Order-** was filed by Purkayastha in Delhi High Court (HC) where he claimed that his arrest was illegal as neither he was not informed about the grounds of arrest by the authorities until his arrest and remand nor the FIR filed against him was made available in the public domain, thus violating his fundamental right under Article 22(1) of the constitution and Supreme Court's ruling in *Pankaj Bansal v. Union of India and Others, 2023.*
  - ✓ **Article 22(1)-** It states that no arrested person can be detained in custody without being informed of the grounds for his arrest and be denied the right to consult, and to be defended by, a legal practitioner of his choice.
  - ✓ ***Pankaj Bansal v. Union of India and Others, 2023***- In this case, the SC gave true meaning to the constitutional and the statutory mandate of Section 19(1) of the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA) as it mandated- furnishing written grounds of arrest to the person arrested under PMLA as a matter of course and without exception. The case involved the owners of Gurgaon based realty group M3M- Pankaj Bansal and Basant Bansal who were arrested in 2023 in a money laundering probe linked to a bribery case against a former special judge.
    - ➢ PMLA was enacted in 2003 to- 1) prevent and control money laundering; 2) confiscate and seize the property obtained from such sources; and 3) deal with other issues related to money laundering in India.
- **Delhi HC's Verdict**- It upheld the Trial Court's decision to remand Prabir Purkayastha to police custody and held that the Pankaj Bansal (supra) is not squarely applicable to arrests made under the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA).
- **Petition in SC**- After the Delhi HC rejected Purkayastha's plea, he filed the present petition challenging his arrest and remand in the SC.

What Did The SC Rule

- ***No Significant Difference between Section 19(1) of PMLA and Section 43B of UAPA***- as the requirement to communicate the grounds of arrest is the same in both the statutes and both provisions find their source in the constitutional safeguard provided under Article 22(1) of the Constitution.

PMLA	*UAPA*
• Section 19 of PMLA deals with Enforcement Directorate's (ED) power to arrest an accused. • Section 19(1) states that an ED officer based on the material in his possession (recorded in writing) believes that a person is guilty of an offence under the PMLA then he can arrest that person provided that the written grounds of arrest are communicated to the accused as soon as possible.	• Section 43 A empowers an Officer authorized by the Central Government to arrest a person based on material available with him (in written) which proves that the person has committed an offence under UAPA. • Section 43B mandates furnishing of the grounds of arrest to an accused at the earliest. *** A remand order can be extended to 30 days instead of the standard 15, and the maximum duration of judicial custody before filing a chargesheet can be increased from the typical 90 days to 180 days.*

- ***Technicality Crucial for Granting Bail***- The court highlighted the importance of technicality in such cases as the bar for granting bail in stringent special legislations such as PMLA and UAPA is very high, making it virtually impossible to get bail and protection against unlawful arrests is important in stringent offences.
  - ✓ The SC in 2021 allowed bail under UAPA for the first time over inordinate delay in conducting trial.
- ***Differentiated Between the Meaning of 'Reasons of Arrest' And 'Grounds of Arrest'-*** The court held that 'reasons of arrest' relates to general parameters based on which a person had to be arrested, and 'Grounds of Arrest' requires the police to list out specific facts necessitating the arrest of the individual concerned, so that he/she could effectively oppose the plea for remand or seek bail. If the "grounds of arrest" are not communicated in writing, the right to life and personal liberty is violated making the arrest and detention illegal, despite repeated remand orders.

Significance of the Ruling

- **Sets Positive Precedent Regarding Arrests-** by declaring the detention of Newsclick founder illegal and paves way for strict adherence to constitutional rights during arrests.
- **Reaffirms the Importance of Due Process of Law-** by delineating its substantive role in safeguarding individual liberties against arbitrary state actions, the judgment upholds the rule of law and aims to protect human rights.
- **Extending Procedural Safeguards to UAPA is Crucial**- as the law gives the statewide powers to authorities i.e., from relaxing timelines in filing chargesheets to its stringent conditions for bail, when compared to Indian Penal Code (IPC).

Extra Mile: Supreme Court Limits ED's Powers to Arrest PMLA Accused

Recently, the Supreme Court (SC) held that the Directorate of Enforcement (ED) cannot arrest a person under PMLA after a special court has taken cognizance of the complaint of money laundering.

What Was The Case

- The court was hearing an appeal filed by Tarsem Lal who had challenged a Punjab and Haryana High Court order which denied him anticipatory bail in a PMLA case against him as the accused failed to meet one of the conditions outlined under *Section 45 of the PMLA*.
  - ✓ Section 45 of PMLA provides for **twin conditions** for granting bail to an accused in a money laundering case. Bail is granted only if the court is satisfied that-
    - *There are valid reasons to believe that the accused is innocent*
    - *The accused is not likely to commit an offence when on bail*

  **The burden of proof here lies entirely on the incarcerated accused, who would be often handicapped to fight the might of the state and these twin conditions make it almost impossible for an accused to get bail under the PMLA.

- Main question in this case before SC was whether an accused person would still need to apply for bail under Section 437 of the CrPC after appearing before the special court in response to a summons and whether the conditions under Section 45 of the PMLA would apply in the case or not.

What Did The SC Decide

- ***Gave a fillip to the Right to Personal Liberty*** by holding that a person summoned by a designated special court under PMLA is presumed to be not in custody and need not apply for bail under the draconian conditions posed by the anti-money laundering law.
- ***Limited the Powers of ED to Arrest*** by holding that ED cannot arrest a person after a special court has taken cognizance of his case and the ED would have to separately apply for his custody along with specific grounds that necessitated custodial interrogation once he appears in court.
- ***Direct the Accused to Furnish Bonds***: A special court can direct the accused to furnish bonds in terms of Section 88 of the Code of Criminal Procedure which is an undertaking. Such an order of accepting bond under Section 88 will not amount to grant of bail and therefore the twin conditions of Section 45 of the PMLA are not applicable to it.
- ***Exempted the Accused from Personal Appearance in Court*** in future if he appears in a special court pursuant to its summons. The court also emphasized that the accused does not need to meet the strict criteria for bail under Section 45 of PMLA when they voluntarily appear before the special court following the ED complaint. But if the accused does not appear after serving a summon then the special court could issue a bailable warrant against him followed by a non--bailable one.
- ***ED allowed to Arrest a Person not shown as Accused***: under Section 44(1)(b) of PMLA, if the ED wants to conduct a further investigation concerning the same offence, provided the requirements of Section 19 (procedures of arrest) under the Act were fulfilled.
  - ✓ Section 44(1)(b) empowers a Special Court to take cognizance of a money laundering offence upon receiving a complaint by ED without the accused being committed to it for trial.

Digital Arrest

Following increasing reports of "digital arrests" by cybercriminals posing as law enforcement officers, the central government has collaborated with Microsoft to block more than 1,000 Skype IDs used for online intimidation, blackmail, and extortion and has advised people to file a complaint immediately after an incident.

What Is Meant By Digital Arrest (Digital Confinement)

- Digital arrests are a type of sophisticated cyber fraud used by cyber-criminals where they impersonate law enforcement officials like police, Enforcement Directorate, CBI etc. to defraud gullible victims and extort money.
- The fraudsters in this case manipulate the victims to believe that they have committed some serious crime and threaten them with imminent arrest, legal consequences, or public humiliation for not cooperating with a series of urgent demands.
- They often force the victims to self-arrest themselves, by making them believe that they have been put under 'digital arrest' and cannot leave their house unless they pay up. Hence, the cyber criminals often force the naive victims to **self-arrest or self-quarantine** themselves.

What Are The Techniques Used In Digital Arrest

1. **Impersonation**: where the criminals pose as law enforcement, bank representatives, or other authoritative figures, using forged documents and spoofed phone numbers to create a convincing facade of legitimacy. (Artificial Intelligence (AI) is used to scare victims by mimicking the voices of their family members.)

2. **False Accusations**: where the victims are accused of involvement in illegal activities, money laundering, identity theft, or other serious crimes.
3. **Demands and Threats**: where the cybercriminals demand sensitive information like banking credentials, passwords, and personal identification details by threatening the victims of arrest, hefty fines, or the release of compromising information.
4. **Technological Trickery**: where fraudsters trick victims into downloading remote access software like TeamViewer or AnyDesk, and get extensive control over their devices. This can allow the criminals to monitor and steal the victim's sensitive information.
5. **Monitored 'Interrogation'**: where criminals insist the victims to have conversation with them over video calls to maintain their illusion of authority and monitor victims. They may threaten to fabricate and disseminate compromising evidence to extort large sums of money.

What Could Be The Possible Reasons For Growing Instances Of Digital Arrests

- ***Technological Sophistication:*** With the development of new technologies each day and artificial intelligence software, criminals can easily disguise identities, gain remote access, and evade detection emboldens criminals.
- ***Digital Payments:*** Switching to digital payment mode and online shopping, often leaves one vulnerable to data leak where the fraudsters can gain access to sensitive information like credit card and bank account details which can be further used for threatening the victims to extort money.
- ***Global Networks:*** Cyber criminals which operate across borders make the investigation process more complex leading to delayed prosecution. So, there is no fear of being prosecuted among the criminals in such cases.

What Could Be The Preventive Measures

- ***Verify Calls & Messages***: one should always verify the caller's identity, especially if it's claiming to be a bank or police. Banks don't obtain KYC or personal information through mobile phones; legitimate law enforcement agencies communicate through official channels only.
- ***Cyber Hygiene with Safeguarding Personal Information***: One should never share their personal information, like Aadhaar details, banking details or One Time Passwords with unknown persons or unverified emails.
- ***Exercising Caution with Video Calls***: Answering video calls from unknown phone numbers should be avoided. Fraudsters may misuse screenshots of video calls for extortion.
- **Not Paying Money Under Pressure**: Never transfer any money under coercion or pressure. No law enforcement officer will ask to transfer or deposit money while investigating a crime.
- **Staying Informed**: Keeping a constant vigil and familiarizing with the modus operandi of cybercriminals to protect yourself and educate others. On receipt of such calls, they should immediately report the incident on cybercrime helpline number **1930** or www.cybercrime.gov.in for assistance (or dial on 112).
- **Securing Social Media Accounts**: Enabling privacy settings on social media accounts to prevent public access to personal details, photos and videos and regularly changing the passwords of accounts may help.
- **Securing Electronic Devices & Browser Settings**: Strong firewalls, antispyware and antivirus software should be used in electronic devices and regular updates should be done. An updated version of the browser should be used, and safe browsing tools should be used for protection from hackers and malware.
- **Using Virtual Private Networks (VPNs):** VPNs should be used while accessing sensitive data for enhanced privacy and security purposes.
- **Monitoring Online Services-** Unauthorized access to bank accounts should be monitored on a regular basis to avoid falling prey to cybercrimes.
- **Against Phishing Attempts-** Never click suspicious links or attachments received in e-mail, text message or social media from unknown person. This may be an attempt to infect a computer with malware (Malicious Software).

✓ Phishing refers to an attempt to steal sensitive information, typically in the form of usernames, passwords, credit card numbers, bank account information or other important data in order to utilize or sell the stolen information.

What Measures Have Been Taken By The Government To Tackle Digital Arrests

- The Indian Cyber Crime Coordination Centre (I4C), under the Ministry of Home Affairs, coordinates activities related to combating cybercrime and closely works with other Ministries and their agencies, RBI and other organizations to counter these frauds.

✓ The Department of Telecommunications (DoT) has also issued an advisory to citizens.

- I4C provides input and technical support to Police Authorities of States/UTs for identifying and investigating the cases related to digital arrests. I4C is envisaged to act as the nodal point to curb Cybercrime in the country.
- It has blocked more than 1,000 Skype IDs involved in such activities, in collaboration with Microsoft and is also blocking SIM cards, Mobile devices and Mule accounts used by such fraudsters.

✓ Complaints have been registered on the National Cyber Crime Reporting Portal (NCRP), prompting the cyber wing to take action.

- It has also issued various alerts through infographics and videos on its social media platform 'CyberDost' on X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, Instagram and others.

✓CyberDost spreads awareness about cybercrimes.

Concerns Regarding ECI's Voter Turnout Data

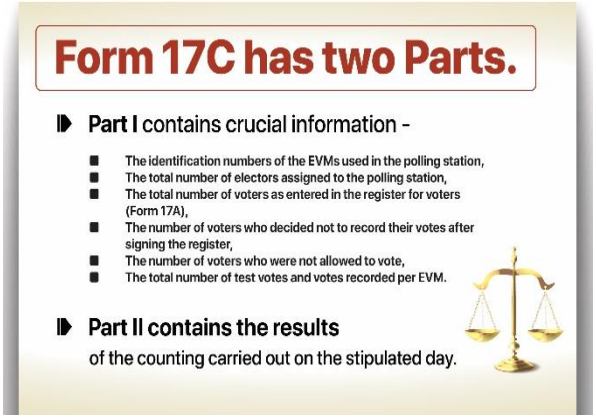
The Supreme Court (SC) recently while hearing an application filed by the NGO Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR) refused to issue directions to the Election Commission of India (ECI) to upload polling station-wise voter turnout data on its website within 48 hours of the conclusion of polling for each phase of the Lok Sabha elections.

✓The application was filed by ADR in its PIL pending in the court since 2019 seeking identical mandamus to ECI.

- **Voter turnout is a module of *ENCORE*** *(Enabling Communications on Real-time Environment)* that runs on the poll day.
- It involves the **data entry of a two hourly estimated poll percentage** through ENCORE.
    - **ENCORE** is an umbrella application of the ECI that **provides the facility to process and monitor the work related to conduct of elections** through a single portal.

Form 17C and Its Significance

- **As per the Conduct of Election Rules 1961**, the ECI has to maintain two forms - **Forms 17A and 17C** - that have data on the number of electors and the votes polled.
- While the **Form 17A** is used to record the **details** of every voter who comes into a polling booth and casts his or her vote, the **Form 17C** is an account of all the votes recorded.
- Under the 1961 Rules, **a presiding officer is mandated to furnish a copy of the entries made in Form 17C** to the polling agents of the candidates at the close of polling.
- The data in Form 17C is **used by candidates to verify the results** on counting day by matching it with the EVM count.
    - **In the event of any anomalies**, an election petition may also be filed with the relevant High Court.



What The ADR Petition Is Seeking From The SC?

- **The ADR is seeking a direction to the ECI** to upload polling station-wise voter turnout data on its website within 48 hours of the conclusion of polling for each phase of the Lok Sabha elections.
- According to the ADR, many times polling agents are not available at polling booths to obtain the Form 17C data.

What Is The ECI's Response To The Claims Of Disparities In The Voter Turnout Data

- In the hearing on the issue, the SC had asked why the EC could not upload voter turnout details.
- The ECI told the SC that there is **no "legal mandate"** to provide the Form 17C to any person other than the candidate or his agent.
    - However, it was the ECI's **voluntary and non-statutory initiative** to disclose the voter turnout through voter turnout app, website and various press releases.
    - **This was an initiative for transparency** at a national level as prior to the app, information was gathered in a decentralised manner from returning parties, polling agents, sector magistrates, etc.
- **The NGO had ignored the disclaimer** that figures in the "non-statutory Voter Turnout App" were **secondary and provisional data**.

What do Experts Say on the Claims of Disparities in the Voter Turnout Data?

- The ECI always discloses absolute numbers of voter turnouts. **However, this time they are only disclosing percentages.**
- Unlike this time, the turnouts are generally released within 24 hours of the end of polling.
- Also, the **increase in voter turnout in the final figures is unusually high this time**.
- To infuse more transparency to the electoral process, **the poll body should upload a scanned copy of Form 17C** as soon as it is submitted by the Presiding Officer.
    - This is because smaller political parties cannot afford to have polling agents in all booths or constituencies due to financial constraints.

What Did The SC Say

- *Refused to Issue Directions to ECI* to upload authenticated, scanned and legible copies of Form 17C as the elections to Lok Sabha were ongoing which require huge human resources and it did not want to divert the attention of the ECI in the middle of the elections.
- *Adjourned the Application*- unconditionally as the interim relief sought by ADR in its application for publication of voter turnout data in Form 17C was already part of relief ought in a petition pending since 2019.
- *All Related Petitions Adjourned*- The court adjourned the hearing on the pleas until after the court's summer recess as the country was in the midst of elections.

Extra Mile: Article 329(b)

The EC during the hearing of the ADR application invoked Article 329(b) of the Constitution to prevent SC from hearing the matter as it amounted to questioning the electoral process while it is still in process as the general elections are ongoing.

What is Article 329(b)?

Article 329 is related to the role of judiciary in electoral matters and Article 329(b) states that no election to either House of Parliament or to the House or either House of the Legislature of a State shall be called in question except by an election petition presented to the authority designated by a law.

✓ The Representation of the People Act (RPA), 1951 empowers the High Courts (HC) to hear and decide such election petitions. Although a decision in such petitions can be challenged in the SC.

Previous Judgements in Election Petitions

1. ***Ponnuswami v. Returning Officer Namakkal, 1952***- The SC held that the word "election" in Article 329(b) connotes the entire electoral process commencing with the issue of the notification calling the election and

culminating in the declaration of result; the electoral process once started could not be interfered with at any intermediary stage by courts through their writ jurisdiction.

2. ***Inderjit Barua vs Election Commission of India, 1985***- The court excluded electoral roll preparation from the definition of "election" and rejected any challenge to elections on the grounds of defects in electoral rolls.
3. ***K. Venkatachalam vs. A. Swamickan, 1999-*** The court determined that Article 329(b) is inapplicable if the matter pertains to Articles 191 and 193, which deal with disqualifications and penalties related to parliamentary and legislative assembly membership, respectively.
4. ***Hari Krishna Lal vs Atal Bihari Bajpai, 2002***- The court clarified that by merely filing a nomination paper, a person does not become a duly nominated candidate. He becomes a nominated candidate only when the EC recognizes him to be a valid candidate fulfilling all statutory obligations.
5. ***N.C. Patel vs State of Gujarat, 2007***- The Gujarat HC in this case affirmed that election petitions can only be filed under RPA 1951 and not by way of a writ petition.

Draft Digital Competition Bill 2024

Ministry of Corporate Affairs (MCA) has invited comments of stakeholders on Draft Digital Competition Bill 2024 by 15 May 2024.

✓ The proposed legislation is similar to European Union's (EU) **Digital Market Act (DMA)** that could stop tech giants like Google, Facebook, and Amazon from self-preferencing their own services, or using data gathered from one company to benefit another group company.

Digital Markets Act (DMA)

- It aims to make the digital market a fair and contestable place by establishing a set of rules which the *gatekeepers* must comply with.
  - ✓Gatekeepers are large digital platforms like Alphabet, Amazon, Apple, Meta, Microsoft, TikTok etc. providing core platform services, such as online search engines, app stores, messenger services.

Under the new law, consumers won't be forced into default choices for key services. Android users can now pick which search engine to use by default, while iPhone users will get to choose which browser will be their go-to and download apps outside its App Store. Microsoft, meanwhile, will stop forcing people to use its Edge browser.

About the Draft Digital Competition Bill 2024

It seeks to regulate large digital enterprises, including news aggregators to ensure contestability, competition, fairness and transparency and to foster innovation and protect the interest of users of digital services.

Evolution- The bill has been proposed by the Committee on Digital Competition Law, constituted by the Ministry of Corporate Affairs to review the existing regime under the Competition Act, 2002 and to evaluate the need for an ex-ante competition framework for digital markets in India.

Need

1. ***To Introduce "Ex-Ante" Competition Intervention in Digital Markets*:** Currently, India follows an *Ex-Post* regulation (antitrust framework) under the Competition Act, 2002 as per which investigations into incumbent players begin after a contravention has occurred. This is resource-intensive and time-consuming and may result in Large digital enterprises escaping timely scrutiny. Addressing such problems through an ex-ante digital competition law will lead to significantly increased administrative efficiency.
   - ✓*Ex-ante* regulation refers to proactive regulatory actions taken to prevent anti-competitive behavior before it occurs.

2. ***Anti-Competitive Practices:*** Last year, Google was fined Rs 1.337 crore by the CCI for its anti-competitive conduct in the Android ecosystem.
3. ***Limited Innovation due to High Market Barriers for Startups***: In the last decade or so, most of the innovation has been confined to a handful of big tech companies due to high market barriers for new entrants in the sector. For instance, once a company gets a significant portion of the online market, their product becomes the default way to access a particular service, with rivals finding it increasingly difficult to challenge their dominance.

Key Features-

1. **Systematically Significant Digital Entreprises (SSDE)-** The bill proposes that for certain "core digital services" like search engines, and social media sites, the Competition Commission of India (CCI) should designate an enterprise as a SSDE based on various quantitative and qualitative parameters such as turnover, user base, market influence etc.

Quantitative Parameters	*Qualitative Parameters*
An enterprise can be designated as a SSDE if in each of the immediately preceding three financial years, its: i) turnover in India is not less than INR 4000 crore; or ii) global turnover is not less than USD 30 billion; or iii) gross merchandise value in India is not less than INR 16000 crore; or iv) global market capitalization is not less than USD 75 billion, or its equivalent fair value is not less than USD 75 billion; and v) the core digital service provided by the enterprise has at least one crore end users; or at least ten thousand business users.	An enterprise can be designated as a SSDE if the Commission is of the opinion that such enterprise has significant presence in respect of such a Core Digital Service, based on any or all of the following factors of the enterprise: i) Its volume of commerce; ii) Its size, resources, users and economic power; iii) Monopoly position i.e. whether it's a government company/autonomous organization or PSU; iv) Market Structure; v) Barriers to entry or expansion including regulatory barriers, financial risk, high cost of entry, marketing costs, technical entry barriers etc.

2. Self-Reporting Obligation and Designation- If an enterprise meets the criteria required to be designated as an SSDE, it should notify the CCI within 90 days. It should also notify the CCI about other enterprises within the group the enterprise belongs to, which are directly or indirectly involved in provision of the Core Digital Service, as Associate Digital Enterprises. CCI then upon examining the application grant a SSDE status.

3. Associate Digital Enterprises (ADE)- If the CCI is considering whether to designate an enterprise as a SSDE, and such enterprise is a part of a group of enterprises directly or indirectly involved in Core Digital Services then the commission may designate them as ADE. They would have the same obligations as SSDEs depending on the level of their involvement with the core digital service offered by the main company. For example- Google Maps could be seen as an ADE because Google Search directs users to it.

4. Revocation- At any time after one year of being designated or re-designated, the SSDE may request the Commission to revoke its designation in respect of all or any Core Digital Services if there has been a significant change in market dynamics. The CCI should within 90 days either accept or reject the application.

5. **Obligations on SSDEs and ADEs**- Entities designated as SSDEs and ADEs have been prohibited from engaging in practices such as self-preferencing, anti-steering, tying and bundling, data usage and restricting third party applications. They should establish an effective and transparent complaint handling and compliance mechanism.

- ✓ Anti Steering refers to restricting users from directly or indirectly, communicating with or promoting offers to their end users, or directing their end users to their own- or third-party services.

- ✓ Tying and Bundling refers to incentivizing business users to use one or more of other products of the SSDE.
- ✓ Data Usage here refers to directly or indirectly, using or relying on *non-public data* of business users operating on its Core Digital Service for competition.

6. Inquiry- The Director General of CCI, based on information received or on the recommendation of the Central/State government investigate whether a SSDE or an ADE is in breach of the obligations. A show-cause notice is also issued to the SSDE giving it a reasonable opportunity of being heard. Upon completion of the inquiry, the commission may either close the case or direct the enterprise to discontinue and not to resume such conduct and provide in detail the measures taken by them for improvement; or impose a penalty;

7. Penalties- All sums realized by way of penalties, settlement, and recovery of legal costs by the Commission will be credited to the Consolidated Fund of India. The bill prescribes following penalties:

a.) For failure to comply with obligations, SSDEs/ADEs can be fined up to 10% of their global turnover in the preceding financial year.

b.) For providing incorrect/misleading information, SSDEs/ADEs can be fined up to one percent of their global turnover.

8. Appellate Tribunal: The Bill recommends constituting a separate bench of the National Company Law Appellate Tribunal (constituted under Companies Act 2013) for timely disposal of appeals received within 60 days of the order date. The Central/state Government or the Commission or any statutory authority or any enterprise or any person aggrieved by the decision of the Appellate Tribunal may file an appeal to the Supreme Court within sixty days from the date of such order.

9. Power of Central Government: The bill empowers the Central Government to issue directions to the commission & to exempt an enterprise from the application of one or more provisions of this Act-

a. in the interest of security of the State or public interest;
b. in accordance with any obligation assumed by India under any treaty, agreement or convention with any other country or countries.
c. if it performs a sovereign function on behalf of the Central Government or a State Government.

The Central Government may by notification with reasons specified therein, supersede the Commission (for not more than six months) if it is of the opinion that the commission is unable to discharge its functions but not without giving a reasonable opportunity to the Commission to present its case.

10. **Exclusion of Jurisdiction of Civil Courts**- No civil court shall have jurisdiction to entertain any suit or proceeding in respect of any matter related to this act.

Concerns Raised

1. **Compliance Burden-**
   - An ex-ante framework with its strict prescriptive norms could lead to significant compliance burden, and shift focus from innovation and research to ensuring that companies do not presumptively engage in an anti-competitive practice.
   - As a result, the tech giants are calling for the current competition law to be strengthened rather than moving towards an ex-ante framework.
2. **Potential Security Ramifications-** If the law is implemented, Apple will have to allow iPhone users to download. third-party apps from which the company has lobbied against vehemently. While Android's relatively open nature over iOS allows such 'sideloading' of apps, Google too has advocated against this change as these third-party apps can have potential security ramifications.
3. **The principle of 'caveat emptor':** The blanket prohibition on practices like self-preferencing and anti-steering does not consider the well-established and time-tested principle of 'caveat emptor' i.e., that the buyer needs to conduct the necessary checks and is ultimately responsible for their choices.
4. **Criteria for SSDE could lead to Arbitrary Decision Making-** To decide which enterprise can be designated as SSDE has been left to the discretion of the CCI. This could lead to arbitrary decision making, which could

potentially impact start-ups too. As if the companies start making changes to their platform to fit in the qualitative and quantitative criteria for SSDE and cut down on data sharing, it could impact smaller businesses who rely on their platforms to reach a big target audience.

5. **Threat to Innovation**- By banning pro-competitive activities such as self-preferencing or bundling products and services without allowing firms to justify their behavior could hinder innovation and harm consumers.
6. **Affects Future Investments in India**- By regulating international leading digital firms through this bill, future investments in India could be affected and India's relationship with countries like the US (home to big digital companies like Microsoft and Alphabet (Google)) could be strained

Extra Mile: Steps Taken by Indian Government to Regulate Large Digital Enterprises

1. *Competition Act, 2002*- Amended in 2023, this act aims to promote and sustain competition in markets, protect the interests of consumers and to ensure freedom of trade carried on by other participants in markets.
2. *Information Technology Rules, 2021*- aims to regulate news aggregators, online gaming intermediaries, publishers of news and current affairs content and online curated content, significant social media intermediaries and social media intermediaries.
3. *Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023*- deals with processing of digital personal data within the territory of India where the personal data is collected in digital form or in non-digital form and digitized subsequently, as well as outside India if such processing is in connection with any activity related to offering of goods or services to data principals within India. It excludes personal data which is processed by an individual for any personal or domestic purpose.
4. *Proposed Digital India Act*- proposes to regulate digital enterprises like social media websites, artificial intelligence-based platforms, and e-commerce enterprises.
5. *Consumer Protection Act, 2019*- aims to address unfair trade practices which are prejudicial to the interests of the public and of consumers and applies to e-commerce platforms.
6. *Draft E-Commerce Policy*- sought to build a facilitative regulatory environment for the growth of the e-commerce sector by empowering domestic entrepreneurs by addressing issues such as counterfeiting of products, piracy, prevention of sale of prohibited items, and strategies for consumer protection.
7. *Draft National Data Governance E-commerce*- released by Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) in 2022, this policy aims to have standardized data management and security standards for non-personal and anonymized data across all government bodies. It proposed sharing of any non-personal data to be done only through platforms authorized by the India Data Management Office ("IDMO").

Decade for Street Vendors Act

A decade has passed since the Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act came into effect in 2014.

Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act, 2014

It aims to protect the rights of urban street vendors and to regulate street vending activities by demarcating vending zones and laying out conditions and restrictions for street vending.

- ✓According to government estimates, street-vending accounts for 14% of the total (non-agricultural) urban informal employment in the country.
- ✓Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Karnataka, and West Bengal have established state-specific regulations for street vendors in accordance with the Street Vendors Act of 2014.

Need

1. ***Large Population***- There are an estimated 50-60 lakh street vendors in India, with the largest concentrations in Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, and Ahmedabad. Most of the street vendors are migrants working for 10–12 hours every day on average. The act will help in addressing their needs. (Uttar Pradesh leads with over 8 lakhs, followed by Madhya Pradesh with over 7 lakhs. + No street vendor has been identified in Sikkim)
2. ***Unrealistic License Caps-*** is a big problem in most of the cities which needs to be regulated. For instance, Mumbai has a ceiling of around 15,000 licenses as against an estimated 2.5 lakh vendors. This results in hawking goods illegally, making them vulnerable to exploitation and extortion by local police and municipal authorities.
3. ***Eviction Drives and Seizure of Goods***- Local bodies often conduct eviction drives to clear the pavements of encroachers, confiscate their goods and impose hefty fines. Fixed penalties and vendor friendly initiatives will help check this issue.

Key Provisions-

1. ***Street Vending***- Any person intending to undertake street vending needs to register with the Town Vending Committee (TVC) and then apply for a vending certificate.
   - ✓ It mandates that States/ULBs conduct surveys to identify SVs at least once every five years.
2. ***Town Vending Committee (TVC)***- is constituted under the act for (i) identifying street vendors; (ii) issuing vending certificates; and (iii) keeping vendor records. TVC consists of municipal commissioner as chairman and representatives of street vendors (should be at least 40%), local authority, planning authority, local police, resident welfare association and other traders' associations.
   - ✓ 1/3rd of members should women and due representation should be given to the Scheduled Castes, the Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Classes, minorities and persons with disabilities.
3. ***Conditions For Issuing Vending Certificates-*** Every street vendor shall give an undertaking to the Town Vending Committee prior to the issue of a certificate of vending that-
   a. he shall carry on the business of street vending himself or through any of his family member;
   b. he has no other means of livelihood;
   c. he shall not transfer (including rent), the certificate of vending or the place specified to any other person.
      - ✓ The certificate can be transferred to a family member until its expiry in case of the death of the certificate holder.
4. ***Rights of Street Vendors-*** includes right to carry on the business of street vending activities and right to have a new site in case of relocation.
5. ***Obligations***- the vendor should:
   a. remove his goods and wares at the end of his allotted time;
   b. maintain cleanliness and public hygiene in the vending zones and the adjoining areas;
   c. maintain civic amenities and public property in the vending zone in good condition;
   d. pay periodic maintenance charges.
6. ***Relocation and Eviction***- No street vendor shall be relocated or evicted by the local authority from the place specified in the vending certificate unless he has been given thirty days' notice and if he fails to vacate the place after the notice period then he is liable to pay a penalty.
7. ***Dispute Redressal Mechanism***- Every street vendor who has a grievance or dispute may make an application in writing to the committee consisting of a chairperson (a civil judge or a judicial magistrate) and two other professionals having experience for dealing such applications.
8. ***Plan for Street Vending***- The Local authority is required to make out a plan once in every 5 years, on the recommendation of TVC, to promote a supportive environment and adequate space for urban street vendors to carry out their vocation.

9. ***Penalty***- If any street vendor indulges in vending activities without a vending certificate or contravenes the terms of vending certificate, he shall be liable to a penalty of up to two thousand rupees.
10. ***Applicability***- The provisions of this Act shall not apply to any land, premises and trains owned and controlled by the Railways.

Challenges Faced By The Act-

1. ***Grievance Redressal Committees (GRCs)***- are yet to be established in all urban local bodies. GRCs have only been set up in 17 states, and that too, not in all urban local bodies of those states.
2. ***Increase in Harassment and Eviction-of Street*** vendors due to an outdated bureaucratic mindset which considers vendors as illegal entities that need to be cleared. (Cases of 'rangdari tax'/'hafta')
3. ***Lack of Awareness and Representation***- There is lack of awareness about the act among state authorities, public, and vendors themselves. TVCs often remain under the control of local city authorities, with limited representatives from street vendor associations. Women representation is also mostly tokenistic.
4. ***Weak Urban Governance Mechanisms***- The Act does not integrate well with the framework established by the 74th Constitutional Amendment Act for urban governance. Schemes like the Smart Cities Mission, laden with resources and pushed through as policy priorities mostly focus on infrastructure development and in this process, the inclusion of street vendors in city planning is ignored.
5. **Street vendors treated as Obstacles to Urban Development**- The prevailing image of the world class city tends to be exclusionary. It marginalizes and stigmatizes street vendors as obstacles to urban development instead of acknowledging them as legitimate contributors to the urban economy.

Way Forward

- ***Strong Need to Decentralize Interventions***- There is a strong need to decentralize interventions, enhance the capacities of Urban Local Bodies to plan for street vending in cities and move away from high-handed department-led actions to actual deliberative processes at the TVC level.
- ***Amendments in Urban Planning Schemes***- City planning guidelines, and policies need to be amended to include street vending and steps should be taken to tackle new challenges being faced by the street vendors such as the impact of climate change on vendors, a surge in the number of vendors, competition from e-commerce, and reduced incomes.
- ***Facilitate Innovative Measures***- Steps should be taken to take cognizance of changed realities and facilitate innovative measures for addressing needs of street vendors.

Extra Mile: Government Initiatives for Street Vendors

1. ***PM-SVANidhi***: The Prime Minister Street Vendor's Atma Nirbhar Nidhi (PM SVANidhi) is a micro credit scheme for urban street vendors launched by the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs (MoHUA) in 2020 to provide collateral-free working capital loans up to ₹50,000 to street vendors.
   - ✓ PM SVANidhi aims to link the eligible SVs to select central Govt. welfare schemes including Pradhan Mantri Jeevan Jyoti Bima Yojana, PM Suraksha Bima Yojana, Pradhan Mantri Shram Yogi Maandhan Yojana, Janani Suraksha Yojana, and Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana (PMMVY).
2. ***Support to Street Vendors under DAY-NULM***: The Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana-National Urban Livelihoods Mission (DAY-NULM) seeks to address the concerns of urban street vendors by facilitating them access to suitable spaces for vending, institutional credit, improved skills and social security linkages.
3. National Association of Street Vendors of India (NASVI) is an organization dedicated to safeguarding the livelihood rights of street vendors nationwide. It played key role to bring a national policy for Street Vendors and played a significant role to pass the law

4.***Skill Development Initiatives***: The Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship (MSDE) started an initiative in 2021 to upskill street food vendors by impart them skill training and make them eligible for e-cart licenses while improving the hygiene conditions in food preparation and aesthetics of vending.

Russia - China Summit

- Recently, President Vladimir Putin arrived in Beijing for a two-day state visit. During this visit, he met with President Xi Jinping.
  - This was Putin's first international visit since the start of his fifth presidential term.
- During this visit, both the leaders signed and issued a joint statement on deepening China-Russia comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination for a new era.

China – Russia Friendship

- **Relationship – Historical Background**
  - The relationship between China and the Soviet Union did not begin well.
    - When Chairman Mao Zedong visited Moscow after the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, he was made to wait for weeks for a meeting with Joseph Stalin.
  - During the Cold War, China and the USSR were rivals, competing for control of the global communist movement.
  - Tensions between the countries rose dangerously in the early 1960s, and they fought a brief border war in 1969.
  - The relationship began to **improve** after the death of Mao in 1976, but remained frosty right until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.
  - In the post-Cold War-era, economic relations have formed the new strategic basis for Sino-Russian relations.
    - China became Russia's biggest trading partner, and the largest Asian investor in Russia.
    - China views Russia as a powerhouse of raw material and a valuable market for its consumer goods.
  - The hostile approach of Western countries led by USA towards Russia after the annexation of Crimea in 2014 brought Moscow closer to Beijing.
- **Nature of Relationship**
  - As per the leaders of both the countries, the relations between China and Russia are not opportunistic, and are not directed against anyone.
  - President Xi said the China-Russia friendship was everlasting, and had become a model for a new type of international relations.
  - On the other hand, a White House spokesperson had said that the China-Russia relationship was a *marriage of convenience.*
- **Relationship Against the Backdrop of Ukraine War**
  - China and Russia signed a no-limits strategic partnership only days before Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24, 2022.
  - The Chinese role in the war has been a major concern for the West, led by US
    - The US believes China is supplying tech that Russia is using to build missiles, tanks, and other battlefield weapons.
    - Russian imports of machine tools, computer chips, and other dual-use items from China have increased significantly.

    - The sales of Chinese logistics equipment like lorries (to transport troops) and excavators (to dig trenches) to Russia have increased by four to seven times since the war began.
- **China – Russia Friendship: Concerns for India**
    - For New Delhi, the Russia-China defence axis throws up critical questions. About 60-70% of Indian defence supplies come from Russia, and India needs regular and reliable supplies.
        - This is crucial especially at a time when Indian and Chinese soldiers are locked in a standoff at the border for the last four years.
    - Experts in India are also worried about a scenario in which Russia becomes a "junior partner" of China.
    - Analysts claim that if war broke out between India and China, Russia's response would be uncertain.
        - During the 1962 war, Soviet Union did not support India. In contrast, Moscow backed India during the 1971 war.
        - However, today's Russia under Vladimir Putin is different from the old Soviet Union, and its stance might vary.

Death of Iranian President

- Iran's President Ebrahim Raisi, country's foreign minister and several other officials died in helicopter crashed in the country's northwest.
- Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said that First Vice President Mohammad Mokhber would take over as interim president.

Death of President of Iran - India's concern

- **Iran as part of its extended neighbourhood**
    - India, which considers Iran to be part of its extended neighbourhood, has been watching Iran's dynamics in the region quite closely and cautiously.
    - The assessment in Delhi is that the supreme leader Ali Khamenei being the most powerful player in the Iranian establishment is around.
    - Hence, the death of President Raisi will not create a political vacuum.
- **Iran's response after the war in Gaza**
    - Iran's response after the war in Gaza, and the Israeli attack on its consulate in Syria which killed a top Iranian military officer, was a direct attack on Israel in April 2024.
    - Israel being a close friend of India, India will be keenly watching these political development.
- **Iran's active support to some of the regional groups during Raisi's regime**
    - Iran's active support to some of the regional groups, often referred to as the 3Hs — Hezbollah, Houthis and the Hamas — is seen to have impacted the peace and stability in the region.
    - While Hezbollah has kept Israel busy on the northern border, the Houthis attacks on the ships passing through the Red Sea had disrupted the shipping sea routes for maritime trade.
- **India was actively engaging with Raisi's regime**
    - In August 2023, Prime Minister Narendra Modi met with President Raisi in Johannesburg on the sidelines of the BRICS Summit.
        - As a result, both the countries signed a long-term contract on Chabahar Port in May 2024.
    - External Affairs minister S Jaishankar had also engaged with Iranian Foreign Amir, that had been key to securing Indian interests.
        - The latest one being the release of Indian sailors who were on board a ship that was seized by the Iranian navy.

- **Various agreements between both the countries**
  - The two countries had signed a friendship treaty on March 15, 1950, and the visit of PM Vajpayee to Iran and the signing of the Tehran Declaration in April 2001.
  - However, the relationship was hampered by Delhi's proximity to the US, signing of the Indo-US nuclear deal, and Iran's nuclear programme faced sanctions.
    - India has not been able to buy oil since 2018, and managed to get a waiver on the Chabahar port citing access to Afghanistan as the key reason.
  - Earlier in May 2024, India signed a long-term agreement to further develop and operate one of the two terminals of the Chabahar port.
- The fact that India sent Vice President Jagdeep Dhankhar to Tehran to offer condolences shows that retaining the current momentum in ties remains a priority for New Delhi.

Authority of the President in Iran

- **Role of President**
  - Iran's President works under the authority of the Supreme Leader but is still a powerful figure in Iran's political system.
  - The President mediates between the legislature and the executive, and appoints ministers and vice presidents.
  - The President also makes key foreign policy decisions. Then President Hassan Rouhani acted with significant authority during the JCPOA negotiations.
    - The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), also known as the Iran nuclear deal, is an agreement signed in July 2015 between Iran and the P5+1.
    - The agreement limits Iran's nuclear program in exchange for sanctions relief.
  - The Iranian President's authority is superseded only in the event of a clash between him and the Supreme Leader.
- **Major Achievements of Ibrahim Raisi as a President**
  - Iran-Saudi deal, brokered by China.
  - Raised the pitch for **an 'Axis of Resistance'**,
    - It is an informal, Iran-led political-military coalition comprising the Islamic resistance in Iraq, the Syrian government, the Lebanese Hezbollah, Yemeni Houthis, and Palestinian groups including Hamas.

China Reclaims India's Top Trading Partner Tag

- China has emerged as the largest trading partner of India with ***USD 118.4 billion*** *two-way commerce in 2023-24*, narrowly overtaking the US (India-US two-way trade came in at $118.3 billion in FY24).
  - The US was India's top trading partner during FY22 and FY23 after China was the top bilateral trading partner in FY21.
- This has been revealed by the data released by the think tank **Global Trade Research Initiative (GTRI).**

Bilateral Trade Between India and China

- **Statistics**
  - India's bilateral trade with China in FY24 stood at $118.4 billion.
  - India's imports increased by 3.24 per cent to **$101.7 billion** and exports rose by 8.7 per cent to **$16.67 billion** in FY24 compared to FY23.
- **Surge in imports for China in recent years**

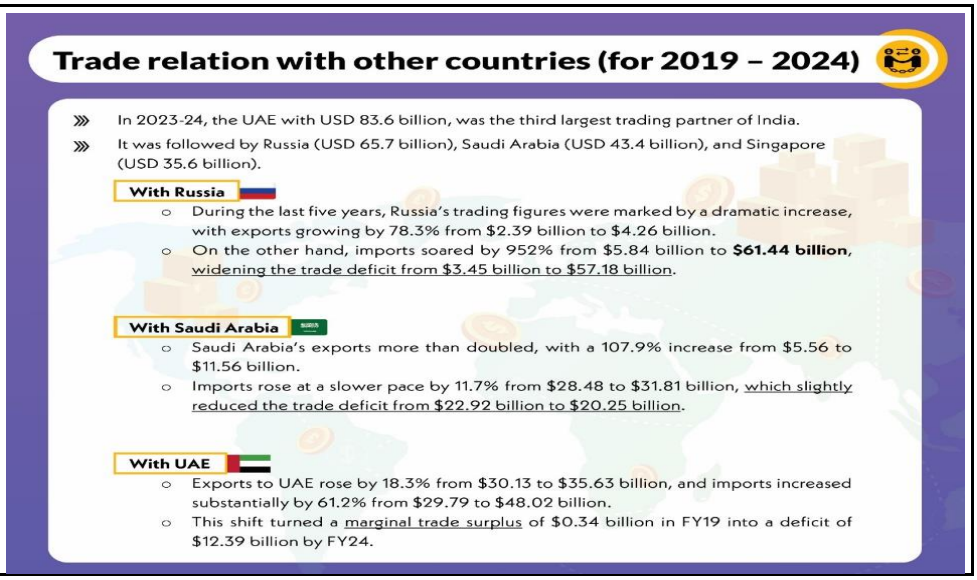
- Between FY19 and FY24, India's exports to China witnessed a marginal decline by 0.6 per cent, down from $16.75 billion.
- However, during the same period, imports from China surged by 44.7%, up from $70.32 billion

- **Major Imports from China to India**
  - Electrical, electronic equipment, engineering goods, chemicals and related products, telecom equipment, organic chemicals and fertilizers, plastics, other manufacturing goods and textiles.
- **Major Exports from India to China**
  - Engineering goods, agricultural and allied products, **ores and minerals (**copper, aluminum), cotton, diamonds/natural gems, chemicals and related products, Petroleum & crude products etc.
- **Existing trade deficit**
  - The balance of trade is highly tilted in favour of China.
  - The growth in imports from China led to an expanding trade deficit, rising from USD 53.57 billion in FY2019 to **USD 85.09 billion in FY2024**.
- **Reasons behind high trade deficit**
  - **India imports goods to fill Gap between domestic production & demand for various products**
  - **Export of raw materials while importing finished goods**
  - **India's pharmaceutical industry imports about 68% of its active pharmaceutical ingredients (APIs) from China.**
  - **Other factors**
    - A narrow basket of commodities, mostly primary, that India exports to China.
    - Market access impediments for most Indian agricultural products and competitive markets, such as pharmaceuticals, IT/ITES etc.
- **Strategic implications of widening trade deficit**
  - India's trade relations with China have been under scrutiny largely due to India's dependence on the neighbouring country's critical products.
    - These products include telecom & smartphone parts, pharma, advanced technology components among others.
    - It should be noted that China is the top supplier in eight major industrial sectors, including machinery, chemicals, pharmaceuticals, and textiles.
  - In the fast-emerging EV sector too, India's dependence on China is high as lithium-ion batteries for EVs are imported from China.
    - These were valued at $2.2 billion, comprising 75 per cent of such imports, and are critical for India's electrification of transport.
  - The strategic implications of this dependency are profound and affects not only economic but national security dimensions.
  - Now, India has undertaken significant measures to decrease its dependence on China through production linked incentive schemes (PLI), anti-dumping duties along with quality control orders.

India – US Bilateral Trade

- **Statistics:** India-US two-way trade came in at $118.3 billion in FY24 after exports dipped by 1.32% to **$77.5** billion compared to FY 23.
  - During this period, imports also dipped 20% to **$40.8 billion**.
- **Recent trend:** During the last five years, trade with the US showed positive growth, with exports increasing significantly by 47.9 per cent from $52.41 billion.
  - Imports from the US grew by 14.7 per cent, rising from $35.55 billion.

- This resulted in an **expanded trade surplus for India**, which grew from $16.86 billion to $36.74 billion.



Russia To Channel Rupee Balance

RBI has allowed Russian entities to invest their rupee balance in various options like government securities, bonds, equity & loans. This may soon end Russia's struggles with payments to India.

Increasing Bilateral Trade Between India And Russia

- **Trade statistics**
  - Russia is now India's second largest import source, after China, surpassing UAE and US.
  - In 2023-24, India's imports from Russia increased 32.95% to $ 61.44 billion, while its exports were at $4.26 billion, creating a trade deficit of **$ 57.18 billion**.
  - Most of India's import from Russia comprises oil, but there are also imports of defence equipment, fertilisers, edible fats and oil and precious and semi-precious stones and jewellery.
  - While payment for defence equipment was largely in rupee, payment for Russian oil was taking place in other currencies.
- **Reasons behind the increase in bilateral trade**
  - Since the start of Ukraine war on February 24, 2022, Moscow has been hit by Western banking and economic sanctions.
  - Against this backdrop, it found a ready market for its goods, especially crude oil, in India and offered steep discounts.
    - Russia is now the largest supplier of oil to India, displacing traditional players such as Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and UAE.
  - India, unlike the West, chose to not join the list of countries formally imposing sanctions on Moscow.
- **Existing payment settlement mechanism between India and Russia**

- India and Russia put in place a **rupee payment system** to circumvent the Western countries' banking and economic sanctions against Russia following its attack on Ukraine.
- Under the mechanism, a number of Russian banks, opened their **rupee vostro accounts** with authorised dealer banks in India for enabling rupee trade between the two countries.
  - A Vostro account is a bank account that a correspondent bank holds on behalf of another bank, often a foreign bank.
  - In this context, a rupee vostro account is a special account that authorized Indian banks to open and maintain for the banks of their partner trading countries.

Payment Issues Faced By India And Russia

- **Dollar and existing channel like SWIFT were not an option**
  - As part of war-induced sanctions on Moscow, the U.S., the EU, and the U.K. have blocked multiple Russian banks from accessing the *Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication (SWIFT).*
    - SWIFT is a global secure interbank system whose primary function is to facilitate the secure exchange of financial messages between banks and other financial institutions.
    - These messages typically involve instructions for transferring funds, such as payment orders, securities trading information, and other types of financial transactions.
  - The West had targeted one of its biggest traded goods — energy — for which transactions have traditionally been dollar-dependent.
    - Western countries did so by imposing a price cap of $60 per barrel.
  - While India is not a formal signatory, it has tacitly agreed to maintain the price cap as much as possible.
- **Challenges to rupee-rouble mechanism**
  - This mechanism was considered as an alternative payment mechanism to settle dues in rupees instead of dollars or euros. However, as per the reports, this mechanism could not take off due to factors. This includes:
    - scepticism on the rupee-rouble convertibility as the rouble's value is kept up by capital controls and not determined by the market.
    - Russia finds the rupee to be volatile.
  - The unforeseen surge in oil trade between India and Russia in one year alone has led to a massively ballooning trade deficit.
    - **India's trade deficit with Russia touched $43 billion in 2022-23**.
    - India imported goods worth $49.35 billion while its exports were at $3.14 billion.
  - This has led to staggering amounts of Indian rupees in Russian banks that cannot be used by Russia in its war efforts.

WTO's Agreement on Agriculture (AoA)

The US and Australia have contended that India has provided sugarcane subsidy beyond the limits set out in the WTO's Agreement on Agriculture (AoA), which may have distorted global trade.

WTO's Agreement on Agriculture (AoA)

- **The AoA is an international treaty** of the WTO, negotiated during the **Uruguay Round of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT)**.
  - It entered into force with the establishment of the WTO on **1 January 1995**.
- It includes the classification of" **subsidies" by "boxes"** depending on consequences of production and trade:

Amber Box	• These can **distort international trade** by making a country's products cheaper in comparison to those of other countries. • E.g: **Subsidies** for inputs (fertilisers, seeds, electricity, irrigation), Minimum Support Price (MSP). • Members must keep their amber box support within 5-10% of their value of production. (Di Minimus Clause) 10% for developing countries | 5% for developed countries
Blue box	• Any support that would normally be in the amber box is placed in the blue box if it **requires farmers to limit production.** • These subsidies aim to limit production by imposing production quotas or requiring farmers to set aside part of their land. • At present there are **no limits** on spending on these subsidies.
Green Box	• Green Box is domestic support measures that **don't cause trade distortion** or at most cause minimal distortion. These are govt. funded without any price support to crops. ▪ Eg. environmental and conservation programs, research funding, inspection programs, domestic food aid including food stamps, and disaster relief. • These are therefore allowed without limits (except in certain circumstances).

- However, **all must comply with the fundamental requirement:**
  - To cause not more than minimal distortion of trade or production, and
  - **Must be provided through a government-funded programme** that does not involve transfers from consumers or price support to producers.

The AoA Consists of Three Pillars

Domestic support	1.AoA divides domestic support into **two categories:** trade-distorting and non-trade-distorting (or minimally trade-distorting). Its classification includes *green, blue and amber boxex* 2.The system currently allows Europe and the US to spend $380 billion a year on agricultural subsidies. **3.These subsidies end up flooding global markets** with below-cost commodities, depressing prices, and undercutting producers in poor countries, a practice known as **dumping**.
Market access	Market access refers to the reduction of tariff (or non-tariff) barriers to trade by WTO members. The AoA consists of tariff reductions of: 1.36% average reduction — **developed countries** — with a minimum of 15% per-tariff line reduction in next six years. 2.24% average reduction — **developing countries** — with a minimum of 10% per-tariff line reduction in next ten years. **3.Least developed countries (LDCs) were exempt from tariff reductions**. But they either had to convert non-tariff barriers to tariffs or "bind" their tariffs, creating a ceiling that could not be increased in future.
Export subsidies	1.It requires **developed** countries to reduce export subsidies by at least 36% (by value) or by 21% (by volume) over six years. 2.For **developing** countries, the agreement required cuts were 24% (by value) and 14% (by volume) over ten years.

Concerns Raised About India's Sugarcane Subsidies

- **US-Australia Report**
  - It argued that during all the four years (2018-19 to 2021-22) **India's sugar subsidies crossed 90% of the value of production against the permissible level of 10%.**
  - However, for calculating subsidy (**Aggregate Measurement of Support [AMS])** levels, the report referred to the methodology recommended by a WTO panel that had ruled against Indian sugar subsidies in 2021.
    - AMS is a trade distorting (amber box) subsidy. Since it distorts trade, the AMS is categorized as a 'reducible', 'non permissible' or 'non-exempted' subsidy.
    - The AMS consists of two parts—**product-specific subsidies** and **non-product specific subsidies**.

- Product-specific subsidy refers to the total level of support provided for each individual agricultural commodity. E.g., wheat AMS is the subsidy given specifically to wheat.
- Non-product specific subsidy, refers to the total level of support given to the agricultural sector as a whole, i.e., subsidies on inputs such as fertilizers, electricity, irrigation, seeds, credit etc.

- **India's Stand**
  - Each sugar season, India sets the **Fair and Remunerative Price (FRP)** for sugarcane.
  - The FRP is an administered price that effectively acts as a floor price for sugar mills to pay farmers for sugarcane.
  - In addition, farmers are paid premiums for increased production efficiency, and farmers in some States are eligible for additional payments by sugar mills under specific State-level support, known as **State-Advised Prices (SAPs)**.
  - In its appeal against the WTO panel report of 2021, **India argued that the panel had erred in finding that the country's FRP and SAP constituted market price support under the AoA.**
- **2021 Panel Report could not be adopted**
  - The US-Australia report said India's appeal prevented the panel report from being adopted by the WTO Dispute Settlement Body.
  - As the Appellate Body of the WTO is not functional because of non-appointment of members, no decisions on appeals can be taken till it starts functioning again.

NIA's Allegations Against NSCN

- In March 2024, the National Investigation Agency (NIA) filed a charge sheet in a court in Guwahati.
- The charge sheet accuses the China-Myanmar module of the Isak-Muivah (IM) of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN).
- According to NIA, this group is helping members of 2 banned Meitei outfits to infiltrate India.
  - These outfits are: People's Liberation Army (PLA) and Kanglei Yaol Kanba Lup (KYKL).

Key Highlights of the Charge Sheet Filed by NIA Accusing NSCN

- It is the first official statement of links between the NSCN-IM and Imphal valley-based insurgent groups during the current ethnic crisis.
  - In May 2023, ethnic violence erupted in Manipur between the **Meitei** people, a majority that lives in the Imphal Valley, and the **Kuki-Zo** tribal community from the surrounding hills.
  - Tensions boiled over when Kukis began protesting against demands from the Meiteis to be given official tribal status.
  - The Kukis argued that this would strengthen their already strong influence on government and society, allowing them to buy land or settle in predominantly Kuki areas.
- The NIA said the accused criminally conspired with intent to carry out violent terror attacks targeting the rival Kuki-Zo community with prohibited arms.
  - These arms and ammunition were looted from various government sources.

Main Ethnic Groupings of Manipur

- The Meitei, Naga and Kuki-Zomi-Mizo are the three main ethnic groupings in Manipur.
- Meiteis (largest community), account for about 53% of State's total population of 27.21 lakh (2011 Census).
- Nagas and the Kuki-Zo which are categorised into 34 Scheduled Tribes constitute 17% and 26% of the population respectively.

Insurgency in Manipur

About: There is an ongoing armed conflict between India and a number of separatist rebel groups in Manipur.

- This insurgency in Manipur is part of the wider Insurgency in Northeast India which combines elements of a national liberation war as well as an ethnic conflict.

Historical background

- Following the brief Anglo-Manipur War of 1891, the Kingdom of Manipur was conquered by Britain.
  - After this war, Manipur kingdom became a British protectorate.
- Manipur became a part of India in October 1949 and became a separate state in 1972.

Rise of insurgency

- Manipur's incorporation into the Indian state led to the formation of a number of insurgent organisations.
  - These groups demanded the creation of an independent state within the borders of Manipur, and dismissed the merger with India as involuntary.
- The insurgency problem in Manipur came into existence in the late 1960s and 1970s.
  - There was no problem of insurgency when Manipur merged into India.
- The first separatist faction, United National Liberation Front (UNLF), was founded in November 1964.
- Later, the insurgency took another form when the Kuki-Naga clashes started to take place in the 1990s where hundreds were killed.
  - The clashes and killings happened after the NSCN demanded that Kuki-Zo-inhabited areas be included in its proposed '**Greater Nagaland'** project in the 1980s.
- The insurgent groups demanded an independent land for the Kuki-Zo people.

Are there other active insurgent groups?

- There are nearly 30 Kuki insurgent groups in Manipur, of which 25 are under tripartite Suspension of Operations (SoO) with the Government of India and the state.
  - In 2008, 24 Kuki-Zo insurgent groups under the umbrella of the United Peoples' Front (UPF) and the Kuki National Organisation (KNO) signed a tripartite SoO pact with the MHA and the Manipur government.
- In February 2024, when the pact came up for an annual extension, the Manipur government refused to send a representative.
  - Manipur Chief Minister N. Biren Singh has accused the groups of violating the ground rules and instigating violence in the State.

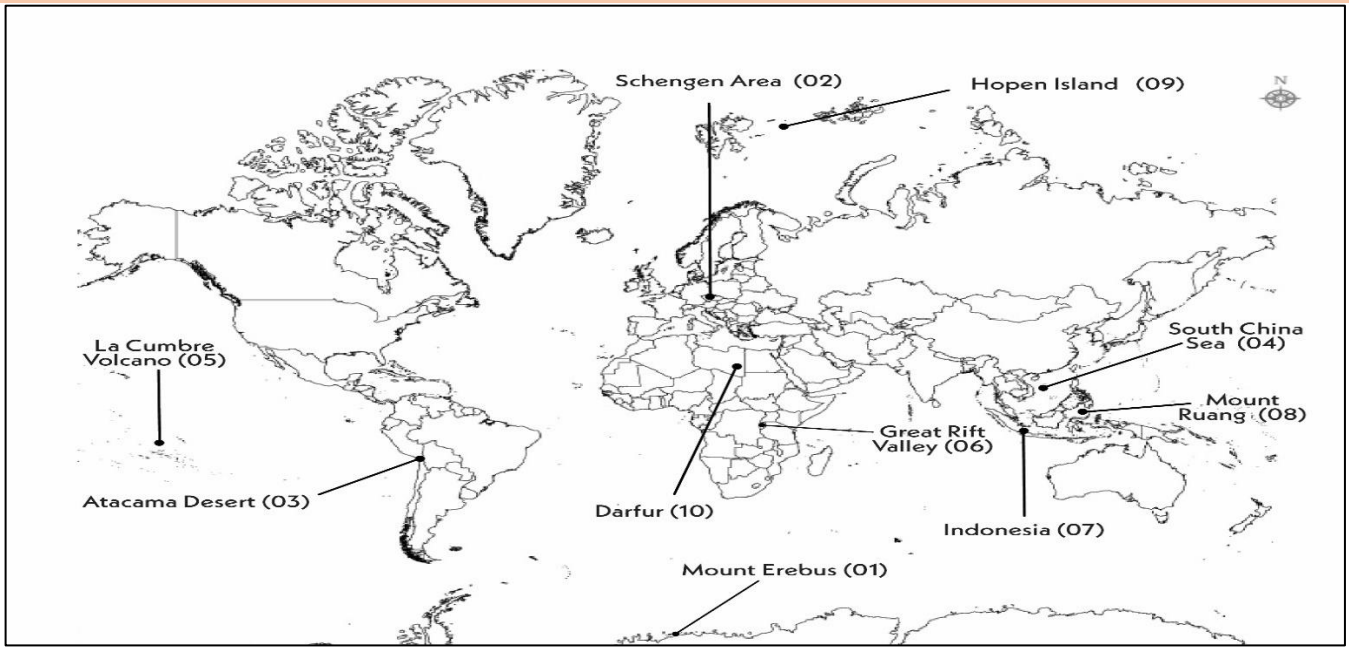
Naga Insurgency

- **Background**:
  - The Naga National Council (NNC) was formed in April 1946 to carry out social and political upliftment of the Nagas.
  - After the return of the radical leader of Naga cause, Angami Zapu Phizo**,** from Burma in 1947, the faction of NNC demanding full impendence grew strong.
- **Shillong Accord and the split of NNC**
  - The Shillong Accord was signed in 1975 by Government of India with a section of the NNC leaders.
  - As part of the accord, the leaders agreed to abjure violence and work towards the solution of the Naga problem within the framework of the Indian Constitution.
  - It was opposed by Phizo, Isak Swu and Muivah. Later, Isak Swu and Muivah formed the "National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN)" in January 1980.
  - Later, NSCN split into two factions, namely NCSN (I-M) led by Isak & Muivah and NCSN (K) led by Khaplang.

- **Demand for Greater Nagaland:** The NSCN-IM, has been demanding:
  - 'Greater Nagaland,' an extension of Nagaland's borders by including Naga-dominated areas in neighbouring Assam, Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh, to unite more than 1.2 million Nagas,
  - a separate flag and
  - a constitution.
- **Naga Peace Accord:** Since 1997, NSCN (I-M) has been involved in negotiations with the Government of India and signed many ceasefire agreements.
- **2015 Framework Agreement** (FA): On August 3, 2015, the Centre signed a framework agreement (FA) with the NSCN (I-M) to resolve the Naga issue. The agreement was only a framework, with many details still to be hammered out.
  - Talks were being held regularly to chart out the finer details of the FA.
  - In June 2022, talks broke down after the NSCN accused the interlocuter appointed by the Centre of excluding three political points.

MAPS: PLACES IN NEWS

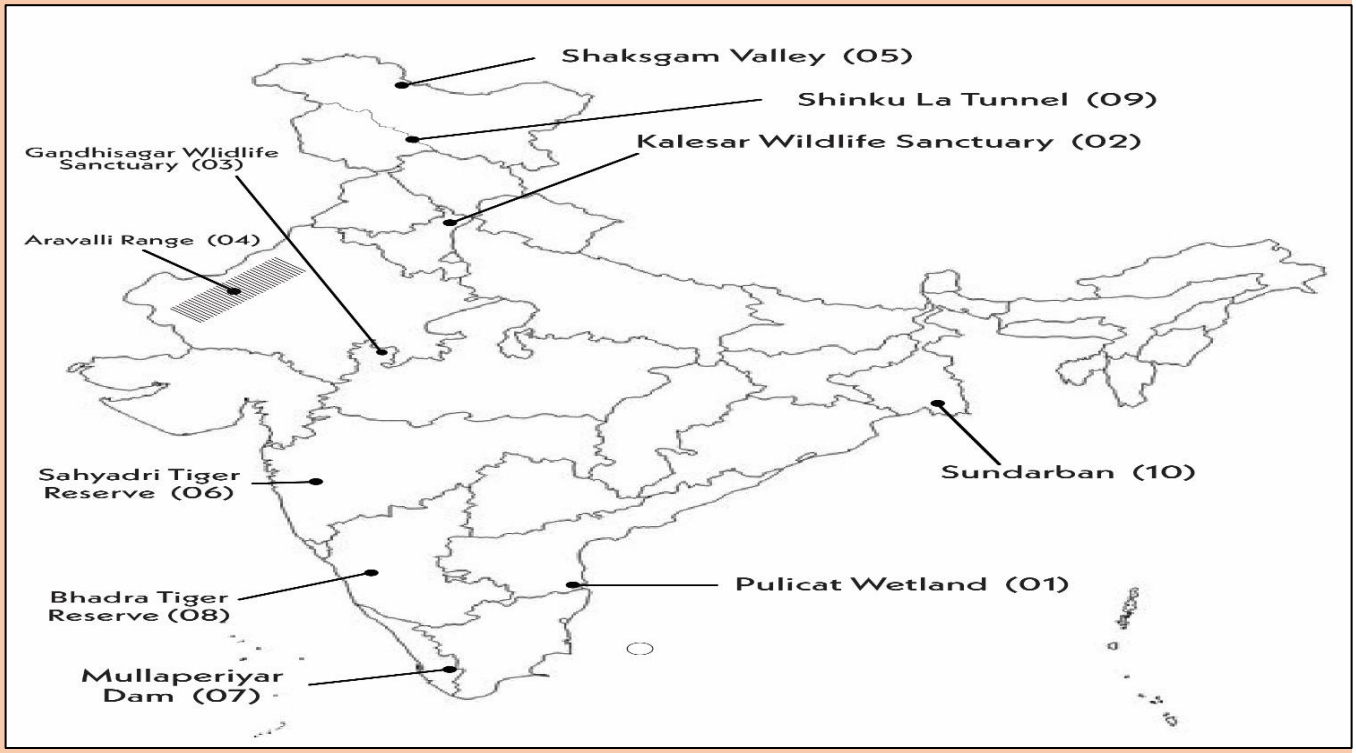
International Places in News



1.	**Mount Erebus**	Mount Erebus, located in Antarctica, is spewing out approximately 80 grams of gold worth $6000 daily. It is situated on Ross Island, Antarctica. It's a strato-volcano, characterized by a conical shape and layers of hardened lava.
2.	**Schengen Area:**	Indian nationals can now obtain long-term multi-entry Schengen visas with a validity of two years, provided they have lawfully used two visas within the previous three years. It is the world's largest free travel area, encompassing 27 countries. This includes 23 of the 27 EU members and all members of the European Free Trade Association (Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway, and Switzerland)
3.	**Atacama Desert:**	Researchers have found microbes thriving 13 feet beneath the scorched surface of Chile's Atacama Desert. The Atacama Desert is the driest hot desert in the world located in Chile in the Yungay Valley. Argentina, Peru, and Bolivia border the Atacama Desert.
4.	**South China Sea:**	Second Thomas Shoal (located near the Spratly Islands) is a submerged reef in the South China Sea. The shoal is within the Philippines' exclusive economic zone (EEZ) but is also claimed by China. It is a vast area of the western Pacific Ocean, stretching from Singapore and the Strait of Malacca in the southwest to the Strait of Taiwan in the northeast. It is a region of significant geopolitical tension due to various territorial disputes.
5.	**La Cumbre volcano:**	La Cumbre is a shield volcano on Fernandina Island in the Galápagos Islands. Volcanic emissions from Galápagos volcanoes are typically rich in sulfur dioxide and have little ash. The La Cumbre volcano is located around 1,125 kilometres off mainland Ecuador.
6.	**Great Rift Valley:**	At least 42 people died when a dam burst its banks near a town in Kenya's Rift Valley, as heavy rains and floods battered the country recently. The Great Rift Valley is a series of contiguous geographic trenches, that runs from Lebanon in Asia to Mozambique in Southeast Africa. There are deep, elongated lakes known as ribbon lakes, such as Lake Malawi and Lake Tanganyika.

7.	**Indonesia:**	India and Indonesia celebrate 75 years of diplomatic ties, forged by the Treaty of Friendship in 1951. Both nations were part of the Bandung Conference in 1955, leading to the Non-Aligned Movement. They established a Strategic Partnership in 2005, later elevating it to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.
8.	**Mount Ruang:**	Indonesia's Mount Ruang volcano recently erupted, triggering the highest level of alert. Indonesia is home to many volcanoes due to its location along the Pacific Ring of Fire, where several tectonic plates meet and interact. This convergence creates intense geological activity, including the subduction of oceanic plates beneath continental plates, which leads to volcanic eruptions.
9.	**Hopen island:**	The first case of a walrus dying from bird flu was recorded on Hopen Island in the Svalbard archipelago (Norway). However, it's unclear whether it was the H5N1 or H5N8 strain, and there's a possibility that other walruses found also had bird flu. Hopen island was discovered in 1596 during Willem Barentsz's expedition.
10.	**Darfur:**	The UN warns of imminent starvation in Darfur, Sudan, as escalating violence worsens the country's hunger crisis. Civil war since April 2023 has led to a devastating humanitarian situation, with people resorting to eating "grass and peanut shells" to survive, according to the World Food Programme. It is a region in western Sudan that has been plagued by violent conflict and humanitarian crises. The area has experienced ethnic tensions between Arab and African communities, leading to widespread violence and human rights abuses.

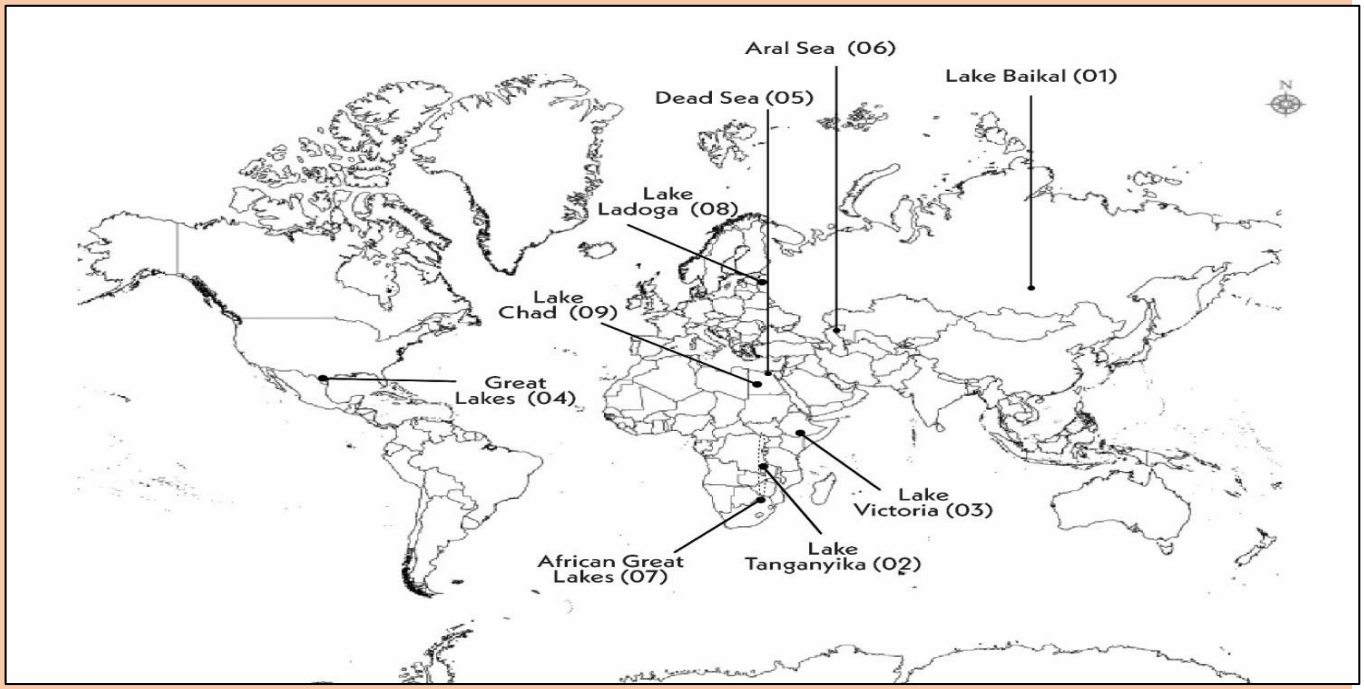
National Places in News



1.	**Pulicat Wetland:**	Recently, there was a concern arising from the fact that the State government plans to denotify a sizable area of the Pulicat wetland and sanctuary. It is located in the northern part of Tamil Nadu and the southern part of Andhra Pradesh. It is the second-largest brackish water ecosystem in India. The Pulicat Ecosystem supports a

		very rich and diverse biota and acts as a breeding ground for several species of bird and marine life.
2.	**Kalesar Wildlife Sanctuary:**	The Supreme Court has halted the construction of four dams inside Haryana's Kalesar Wildlife Sanctuary, citing concerns about its negative impact on wildlife and the ecosystem. It lies within the Shivalik foothills of Himalayas. Its name derives from the Kalesar forest and Kalesar Mahadev temple situated within its bounds. Bounded by Yamuna River to the east, it shares borders with Rajaji National Park to the northeast
3.	**Gandhisagar Wlidlife Sanctuary:**	South African delegation recently visited the Gandhi Sagar Wildlife Sanctuary in Madhya Pradesh to assess its readiness for the release of five to eight cheetahs later this year. The Gandhi Sagar Wildlife Sanctuary is situated on the northern boundary of Mandsaur and Nimach districts in Madhya Pradesh. It shares its border with the state of Rajasthan.
4.	**Aravalli Range:**	The Supreme Court recently said that illegal mining in the Aravalli range in Rajasthan must stop. The Aravalli Range, stretching in a northeastern direction, traverses the Indian states of Gujarat, Rajasthan, and Haryana before culminating in Delhi, is the oldest mountain range in India.
5.	**Shaksgam Valley:**	India has registered its protest against China's "illegal attempts" to build a road into the lower Shaksgam valley in the Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK). The Shaksgam Valley or the Trans Karakoram Tract is part of Hunza-Gilgit region of Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK), and is a disputed territory claimed by India but controlled by Pakistan.
6.	**Sahyadri Tiger Reserve:**	The Maharashtra forest department is gearing up for translocation of a few tigers from the Tadoba-Andhari Tiger Reserve (TATR) in Chandrapur to Sahyadri. The Sahyadri Tiger Reserve (STR) is located in the Sahyadri Ranges of Western Ghats in Maharashtra. These ranges form a common boundary between Maharashtra, Karnataka and Goa, and consist of rich evergreen, semi-evergreen and moist deciduous forests.
7.	**Mullaperiyar dam:**	Tamil Nadu accuses Kerala of obstructing Mullaperiyar dam work while expressing safety concerns. Kerala allegedly delays routine maintenance, hindering strengthening efforts. TheMullaperiyar Dam, a 126-year-old structure in Kerala's Idukki district, is owned and maintained by Tamil Nadu for various purposes like irrigation and hydro-power. Disputes over its safety and water levels have led to ongoing litigation.
8	**Bhadra Tiger Reserve:**	Bhadra Tiger Reserve in Chikkamagaluru is attracting more tourists, scientists, and photographers. Situated in the Western Ghats region of Karnataka, Bhadra Tiger Reserve is unique for being nestled within several hill ranges. It has served as both an Elephant Reserve and the 25th Project Tiger Reserve of India since 1998, boasting a substantial tiger population.
9	**Shinku La tunnel:**	The Border Roads Organisation (BRO) is set to begin work on the Shinku La tunnel, which will be the world's highest, facilitating all-weather connectivity from Manali to Leh. The tunnel will be the world's highest tunnel at 15,800 ft, surpassing China's Mila tunnel. Spanning 4.1 km along the Nimmu-Padam-Darcha route, it will provide all-weather connectivity from Manali to Leh, cutting the distance by 60 km.
10	**Sundarban:**	Air pollution from Kolkata and the Indo-Gangetic Plain threatens the Sundarbans mangrove ecosystem, revealed a recent study. Sundarbans is a mangrove area, in the delta region formed by the confluence of the Ganges, Brahmaputra and Meghna Rivers in the Bay of Bengal.

Major Lakes in World

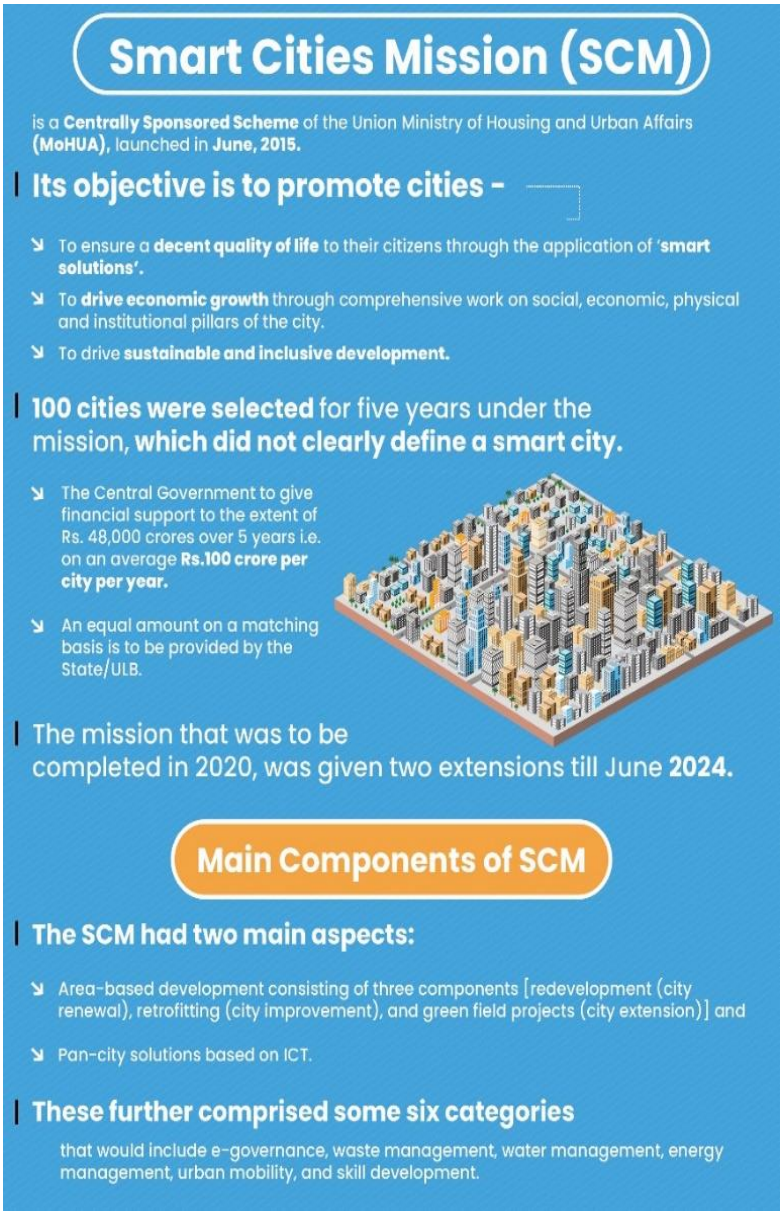


1.	**Lake Baikal:**	Located in Siberia, Russia. The deepest lake in the world. It is the world's largest lake by volume.
2.	**Lake Tanganyika:**	The longest lake in the world. It is also the second largest by volume. It is the second deepest lake in the world, after lake Baikal.
3.	**Lake Victoria:**	Lake Victoria is one of the African Great Lakes. It is Africa's largest lake by area, the world's largest tropical lake, and the world's second-largest fresh water lake by surface area after Lake Superior in North America.
4.	**Great Lakes:**	Great Lakes of North America are a series of interconnected freshwater lakes which connect to the Atlantic Ocean through the Saint Lawrence Seaway. Consisting of Lakes Superior, Michigan, Huron, Erie, and Ontario [in the order of west to east]. Superior, Huron, Michigan, Erie, and Ontario [In the order of largest to smallest. Lake Superior is the largest continental lake in the world by area, and Lake Michigan is the largest lake that is entirely within one country.
5.	**Dead Sea:**	Also called the Salt Sea. It is landlocked salt lake bordered by Jordan to the east, and Palestine and Israel to the west. It is Earth's lowest elevation on land.
6.	**Aral Sea:**	It was a lake lying between Kazakhstan in the north and Uzbekistan, in the south. Aral Sea has been steadily shrinking since the 1960s after the rivers that fed it were diverted by Soviet irrigation projects.
7.	**African Great Lakes:**	These are the Series of lakes constituting the part of the Rift Valley lakes in and around the East African Rift. They include Lake Victoria, the second largest fresh water lake in the world, and Lake Tanganyika, the world's second largest (in volume as well as the second deepest).
8	**Lake Ladoga:**	It is a freshwater lake located in northwestern Russia, in the vicinity of Saint Petersburg. It is the largest lake located entirely in Europe, the second largest lake after Baikal in Russia, and the 14th largest freshwater lake by area in the world.
9	**Lake Chad:**	It is a freshwater lake located in the Sahelian zone of west-central Africa at the conjunction of Chad, Cameroon, Nigeria, and Niger. It is situated in an interior basin formerly occupied by a much larger ancient sea that is sometimes called Mega-Chad.

Overview of Smart Cities Mission

Achievements of SCM

- Around ₹2 lakh crore was kept aside for the mission, with **public-private partnerships (PPP)** an important driver of the same (though, not more than 5% has come through the PPP route).
- In order to make the mission effective, **a business model of governance** was adopted bypassing the existing models of city governance in the country.
    - **An SPV (special purpose vehicle)** led by a bureaucrat or a representative of an MNC, and other major stakeholders was created and registered under the Companies Act.
- The SCM, with an allocation of ₹86,850 crore over eight years, **has achieved an impressive completion rate of 83%**.
- Participating cities have utilised ₹72,571 crore, **focusing on 21 sectors including** education, health, housing, water supply, solid waste management, and public transport.
- The most common feature across all cities - **Integrated Command and Control Centers (ICCCs)**, enable monitoring of various urban functions.
    - They have been instrumental in **disaster response, flood monitoring, and traffic management.**



Criticisms of SCM

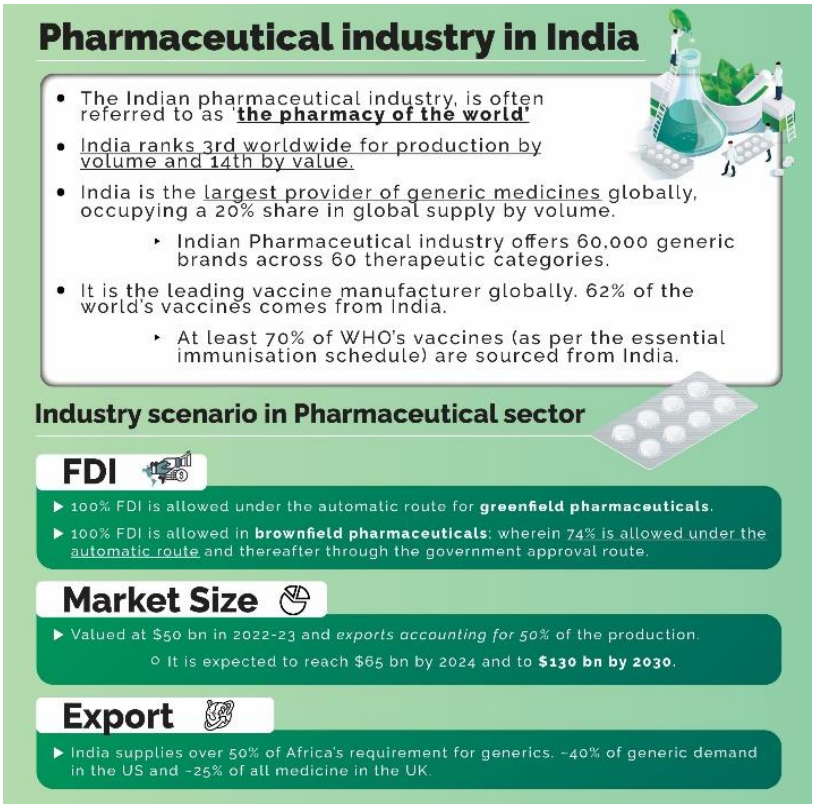
- **The selection of 100 cities** on a competitive basis and implementation of SCM was flawed, as the urbanisation in India is dynamic and not static like the West.
- **The SCM became an exclusionary scheme** wherein not more than 1% of a city's geographical area was selected for development.
- The projects sanctioned under the SCM **have seen a fall in the total outlay** from the expected ₹2 lakh crore to ₹1,67,875 crore.
    - This is 16% less than the projected capital flow in 100 cities.
- **The SPV model** designed for smart cities was not aligned with the **74th Constitutional Amendment**, resulting in a **top-bottom governance structure**.
- In the name of executing smart city projects, **there was displacement of people living in poorer localities.** For example, street vendors.

- Another major consequence has been **enhanced urban flooding**, because infrastructure projects dismantled water channels in some of the towns.

Pharma Sector in India

India's drug regulator, the Central Drugs Standard Control Organisation (CDSCO), has **taken back** the authority given to State licensing authorities to issue no objection certificates (NOCs) for making unapproved, banned, or new drugs for export. This change comes as India faces criticism for providing low-quality drugs to other countries.

- In 2018, the CDSCO had permitted State and UTs' drug licensing authorities to grant permissions to export some specific drugs.
- The head of the CDSCO zonal office will now grant NOCs.
- *Manufacturers must obtain NOCs online through the Sugam Portal before getting a manufacturing license from the State Licensing Authorities.*



Centralization Of The Licensing Authority

Impact	Challenges
• India needs to get ready to take advantage of drug sales worth $251 billion going o**ff-patent** this coming decade. ✓ Expiry of patents is very promising for the Indian generic drug market as it is expected to expand and grow further with inclusion of these new drugs. • It will help to bring uniformity in protocols, achieve the target of reaching $450 billion by 2047. Also, it was noted that getting NOCs from local drug regulators for pharmaceutical products is a tedious process, leading to delays	• Tackling intellectual property rights, lack of research and development etc. • Understanding the political, economic, socio-cultural, technological, environmental, and legal factors is vital for assessing the opportunities and challenges in the pharmaceutical market in India.

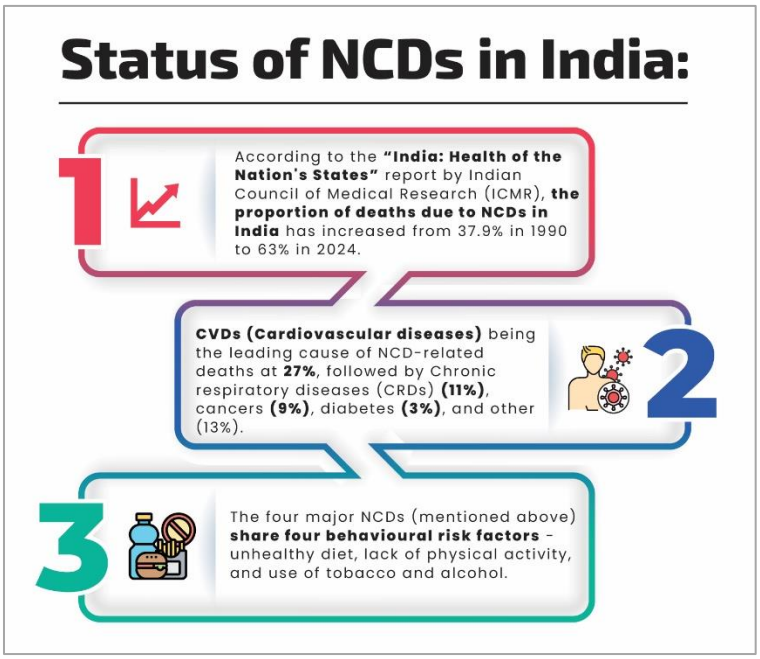
Steps Taken To Ensure The Quality Of Manufacturing

- **Crack down by Indian Govt.**
  - Taken steps on 18 drug companies for poor quality manufacturing & cancelled the licences of over 10 pharmaceutical companies.
  - Given notices to a further 26 companies for not complying with good manufacturing processes.
- **Vision Pharma 2047**
  - Make India a global leader in the manufacturing of affordable, innovative & quality pharmaceuticals & medical devices for the goal of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam.
- **National Pharmaceutical Policy (2023)**
  - It serves as a comprehensive framework to address the challenges faced by Indian Pharmaceutical industries. The draft policy encompasses five key pillars:

- Fostering Global Pharmaceutical Leadership, Promoting Self-Reliance, Advancing Health Equity and accessibility, Enhancing Regulatory Efficiency and Attracting investments.

Comprehensive Guidelines on the Diet of Vulnerable Groups

India's premier nutrition research institute - **National Institute of Nutrition (NIN)**, has published comprehensive guidelines on the diet of **vulnerable groups**, including pregnant and lactating women, and children and the elderly. This comes as the **non-communicable diseases (NCDs)** such as cardiovascular disease, cancers, diabetes, etc., **are rising among adolescents and even children**.



Initiatives of Indian Government to Reduce Prevalence of NCDs In the Country

- **Rebranded and expanded NPCDCS to NP-NCD:**
  - The National Program for Prevention and Control of Cancer, Diabetes, CVDs & Stroke (NPCDCS, launched in 2010) has been rebranded into the National Programme for Prevention and Control of NCDs (**NP-NCD**).
  - Also, **its scope has been broadened to include** Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD) and Asthma, Chronic Kidney Disease (CKD), and *Non-Alcoholic Fatty Liver Disease (NAFLD).*
- **Revised operational guidelines of NP-NCD:** It underscores the growing financial burden of NCDs on individuals and the economy, a situation that's driving a **focus on primary and secondary prevention to improve the quality-of-care services**.
- **Providing standard care:** The union health ministry is aiming to provide standard care to 75 million people with **hypertension and diabetes by 2025**, representing the world's largest coverage of NCDs in primary healthcare.
- **National Institute of Nutrition (NIN)**
  - It was founded by Sir Robert McCarrison in the year 1918 as 'Beri-Beri' enquiry unit and emerged as a full-fledged institute (under ICMR and located in Hyderabad) in **1967**.
  - It has attained global recognition for its **pioneering studies on various aspects of nutrition research**, with special reference to protein energy malnutrition (PEM).

Comprehensive Guidelines on the Diet of Vulnerable Groups

The guidelines say **an estimated 56.4% of India's total disease burden** can be attributed to unhealthy diets.

Key Focus Areas Of The Guidelines - Children

- Optimal nutrition for mother and child from conception till the age of 2 years is linked to proper growth and development. **It can prevent all forms of undernutrition**, including micronutrient deficiencies, and obesity.
  - **The report quotes the Comprehensive National Nutrition Survey 2019**, which showed high prevalence of lifestyle conditions even in children.

YOUNG & UNHEALTHY

	1-4 yrs	5-9 yrs	10-19 yrs
DISEASES OF OVERNUTRITION (%)			
Overweight		3.7	4.9
Obesity		1.3	1.1
Pre-diabetes		10.3	10.4
Diabetes		1.2	0.6
Hypertension			4.9
High total cholesterol		3.2	3.7
DISEASES OF UNDERNUTRITION (%)			
Anaemia	40.6	23.5	28.4
MICRONUTRIENT DEFICIENCIES (%)			
Iron	32.1	17.0	21.5
Vitamin D	13.7	18.2	23.9
Vitamin A	17.5	21.5	15.6
Vitamin B12	13.8	17.2	30.9
Zinc	19.0	16.8	31.7

Source: ICMR-National Institute of Nutrition Report on Dietary Guidelines for Indians

- **India is facing the dual nutrition challenge (both micronutrient deficiencies and diseases of overnutrition)**
  - A study on malnutrition said that undernutrition continues to be high in India, but obesity has increased significantly over the last 30 years.
  - **Incidence of micronutrient (zinc, iron, vitamins) deficiencies** ranged from 13% to 30% of children between ages 1 and 19.
  - While severe forms of undernutrition such as marasmus (a deficiency of macronutrients such as carbohydrates and proteins) and kwashiorkor (deficiency of proteins) have disappeared from the country, **manifestations such as anaemia continue.**
  - The faulty dietary pattern in which unhealthy, highly processed, high-fat, sugar and salt (HFSS) foods have become more affordable and accessible, **contributes to deficiencies in iron and folic acid.**
- **Recommendations of the guidelines:**
  - **Getting required nutrients from at least eight food groups**, including vegetables/leafy vegetables, roots and tubers, dairy, nuts, and oils.
  - **Consumption of cereals should be restricted** and **more proteins** (pulses, meat, poultry, fish) should be consumed.
  - **Achieving adequate levels of essential polyunsaturated fatty acids (PUFA) and B12** is a challenge for vegetarians.
    - The guidelines recommend consumption of flax seeds, chia seeds, walnuts, vegetables, and greens.
  - **Salt consumption should be restricted to 5g a day**, and strongly recommends against consuming highly processed foods that are typically high in fats, salt, and sugar.
- **Age/group-specific recommendations:**
  - **Pregnant women:** Consumption of lots of fruit and vegetables, especially those high in iron and folate content.
  - **Infants and children:** For the first six months, infants should only be breastfed, and after age 6 months complementary foods must be included.
  - **Elderly:** Consume foods rich in proteins, calcium, micronutrients, and fibre. **Exercise is important** in order to maintain bone density and muscle mass.

Cancer Screening at Ayushman Centres

In June 2023, the NITI Aayog had prepared a report to study the performance of the Ayushman Bharat Scheme. The report has not been made public yet. However, it is learnt that its findings have been shared with the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare.

About Ayushman Bharat Scheme:

- It was launched in 2018 as **recommended** by the **National Health Policy (2017)**.
- It adopts a continuum of care approach, comprising of two inter-related components:
  - **Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (PM-JAY): Health insurance cover of Rs. 5 lakhs per year** to over 10 crore poor & vulnerable families for seeking secondary and tertiary care
  - **Health and Wellness Centres (HWCs)**

Ayushman Bharat Health and Wellness Centres (HWCs)

- In February 2018, the Government of India announced the creation of 1,50,000 HWCs by transforming the existing Sub Centres and Primary Health Centres.
- The goal is **to ensure access to quality healthcare closer to the community**, thereby improving health outcomes and reducing out-of-pocket healthcare expenditures for individuals and families.
- These centres provide free essential medicines and diagnostic services, teleconsultation, and health promotion including wellness activities like Yoga.

- The **HWCs also offera nnual screening for those 30 years or older for Non Communicable Diseases** such as:
    - Hypertension, Diabetes, and 3 most common Cancers in India — oral, breast & cervical.

Cancer Menace in India:

- In 2022, India had more than 14.1 lakh new cancer cases and **over 9.1 lakh deaths due to the disease**.
- Breast cancer was the most common, according to the latest estimates of the disease's global burden by WHO.
- **Most common Cancers among Men**:
    - **Lip/oral cavity** and **lung**, accounting for 15.6% and 8.5% of the new cases, respectively.
- **Most common Cancers among Women:**
    - Cancers of **breast** and **cervix**, making up close to 27 and 18%of the new cases.

Key Findings of the Report

- Six years since the launch, the Ayushman Bharat insurance scheme has been availed of by more than 5.47 crore users across the country.
- However, when it comes to cancer screening at the HWCs, there is a huge gap.

Negative Takeaways	Positive Takeaways
Currently, there are three distinct methods of screening for the three cancers: ▪ **Oral visual examination** for oral cancer; ▪ **Visual inspection with acetic acid** for cervical cancer (under this, cervix is examined after the application of 3-5% acetic acid); and ▪ **Clinical breast examination** (CBE) for breast cancer for the people in age-group 30-65 years. Nurses and Midwives at HWCs were meant to be trained in these 3 screening methods. However, training hasn't been achieved to the extent that was expected. For example, **provision for screening of cervical cancer is yet to be operationalized**. The report also flagged that although NCD screening was underway at most facilities, **yearly screening was still largely absent**. NITI Aayog teams also found that the **HWC staff had limited or no knowledge of the fact that the screening for hypertension and diabetes needed to be done on an annual basis**.	The report said that the infrastructure in HWCs was in accordance with standards as envisaged in the operational guidelines. All basic devices such as stethoscope, BP apparatus (digital), weighing scale (adult and infant), clinical thermometer (oral and digital) were available and functional. NITI Aayog teams found that **medicines and diagnostic tests were available free-of-cost in all the visited facilities**.

Status Of Spice Exports

Hong Kong and Singapore recalled certain spice mix products from MDH and Everest Group due to higher than prescribed levels of the **sterilizing agent *Ethylene Oxide (ETO).*** In response, Indian authorities have initiated several measures to ensure that Indian spices comply with the food safety standards of importing countries.

Impact of Recall

- **Recall, Not a Ban**
    - An official from the Federation of Indian Spice Stakeholders clarified that Singapore and Hong Kong recalled, but did not ban, Indian spice products.

- Exports to these countries have resumed, so a significant impact is not expected in the coming months.

- **India's share in spice production:** India contributes about 70% of global spice production.
  - Hence, such incidents of contamination will affect India's image as a spice producer.
- **Varied Standards:** Countries have different standards for ETO & *maximum residue levels (MRL).*
  - While ETO is permitted by U.S., EU seeks steaming as the method for sterilisation.
  - But the cost of using ETO as a sterilising agent is 5 per kg, for steaming it is 20-25 a kg.
  - The Indian spice industry is urging the government to negotiate with the EU to relax these stringent norms to enhance Indian spice exports to European markets.
  - Also, the Indian government should lay down achievable guidelines and tell the buying countries about it.

Steps Taken By The India

- **Issuance of Protocols:** Following the recalls by Hong Kong and Singapore, the Spices Board of India issued a detailed protocol to all manufacturing exporters to prevent ETO contamination.
- **Mandatory Testing:** The Board initiated mandatory testing of spice consignments destined for Singapore and Hong Kong specifically for ETO levels.
- **International Standards:** Spices Board has engaged with international food standards body to address the need for uniform ETO usage limits, as these standards vary across different countries.
- **Consumer Awareness:** By encouraging consumers to focus on the quality of products, there is a push towards higher standards in the spice industry.
- **Industry-Government Collaboration:** The spice industry and government are working together to ensure that Indian spices comply with the varying standards of different countries, addressing issues specific to each market to prevent future recalls.

Extra Mile

Use of ETO	Harmful effects of ETO
○ ETO is a colorless, flammable, and in many ways, a remarkable gas that was originally intended for sterilizing medical devices. ○ It is used as a chemical in industrial settings, agriculture, and as a sterilizing agent in food products, including spices, dried vegetables and other commodities.	○ The improper and excessive use of ETO may leave behind residues, causing toxic and even carcinogenic compounds to form, thus contaminating the product. ○ One such compound is **ethylene glycol**, an ingredient found in Indian-made cough

- The chemical lends life to the spice industry: it **reduces microbial contamination, and in turn, extends products' shelf life and makes their storage safe**.

syrups which were linked to the deaths of more than 300 children in Cameroon, Gambia, Indonesia and Uzbekistan

Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI)'s Response

FSSAI has increased the default limit for pesticide residues in **spices** to 0.1 mg/kg, a ten-fold increase over the previous 0.01 mg/kg.

- This will be **applicable only in cases where the Indian regulation does not specifically mention the maximum residue limits (MRL) for a pesticide for the crop**.
- However, the default MRL for other food products remains the same at 0.01 mg/kg.

Examples of limits set by FSSAI and international agency Codex:

S. No.	Name of the Pesticides /Insecticides	Spices	FSSAI MRL (mg/Kg)	Codex MRLs (mg/kg)
1.	Metalaxyl and Metalaxyl-M	Black pepper	0.5	2
2.	Myclobutanil	Chilli, dried	2	20
3.	Spiromesifen	Chilli, dried	1	5
4.	Thiamethoxam	Chilli, dried	5	7

Reasons for Increasing Limits for Spices

- **One**, it is difficult to keep the limits below the 0.01 mg/kg limit because of the confounding effect of the large number of phenols present in spices.
- **Two**, imports from other countries may contain pesticides that are approved for use in those countries but not in India.
- **Three**, there could be seepage of a pesticide not approved in spices from other crops where it might be allowed.

What Were The Concerns That Were Raised

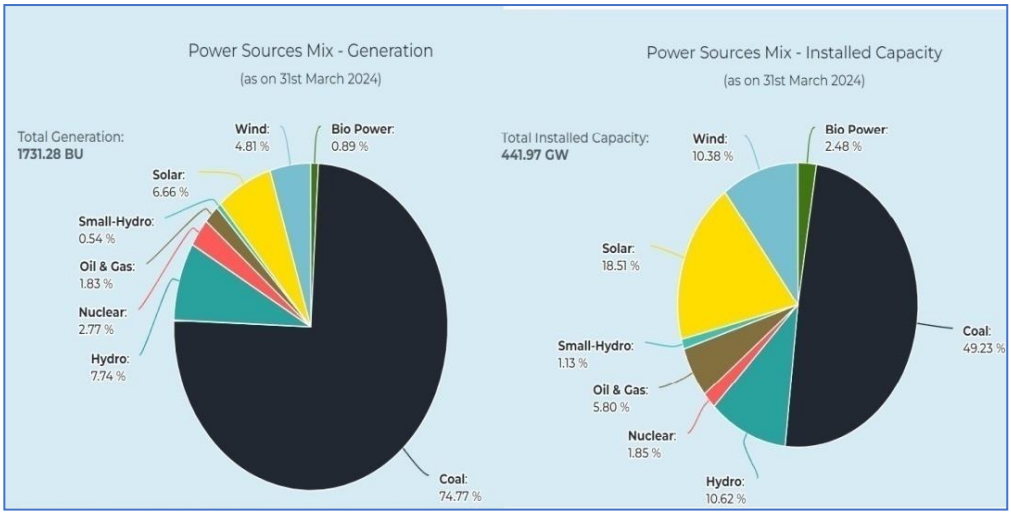
- The activists have said that the higher limit may allow for more pesticides affecting our bodies.
- Experts from the FSSAI have said that the limits were raised only for the tests to detect the compounds effectively. Action will still be taken if pesticides higher than the limit are used.
- The government maintains that the limits set by India continue to be the lowest in the world.

Govt. Bolsters Hydro Capacity To Meet Rising Peak Demand

With peak **power demand** set to touch **240 GW** in June, the Ministry of Power is relying on **hydropower** generation to avoid supply shortfall. The Ministry has optimised hydropower generation to make available an additional 4GW capacity.

Electricity Scenario In India

- **Total Installed Capacity and generation**
  - As of March 31, 2024, India's total installed power capacity is **~442 gigawatts (GW).**
  - The total installed capacity is broken down by sector as follows:



Central Sector: 102. 27GW	State Sector: 106. 33 GW	Private Sector: 219.69 GW

  - As of 31 March 2024, India's electricity generation in 2023-24 was 1731.28 billion units (BU).
    - Ministry had set a target of 1750 BU for 2023-24, which includes: 1324.110 BU thermal, 156.700 BU hydro, 46.190 BU nuclear, 8 BU import from Bhutan, and 215 BU Renewable Energy Sources (excluding large hydro).
- **Peak Demand** or peak load
  - It is the *highest electrical power demand* measured over a certain period of time, which can be annual, daily, or seasonal.
  - Factors that can affect peak demand include: Demography, Economy, Weather, Climate, Season, and Day of the week.
  - India's peak demand in **2023-24**: 243.27 GW but only 239.93 GW was fulfilled, resulting in a **1.4% deficit**

Key Highlights Of Augmentation Of Hydro Capacity

- **Reliance on coal and gas to meet peak demand is more pronounced**
  - India added a record renewable capacity of over 18 GW in FY24.
  - However, the **variability** in renewable energy generation is putting pressure on base load capacity, including thermal.
    - This is true especially during evening hours of low sunlight and high demand.
  - Additionally, due to the lack of sufficient energy storage infrastructure in the country, India struggles to store excess energy generated by solar and wind plants during non-peak hours and release it during peak hours.
- **India's peak demand deficit could increase**
  - India's peak demand deficit has fallen considerably in recent years. However, insufficient energy storage infrastructure and rising temperatures could widen the gap moving forward, especially in the summer months.

- The country is staring at a 14 GW peak shortfall in June, its largest in 14 years, due to delays in commissioning new coal-based plants.
- In June, demand from agriculture will suddenly come up and the majority of the northern states will start to take power to run pump sets.

- **Hydro-power Augmentation**
  - The latest move comes in light of hydro generation missing the cumulative target of 12,487 MU (million units) by 1,770 MU in the ongoing FY25 (*till May 9*).
  - With the recent move to augment hydro power generation and forecasts of above-normal monsoon in the coming months, it is expected that the power demand would be adequately met.
- **India as the world's *third* largest producer of renewable energy**
  - Around 40% of installed electricity capacity comes from non-fossil fuel sources.
  - This green push has resulted in a sharp 24% reduction in emission intensity of GDP between 2005 and 2016.
  - However, it has also thrown up challenges in meeting peak demand with a grid being increasingly powered by renewables.

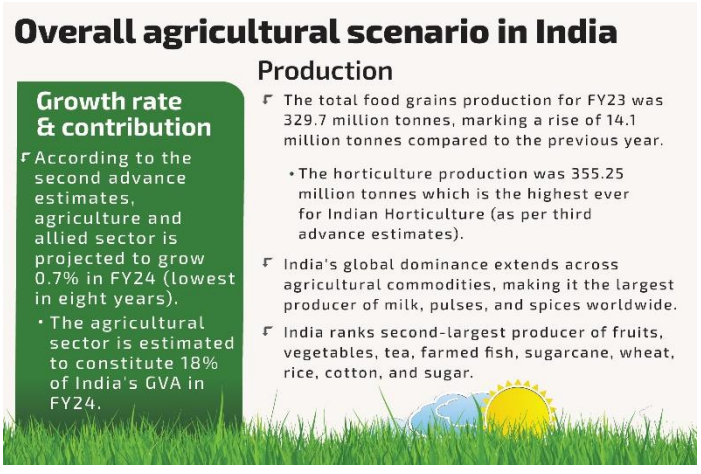
Extra Mile

As per the **Global Electricity Review 2024**, India surpassed Japan to claim the title of the world's third-largest solar power **generator** in 2023. The report was published by global energy think tank **Ember.**

- *India **generated** 113 Billion Units (BU) of solar power in 2023 compared to japan's 110 BU.*
  - China and USA are two major producers ahead of India in 2023.
- In terms of **installed solar power capacity**, India ranks **fifth** in the world while Japan is at third place (83 GW).
- **India experienced the world's fourth-largest surge in solar generation in 2023**
  - It added 18 Terawatt hours (TWh) to its capacity, following China (+156 TWh), United States (+33 TWh), and Brazil (+22 TWh).

Need For A New Agricultural Export-Import Policy

India's agricultural exports decreased by 8.2% in the fiscal year ending March, 2024, due to restrictions on shipments of various commodities (from cereals and sugar to onions).



Analysis of Agricultural Export

- **Statistics**
  - The total value of farm exports was $48.82 billion in 2023-24, according to Department of Commerce data.
  - It has shown a decline from the record $53.15 billion in 2022-23 and $50.24 billion in the previous fiscal year.
- **Trends Over Years**
  - During the initial years of the present govt., agricultural exports dropped from $43.25 billion in 2013-14 to $35.60 billion in 2019-20, accompanied by an increase in imports from $15.53 billion to $21.86 billion (during the same period).
  - During this period, global agri-commodity prices fell significantly, leading to a decline in India's agricultural exports.

        - The UN Food and Agriculture Organization's (FAO) food price index dropped from an average of 119.1 to 96.5 points between 2013-14 and 2019-20.
    - Low international prices made India's exports less competitive and increased its vulnerability to imports.
- **Impact of Global Events**
    - The global price recovery after the Covid-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine caused India's farm exports and imports to reach all-time highs in 2022-23, with the FAO index soaring to 140.8.
    - However, exports decreased in the fiscal year that just ended.

Agri Exports: Key Trends

- **Impact of ban on export of sugar and non-basmati rice**
    - The fall in exports to have been led primarily by sugar and non-basmati rice.
    - The government hasn't allowed any sugar to go out of the country during the current production year from October 2023.
        - Exports of the sweetener were valued at only $2.82 billion in 2023-24, after peaking at $5.77 billion and $4.60 billion in the preceding fiscals.
    - Concerns over domestic availability and food inflation have similarly triggered a ban on exports of all white non-basmati rice since July 2023.
        - Currently, only parboiled grain shipments are being permitted within the *non-basmati segment*, while also attracting a 20% duty.
        - These restrictions have pulled down overall non-basmati exports from a record $6.36 billion in 2023-23 to $4.57 billion in 2023-24.
- **Impact of export restrictions on wheat and onion**
    - Wheat exports were altogether stopped in May 2022, following which their value plunged to $56.74 million in 2023-24, after reaching an all-time-high of $2.12 billion in 2021-22.
    - Similarly, the onion export was also banned.
        - On May 4, 2024, the Centre lifted a ban on exports of the bulb. Simultaneously, a floor price of $550 per tone (below which no exports can take place), along with a 40% duty, was imposed.
- **Trend of other major agri export items**
    - Most of the other major agri export items — barring marine products, castor oil and other cereals (mainly maize) — have posted growth.

Agri Imports – Key Trends

- **Dip in imports of edible oils**
    - 7.9% dip in overall agri imports during 2023-24 was largely due to a single commodity - edible oils. India's imports of vegetable fats topped $20 billion in 2022-23.
        - That was the year immediately after the Russia-Ukraine war when the global price of vegetable oils increased.
    - However, 2023-24 saw lowering of global prices of the vegetable oil. This, in turn, reduced the import bill to below $15 billion during last fiscal.
- **Increase in import of pulses**
    - The import of pulses almost doubled to $3.75 billion in 2023-24, the highest since the $3.90 billion and $4.24 billion levels of 2015-16 and 2016-17 respectively.

Key Takeaways

- **Policy stability and predictability is the key**
    - Farmers and agri-traders, like all businessmen, want policy stability and predictability.
    - When governments resort to banning/restricting agri exports, they usually privilege the interests of consumers over producers.
        - These actions hurt more when taken overnight, like with wheat exports.

- Building export markets takes time and effort.
- A more predictable and rules-based policy — say, introducing temporary tariffs instead of outright bans or quantitative restrictions is recommend.

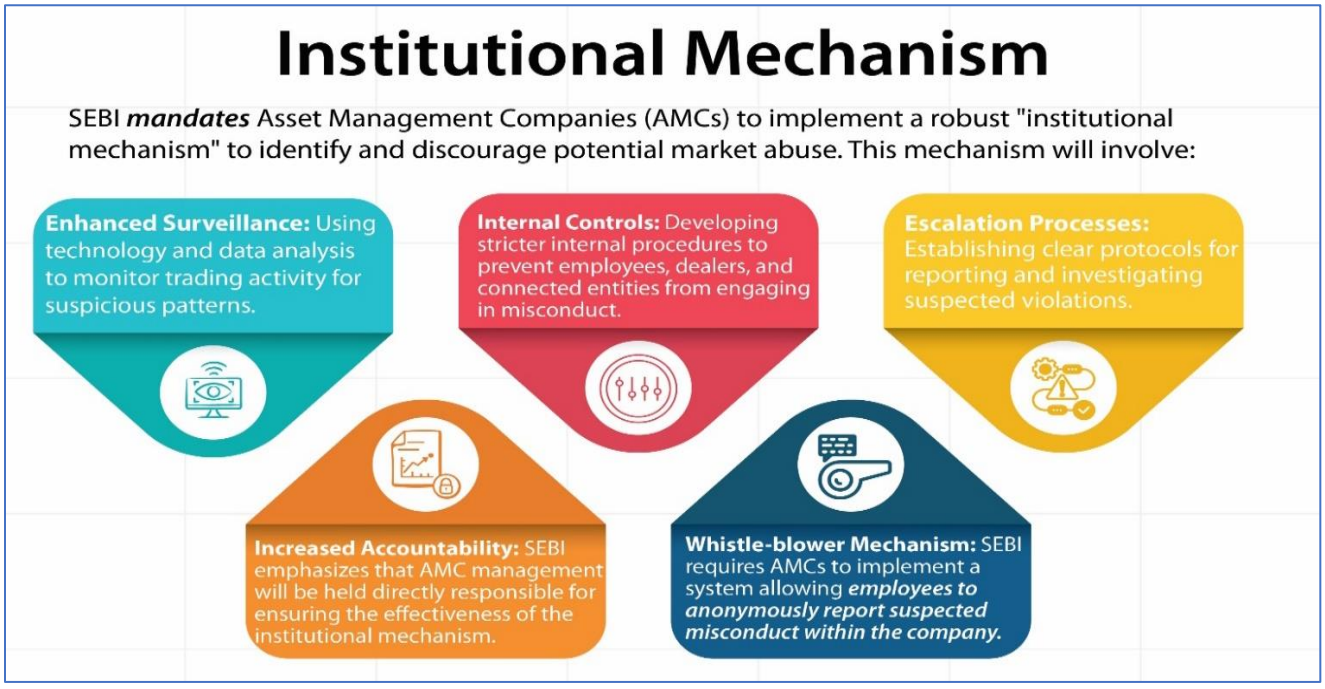
- **Zero/low import duties are *not* suitable for crop diversification**
  - The govt has done away with import duties on most pulses — arhar (pigeon pea), urad (black gram), masoor (red lentils), etc.
    - The rate has been kept at 5.5% for crude palm, soyabean and sunflower oil.
  - The above zero/low tariffs are at *variance* with the government's own objective to promote crop diversification.
    - The govt is taking steps to wean away farmers from rice, wheat and sugarcane to growing pulses and oilseeds, which are less water-guzzling and also significantly imported.

SEBI's Norms To Curb Front Running

- The Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) has approved amendments to its *mutual fund regulations* to establish an institutional mechanism to curb front-running and fraudulent transactions.
- Front-running is trading stock or any other financial asset by a broker who has inside knowledge of a future transaction that is about to affect its price substantially.
- It is considered as a form of market manipulation and insider trading because a person who commits a front running activity expects security's price movements based on the non-public information.

Background

The amendments have been made after SEBI uncovered instances of front-running in Axis *Asset Management Company (AMC)* and LIC. In this case, broker-dealers, certain employees and connected entities were found to have front-run the trades of the AMC and in the case of LIC, an employee of a listed insurance company was observed to be front-running the trades of the company.



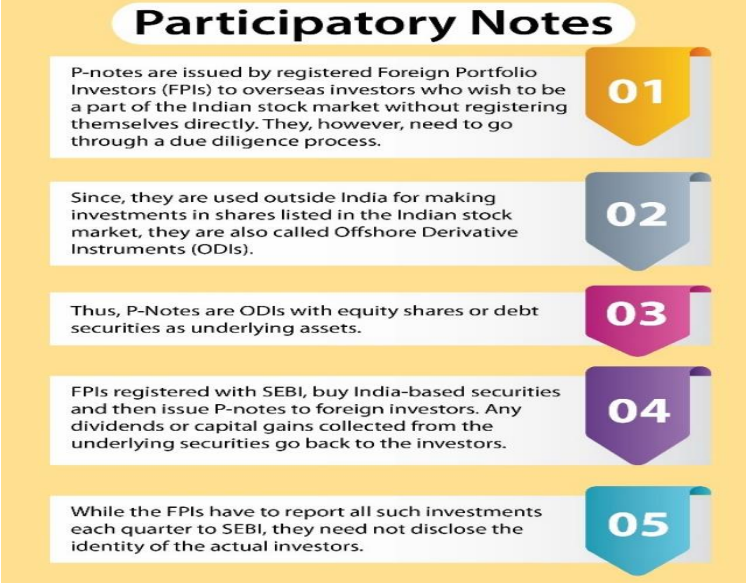
Addressing Challenges With Recording

- SEBI previously required recording all communication by dealers and fund managers. However, concerns were raised about the burden this placed on AMCs and the potential for employee departures.

- SEBI will now exempt AMCs from recording face-to-face interactions (including out-of-office communication) during market hours once the institutional mechanism is implemented.
- This exemption aims to achieve a balance between effective oversight & a less restrictive work environment.

Increase in Participatory Notes

- Investments through participatory notes in the Indian capital markets reached Rs 1.5 lakh crore at the end of February, making it the highest-level in nearly six years
- The amount has reached the highest-level since June 2017, when investment through the route stood at Rs 1.65 lakh crore.
- The growth in P-notes generally aligns with the trend in FPI flows.
- As per experts, the influx in February can be attributed to robust corporate earnings and positive economic growth trends observed during the December quarter.



Advantages	Disadvantages
• **Time and cost saving:** P-notes are popular investment channels as investors do not have to go through complicated regulatory approvals thus saving them time and cost. • **Anonymity:** Also, since the end beneficiary of P-notes is not disclosed. It enables large hedge funds to carry out their operations without disclosing their identity. • **Tax saving:** Some of the entities route their investment through P-notes to take advantage of the tax laws of certain preferred countries.	• Indian regulators are concerned about P-notes because they have no way to know who owns the underlying securities. • It is alleged that a lot of illegal and unaccounted money made its way to the country through this route. • There have also been reports that Indians were routing their black money by round-tripping and integrating it into the economy.

GST Appellate Tribunal

- The Union Minister for Finance and Corporate Affairs recently administered the oath of integrity and secrecy to Justice (Retd.) Sanjaya Kumar Mishra as the first President of the GST Appellate Tribunal (GSTAT).
  - ✓ The president of the national bench would be a former judge of the Supreme Court or former Chief Justice of a High Court.
- The appointment marks the beginning of the operationalization of the GSTAT, a crucial body for resolving GST related disputes.
- The GSTAT is an appellate authority established under the **Central Goods and Services Tax Act, 2017**.
- It is responsible to hear various appeals under the said Act and the respective State/UTs GST Acts against the orders of the first appellate authority.
- The Tribunal consists of a Principal Bench and various State Benches. The Principal Bench has been notified at New Delhi and 31 State Benches have been notified at various locations across the country.
- The Principal Bench consists of the President, a judicial member and two technical members (one for the Centre and one for the State).

Significance

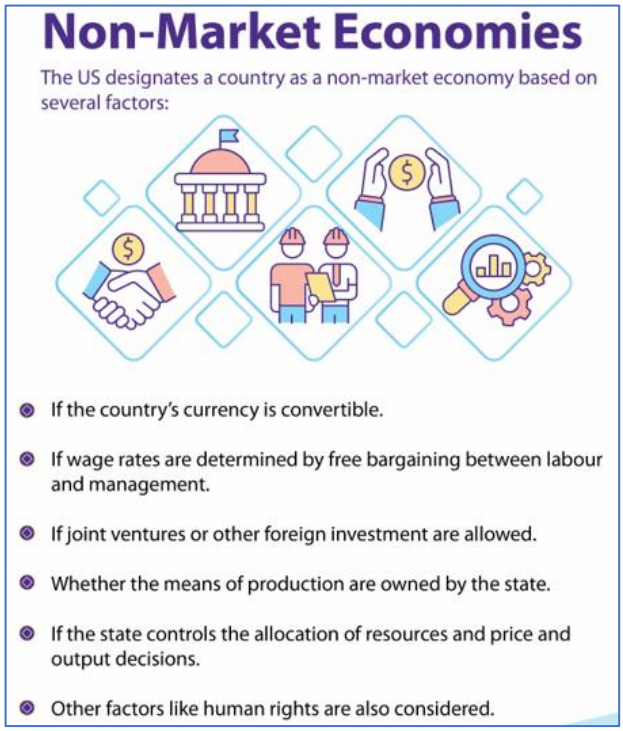
- The Tribunal will ensure swift, fair, judicious and effective resolution to GST disputes, besides significantly reducing the burden on higher courts.
  - ✓ Currently, taxpayers aggrieved with ruling of tax authorities are required to move the respective High Courts. The resolution process takes a long time as High Courts are already burdened with backlog of cases and do not have a specialised bench to deal with GST cases.
- It would further enhance the effectiveness of the GST system in India and facilitate a more transparent and efficient tax environment in the country.

Market and Non-Market Economy

- Vietnam has been pushing the US administration to change its "non-market economy" classification to market economy.
- Although Vietnam has emerged as one of the top trading partners of the US and helped reduce China's expanding influence in the region, it has continued to be on Washington's list of non-market economies for more than two decades.
- In total, the list includes 12 non-market economies such as Russia, China, and some countries which used to be a part of the erstwhile Soviet Union.

Non-market Economies

- The non-market economy label allows the US to **impose anti-dumping duties** on goods imported from designated countries.
- In international trade, dumping is when a country's export prices are considered to be intentionally set below domestic prices, which harms the industries in the importing country.
  - ✓ Anti-dumping duties essentially compensate for the difference between the imported good's export price and their normal value.
- The level of anti-dumping duties is determined by relying on a third country, for instance, Bangladesh, which is a market economy.
- The US assesses the value of a product to be imported from a non-market economy like Vietnam based on what it is worth in Bangladesh and then assumes that this is the supposed production cost to a Vietnamese company.
- The company's own data about the costs are not considered.



Vietnam's Case To Get The 'Market Economy' Status

- Vietnam has argued that in recent years it has implemented enough economic reforms that should get its name off the non-market economies list. The country does meet several criteria for the status to be changed.
- For instance, Vietnam allows foreign investment, wages are determined by free negotiations between workers and management.
- Further, most of the means of production are not owned by the state.

- The change in status will also help Vietnam get rid of the anti-dumping duties, making its products more competitive in the US market.
- Vietnam's Center for WTO and International Trade has said that the method of calculating anti-dumping duties is flawed as it causes the dumping margin to be pushed up very high and does not actually reflect the situation of Vietnamese companies.

Challenges

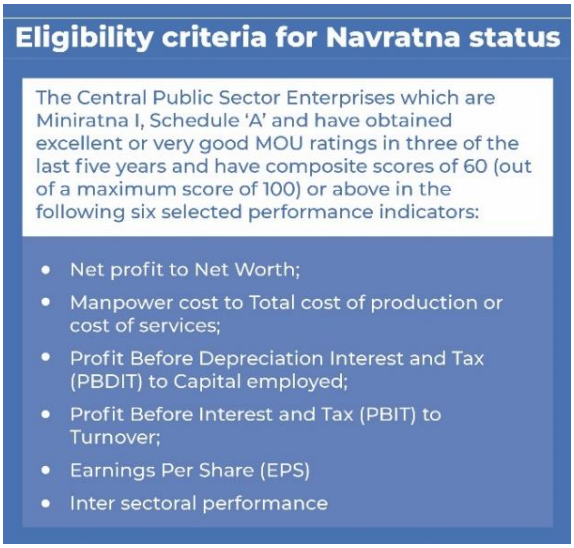
- The US steelmakers and the American Shrimp Processors Association have asked the US administration to not change Vietnam's status.
- The association has cited Vietnam's restrictions on land ownership, the country's weak labour laws, and lower shrimp duties that would hurt its members.
- The move could also see opposition in Congress, where several members claim that the change in Vietnam's status would aid Chinese state firms that have invested heavily in Vietnam, by letting them more easily circumvent US tariffs on their goods.

Growth in Mineral Production

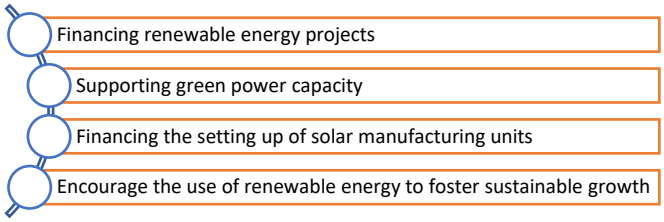
- The index of mineral production of mining and quarrying sector for the month of February, 2024 (Base: 2011-12=100) at 139.6 is **8.0% higher** as compared to the level in the month of February, 2023.
- As per the provisional statistics of Indian Bureau of Mines (IBM), the cumulative growth for the period April-February, 2023-24 over the corresponding period of previous year is 8.2%.
- Important minerals showing positive growth during February, 2024 over February, 2023 include: Gold (86%), Copper Conc.(28.7%), Bauxite (21%), Chromite (21%), Phosphorite (19%), Limestone(13%), Coal (12%), Natural gas (11%), Petroleum(crude) (8%).
- Other important minerals showing negative growth include Iron Ore (-0.7%) and Lead Conc.(-14%).

IREDA Gets Navratna Status

- The Indian Renewable Energy Development Agency (IREDA) was recently granted 'Navratna' status by the Department of Public Enterprises.
- IREDA is a public sector enterprise functioning under the administrative control of Ministry of New and Renewable Energy (MNRE).
- It was established as a Non-Banking Financial Institution in 1987 for promoting, developing and extending financial assistance for setting up projects related to new and renewable sources of energy and energy efficiency/conservation.
- It has been notified as a 'Public Financial Institution' under the Companies Act, 1956 and registered as Non-Banking Financial Company (NBFC) with RBI.



Objectives of IREDA

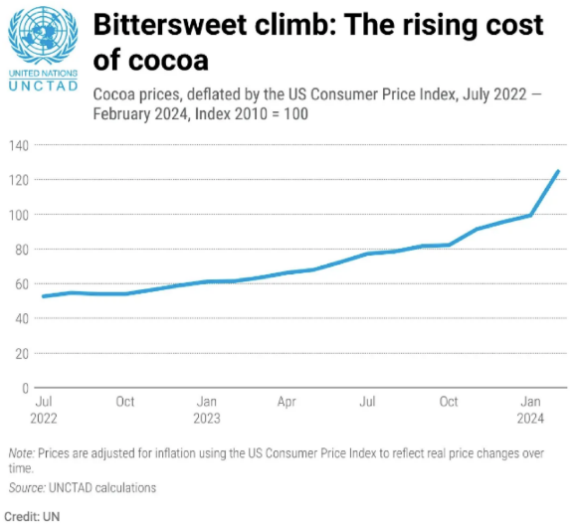


Benefits of Navratna status

- The grant of "Navratna" status leads to enhanced delegation of powers, more operational freedom and financial autonomy which will give huge impetus to the company's progress.
- Normally, a CPSE requires permission from the Indian government to invest a large sum of money in a project or a deal.
- The Navratna companies are granted financial independence to invest up to ₹1,000 crore without seeking approval from the central government.
- Navratna companies are also allowed to invest up to 15% of their net worth on a single project, or 30% of their net worth in a given year, subject to a cap of ₹1,000 crore.
- This increased financial freedom gives Navratna companies a competitive edge when competing globally.

Rise in Cocoa Prices

- The price of cocoa beans, the most important raw material in chocolates, has skyrocketed, hitting a record $12,000 a tonnes in April, around four times last year's price.
- Cocoa processors — who turn the beans into butter and liquor that are then converted to chocolate by companies — have thus reduced production because they cannot afford the beans.
- The International Cocoa Organization has forecasted a global shortfall of about 374,000 tonnes for the 2023-2024 season compared to 74,000 tonnes last season. The scarcity has already led to an increase in the price of chocolate.



Factors Causing Rise In Price

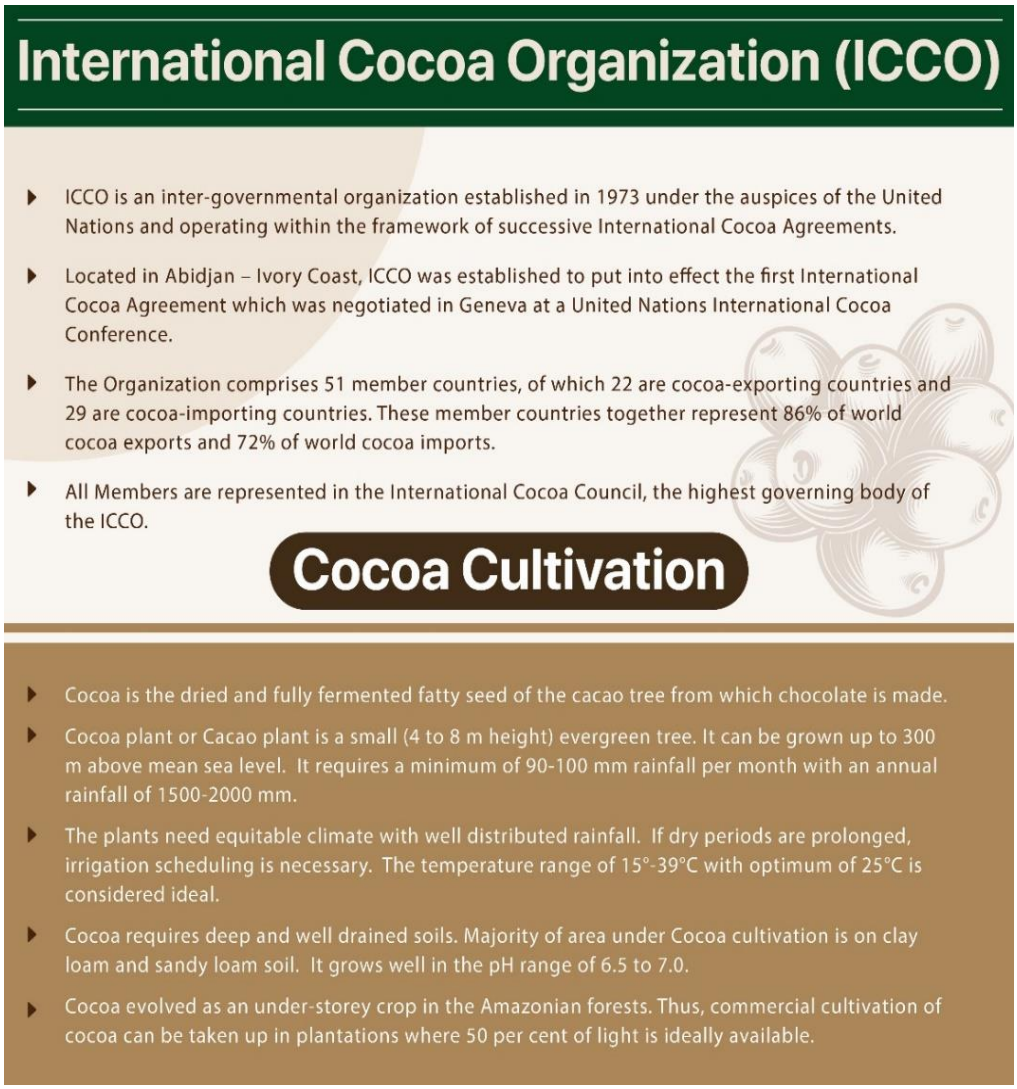
El Nino and Climate Change

- The immediate reason for the ongoing crisis is the bad harvest season in West African countries Ghana and Ivory Coast, where 60% of the world's cocoa beans come from.
- Due to the development of El Niño — a weather pattern, which refers to an abnormal warming of surface waters in the equatorial Pacific Ocean — in 2023, West Africa experienced heavier-than-usual rainfalls.
- This created an ideal ground for the spread of **black pod disease**, which causes cocoa pods (a case that holds a plant's seeds) to rot on the branches of cocoa trees. The consequence is the drop in crop yield.
- Climate change is also a driving factor. With rising temperatures, rainfall in the region has become erratic — a problem for moisture-sensitive cocoa trees.
- Moreover, extreme weather events such as heat waves, droughts, and heavy rainfalls, have made these trees more vulnerable.
- The situation is expected to get worse. Earlier, when supply declined and prices went up, farmers used to plant more cocoa trees, which would bear fruits five years later and boost the supply.
- However, this is unlikely to happen now because of climate change, which could soon turn some cocoa-growing areas unusable.

Low Income For The Farmers

- The underlying issue is that the big chocolate companies do not pay enough to the cocoa farmers in West Africa.

- These farmers earn on average as little as less than $1.25 a day, which is well below the United Nations' absolute poverty line of $2.15 per day.
- According to a 2023 report by Oxfam, up to 90% of the farmers in Ghana cannot afford enough food or other basics such as clothing, housing, and medical.
- The net incomes of the surveyed farmers have fallen on average by 16% since 2020, with women's incomes falling by nearly 22%. Nine out of ten farmers said they are worse off since the pandemic.
- Farmers are not able to invest in land to increase yield or build resilience against climate change due to the lack of funds.
- Consequently, slave and child labour are rampant in cocoa farms and farmers are selling off their land to illegal gold miners.



<u>Exploitation By Chocolate Companies</u>

- At the same time, the four biggest chocolate companies have made huge profits from chocolate sales. While Lindt, Mondelēz, and Nestlé together made nearly $4 billion last year, Hershey's confectionery profits totalled $2 billion.
- Despite such financial gains, these companies have not done much to help raise farmers' income. A historic focus on keeping consumer prices low had contributed to long-term exploitation.

Cocoa in India

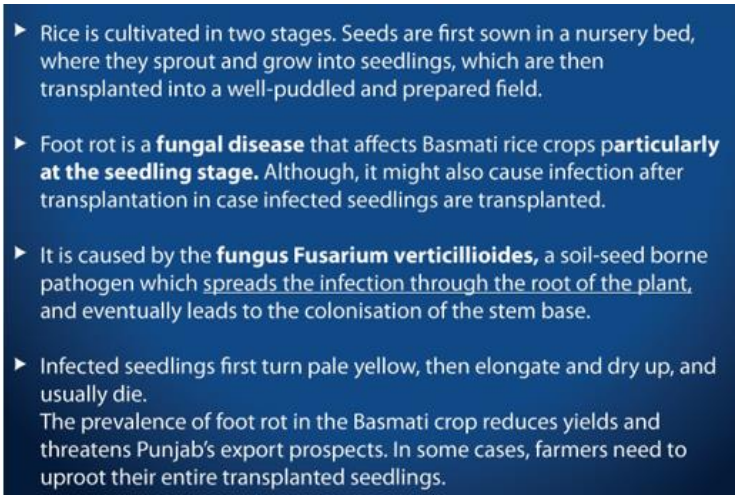
- In India, cocoa is best cultivated in arecanut & coconut gardens as an intercrop, where 30-50% sunlight penetrates through their canopy, which can be intercepted by cocoa.
- It is cultivated in Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu

Foot Rot Disease

The Punjab Agricultural University (PAU), Ludhiana, has developed a biocontrol agent **Trichoderma asperellum**, that will help Punjab farmers manage the deadly foot rot or bakanae disease that plagues the crops of Basmati rice.

Current Management Practices

- To prevent the disease from occurring and spreading, farmers resort to *early seedling treatment*, try and use disease-free seeds, and destroy infected seedlings.
- Timely seed nursery management is crucial — experts recommend seed sowing in the first fortnight of June, and transplantation in July.
- Sowing in May often leads to problems as the month's high temperatures are favourable to the disease.
- Fields where the nursery is being set up must also be well-drained, with proper irrigation, to avoid the spread of foot rot.



- Currently, seedlings are treated with Trichoderma harzianum before sowing and transplantation. Seeds are also treated with fungicides such as Sprint 75 WS (carbendazim + mancozeb) before sowing.
- But these are the chemical treatments which are harmful for the soil, and can be toxic for consumers of the rice. The fungicide carbendazim is already banned in Punjab because it leaves behind high residues.

PAU's Solution

- Trichoderma asperellum offers **a non-chemical alternative** to traditional pesticides, aiding in disease management while minimising environmental harm.
- During the experimental phase it gave good results to combat foot rot without leaving harmful residues on the crop and compromising environmental safety.

Way Ahead

- The challenge now is to ensure the distribution of this agent among farmers.
- An MoU has been signed with a private company for the large-scale manufacturing and distribution of Trichoderma asperellum, with the aim of making it available to farmers from the coming season.
- This would be a major development in Punjab, which, along with Haryana, accounts for more than 70% of India's basmati exports.

Drip Pricing

- The Department of Consumer Affairs recently warned the consumers about drip pricing.
- Drip pricing is a strategy where only a portion of an item's cost is initially displayed, with the full amount revealed later during the purchase process.
- The charges often involve withholding essential fees like local taxes or booking charges, or omitting necessary add-ons like internet access or amenities, which may be required for product or service usage.
- The price advertised, whether in print, email, or on a website (referred to as the "headline price"), may not accurately reflect the final cost to the consumer.
    - Companies prefer to present a lower initial price and later disclose mandatory fees to avoid alarming customers with unexpectedly high prices.

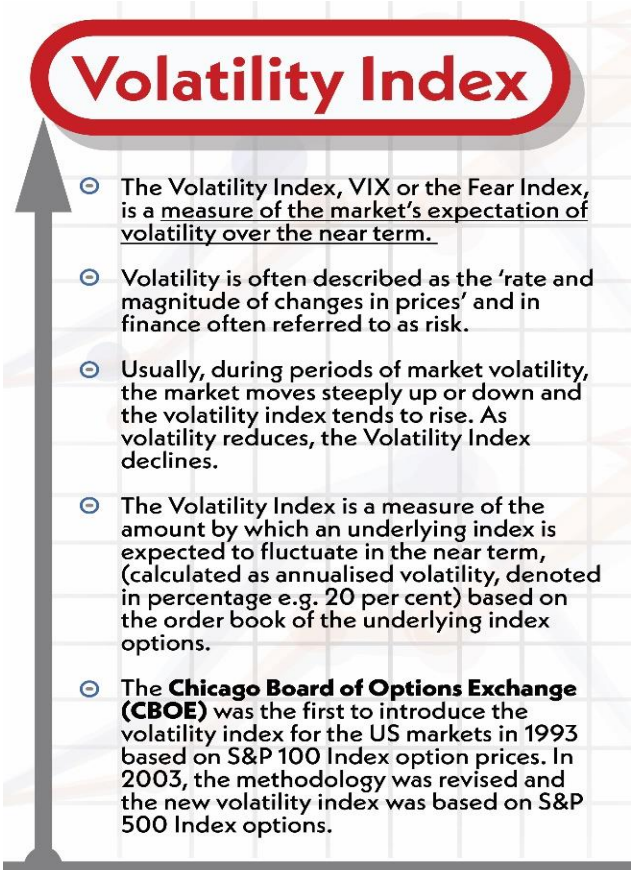
- The rationale for employing drip pricing is that shoppers who are invested in the shopping process may commit to a purchase once additional fees are revealed, even if they had not initially factored in.
- Drip pricing complicates comparison shopping and creates a disadvantage for sellers who provide more transparent pricing structures.

India VIX

In May so far, the India VIX has risen by around 53 per cent and recently crossed the 21 mark.

India VIX

- India VIX is a volatility index computed by the National Stock Exchange based on the order book of NIFTY Options.
- India VIX indicates the investor's perception of the **market's volatility in the near term** i.e. it depicts the expected market volatility **over the next 30 calendar days**.
- The higher the India VIX values, the higher the expected volatility and vice versa.
- The recent rise shows that fear among traders or market participants on the expected volatility is more now. Currently, the fear among the market players is coming from the outcome of the ongoing Lok Sabha elections.
- **'VIX' is a trademark of the CBOE**, and Standard & Poor's has granted a license to NSE, with permission from the CBOE, to use such a mark in the name of the India VIX and for purposes relating to the India VIX.



Sachetisation of F&O Trade

- The Chief Economic Advisor (CEA) has cautioned against household savings getting invested in futures and options trade and there is a need to reconsider sachetisation of Futures and Options (F&O) trade.
- He further noted that whenever financial sector development precedes national development, the journey has not ended well for other countries as well. The Asian crisis of 1997-98 is an important example of the same.
- **Sachetisation** refers to the process of making financial products and services available in smaller, more manageable packets.
- Recent data has shown a **decline in net financial household savings to a five-year low** in FY23, a decline of Rs 9 lakh crore in three years to Rs 14.16 lakh crore at the end of FY23.
  - ✓ The net household savings peaked at Rs 23.29 lakh crore in 2020-21
- **Financial liabilities** at Rs 15.6 lakh crore were at their highest level in 2022-23 since 2011-12 when it was at Rs 2.9 lakh crore.
- **Bank advances to households** nearly doubled to Rs 11.88 lakh crore in 2022-23 rising from Rs 6.05 lakh crore in 2020-21.
- Investment in mutual funds almost trebled to Rs 1.79 lakh crore in 2022-23 in three years from Rs 64,084 crore in 2020-21.

- The household investment in shares and debentures almost doubled to Rs 2.06 lakh crore in 2022-23 from Rs 1.07 lakh crore in three years from 2020-21.

Risks With F&O Trades

- There is a need to reconsider sachetisation of F&O trade because the financial literacy required for trading stocks is very different from trading F&O. Trading in F&O has been a concern as many retail investors have lost their hard-earned money.
- Last year, a study by SEBI showed that **nearly 89% of the individual traders** in the equity F&O segment **incurred losses** with an average loss of Rs 1.1 lakh during FY22.
- Any unchecked explosion in retail trading of futures and options can create future challenges, not just for the markets, but for the investor sentiments and also for household finances.
- The financial sector has a responsibility to ensure that capital market grows in those areas where Indian household savings can be utilised for productive purposes.
- Hence, it would be advisable for them to go for long-term investment for wealth creation and to get a real rate of returns.

Compulsory Convertible Debentures (CCD)

- The Competition Commission of India (CCI) has approved subscription to Compulsory Convertible Debentures (CCDs) of Napino Auto and Electronics Limited (Napino) by International Finance Corporation (IFC).
- A **compulsory convertible debenture (CCD)** is a type of bond which must be converted into stock by a specified date. It is classified as a hybrid security, as it is neither purely a bond nor purely a stock.
- A **debenture** is a **medium- to long-term debt security** issued by a company as a means of borrowing money at a fixed interest rate.
- Unlike most investment-grade corporate bonds, it is not secured by collateral. It is backed only by the full faith and credit of the issuing company. In effect, an unsecured corporate bond is a debenture.
- Debenture holders have no rights to vote as shareholders until their debentures are converted into shares.
- For companies, the compulsory conversion of debentures to equity is a way to repay a debt without spending cash.

Types of Debentures

Non-convertible debenture cannot be converted into equity shares of the issuing company.

Instead, debenture holders receive **periodic interest payments** and get back their principal at the maturity date, just like most bond holders. The interest rate attached to them is **higher** than for convertible debentures.

Convertible debentures may be converted into the company's equity after a set period of time. That convertibility is a perceived advantage, so investors are willing to accept a lower interest rate for purchasing convertible debentures. The CCD is one form of the convertible debenture.

International Finance Corporation (IFC)

- IFC is an international organisation, established in 1956 to further economic growth in its developing member countries by promoting private sector development. It is a member of the **World Bank Group.**
- IFC helps developing countries achieve sustainable growth by financing private sector investment, mobilizing capital in international financial markets, and providing advisory services to businesses and governments.

Napino

- It is engaged in the business of automotive electronics and components in India.

- It manufactures electrical and electronic products primarily for 2-wheeler and a small segment of 3-wheeler and 4-wheeler vehicles.
- It is also engaged in certain ancillary businesses related to Internet of Things (IoT), smart data devices, prototyping, hardware designing, digital solutions, *etc*.

AI Krish and AI Bhoomi

- DD Kisan has deployed two Artificial Intelligence anchors - **AI Krish and AI Bhoomi** - as part of the initiative to present the television channel in a new avatar.
- DD Kisan is the *first government TV channel* of the country, to feature AI anchors. The farmer viewers will be able to see these anchors in all the states of the country.
- These news anchors are a computer, which are exactly like a human, or rather, these can work like a human.
- They can **speak in 50 Indian and foreign languages** and read news 24 hours and 365 days without stopping or getting tired.
- These AI anchors will provide every necessary information about agricultural research happening in the country and at the global level, trends in agriculture mandis, changes in the weather, or any other information of government schemes.

DD KISAN

- DD Kisan, which comes under the **Union Ministry of Information and Broadcasting**, was **launched in 2015** to cater to the farming and rural community.
- Its objective was to keep the farmers informed about the changes in weather, global and local markets etc., so that farmers can make appropriate plans in advance and take right decisions on time.
- It is also strengthening the three-dimensional concept of agriculture which includes balanced farming, animal husbandry and plantation.

India International Bullion Exchange

- The State Bank of India (SBI) has become the first trading-cum-clearing member at the *India International Bullion Exchange (IIBX).*
- This enables SBI's IFSC Banking unit (IBU) to trade on the IIBX platform.
- **Bullion:** Bullion refers to **physical gold and silver of high purity** that is often kept in the form of bars, ingots, or coins. Bullion can sometimes be considered legal tender and is often held as reserves by central banks or by institutional investors.

IIBX

- IIBX is India's first International Bullion Exchange set up at the GIFT City, **IFSC (International Financial Services Center),** Gandhinagar.
- IIBX has been conceptualised to provide a gateway to import bullion into India and provide world class bullion exchange ecosystem to promote bullion trading, investment in bullion financial products and vaulting facilities in IFSCs.
- It offers a diversified portfolio of products and technology services at a cost which is far more competitive than the Indian exchanges as well as other global exchanges in Hong Kong Singapore, Dubai, London and New York.
- IIBX is regulated by the International Financial Services Centres Authority (IFSCA).

International Financial Services Centres Authority (IFSCA)

- The IFSCA was established in 2020, under the **IFSCA** Act, 2019. It is headquartered at GIFT City, Gandhinagar in Gujarat.

- It is a *unified authority* for the development and regulation of financial products, financial services and financial institutions in the International Financial Services Centre (IFSC) in India.
- Prior to the establishment of IFSCA, the domestic financial regulators, namely, RBI, SEBI, PFRDA and IRDAI regulated the business in IFSC.
- Its main objective is to develop a strong global connect and focus on the needs of the Indian economy as well as to serve as an international financial platform for the entire region and the global economy.

Cost Inflation Index

- The Central Board of Direct Taxes, CBDT has notified the Cost Inflation Index (CII) for the financial year 2024-25 for calculating long-term capital gains.
- CII is notified under the **Income-tax Act, 1961** every year. It is used by taxpayers to compute gains arising out of sale of capital assets after adjusting inflation, so that the taxpayers are taxed on **real appreciation** of the assets and not the gains due to inflation.
- Normally, an asset is required to be retained for more than 36 months (24 months for immovable property and unlisted shares, 12 months for listed securities) to qualify as long-term capital gains.
- CII is a tool that reflects the inflation in the economy, which causes the prices of goods and services to increase over time.
- For the financial year 2023-24, the CII was set at 348. The index for FY 2024-25, has been updated to 363, marking an increase of 15 points, which corresponds to an annual inflation rate of approximately 4.3%.
- Taxpayers usually prefer a higher CII as it allows them to claim larger tax rebates.

Zimbabwe Gold

To address its long-standing economic instability, the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe (RBZ) has launched a new **gold-backed currency** called the **ZiG**, short for **Zimbabwe Gold,** replacing the Zimbabwean dollar.

Need For Launching A New Currency

- The ZiG is now the sixth national currency used by Zimbabwe in 15 years. Zimbabwe has dealt with high inflation, with rates surpassing 500% in recent years.
- Consequently, the Zimbabwean dollar, introduced in 1980, lost its value due to hyperinflation. Following this, the country relied on various currencies, primarily the US dollar, leading to limited control over its economy.
- The collapse of the Zimbabwean dollar in 2009, with hyperinflation peaking at 5 billion per cent, marked one of the most severe currency crashes in history.
- By backing the currency with gold, the RBZ intends to restore public confidence in the national currency, provide stability, prevent currency devaluation, and stabilize the exchange rate.

Backed vs. Redeemable Currency

- A critical distinction must be made between a currency that is backed by assets and one that is redeemable for those assets.
- While ZiG is backed by a basket of assets, including gold, it is not directly redeemable for gold by the currency holders.
- This approach means that while the currency's value is supported by gold, the holders cannot exchange it for gold on demand.
- This differs from some gold-backed currencies and tokens that allow direct redemption of the currency for physical gold, providing an additional layer of security and liquidity for holders.

Convertibility

- Currently, ZiG is not yet fully convertible but the RBZ intends to work towards making ZiG a fully convertible currency in the future.
- Convertibility refers to the ease with which a currency can be freely exchanged for foreign currencies without restrictions or legal obstacles.

Way Ahead

The success of ZiG will rely on robust economic policies, political stability, and the commitment of the government and central bank to uphold fiscal discipline and transparency.

Initiatives To Enhance Public Access To Central Bank

RBI has launched three major initiatives – the PRAVAAH portal, the Retail Direct Mobile App and a FinTech Repository – aimed at enhancing public access to the central bank and facilitating regulatory approvals and transactions.

PRAVAAH portal

- The PRAVAAH (Platform for Regulatory Application, Validation, and Authorisation) portal is a **secure and centralized web-based platform** for individuals and entities to apply online for various regulatory approvals from the RBI.
- The portal streamlines the process of seeking authorizations, licenses, or regulatory approvals by providing a single point of contact for applicants.

Retail Direct Mobile App

- It offers retail investors easy access to the Retail Direct platform and facilitates transactions in government securities (G-Secs).
- The app enables retail investors to open Retail Direct Gilt accounts with the RBI, participate in primary auctions for G-Secs, and buy and sell G-Secs in the secondary market.

Fintech Repository

- The Fintech Repository is a comprehensive database containing information on the Indian fintech sector, their products and services.
- It aims to provide a better understanding of the sector from a regulatory perspective and facilitate the design of appropriate policy approaches.
- It includes information on Indian fintech companies, their products and services, and the regulatory framework applicable to them.

EmTech Repository

- The RBI has also launched a related repository called the EmTech Repository meant for RBI-regulated entities (banks and NBFCs).
- The EmTech Repository contains information on the **adoption of emerging technologies** such as artificial intelligence (AI), machine learning (ML), cloud computing, distributed ledger technology (DLT), and quantum computing by these entities.

Gold Loan Norms

- RBI has asked gold loan lenders to stick to regulatory norms while lending in order to tighten its grip over Non-Banking Financial Companies (NBFCs).
- The RBI has increased its scrutiny of NBFCs after it found certain NBFCs to be flouting regulatory norms.

RBI's Gold Loan Norms

- Lenders are **not allowed to lend any amount of money that is greater than 75% of the value of the gold** that is submitted as collateral by the borrower.
- This is to ensure that banks have sufficient space to absorb any losses by selling the gold in case the borrower defaults on the loan.
- And to comply with income tax rules, the RBI also mandates that when a loan is given, **no more than ₹20,000 can be given in the form of cash**. The remaining loan amount needs to be deposited in the borrower's bank account.
- It also instructs lenders to conduct the auction of any gold (in case a borrower defaults) in a fair and transparent manner in locations that are accessible to the borrowers.

Need to Reinforce Norms

- In March, the RBI banned IIFL Finance from issuing fresh gold loans after the firm was found violating lending norms related to the size of loan disbursals, the evaluation and assaying of gold, the levying of charges, and irregularities in the auction process.
- NBFCs want to increase the size of their loan book at an aggressive pace in an attempt to grow their business, and thus may be willing to offer loans of value that exceed 75% of the value of the underlying collateral.
- To do this, NBFCs may try to deliberately overestimate the value of the gold that the borrowers submit as collateral.
- For instance, the RBI found that there were loan-to-value irregularities in over two-thirds of defaulted accounts in the case of IIFL Finance.
- Moreover, lenders such as IIFL Finance were using internal assayers to evaluate the value and the purity of the gold offered as collateral by borrowers. This is in contrast to gold loans extended by banks wherein external assayers determine the value and purity of the gold.
- The gold loan portfolio of NBFCs has increased at an aggressive pace since the pandemic, growing over four-fold.

Golden Rice

- A court in the Philippines recently revoked biosafety permits for commercial propagation of genetically modified golden rice.
- In 2021, Philippines became the first country to approve commercial production of the rice variety. However, non-profit organisations such as Greenpeace & local farmers have been protesting against it.
- Golden rice, so named because of its **rich yellow colour**, was genetically engineered to contain higher levels of the micronutrients iron and zinc in the grains.
- It also contains **beta carotene** (provitamin A, a plant pigment that the body converts into vitamin A as needed). This compound is what gives this grain its yellow-orange or golden colour.
- Like ordinary rice, Golden Rice does not require any special cultivation practices, and generally has the same yield and agronomic performance.
- Golden Rice has been assessed to be as safe as ordinary rice by Food Standards Australia New Zealand, Health Canada and the United States Food and Drug Administration.

Vitamin A

- Vitamin A is an essential micronutrient for growth, development, and keeping the body's visual and immune systems healthy. *vitamin A deficiency (VAD)* weakens the body's resistance to diseases and infections, causes blindness, and may even result in death.

- While vitamin A can be obtained from food products and supplements, challenges regarding their availability, accessibility, and affordability make it difficult to address the problem of *VAD.*
- As rice is a staple food in many VAD communities in Asia, Golden Rice can significantly help in improving these areas' vitamin A status.
- The World Health Organization has classified vitamin A deficiency as a public health problem affecting about one third of children aged 6 to 59 months, with the highest rates in sub-Saharan Africa (48 per cent) and South Asia (44 per cent).

Drop In Sovereign Bond yield

Sovereign bond yields eased, with the 10-year yield falling to a near-one-year low, as the record surplus dividend transfer by the Reserve Bank of India to the government led to hopes of the Centre lowering its fiscal deficit and borrowing.

Sovereign Bonds and Bond Yields

- Sovereign bonds are debt securities issued by a government to raise capital. Across the world, governments sell bonds to raise money for its operations, pay down old debt, pay interest on current debt, and for any other government spending needs.
- Like any bond, these bonds have a selling price and a **fixed coupon rate** (or the absolute amount of money that people earn).
- Bond yield is the return an investor gets on that bond or on a particular government security. **Bond prices and yields move inversely**.
- For example, consider a 10-year government bond (called Treasuries in the US, Gilts in Britain and G-Secs or government securities in India) is priced at $100 and the coupon rate is $5.
- This means that if person buys this bond from the government for $100 today, the government will pay the person $5 each year and return $100 to the person at the end of 10 years.
- In this example, the "yield" or the annual rate of return from the bond is 5%, but this **yield can change if the selling price of the bond changes**.

Change In Bond Yields

- For example, at the start of the second year, if investors feel that the prospects of the overall economy are not good, they might start investing in government bonds, as it is the safest form of investment.
- Due to this, the demand for government bonds will increase, which will increase the price of the bond.
- Consider that the price of the same 10-year bond rises by a dollar to $101. Since the fixed coupon rate is still $5, the effective return — on an investment of $101 — that bondholders will get at the end of the second year will be only $4.
- This leads to a yield of 3.96% — a fall from the 5% yield bondholders earned in the first year.

Factors Affecting Bond Yields

- There are many domestic and global developments that have an impact on bond yields.
- Major factors affecting the yield is the monetary policy of the Reserve Bank of India, especially the interest rates and the inflation.
- Inflation and interest rates are in turn affected by various other factors such as economic growth, sovereign rating, money supply, government borrowing, global liquidity and geopolitical developments.

Link Between Interest Rate And Bond Yields

- A fall in interest rates in the economy (e.g. the rate at which government lends to banks and banks further lend to businesses) leads to an increase in bond prices and bond yields fall.
- Similarly, rising interest rates cause bond prices to fall, and bond yields to rise.

Link Between Stock Markets And Bond Yields

- Traditionally, when bond yields go up, investors pull out their investments from stocks and invest that money into bonds, as they are much safer.
- In essence, this means investors consider lending to the Indian government a better alternative than lending to the Indian firms via the stock markets.
- Therefore, generally bond yields are inversely proportional to equity returns (returns from the stock markets).
- Also, a rise in bond yields raises the borrowing cost for companies, which in turn reduces the valuations of their stocks.

Impact Of Bond Yield On Borrowing Cost

- When bond yields rise, the RBI has to offer higher yield to investors.
- Besides, as government borrowing costs are used as the benchmark for calculating loans to businesses and consumers, any increase in yields can increase the borrowing cost in the overall economy.

Impact Of Bond Yield On FPI

- Traditionally, when bond yields rise in the US, FPIs move out of Indian stock market.
- So, a continued rise in yields in developed markets may put more pressure on Indian stock markets, which may lead to an outflow of funds.

Fair Practices Code

RBI has come across instances of lenders resorting to certain unfair practices in charging of excess interest from borrowers. Through its supervisory teams, has advised banks to refund such excess interest and other charges to customers.

Unfair Practices Followed By Banks

- RBI found that banks were charging the interest from the date of sanction of loan or date of execution of loan agreement, and not from the date of actual disbursement of the funds to the customer.
- Similarly, in the case of loans being disbursed by cheque, instances were observed where interest was charged from the date of the cheque whereas the cheque was handed over to the customer several days later.
- In the case of disbursal or repayment of loans during the course of the month, some banks were charging interest for the entire month, rather than charging interest only for the period for which the loan was outstanding.
- It was also observed that banks were collecting one or more instalments in advance but calculating the full loan amount for charging interest.

RBI's Policy On Interest Rate

- The guidelines on Fair Practices Code, issued to banks and NBFCs since 2003, advocate *fairness and transparency* in charging of interest by the lenders, while providing adequate freedom to banks with regard to their loan pricing policy.
- At the time of sanction, banks are supposed to clearly communicate to the borrowers about the possible impact of change in **benchmark interest rate** on the loan leading to changes in EMI and/or tenor or both.
- Subsequently, any increase in the EMI/ tenor or both should be communicated to the borrower immediately through appropriate channels.
- At the time of reset of interest rates, Regulated Entities should provide the option to the borrowers to switch over to a fixed rate as per their Board approved policy.
- The policy may also specify the number of times a borrower will be allowed to switch during the tenor of the loan. However, these norms are not often practised by banks.

Financial Services Institutions Bureau (FSIB)

- Financial Services Institutions Bureau (FSIB) is in the process of interviewing candidates for the post of SBI chairman.
- FSIB is a government body set up under the **Department of Financial Services (DFS)**. The board is entrusted with making recommendations for the appointment of full-time directors and non-executive chairman of state-run financial services institutions.
- It also issues guidelines for selecting general managers and directors of public sector general insurance companies.
- The board is also involved in formulating and developing business strategies for state-run banks and help them in their fund-raising plans.
- It replaced the **Bank Board's Bureau (BBB),** which was declared an incompetent authority.

Structure

- FSIB is headed by a chairman, a central government nominee.
- The board comprises of the Secretaries of the DFS, the chairman of Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority of India (IRDAI), and a deputy governor of the RBI.
- Additionally, it has three part-time members who are experts in banking and three more from the insurance sector.

Economic Capital Framework

- RBI's central board of directors have approved an all-time high surplus transfer of ₹2,10,874 crore to the Union government for FY24. The previous highest surplus transfer was ₹1,76,051 crore in 2018-19.
- The latest transfer by the central bank is more than double the ₹87,416 crore that the RBI had transferred in FY23.
- The transferable surplus for the year (2023-24) has been arrived at on the basis of the **Economic Capital Framework (ECF)** adopted by the Reserve Bank in 2019, as per the recommendations of **Bimal Jalan Committee.**
- The RBI has been transferring surplus funds based on the ECF formula since 2018-19.
- The ECF provides a methodology for determining the appropriate level of risk provisions and profit distribution to be made under Section 47 of the RBI Act, 1934.
- As per this provision, the central bank is required to pay balance of its profits to the central government after making provision for bad and doubtful debts, depreciation in assets, and contributions to staff.
- The board of directors also decided to increase the Contingent Risk Buffer (CRB) to 6.50% for 2023-24, from 6% in the previous year.
- The Committee had recommended that the risk provisioning under the CRB be maintained within a range of 6.5-5.5% of the RBI's balance sheet.
    - The CRB is the country's savings for a financial stability crisis which has been consciously maintained with the RBI in view of its role as Lender of Last Resort.
- It is the component of the RBI's economic capital required to cover its monetary and financial stability, credit and operational risks.

Source of Surplus Transfer

- The higher surplus transfer to the government is partly because of an increase in the revenue of the RBI from the variable repo rate (VRR) auctions conducted through the previous year to provide banks funding support amid tight liquidity conditions.
- The revaluation gains on forex reserves, higher interest rates on domestic and foreign securities and significantly higher gross sales of foreign exchange also led to the higher surplus.

Impact of Surplus Transfer

- The amount of ₹2,10,874 crore is well above the budgeted figure of ₹1,50,000 crore in the Interim Budget for 2024-25. This bumper surplus transfer could help the government to either borrow less in FY25 or increase capital expenditure.
- If the government borrows less, government security (G-Sec) yields could soften, thereby lowering its borrowing cost.
- The surplus transfer would also help the government to improve the quality of fiscal deficit, through a sharper fiscal consolidation compared to the target in the Interim Budget.

Variable Repo Rate (VRR) Auctions	**Variable Reverse Repo Rate (VRRR) Auctions**
• The repo rate (Repurchase Option) is the interest rate at which the RBI loans money to commercial banks. • It is utilized by the RBI to control the flow of money in the market. When the market is impacted by inflation, the RBI raises the repo rate. • Thus, the central bank conducts the VRR auctions to inject liquidity in the banking system when it turns negative or tight	• As the name implies, the reverse repo rate is the rate at which the RBI borrows funds from the country's commercial banks. • Thus, it is the rate where the commercial banks in India park excess funds with the RBI, typically for a short period of time. • Thus, VRRR auctions are conducted by the RBI to remove excess liquidity from the markets.

Eggshell Skull Rule

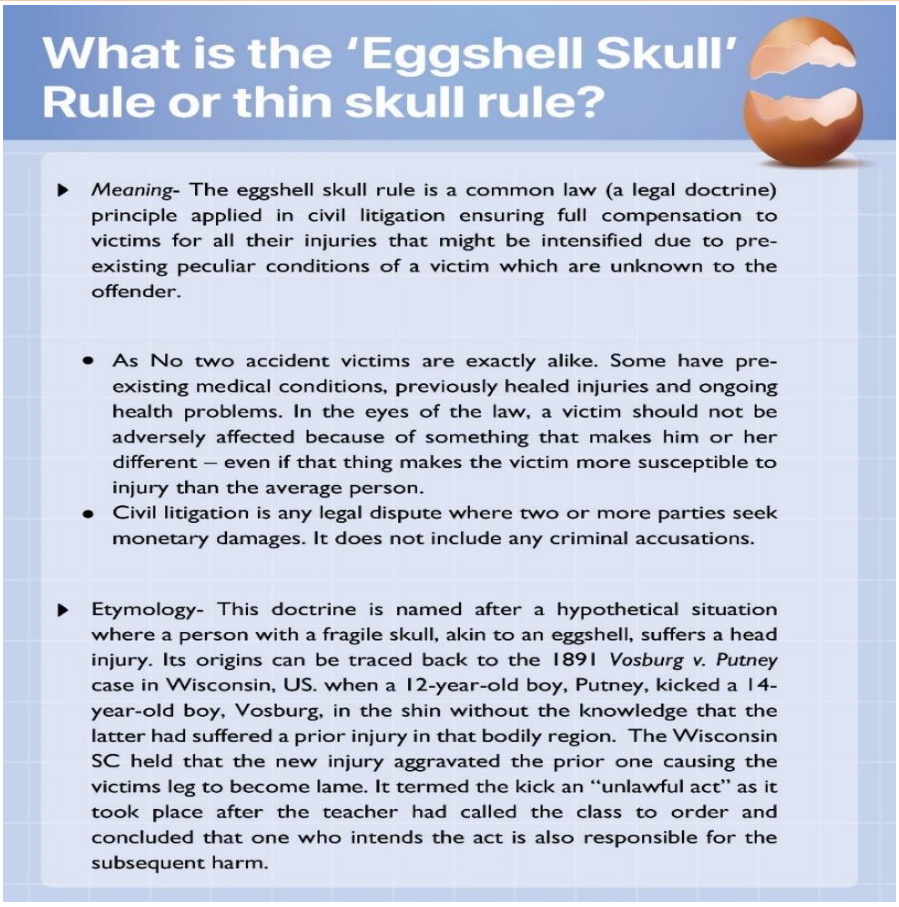
Underlining that the state and central consumer courts incorrectly applied the 'eggshell skull' legal principle, the Supreme Court (SC) restored the compensation of Rs 5 lakhs awarded by the district consumer forum in a medical negligence case.

Rule Applicable To

Despite its name, the eggshell skull rule is applied (based on principles of fairness and justice) for claiming enhanced compensation for all types of injuries, including physical, emotional, and psychological harm caused by the defendant that exaggerated a victim's pre-existing vulnerability.

Not Applicable To

The rule does not provide compensation for an unrelated pre-existing injury.



Commission on Population and Development

Recently, Elected women representatives (EWRs) from India's Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI) participated in a side event of the 57th session of **Commission on Population and Development (CPD 57)** titled- "Localizing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): Women in Local Governance in India Lead the Way".

- ✓ The CPD57 Side Event underlined the invaluable contributions of women in local governance towards achieving the SDGs and sparked a global demand for **exporting** India's Panchayati Raj model as an effective system of local governance and to *learn from and institutionalize the successful Panchayati Raj model of local governance led by women.*
- ✓ In 2023, Bhopal (City of Lakes) became the first city in India **to localize** the United Nations' SDGs. The city launched An Agenda for Action: Sustainable Urban Transformation in Bhopal, India's first city-level Voluntary Local Review (VLR), in partnership with UN

Habitat. The VLR allows cities to choose specific SDGs for review and adapt national indicators to reflect local realities.

Diplomatic Passports

Recently, a Member of Parliament (MP) Prajwal Revanna fled to Germany on a diplomatic passport after allegations of sexual abuse.

About Diplomatic Passport

What is a Diplomatic Passport? Diplomatic passports or 'Type D' passports are the ones issued by the Consular, Passport & Visa (CPV) Division of the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) to people falling in broadly five categories-

1. those with diplomatic status;
2. government-appointed individuals travelling abroad for official business;
3. officers working under the branches A and B of the Indian Foreign Service (IFS), normally at the rank of Joint Secretary and above;
4. relatives and immediate family of officers employed in IFS and MEA;
5. to "select individuals who are authorized to undertake official travel on behalf of the government", this includes union ministers and MPs who often travel abroad representing the government.

How are they different from Normal Passports?

Normal passports have dark blue covers and are valid for 10 years (for adults) whereas diplomatic passports have maroon covers and are valid for five years or less (in case of MPs, the validity is concurrent with their term). For example, Congress leader Rahul Gandhi surrendered his diplomatic passport after he was disqualified as an MP in 2023.

What protocols are needed to be followed while travelling on diplomatic passports?

- **Political Clearance**- Holders of diplomatic passports such as Chief Ministers and Ministers of State Governments/UTs, must obtain political clearance from MEA for official visits overseas after which the MEA issues a visa note for their visit.
- **Informing Relevant Authorities**: MPs are required to adhere to stringent guidelines when travelling abroad for non-official purposes which mandate seeking political clearance and informing relevant authorities about the trip's details and expected hospitality.
  - ✓ In the present case, MP Prajwal **did not** seek prior parliamentary clearance before travelling to Germany.
  - ✓ As per a latest bulletin issued by the Rajya Sabha Secretariat, members, when using a diplomatic passport, are required to obtain prior political clearance directly from MEA at least three weeks in advance.

What is the Period of Stay for Diplomatic Passport Holders in a Foreign Country?

Diplomatic passport holders can stay in a foreign country for a period of 30 to 90 days. Depending on the country like Afghanistan and Turkmenistan allow a 30-day visa-free stay to diplomatic passport holders, while Uzbekistan allows 60 days and Germany, Finland, France and a majority of other nations on the list permit 90 days (Under Operational **Visa Exemption** Agreements).

Benefits

- Diplomatic passport holders enjoy certain privileges and immunities that ordinary holders don't have like immunity from arrest, detention, and certain legal proceedings in the host country.
- Their immigration formalities are fast-tracked upon arrival in a foreign country.
- Also, they don't need to acquire a visa note from the MEA if they are travelling to one of the 34 nations with which India has 'Visa Exemption Agreements' like Finland, France, Germany, Spain, Kenya, Japan, and Iran. These agreements are reciprocal.
  - ✓ This is the reason why MP Prajwal *did not need a visa note* from MEA before travelling to Germany.

- ✓ Recently, India & Moldova signed an agreement on visa waiver for diplomatic & official passport.
- ✓ India also has agreements with 99 other countries like Bahrain, Brazil, Egypt, Hong Kong, Oman, Singapore, the United Arab Emirates etc. wherein apart from diplomatic passport holders, even those holding service & official passports can avail operational visa exemption for stays up to 90 days.

How can a Passport be Revoked? As per section 10(3) of the Passport Act 1967, the passport authority can revoke a passport on following grounds-

- if the holder is in wrongful possession; or
- if it was obtained by the suppression of material information or based on wrong information; or
- if the passport authority deems it necessary so to do in the interests of the sovereignty and integrity of India, or friendly relations of India with any foreign country.
- if the holder, after the issue of the passport, has been convicted by a court in India, and sentenced to imprisonment for not less than two years.
- if proceedings of an offence alleged to have been committed by the holder of are pending before a criminal court in India; or
  - ✓ MP Prajwal's diplomatic passport can be revoked only after a court order to that effect.
- if any of the conditions of the passport or travel document has been contravened;

International Laws related to Diplomatic Passports

- **Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations, 1961-** It lays down the rules and regulations of diplomatic relations between countries and the privileges that diplomats enjoy in other countries.

Extra Mile: Types of Passports in India

Type	Colour	Validity	Description
Ordinary Passport/ Type P	Blue	10 years for adults and 5 for minors	It is issued to Indian citizens for personal travel purposes, who have completed their education beyond the 10th grade.
Service Passport	White	10 years for adults and 5 for minors	It is issued to government officials excluding diplomatic or consular officials.
Emigration Passport	Orange	10 years for adults and 5 for minors	Indian citizens who have not completed their formal education and seek overseas employment.
Diplomatic Passport	Maroon	5 years	It is exclusively issued to diplomats, consular officers, and other high-ranking government officials representing India abroad.
Others	Yellow		Issued to Tibetans seeking refugee status in India as their identity card.
E-Passports (digital version of ordinary (blue) passports)	-	10 years for adults and 5 for minors	Equipped with an electronic chip which holds the biometric information of the passport holder, including his fingerprint and iris data alongside the traditional personal details found in a passport. It aims to streamline the immigration process through automated identity verification, reduce passport forgery, and enhance overall security.

As per Henley Passport Index 2024, Indian passport secured 80th position in the list of world's most powerful passports for 2024, granting its holders visa-free access to 62 countries (Out of 199 countries taken into consideration).

Rules on Contesting Seats

Recently, as the Congress leader Rahul Gandhi announced his intentions of contesting from Rae Bareli in Uttar Pradesh. Questions were raised on why he took the decision after the Kerala election was over as he is a contestant from Wayanad too.

About The Rules on Contesting Elections

How Many Seats can a Candidate Contest get from?

According to Section 33(7) of the Representation of the People Act (RPA), 1951, a candidate can contest an election from up to two constituencies but is allowed to hold only one seat at a time if elected from both the constituencies (as per Section 70 of RPA).

- ✓ Section 33(7) was added through an amendment in 1996 to avoid the need to conduct multiple by-elections for the remaining seats after the polls were over.
- ✓ There have also been recommendations by the Election Commission of India and the Law Commission to amend the RPA allowing one person to contest from only one seat as a candidate cannot hold two seats at the same time also, for this purpose, that person should be a voter in the particular State he seeks to contest Assembly polls from.
  - ➢ At present, to contest in a Lok Sabha election, a person can be registered as a voter in any constituency of the country and can contest from any seat in India, except autonomous districts of Assam, Lakshadweep and Sikkim.

What are the prerequisites for Contesting Elections?

The minimum age for contesting Lok Sabha & Assembly elections is 25 years. There is no minimum educational qualification needed. Candidates must be an Indian citizen, registered in as a valid voter in any constituency & must not have been convicted of any offence punishable by more than two years.

When can a candidate not contest elections? A person shall be disqualified from being chosen as or being a member of either House if:

- he holds any office of profit under the Government of India or the Government of any State;
- he/she is of unsound mind and stands so declared by a competent court;
- he/she is an undischarged insolvent;
- he/she is not a citizen of India or has voluntarily acquired the citizenship of a foreign state.
- he/she is convicted of any offence and sentenced to an imprisonment of two years or more, this will lead to his disqualification to contest elections (section 8 of RPA).
- he/she is out on bail, after the conviction and his/her appeal is pending for disposal.
  - ✓ If the conviction is stayed, then the candidate can contest elections.
- he/she is convicted for serious offences like dowry, rape, murder etc. regardless of the quantum of punishment.

DigiLocker

With the release of board exam results, 10th and 12th standard students from the CISCE board as well as 10th standard students from the State Board of Tamil Nadu are getting their 2024 results from DigiLocker and this facility will soon be introduced to CBSE students.

About DigiLocker (cloud-based storage platform)

DigiLocker is a flagship initiative of Ministry of Electronics & IT (MeitY) under Digital India programme, launched in 2015 to digitally empower the citizens by allowing them to store and access their records through a Digital Document Wallet.

- ✓ National e-Governance Division (NeGD) (established in 2009 by the MeitY) is an Independent Business Division under the Digital India Corporation {erstwhile Media Lab Asia} & has been playing a pivotal role in managing several National Public Digital Platforms such as **DigiLocker**, UMANG, Poshan Tracker, Academic Bank of Credits, National Academic Depositories, National AI Portal etc.

Objective- To go paperless and facilitate sharing of e-documents among institutions and organizations by allowing them to verify the 'authenticity' of the documents online.

- ✓ Rule 9A of the Information Technology (Preservation and Retention of Information by Intermediaries providing **DigiLocker** Facilities) Rules, 2016, provides that issued documents in the DigiLocker system are to be regarded on par with original physical documents.
- ✓ For instance, when applying for a new passport, the Passport Seva portal now allows applicants to share their DigiLocker uploaded documents, thus facilitating a seamless application experience.

Benefits

For Users	For Organizations
• Provides access to important documents anytime, anywhere, thus it helps eliminate the need to carry separate sets of physical documents while they are on the move. • Documents available are e-verified making them legally equal to originals. • Requires users consent before sharing digital documents. • Provides faster service delivery in the areas of Government Benefits, Employment, Financial Inclusion, Education and Health.	• Paperless process saves administrative costs reducing the usage of paper and shortening verification process as the documents are verified. This further helps in keeping at bay fa poor quality print copies, and outda documents that miss key details. • Issued documents can be retrieved in real-t from the issuing agency, thus saving time.

How Secure is it?

- DigiLocker is equipped with standard security features including 2048 Bit RSA SSL encryption, multi-factor authentication (OTP verification), consent systems, timed log outs, and security audits.
  - ✓ 2048-bit RSA SSL encryption is a security method that ensures secure communication by encrypting data, making it difficult for unauthorized parties to intercept and decode.
- None of its data is shared with third parties and data is encrypted in transit.
- But any government database that stores citizens' information & documents is inevitably an attractive target for hackers to steal user data & sell it on the dark web. Therefore, DigiLocker posted a notice about a "potential vulnerability in the sign-up flow," that could have led to accounts being compromised. However, due to timely alert, the vulnerability was patched & the user data was safe.

Achievements

- A total of Rs 452 crore documents have been made available to citizens through DigiLocker including more than 40 crore educational documents from school boards and higher education institutions.
- During the Kerala Floods, the IT department issued digital certificates using DigiLocker to Kerala citizens during the Floods.
- DigiLocker was designated as the Sole National Academic Depository (NAD) by the Ministry of Education in 2020 and it handles the Academic Bank of Credits.
- The Ministry of Finance has notified acceptance of e-Documents from DigiLocker as part of Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA).
- Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) also notified the acceptance of Officially Valid Documents (OVD) from DigiLocker for the KYC process since 2020.
- Ministry of Civil Aviation and Indian Railways accept photo Identity documents from DigiLocker.
- Ministry of Road Transport and Highways (MORTH) accepts DL, Registration Certificate or other documents presented through DigiLocker.
- Inter-governmental body Shanghai Cooperation Organization members have unanimously adopted India's proposal for developing Digital Public Infrastructure (includes platforms such as Aadhaar, United Payments Interface (UPI), and DigiLocker).

Related Issues

1. **Digital Divide & illiteracy -** Citizens who cannot read or don't know the use of smartphones face difficulty using DigiLocker, using OTPs, and fetching their credentials unless they have assistance.
2. **Difficulty in Accessing Documents due to Mismatched Initials**- People with multiple names, aliases, inconsistent spellings, or even slightly mismatched certificates face difficulty fetching their documents via DigiLocker as the submitted details of the user should match the issuer's data exactly.

3. **No Uniform Law on Reviewing Official Documents**- as some government authorities and law enforcement bodies insist on being shown virtual documents through DigiLocker, others demand original hard copies.

2024 World Press Freedom Index

In the recently released 2024 World Press Freedom Index by Reporters without Borders (RSF for Reporters sans Frontières), India's rank improved from 161 in 2023 to **159** in 2024 (among 180 countries) but its score fell from 36.62 to 31.28.

Key Highlights of the 2024 World Press Freedom Index

- **From Global Perspective-**
  1. **Best and the Worst-**

Country Wise	Region Wise
Best: 1. Norway 2. Denmark 3. Sweden **Worst:** 1. Eritrea (Bottom) 2. Syria 3. Afghanistan	**Best:** Press freedom is "good" are all in Europe (specifically within the European Union), which has adopted European Media Freedom Act (EMFA) **Worst:** The Maghreb - Middle East region, followed by the Asia-Pacific region where journalism is suffocating under the weight of authoritarian governments.
** It termed the U.S. as the most concerning in terms of press freedoms with its rank deteriorating from 45 to 55. Africa, although less than 10% of the region is in a "very serious" situation, almost half of the countries are in a "difficult" situation.	

  2. **Government's Failure to Protect Journalism**- A worrying decline was witnessed in support and respect for media autonomy and an increase in pressure from the state or other political actors.
  3. **Journalism vs Disinformation in Super Election Year**- While 2024 is the biggest election year in world history, elections are often accompanied by violence against journalists, as in Nigeria & Democratic Republic of Congo. In the absence of regulation, the use of generative AI in the arsenal of disinformation for political purposes is also a concern. Deepfakes now occupy a leading position in influencing the course of elections.

- **From India's Perspective-**
  1. **India's Score-** It dropped (worsened) in political context, legal framework, economic context, sociocultural context except security. According to RSF, press freedom is under threat in the world's largest democracy.
  2. **Neighbourhood**- India lags behind its neighbours Nepal (72), Maldives (106), Sri Lanka (150) and Pakistan (152) but is ahead of Afghanistan (178), Bangladesh (165), Myanmar (171) and China (172).
  3. **Media's Unofficial State of Emergency**- The government has enacted several new laws granting it significant authority to regulate the media, censor news, and suppress dissent. These laws include the Telecommunications Act 2023, the draft Broadcasting Services (Regulation) Bill 2023, and the Digital Personal Data Protection Act 2023.
  4. **Harassment to Journalists**- Journalists who are very critical of the government often face online harassment, intimidation, threats and physical attacks, as well as criminal prosecutions and arbitrary arrests. The situation also remains very worrisome in Kashmir, where reporters are often harassed by police and paramilitaries, with some being subjected to so-called "provisional" detention for several years.

Can Parties Be De-Recognised or De-Registered for Violation Of MCC?

The Election Commission of India (ECI) in its report on enforcement of Model Code of Conduct (MCC) recently served notices to political parties for violation of MCC by their star campaigners. This has raised a debate about ECI's powers to rein in MCC violations and if it could de-recognize/de-register a party for violation of MCC.

Types of Political Parties

- **Registered Parties** are the political parties which register themselves with Election Commission of India (ECI). As per ECI, there are 2,790 active registered political parties in India.
- **Recognized Political Parties** are recognized as a 'national' or 'State' party under the provisions of The Election Symbols (Reservation and Allotment) Order, 1968 (Symbols Order).
- **Registered Unrecognized Political Party (RUPPs)** are either newly registered parties or those which have not secured enough percentage of votes in the assembly or general elections to become a state party, or those which have never contested elections since being registered. The total number of registered unrecognized political parties in the country at present is 2,796.

Issues Faced By ECI Regarding Political Parties

1. ***All Parties Not Contesting Elections***- It has been observed that less than third RUPP contest elections and RPA does not confer explicit powers on the ECI to de-register any political party if it fails to contest elections, conduct inner-party elections or lodge requisite returns.
2. ***Misuse of Tax-Exemption***- The RUPPs not contesting elections have raised concerns over the possible misuse of income tax exemption and donations collected being used for money laundering.
3. ***Legal Limitation of ECI on Action Against Parties Violating MCC***- Recognized political parties are often found guilty of violating the MCC on various occasions for using caste and communal feelings to secure votes and bribing or intimidation of voters. But the ECI on such occasions only bars the leaders from campaigning for a short period of two to three days and takes no action against the political party involved.

✓ MCC lacks statutory backing and is not enforceable by law.

Can ECI De-register or De-recognize a Political Party?

De-registration- *No, ECI has no power to de-register a party under RPA* *except* for circumstances like registration being obtained by fraud or the political party ceasing to have allegiance to the Constitution or if it is declared unlawful by the Central Government.

De-recognition-

- Paragraph 16A of the Symbols (Reservation and Allotment) Order 1968. empowers the ECI to suspend or withdraw recognition of a recognized political party for its failure to observe MCC or follow lawful directions of the Commission.
- ECI in 2015 suspended the recognition of the National People's Party, a recognized state party in Meghalaya due to its failure in filing the election expenditure statement of the party despite sending two reminders. It was the first case that recognition of a party was suspended for its failure to follow the Lawful directions of the Commission.
  - ✓The ECI in pursuance of SC's order in *Common Cause Vs Union of India and others, 1995* had issued instructions to all political parties, to file their election expenditure statement within 75 days of assembly general elections and 90 days of Lok Sabha general elections.
- A party could also be de-recognized if it fails to fulfil the conditions required for being recognized as a national/state party.

Way Forward-

- The ECI in its 2016 Memorandum for Electoral Reforms has suggested amendments allowing itself to deregister a party.

- Law Commission in its 255th report (2015) on 'Electoral reforms' has also recommended amendments for de-registration of a political party if it fails to contest elections for 10 consecutive years.
- These recommendations should be implemented and ECI should be empowered to de-register/ derecognize a party if it fails to fulfil certain conditions like failing to contest elections for a long duration or for violation MCC or for not following the guidelines as strict action by ECI would have a salutary effect in ensuring adherence to the MCC.

Supreme Court Excludes Lawyers from Consumer Act

The Supreme Court (SC) in a recent judgement held that advocates cannot be sued by their clients under the **Consumer Protection Act** for deficiency of service and that their service must be treated differently from other businesses or trades.

Background

The judgment came in the case filed against National Consumer Disputes Redressal Commission's (NCDRC) decision in 2007 where the commission held that lawyers' services fall under Section 2(o) of the Consumer Protection Act, 1986 (CPA) which defines services and if there is any deficiency in the service, a complaint could be filed under the CPA.

- ✓ Section 2(o) of CPA, 1986 defines "service" as the one which is made available to potential users and includes (but not limited to) facilities like banking, financing insurance, transport, processing, supply of electrical or other energy, boarding or lodging or both, housing construction, entertainment, amusement or the purveying of news or other information. It excludes from its ambit any service rendered free of charge or under a contract of personal service.

Reasons Given By Lawyers To Exclude Them From CPA

1. ***Lawyers Occupy a Unique Space***- The legal profession must be differentiated from other businesses or trades and lawyers occupy a unique space among other professions because they cannot act as a "mouthpiece" for their client even after payment of fees due to their duties towards the court and their opponent as per the Bar Council of India Rules, 1961. These obligations are likely to conflict with the duty towards the client. For instance, as a part of a lawyer's duty toward the court, they must refuse to represent clients who insist on unfair means.
2. ***No Control over the Case Outcome***- Due to the complexity of legal issues, which involve intricate statutes and case laws, and the adversarial nature of legal proceedings.
3. ***No Standard of Practice Established***- There is no objective standard that can be applied across the legal profession as each lawyer has their own style of advocacy unlike the medical profession where science can help establish a universal standard of care.
4. ***Conduct of Lawyers is Governed by Advocates Act***- Advocates Act 1961 contains provisions to deal with professional misconduct by the lawyers along with. Even the Bar Councils (both at the state and national level) have been given disciplinary powers by the Advocates Act in such cases. Therefore, the Advocates Act should be applied in such cases and not the CPA.

The Verdict by SC

1. ***Legal Profession is Unique in Nature***- as advocates could impact not only their individual clients, but also the entire society and administration of justice through the courts. They are the medium through which important questions of law reach the court. They ensure that rule of law and administration of justice remain the foundation of civilized society.
2. ***Acknowledged the Problem of Professional Misconduct***- The advocates are expected to act according to the principles of *uberrima fides* i.e., the utmost good faith, integrity, fairness and loyalty while handling the legal proceedings of his client. Sometimes there may be cases of professional misconduct but suing advocates under the CPA was not the answer.

3. ***Lawyer Services do not fall under CPA***- The court held that CPA did not include services provided by professionals like advocates or doctors neither when it was enacted in 1986, nor when re-enacted in 2019. Also, hiring an advocate came under "a contract of personal service" as the client exercises a considerable amount of direct control over the services of an advocate because the advocate requires client instructions before making any concession or undertaking in the court. Therefore, overruled the NCDRC's decision and held that lawyer services cannot be challenged under the CPA.
4. ***Distinguished between 'Business & Trade' and 'Profession'***- 'business and trade' is where there is a commercial interest and 'profession' involves some branch of learning or science. Success in a profession depends on factors beyond one's control. Therefore, it cannot be treated equally with a businessman or a service provider who falls under the CPA.
5. ***Must Revisit the decision in Indian Medical Association v V.P. Shantha (1995)-*** Based on the above distinction, the court said that its previous decision where it held that services by medical practitioners would fall under the CPA- should be revisited by a larger SC bench.

PM-WANI Scheme

Public wifi hotspots under the *Prime Minister Wi-Fi Access Network Interface (PM-WANI)* scheme are nearing the 2-lakh mark in the country.

About PM-WANI Scheme

The scheme was launched by the Department of Telecommunication (DoT) in 2020 to enhance the proliferation of public Wi-Fi hotspots and provide affordable and high-speed internet connectivity to the public in rural and remote areas of the country.

- ✓ It was first recommended by the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) in 2017.
- ✓ This framework took forward the goal of the National Digital Communications Policy, 2018 (NDCP) of creating a robust digital communications infrastructure.

Objective- Through better access to public hotspots, the government aims to increase employment for small and micro-entrepreneurs and provide low-cost internet to the underserved urban poor and rural households.

PM-WANI Eco-System: It consists of four players-

- *Public Data Office (PDO)*: to establish, maintain, and operate only WANI compliant Wi-Fi Access Points and deliver broadband services to subscribers.
  - ✓ For Example: The small shopkeepers can become PDOs as last-mile access service providers and take services from PDOAs for Internet and backend services.
- *Public Data Office Aggregator (PDOA)*: It is an aggregator of PDOs and performs the functions relating to Authorization and Accounting.
  - ✓ PDOA provides user interface for the user to buy a plan and keep track of their data consumption. PDOA need not pay any license fees.
- *App Provider*: to register users and discover WANI compliant Wi-Fi hotspots in the nearby area and display the same within the App for accessing the internet service.
- *Central Registry*: maintains the details of App Providers, PDOAs, and PDOs. It is managed by the Centre for Development of Telematics (C-DOT).
  - o C-DoT was established in 1984 as an autonomous Telecom R&D Centre of DoT. It is a public funded research institution focused on telecom technology and has significantly contributed to the Indian Telecom Network's Digitization. Its diverse product portfolio includes switching & routing, optical communication, wireless communication, network security, advanced security-based solutions, Internet of Things, Artificial Intelligence, network management and a host of other telecom software applications.

No registration is required for PDO and PDOAs. App Providers can get themselves registered with DoT through online registration portal (SARALSANCHAR; https://saralsanchar.gov.in) without paying any registration fee.

Working: For providing high-speed internet connectivity across remote areas, public Wi-Fi networks have been established across the country through the creation of Wi-Fi Access Points (WAPs) set up by PDOs. The WAPs will operate on an open-architecture system, allowing multiple service providers to offer their services to the public through a single platform.

How Can one Access PM-WANI?

- For accessing the internet through PM-WANI, one needs to download the relevant application which shows the available networks.The user can then choose from a list of available connections and make a payment to use the network. The user can access the network till his/her balance is exhausted.

Benefits

- ***Create Employment Opportunities and Boost GDP with Facilitating Ease of Doing Business***
- ***Give a Push to Digital India Initiative & Narrow Digital Divide***.

Article 361

Recently a sexual harassment complaint was filed against West Bengal Governor but due to constitutional immunity, the police is unable to name the Governor as an accused or even investigate the case.

What is Article 361 Under The Constitution of India?

It provides immunity to the President and State Governors and makes them unanswerable to any court of law-

- *for the exercise and performance of the powers and duties of their office; or*
- *for any act done or purporting to be done by him in the exercise and performance of those powers and duties.*
- No criminal proceedings whatsoever shall be instituted or continued against the President, or the Governor of a State, in any court during his term of office. However, civil proceedings can be brought against them for their personal acts after two months' notice.

Why is this Article Controversial?

Because it contains two crucial clauses-

- *Article 361(2)*- which bars any criminal proceedings to be initiated or continued against the President, or the Governor in any court during his term of office.
- *Article 361(3)*- which bars any process for the arrest or imprisonment of the President, or the Governor to be issued from any court during his term of office.
    - But once their official term expires, the police can act against them. Therefore, in this case, the police can act only if the Governor resigns, or he no longer enjoys the confidence of the President.

What has been the Stand of Supreme Court (SC) on the immunity being enjoyed by President or Governors under Article 361?

- *Rameshwar Prasad v Union of India (2006)*- In this case, the SC outlined the immunity enjoyed by the Governor even on allegation of personal malafides and held that the Governor is not answerable to any Court for the exercise of the powers and duties of his office or for any act done or purporting to be done by him in the exercise and performance of those powers and duties. *But this ruling was for exercising discretionary constitutional powers and not related to criminal complaints.*
- *Precedents where Criminal Proceedings were Halted till the Governor Completed His Term in Office*- In 2017, the SC allowed fresh charges of criminal conspiracy against various leaders in the 1992 Babri Masjid Demolition Case but halted the trial against former UP Chief Minister Kalyan Singh under Article 361 since he was then the Governor of Rajasthan and ordered the Court of Sessions to frame charges against him as soon as he ceased to be Governor.

History Sheets

Recently, the Supreme Court (SC) asked all states and Union Territories (UTs) to ensure 'history sheets' drawn up by their police do not reflect caste prejudices.

What is History Sheet and Who is a History Sheeter?

- History Sheet is a record maintained by the Police Station about an offender including his criminal history, activities and other information.
- It is opened automatically following conviction for dacoity, robbery, burglary and theft, for habitual offenders and upon release from life imprisonment for certain cases of financial crime.
- History sheeter is an individual with a significant criminal history who has been implicated in multiple offences.

Purpose and Content

- **Identification:** History sheets help in identifying individuals with prior criminal records.
- **Surveillance:** They facilitate the monitoring and surveillance of habitual offenders.
- **Crime Prevention:** By keeping track of known criminals, police aim to prevent future crimes.

Governing Rules- It is governed by the police rules of respective states, such as the Punjab Police Rules, 1934 which is applicable in Punjab, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Delhi, and Chandigarh. The process to file a history sheet varies according to a state's police rules.

✓ Judicial Oversight: Courts have occasionally intervened to ensure that history sheets are used fairly and do not violate individual rights.

Details Included- It must include:

- **Personal Details:** Name, age, address, physical description, and aliases.
- **Criminal Record:** Details of past offenses, arrests, convictions, and sentences.
- **Associations:** Information about associates, relatives and accomplices.
- **Behavioral Patterns:** Notes on the individual's behavior, habits, and any known modus operandi.
- **Surveillance Notes:** Observations from police surveillance, including movement and activities.
- Details of any property owned by the criminal, and his mode of earning a livelihood to ensure if the criminal is at any time living beyond his means.

** Digital Records: With advancements in technology, many police departments are transitioning from paper-based history sheets to digital records.

Process-

- The process starts when the Station House Officer (SHO), who heads the police station, takes notice of an individual proven guilty in multiple cases, and/or is found to be constantly engaged in criminal activities.
- He then submits a report containing detailed information about that individual, his associates, and known relatives to the Senior Superintendent of Police (SSP) or Superintendent of Police (SP) of the district.

Types-

1. *KD (Known Depredators) sheets*- for criminals convicted of crimes such as dacoity, robbery, or burglary.
2. *Suspect sheets*- for those who have been convicted once for an offence of burglary or theft.
3. *Rowdy sheets*- for those who habitually commit or abet the commission of offences involving breach of the peace.
4. *Members of Organized Crime Sheets*- for those involved in drug trafficking, human trafficking, money laundering, smuggling migrants, cybercrime etc.
5. *Budding Criminal Sheets*- for budding criminals.

Why Did The SC Order The Police To Avoid Caste Prejudices?

The Case- The SC was hearing a plea by AAP MLA Amanatullah Khan challenging a history sheet opened against him, and a proposal to declare him a 'bad character' in police records to keep a close watch on his activities. This

proposal was accompanied by a list of 18 cases pending against him, in 14 of which he had already been discharged, acquitted, or the FIR had been quashed. These cases were mostly related to offences such as intimidation, threatening, and riots.

Verdict- The Supreme Court rejected the appeal but directed the police to not include the details of Khan's minor children and wife in the history sheet and to ensure that the dignity, self-respect and privacy of innocent family members of any person is not compromised while filing a history sheet.

Advertising Standards Council of India

The Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI) recently processed complaints against 101 advertisements (ads) featuring celebrities which were in violation of the ASCI code.

- ✓ The top five categories where violations were found by celebrities were personal care (22%), food and beverages (21%), illegal betting (20%), healthcare (9%), and durables (6%).
- ✓ Celebrities are required to ensure that products endorsed by them in advertisements do not mislead consumers under the ASCI code as well as the Consumer Protection Act, 2019.
- ✓ India's Central Consumer Protection Authority (CCPA-under Consumer Protection Act) issued guidelines to combat fallacious or misleading ads claims.

About Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI- Headquartered in Mumbai)

It is a voluntary self-regulatory organization established in 1985 by professionals from the advertising and media industry to keep Indian ads decent, fair and honest. It is a part of the Executive Committee of the International Council on Ad Self-Regulation (ICAS) and is registered as a not-for-profit company under Section 25 of the Company Act.
Objective- To self-regulate advertisements and ensure the protection of consumer interests while being fair to the advertising industry.
Functions- 1. *Regulates*- the content of advertisements and promotions across all media types and formats such as TV, print, digital, outdoor, radio, point of sale, claims made on packaging and so on. ✓ In 2007, the Government of India amended the Cable TV Network Rules' Advertising Code by which ads that violate ASCI code cannot be permitted on TV. 2. *Resolves Issues*- related to i) Dishonest or misleading ads; ii) Indecent or offensive ads; iii) Harmful ads; iv) Ads that are unfair in competition. ✓ A MoU is signed by the Ministry of AYUSH & the ASCI to check Misleading Drug Advertisements. 3. *Suo Motu Monitoring of Ads*- It does Suo motu monitoring of ads on social media and digital platforms by using advanced technology and artificial intelligence- to act against advertisements which are in potential violation of the ACSI code soon after they are published and to create a level playing field for honest advertisers. ✓ In November 2023, ASCI also proposed guidelines that aim to check Greenwashing in ads. As study by ASCI reported that 79 percent of green claims made by organisations were exaggerated or misleading. ✓ Greenwashing is the process of conveying a false impression or misleading information about how a company's products are environmentally sound. 4. *Provides Advertising Advice Service*- to assist advertisers in identifying any potential violation-related problems. 5. *Endorser Due Diligence*- service is offered by ASCI to celebrities to prevent misleading or invalid claims in the advertisements they appear in. ✓ ASCI's role has been acclaimed by various Government bodies including the Department of Consumer Affairs (DoCA), Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI), Ministry of AYUSH as well as the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting.

6. Complaint Handling- It handles complaints made by public, consumer organizations, the government or industry and also takes Suo motu cognizance of advertisements that may be in potential violation of the ASCI code.
   - ✓It does not entertain anonymous complaints.
   - ✓ASCI bagged two Gold Global Best Practice Awards for the Mobile App "ASCIonline" (2016) and for reducing the time taken to process complaints (2013).

PM-EAC Report

A new analysis by Economic Advisory Council to the Prime Minister (PM-EAC) shows that the share of Hindu population in India has dipped 7.82 per cent while that of Muslims, Christians and Sikhs has seen a rise in the 65-year period between 1950 and 2015.

About Economic Advisory Council to the Prime Minister (EAC-PM): It is a non-constitutional, non-permanent and independent body constituted to give advice to the Government, specifically the Prime Minister (PM) on key economic issues.

Origin- It was set up in 2017 with a term of two years replacing the erstwhile PMEAC, which was headed by former RBI governor C Rangarajan during the tenure of former PM Manmohan Singh.

Composition-

- It is headed by a chairperson (Now Dr. Bibek Debroy) consisting of eminent economists members.
- For administrative, logistic, planning, and budgeting purposes, the NITI Aayog serves as the nodal agency for the EAC-PM.

Functions-

- Analyzing any issue, economic or otherwise, referred to it by the PM and advising him on the same.
- Addressing issues of macroeconomic importance and presenting its views to the PM, these could be either Suo-motu or on reference by the PM or anyone else.
- Attending to any other task as may be desired by the PM from time to time.

About the PM-EAC Report

What is this report about? The report is titled 'Share of Religious Minorities: A cross-country analysis', a study on religious composition of populations for 167 countries. The analysis relied on the Religious Characteristics of States Dataset 2017 to track religious composition across countries that had a majority religion accounting for more than 50% share of the total population in 1950.

Key Highlights of the Report-

1. ***Majority Population Declining Across the World***-
   - Of the 167 countries analyzed, most of world's high-income and liberal democracies, such as OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries have seen a major decline in the share of majority religion from 1950 to 2015.
   - Of 35 OECD countries studied, 25 were from Europe, and the share of majority religious denominations has decreased by about 29% in these countries.
2. ***South Asian (neighbouring) Countries Witnessed Decrease in Minority Population-*** Share of the majority religious denomination has increased, and minority populations have shrunk alarmingly from 1950 to 2015 across countries like Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bhutan and Afghanistan. Infact all the Muslim majority countries witnessed an increase in the share of majority religious denomination except Maldives.
3. ***By Indian Perspective***-
   - *Hindu Population*- The share of the majority Hindu population decreased by 7.82% between 1950 and 2015 from 84.68% to 78.06%.

- *Minority Population*- Share of Muslim population rose from 9.84% to 14.09% followed by Christians, Sikhs and Buddhists whereas the Jain and Parsi community population witnessed a dip.
- *Protected Minorities*- The report highlighted that the rise in share of minorities is because of policy actions, political decisions and societal processes which provided a conducive environment for increasing diversity in society. They are not just protected but thrive in India.

Floor Test

The Haryana Government is likely to face floor test post Lok Sabha election results as three independent MLAs withdrew their support to the BJP government earlier this month.

About Floor Test

A floor test (also called a 'trust vote/ test of the majority') is a way to check if the executive enjoys the confidence of the House, i.e. if it has the support of enough members of the house to remain in power. Floor test can be initiated both at the Central, as well as state levels.

Related Constitutional Provisions- Although the term *floor test* is not mentioned in the Constitution, there are two provisions Article 163 and 174 that deal with a Governor's power to summon (Article 174(1)), prorogue and dissolve (Article 174 (2)) a Legislative Assembly.

- Article 163 empowers the Governor to exercise his/her functions with the aid and advice of the Council of Ministers except when the Constitution requires her or him to carry out any function at her/his discretion.
- Under Article 174, the Governor can invoke his discretionary power if the chief minister's support in the House is uncertain, and their majority is in question.

Who Can Call For A Floor Test?

- The Speaker calls for a floor test when the House is in session.
- When the Assembly is not in session, the Governor using his residuary powers under Article 163 can call for a floor test.
  - ✓ On numerous occasions, the courts have also clarified that when the majority of the ruling party is in question, a floor test must be conducted **at the earliest available opportunity**.

When Is It Required? The Chief Minister is required to undergo a floor test in situations where the government's majority is in question or in situations when there are differences within a coalition government. (As per the Constitution, the Chief Minister is appointed by the Governor of the state.)

What Happens During a Floor Test?

1. ***Vote of Confidence-*** The leader of the House moves a vote of confidence in the legislature to prove his majority among those present and voting. If the majority of members vote in favour, the government survives otherwise, the government has to resign leading to dissolution of the House.
2. ***Voting Methods***- Voting can be done either by a voice vote or electronically or physically. In a physical division of votes, lawmakers cast votes in a ballot box, which are then counted.

What is a Composite Floor Test?

- It is conducted when the majority is not clear, and more than one person stakes a claim to form the government.
- In this case, the governor calls for a special session to test the majority which is counted based on those present and voting in the house.
  - ✓ Some legislators may be absent or choose not to vote. The numbers are then considered based only on those MLAs who were present to vote.
- Voting can be done through a voice vote or through division voting, i.e. through electronic gadgets, ballots or slips. Members may also abstain from voting.
- The person who has the majority forms the government.

- In case of a tie, the speaker casts his vote.

Related Judgements

1. *Shivraj Singh Chouhan vs Speaker Madhya Pradesh Legislative, 2020*- In this case, the Supreme Court (SC) upheld the powers of the Speaker to call for a floor test if there is a prima facie view that the government has lost its majority.
2. *S R Bommai vs Union of India, 1994*- SC held that the refusal of the Chief Minister to undergo the floor test will be considered as the Government losing the faith of its own legislature. (Floor tests must be conducted mandatorily to determine the legitimacy of government)
3. *Pratap Gowda Patil vs State of Karnataka, 2019*- SC ruled that the rebel MLAs have the right to skip the floor test voting process in the House and the Governor (under Article 174) has the power to dissolve the Assembly at his own discretion, when the state government doesn't enjoy the majority in the House.

Voting & Contesting Rights for Election of Prisoners

Amritpal Singh, the jailed head of the pro-Khalistan outfit Waris Punjab de, announced his intention to contest the Lok Sabha elections from Punjab's Khadoor Sahib seat in Lok Sabha Elections.

Why Can Accused Persons In Prison Contest Polls But Not Vote? Legal Status of '*Right to Vote*' and '*Right to Get Elected*'-

Both rights are statutory rights as held by the Supreme Court (SC) in its following judgements-

1. *Indira Gandhi v Raj Narain, 1975*- The court recognized that free and fair elections are a part of the 'basic structure' of the Constitution of India, and any laws or policies that would violate this principle could be struck down. But the rights to elect and be elected *do not* enjoy the constitutional status.
2. *Kuldip Nayar v. Union of India, 2006*- A 5-judge constitution bench in this case held that the right to vote (or the right to elect as it was called) is "pure and simple, a statutory right" implying that voting is not a fundamental right and can be repealed. The same was held for the right to be elected as the laws enacted by Parliament could regulate both these statutory rights.

Can a Jailed Person Contest Elections?

Yes, a jailed person can contest the elections if he is yet to be convicted as under Section 8 of the Representation of People Act, 1951 (RPA), the disqualification only kicks in once a person has been convicted and does not apply if he has only been charged with criminal offence.

✓Section 8 of RPA- provides for the disqualification of MPs/MLAs on conviction for certain offences like bribery, promoting enmity, dowry, rape etc. for not less than two years. The convicted lawmakers are disqualified from contesting elections to Parliament or state legislatures from the date of conviction and further six-years after his release.

Challenges to Section 8 of RPA

- *Public Interest Foundation v UOI, 2011*- A petition was filed by the Public Interest Foundation in SC challenging section 8 of RPA. It argued that persons with criminal charges framed against them or who file false affidavits regarding their criminal history should also be disqualified. But a five-judge bench unanimously held that only the legislature could alter the RPA.
- *Ashwini Kumar Upadhyay vs. Union of India, 2016*- A petition was filed in the SC seeking permanent disqualification for convicted persons. This case is still pending, and the court in 2023 took of the delays in criminal cases against MPs and MLAs and ordered the Chief Justices of all High Courts (HCs) to register a Suo motu case titled "In Re: Designated Courts for MPs/MLAs" for HCs to issue directions for the "expeditious and effective" disposal of these cases.
  - ✓ The High Courts were instructed to ensure the "expeditious and effective" disposal of these cases. However, a report in April 2024 showed 4,472 such cases are still pending.

Are there any Exceptions to Such Disqualifications? Yes, a disqualified candidate can contest elections if-

1. *Election Commission of India (ECI) Uses its Powers*- Section 11 of RPA empowers the ECI to "remove" or "reduce" the period of disqualification, for reasons recorded. The ECI used this power in 2019 to reduce the period of disqualification of Sikkim Chief Minister Prem Singh Tamang who was released following a one-year prison sentence in 2018 for misappropriating funds in the procurement of cows and subsequently won a bye-election.
2. *High Court Stays the Appeal of Conviction*- A disqualified MP or MLA can still contest if his conviction is stayed on appeal to a higher court. The SC in 2019 held that once a conviction is stayed "the disqualification which operates as a consequence of the conviction cannot take or remain in effect".

Can a Jailed Person cast his Vote during Elections?

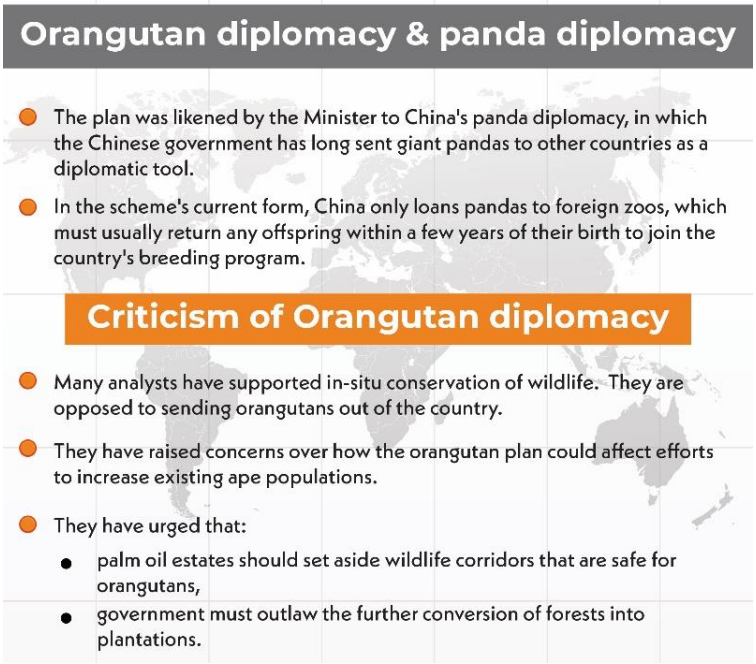
- No, as per Section 62(5) of RPA, if a person is confined in a prison, whether under a sentence of imprisonment or transportation or otherwise or in the lawful custody of the police (except for preventive detention), he cannot vote at any election.
- Thus, Section 62(5) bars every individual with criminal charges framed against them from casting their vote unless they have been released on bail or have been acquitted.

Challenges to Section 62(5) of RPA

1. *Anukul Chandra Pradhan, Advocate, Supreme Court v. Union of India, 1997*- The petitioner in this case argued that section 62(5) of RPA violated the right to equality by denying voting rights to undertrials and detainees while allowing those released on bail to vote. But the court rejected this petition on four grounds-
   i. The right to vote was a statutory right and could be subject to statutory limitations.
   ii. There is a "resource crunch" as infrastructure would have to be provided and police would have to be deployed.
   iii. A person is in prison because of their conduct. Therefore, he cannot claim equal freedom of movement, speech and expression.
   iv. Restrictions on prisoners' right to vote are reasonable as to keep persons with criminal background away from the election scene.
2. The Supreme Court & High Court rejected a similar plea in 2023 & 2020 respectively by relying on the above judgement.

Malaysia's Orangutan Diplomacy

- Recently, Malaysia announced its plans to gift orangutans to countries that import its palm oil as part of a strategy called "orangutan diplomacy".
  - Orangutans are great apes native to the rainforests of Indonesia and Malaysia.
  - The name orangutan means "man of the forest" in the Malay language.
  - IUCN has classified the Bornean & Sumatran orangutans as **critically endangered**.
- The plan would entail gifting the great apes to trading partners, such as the EU, India and China, that import large quantities of palm oil for use in products from food to cosmetics.



- Malaysia has planned to offer the animals as **trading gifts** in an effort to allay concerns about the environmental effects of growing the commodity.
  - Malaysia is the world's second-largest producer of the widely used commodity.
    - Palm oil is used in a wide range of products, from pizza and other foodstuffs to lipsticks, soaps and shampoos.
  - However, according to experts, its production on large plantations has decisively contributed to a significant loss of orangutan habitat in both Malaysia and Indonesia.
- This move came after the EU, in 2023, decided on phasing-out commodities, like palm oil, that are linked to deforestation by 2030.

United Kingdom's Graduate Route Visa (GRV) Scheme

- British PM Rishi Sunak is considering changes to the **Graduate Route visa (GRV) scheme**.
- He wants to limit visas to only the best and the brightest students. This change aims to reduce the number of international students coming to the UK.
- The proposal will particularly target education recruitment agents who provide misleading information to UK colleges and authorities.

Impact Of Restricting The GRV Scheme Only To The Best And Brightest

- **Reduces number of international students seeking to study in the UK**
  - It would do so by creating uncertainty regarding post-graduation prospects, and opportunity for a more long-term stay in the country.
- **Prospects of average student will be hindered**
- **Financial losses to the universities of UK:** An independent Migration Advisory Committee (MAC), in its study, said that the GRV scheme should continue as it helps UK universities make up for financial losses on the domestic front.
- **UK - a less attractive destination for overseas students,** including Indians.
  - Rather than the UK, international students will simply prefer a destination which offers more stability post-education.
  - This proposal came at a time when other countries such as Canada & Australia have also introduced (or will soon introduce) caps on international students. Due to this, the UK was emerging as a top alternative but Sunak's move has brought in an air of uncertainty.
- **Impact on Indian students**
  - Currently, Indians constitute roughly 42% of GRV holders, again, the highest among all nationalities.
    - Indians accounted for 89,200 visas between 2021-2023 (42% of overall grants)

Popularity of the UK as a Study Destination Among Indians

- According to the UK Home Office, between June 2022 and June 2023, student visas issued to Indians increased by 54%.
- Since June 2019, the number of visas granted to Indian nationals has risen seven-fold.

Ireland, Spain, Norway To Formally Recognise Palestine

- Norway, Ireland and Spain have started to formally recognise the state of Palestine.
- This step may encourage other EU countries to do the same. This, in turn, could also lead to more action at the United Nations, further isolating Israel.
  - Although the EU countries and Norway aren't recognizing a current Palestinian state, their support symbolizes a boost for the Palestinians' global image.
  - This increases pressure on Israel to start peace talks.

Issue Of Statehood To Palestine

- **Control of the Palestinian territories remains divided**
  - The 1948 UN decision created Israel envisaged a neighboring Palestinian state.
  - However, even today, the control of the Palestinian territories remains divided and bids for UN membership have been denied.
    - The Palestine Authority currently has observer status at UN.
- **Current status**
  - Around 144 out of 193 member-states of the United Nations recognise Palestine as a state, including most of the global south, Russia, China and India.
  - However, so far, only a handful of the 27 EU members have done so, mostly former Communist countries as well as Sweden and Cyprus.
  - Britain, Australia and EU member Malta have indicated in recent months that they could soon follow suit.
- **Increasing support in favour of Palestine**
  - Recently, in May 2024, 143 of 193 countries in the United Nations (U.N.) General Assembly voted for full membership to the U.N. for the State of Palestine.

- The International Criminal Court (ICC) prosecutor has sought arrest warrants for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defence Minister Yoav Gallant.

- **Stand of Western Countries**
  - The United States, Britain and other Western countries have backed the idea of an independent Palestinian state existing alongside Israel.
  - However, they insist Palestinian statehood should come as part of a negotiated settlement.
    - There have been no substantive negotiations since 2009.
- **Palestinian statehood and stand of India**
  - India and Palestine have had a relationship since 1974, when India became the first non-Arab state to recognize the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO).
  - In 1988, India was one of the first countries to recognize the Palestinian State.
  - In 1996, India opened its Representative Office to Palestine in Gaza City which was shifted to Ramallah in 2003.
  - India has advocated the resumption of direct negotiations towards establishing a sovereign, independent and viable State of Palestine living within secure and recognized borders, side by side at peace with Israel.

India – Nepal Border Dispute

- The Government of Nepal has decided to come out with a Rs-100 currency note that depicts the country's map with areas such as Lipulekh, Kalapani and Limpiyadhura which are under Indian control.
- The decision on the new currency note, was taken at a meeting of the cabinet chaired by Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal 'Prachanda'.

Border Dispute

- In May 2020, the Government of Nepal had released an updated political map of the country, **claiming Kalapani, Limpiyadhura and Lipulekh of Uttarakhand as part of Nepal's territory**.
- Both India and Nepal lay claim to Kalapani region.
  - The Kalapani region derives its name from the **Kali River**. In Nepal, the river is known as **Mahakali** and it holds as much significance in Nepal as the Ganga River does in India.
- The river works as a natural border between India and Nepal. The source of the Kali River has been a point of dispute between India and Nepal.

- **India's Stand**: Kalapani is in Pithoragarh, Uttarakhand where the river originates from.
- **Nepal's Stand**: River originates either from Limpiyadhura or from Lipulekh and considers both the locations as part of Nepal's **Sudurpaschim province.**

Recent flare ups

- Earlier in 2020, Defence Minister of India Shri Rajnath Singh had inaugurated a new link road from India to China to shorten the travel time for pilgrims to Kailash Mansarovar via Lipulekh pass.
- The road starts from Dharchula in Uttarakhand to Lipulekh pass.
- Nepal had protested strongly against this move by India and claimed that it is a breach of agreement reached between the Prime Ministers of India and Nepal in 2014 to work out on the outstanding boundary issues on Kalapani and Susta (West Champaran, Bihar).

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF DISPUTE

- Under the **Treaty of Sagauli (1816)** signed between British East India Company and Nepal, the Kali River was marked as Nepal's western boundary with India.
- It, however, made no mention of ridgeline and the subsequent maps by the British surveyors showed the source of the Kali River at different places.
- This discrepancy has led to the boundary disputes between India and Nepal.
- Officially, Nepal brought the issue of Kalapani before India for the first time in 1998.

- In response, a **Constitutional Amendment Bill was passed by Nepal's parliament to legitimize the alteration to the country's map with the addition of Kalapani, Lipulekh and Limpiyadhura**.
- The passage of the Bill and the new map led to a temporary breakdown of communication between the two countries.
- India rejected the updated map of Nepal stating that the map is not based on historical facts and evidence.

Way Forward

- Given the historical and cultural ties that both nations share, India must not delay in resolving this matter.
- With already ongoing border dispute that India has with China in the Ladakh region, India must put an end to the dispute with Nepal by means of dialogue at the earliest.
- Since free movement of people is permitted between the two countries, Nepal holds immense strategic relevance to India.
- India holds around 6 to 8 million strong Nepali diaspora which is one of the largest contributors to Nepal's economy.
- Hence, it is in the best of the interests for both the countries to resolve the boundary dispute at the political level only.

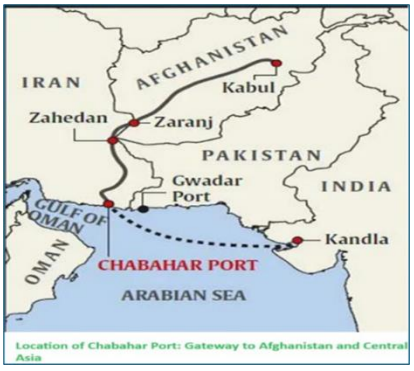
India, Iran Sign 10-year Contract For Chabahar Port Operation

India and Iran signed a long-term agreement covering Indian operations at the Chabahar port, eight years after concluding the general framework of cooperation for the port in Iran.

Key Highlights Of The Agreement

- **Agreement signed:** The long-term agreement was signed between Indian Ports Global Ltd. (IPGL) and Port and Maritime Organisation (PMO) of Iran, enabling operation of the *Shahid-Behesti terminal.*
- **Funding:** IPGL will invest approximately $120 million in equipping the port.
  - India has also offered a credit window equivalent to $250 million for mutually identified projects aimed at improving Chabahar-related infrastructure.
- **Significance:** This agreement has cleared the pathway for bigger investments to be made in the port.
  - The signing of long-term agreement got delayed due to some tricky issues, including arbitration.
  - In the absence of long-term agreement, the two countries had concluded short-term leases.

Chabahar Port



Location of Chabahar Port: Gateway to Afghanistan and Central Asia

- **About**
  - Chabahar is a deep-water port in Iran's Sistan-Baluchistan province. It is the Iranian -port that is the closest to India.
  - It is located in in south-eastern Iran, on the **Gulf of Oman**, providing easy and secure access for large cargo ships.
- **Strategic location**
  - It is Iran's first deepwater port that puts the country on the global oceanic trade route map.
  - The port is on western side of Iran's border with Pakistan, similar to Gwadar, a port developed by China in Pakistan, is on the eastern side of that border.
- **Development of port**
  - An MoU for the development of the Chabahar port by India was signed in May 2015.
  - The contract was executed in May-2016 during the visit of PM Modi to Iran.
- **Current status**
  - India has so far supplied six mobile harbour cranes (two of 140-tonne and four of 100-tonne capacity) and other equipment worth $25 million.

- India Ports Global Ltd (IPGL) has been operating Chabahar port through its wholly owned subsidiary, India Ports Global Chabahar Free Zone (IPGCFZ), since December 2018.
- The port has handled more than 90,000 twenty-foot-equivalent units (TEUs) of container traffic and more than 8.4 million metric tonnes (MMT) of bulk and general cargo since then.

Significance of Chabahar Port

- **Strategic significance** to both Iran and India
  - It can potentially help Tehran ward off the effect of Western sanctions.
  - It offers New Delhi an alternative route that bypasses Pakistan in order to ensure access to Afghanistan and Central Asia.
    - The port is partly intended to provide an alternative for trade between India and Afghanistan as it is 800 kilometres closer to the border of Afghanistan than Pakistan's Karachi port.
    - Pakistan does not allow India land access for trade with Afghanistan and Central Asia.
- **Humanitarian corridor**
  - The port has also facilitated the supply of humanitarian assistance, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic.
  - Till date, a total of 2.5 million tonnes of wheat and 2,000 tonnes of pulses have been trans-shipped from India to Afghanistan through Chabahar port.
  - In 2021, India supplied 40,000 litres of the environment friendly pesticide (malathion)through the port to Iran to fight locust attacks.
- **Chabahar and International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC)**
  - The INSTC, which was initiated by Russia, India, and Iran, is a multi-modal transportation route envisaged to link the Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf to the Caspian Sea via Iran, and onward to northern Europe via St Petersburg in Russia.
  - INSTC envisages the movement of goods:
    - from Mumbai to Bandar Abbas in Iran by sea;
    - from Bandar Abbas to Bandar – e- Anzali, an Iranian port on the Caspian Sea, by road;
    - from Bandar-e-Anzali to Astrakhan, a Caspian port in the Russian Federation by ship across the Caspian Sea; and
    - onward to other parts of the Russian Federation and Europe by rail

The strategic and economic importance of Iran's Chabahar port will be greatly enhanced by its integration with the planned INSTC corridor (in red).

  - Hence, INSTC and Chabahar Port will complement each other for optimising Indian connectivity with Russia and Eurasia.
- **Tool to strengthen India's relation with Iran & Afghanistan**
  - This port has potential to herald a new age of trade, marine cooperation, and transshipment while boosting trilateral trade between India, Iran, and Afghanistan.

EAM Hosts Maldivian Foreign Minister

- EAM S Jaishankar hosted his counterpart from Malé, Moosa Zameer.
  - Mr. Zameer was in New Delhi for his maiden bilateral visit in the six months since taking over as the foreign minister of the Maldives.
  - Zameer's visit is the first high-level visit to India after Muizzu came to power last November.

- Both the leaders met a day ahead of the May 10 deadline set by President Muizzu for India to withdraw its military personnel from the island nation.
    - Riding to power in November 2023 on an 'India Out' poll plank, one of Muizzu's first acts was to demand the withdrawal of around 80 Indian military personnel by May 10.
- This visit is the first signal by the government of President Muizzu that it wants to ease tensions with Delhi.

Key Decisions Taken After This Visit

- **India decided to extend $50 million budgetary support to Maldives for another year**
    - The support is in the form of a roll-over of $50 million Treasury Bill for an additional year, through the State Bank of India, Male.
        - These Govt Treasury Bills are subscribed by SBI under government-to-government, a unique arrangement at zero cost (interest-free) to the Government of Maldives.
    - The support includes infrastructural and community projects.
- **Maldives plans RuPay launch**
    - Maldives has planned to soon launch India's RuPay service amid soaring ties between the two countries.
        - RuPay, a product of the National Payments Corporation of India (NPCI), is the first of its global card payment network in India.
        - Currently, RuPay is also accepted in several countries, including Bhutan, Nepal, Mauritius, UAE, and Singapore.

India's Foreign Trade with its Major Trading Partners

According to the latest data of the Ministry of Commerce & India, India has recorded a trade deficit with 9 of its top 10 trading partners in fiscal year (FY) 2023-24.

Key Highlights

- **Latest trends:**
    - **India's trade deficit** with China rose to $85 billion, Russia to $57.2 billion, Korea to $14.71 billion and Hong Kong to $12.2 billion in 2023-24 against $83.2 billion, $43 billion, $14.57 billion and $8.38 billion in 2022-23.
    - **India has a trade surplus** of $36.74 billion with the U.S. in 2023-24 and America is one of the few countries with which India has a trade surplus along with the U.K., Belgium, Italy, France and Bangladesh.
    - **India's total trade deficit** in the last fiscal narrowed to $238.3 billion as against $264.9 billion in the previous fiscal.
- **What can be drawn from these latest trends?**
    - **Imports are not always bad** if a country is importing raw materials or intermediary products to boost manufacturing and exports.
    - However, it can cause the country's currency to **depreciate** because more foreign currency is needed for imports.
    - This depreciation makes **imports more expensive, worsening the deficit and increasing external debt**.
    - This can deplete foreign exchange reserves and signal economic instability to investors, leading to reduced foreign investment.
- **What needs to be done to cut the trade deficit?** Boosting exports, reducing unnecessary imports, developing domestic industries, and managing currency and debt levels effectively.

India's Aid To Disaster-Hit Papua New Guinea

- India has granted $1 million as immediate assistance for Papua New Guinea.
- Papua New Guinea has been hit by a devastating flood and landslip that has so far killed 2,000 people.

- India had earlier supported Papua New Guinea in 2018 when the country was rocked by an earthquake and subsequently in 2019 and 2023 when volcanic eruptions hit the country.

7th India-Indonesia Joint Defence Cooperation Committee

- During this meeting in *Delhi*, both the sides agreed to enhance collaboration in areas of defence industry, maritime security and multilateral cooperation.
- India and Indonesia have a **Comprehensive Strategic Partnership** and have arrived at a shared vision of the Indo-Pacific.
- Earlier, the first-ever "India-Indonesia Defence Industry Exhibition-cum-Seminar" was organised in Jakarta to mark the **75th year of establishment of diplomatic ties**.

India – UK Maritime Cooperation

- The U.K. is *using* a logistics support agreement with India to enhance military engagements, particularly in the maritime domain, and boost its Indo-Pacific capabilities.
    - This logistics-sharing agreement signed in **2022,** enables logistic support, supplies, and services for joint training, exercises, authorized port visits, and Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) operations.
- In April, a U.K. warship received maintenance at Larsen & Toubro's shipyard in Kattupalli. This coincided with a visit by the Royal Navy Littoral Response Group-South (LRG-S) to India.

Australian Parliamentary Report on India-Australia Trade Deal

- An Australian parliamentary committee in its report has raised concerns over child labour in India.
- The report said that Australia's trade agreement with India does not recognise international labour rights.
    - It said that India has a well-documented presence of child and (forced) labour, making significant contributions to the population of the world in modern slaver.
- It noted that the India-Australia trade deal conflicts with Canberra's policy priorities.
    - In April **2022,** India and Australia signed an Economic Co-operation and Trade Agreement **(ECTA**), which came into force in December 2022.
    - ECTA aims to double the bilateral trade to $50 billion in five years and ease movement of people, goods and services across borders.
    - The deal saw the elimination of duties on 96 per cent of value of Indian exports to Australia that included exports from a range of labour-intensive sectors.
    - India's total exports to Australia in FY24 stood close to $8 billion, 15% higher compared to the previous financial year.
- As per the reports, this deal would potentially increase imports of goods with lower environmental and labour standards.
- This report comes at a times when two countries are currently in negotiations for a comprehensive trade deal.

SUMMITS AND ORGANISATIONS

UNCTAD on Global Trade Disruptions And Rising Temperatures

- United Nations Trade and Development (UNCTAD) has said that global trade disruptions are causing ships to spend more days at sea causing a surge in the emission of greenhouse gases.
    - As Houthi militants are attacking commercial ships passing through the Red Sea, there is a crisis-like situation as these ships have to take longer routes.
    - Since the attacks by Yemen's Houthi rebel forces began in the Suez Canal in October 2023, hundreds of ships have been diverted around the Cape of Good Hope. This takes about 10 to 15 days of voyage time resulting in higher emission.
- A large container ship's journey from China to Germany, for example, emits 38 per cent more carbon dioxide, or 4.32 million kilograms, if it goes around Africa instead of through the Suez Canal.
- The UNCTAD said that for the first time, the world faces simultaneous disruptions in two major global maritime trade waterways, with far-reaching implications for inflation and food and energy security.
    - Since October 2023, there have been more attacks on ships in the Red Sea.
    - These attacks are adding to problems already happening in the Black Sea because of the war between Ukraine & Russia, and in the Panama Canal because of droughts caused by climate change.

United Nations Conference on Trade & Development (UNCTAD)

- It is a **permanent inter-governmental body** established by United Nations General Assembly in 1964.
- It is responsible for dealing with development issues, particularly international trade.
- Framing policies in various domains such as trade, technology, finance, aid, and transport are the most important priorities of UNCTAD.
- The Conference ordinarily meets once in four years.
    - The second UNCTAD Conference took place in New Delhi, India in 1968.
- **Members**: 195 countries; **Headquarters**: Geneva, Switzerland

Europe's AI Convention

Recently, the Council of Europe (COE) adopted the **Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence and Human Rights, Democracy, and the Rule of Law**, known as the 'AI convention,'.

Key Highlights Of The AI Convention Of Europe

- **About:** This agreement is a comprehensive convention covering AI governance and links to human rights, democracy, and the responsible use of AI.
    - It will be opened for signature in Vilnius (Lithuania), on September 5.
- **Aims and Definition**
    - The AI convention ensures that activities involving AI systems comply with human rights, democracy, and the rule of law.
    - It describes an AI system as a machine-based system that uses input to generate outputs like predictions, content, recommendations, or decisions that can influence both physical and virtual environments.
    - Hence, the definition of AI in the convention aligns with the EU AI Act and the OECD's definition.
- **Public and Private Sector Responsibilities**
    - **Public Authorities**: The convention is applicable to AI activities conducted by public authorities or private entities acting on their behalf.
    - **Private Actors**: Risks and impacts from AI activities by *private entities not covered by public authorities* must be addressed in alignment with the convention's objectives and purpose.

- **Exemptions for National Interests**
  - Articles 3.2, 3.3, and 3.4 of the convention provide broad exemptions for national security interests, research, development and testing, and national defense.
  - Consequently, military applications of AI are excluded from the convention.
- **Inclusion of Private Sector**
  - The inclusion of the private sector in the convention's scope was contentious, leading to a compromise.
  - Article 3(b) provides flexibility for parties to address private sector activities without completely exempting them.
- **Protection of Core Values**
  - **Human Rights (Article 4)**: The convention mandates the protection of human rights.
  - **Democratic Processes and Rule of Law (Article 5)**: It emphasizes maintaining the integrity of democratic processes and respect for the rule of law.
    - Although disinformation and deep fakes are not specifically mentioned, parties are expected to take measures against them under Article 5.
- **Flexibility for Enhanced Commitments**
  - Article 22 allows parties to exceed the commitments and obligations specified in the convention, encouraging further proactive measures.

The Council of Europe (COE)

- **About:** It is an international political organization that was founded in 1949 to protect human rights, democracy, and the rule of law.
  - It is the oldest intergovernmental organization in post-World War II Europe and has the most member states, which cooperate voluntarily.
- **Headquarter:** The CoE is based in **Strasbourg, France** and has close ties with the European Union.
- **Member:** It has 46 members including the Holy See, Japan, & U.S., plus countries of the EU bloc and others.
- **CoE's areas of concern:** It addresses issues of common concern to its members, including human rights, crime prevention, drug abuse, environmental protection, bioethical issues, and migration.

BIMSTEC Charter Comes Into Force

- The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) can now accept new members and observers. This follows after the first charter of BIMSTEC came into force on May 20.
- **Background**
  - Following the pandemic, the leaders of the BIMSTEC nations met virtually on 30 March 2022 under the chairship of Sri Lanka and adopted the charter.
    - BIMSTEC charter was adopted during its 5th Summit in March 2022.
  - The chair of BIMSTEC was taken up by Thailand after the 5th leaders' summit.
- **Charter Comes Into Force**
  - In April 2024, Nepal's parliament took up the BIMSTEC charter and ratified it which paved the way for the coming into force of charter.
  - As a result, BIMSTEC charter is said to have come into force on May 20, 2024.
- **BIMSTEC Has Acquired A Legal Personality**
  - With the coming into force of the charter, the BIMSTEC has acquired a 'legal personality'.
    - Legal personality means that a person or entity has rights and duties in law.
  - Now, it will be able to enter into structured diplomatic dialogue with other groupings and countries.

Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC)

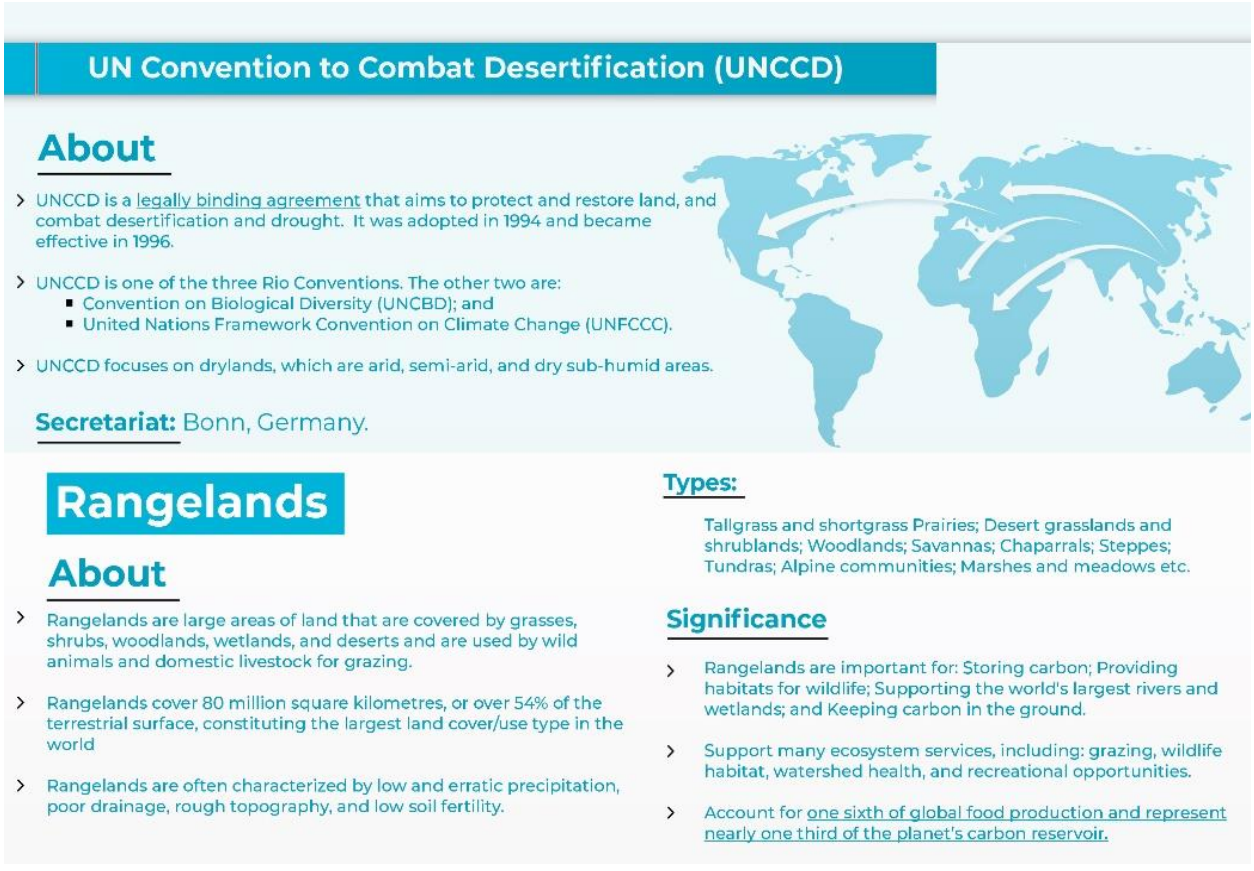
- **About:** It is an economic bloc that came into being in June 1997 through the Bangkok Declaration.

- BIMSTEC was initially formed with 4 member states- Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka and Thailand
- Nepal became an observer state in 1998 and became full-time member of the bloc along with Bhutan in February 2004.
- **Members** - Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Nepal and Bhutan.
- **Permanent Secretariat** - Dhaka, Bangladesh

- **Aim:** To counter the onslaught of globalisation by accelerating regional growth through mutual cooperation by utilising regional resources and geographical advantages.
- **Areas of cooperation**
  - It is sector-driven cooperative organisation in which, initially, 6 sectors had been included:
    - Trade, Technology, Energy, Transport, Tourism and Fisheries
  - As of now, BIMSTEC has 14 priority areas of cooperation.
    - Climate change was added as the 14th priority area of cooperation in 2008.
  - Among these priority areas, a member country chooses which of the 14 priority areas it is willing to take lead.
  - **India is lead country** for Transport & Communication, Tourism, Environment & Disaster Management, Counter-Terrorism & Transnational Crime.

Thematic Report on Rangelands and Pastoralists By UNCCD

Recently, the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) has released the Global Land Outlook Thematic Report on *Rangelands and Pastoralists*. As per the report, up to 50% of rangelands are degraded.



Key Highlights Of The Report: Overall Observation

- **Degradation of rangelands**
  - Almost half of the world's rangelands are degraded due to climate change, population growth, land-use change and growing farmlands.

- **Conversion of rangelands generates little public reaction**
    - When we cut down a forest, when we see a 100-year-old tree fall, it rightly evokes an emotional response in many of us. The conversion of ancient rangelands, happens in silence and generates little public reaction.

Key Highlights Of The Report: India Specific Observation

- **Pastoralists contribute a lot to the economy** through livestock rearing and milk production
    - Livestock sector contributes 4% of national GDP and 26% of agricultural GDP.
        - The country also accounts for 20% of the world's livestock population.
- **Pastoralists in India need better recognition of their rights and access to markets**
    - Millions of pastoralists in India rear livestock and depend on grasslands, shrubs and plateaus for sustenance.
    - Although their exact numbers in India are unknown, it is estimated that there are 20 million or more people in pastoralist communities.
        - These include groups like the Maldharis, Van Gujjars, and Rabaris.
- **Pastoralists in India are a marginalised community**
    - With little influence on policy decisions, resulting in uncertainty over access to common land and land rights.
- **Protection of grasslands in India**
    - Although grasslands are considered threatened ecosystems in India, they have been virtually overlooked in environmental conservation.
        - Ecosystem restoration policies in India are in favour of forestry-based interventions. These includes converting natural grasslands into plantation forests or other uses.
    - **Less than 5 per cent of India's grasslands fall within protected areas**, and the total grassland area declined from 18 to 12 million hectares between 2005 and 2015.
- **Successes highlighted by the report**
    - Some laws such as the Forest Rights Act 2006 have helped pastoralists obtain grazing rights across states in the country.
    - E.g., Van Gujjars won grazing rights and received land titles in the Rajaji National Park, following a high court judgment.
- **Gradual shift in attitude** towards recognition of the socio-ecological role of rangelands and pastoralism in India.
    - It cited the example of welfare schemes and assistance provided to pastoralists under the National Livestock Mission, Animal Husbandry Infrastructure Development Fund and the Rashtriya Gokul Mission on sustainable dairy production.

United Nations Department of Safety and Security (UNDSS)

- Former Indian Army officer Colonel Waibhav Anil Kale, who was working with the **United Nations Department of Safety and Security (UNDSS),** was killed.
- His vehicle was hit while he was traveling to the European Hospital in Rafah.
    - Rafah is the southernmost city in the Gaza Strip, near Egypt's Sinai Peninsula.
- *UNDSS is responsible for providing security services to UN agencies and departments.*
- It was established in 2005 by General Assembly Resolution and reports directly to the Secretary-General.
- Its mission is to enable UN system operations through security leadership and solutions.

DEFENSE AND SECURITY

CISF Takes Over Parliament Security From Delhi Police

- The Central Industrial Security Force (CISF) personnel has replaced the 150 personnel of the Delhi Police, including 54 women personnel, who were deployed for the security of Parliament.
- After a security breach occurred in December 2023, CISF was asked to take over the security of the Parliament complex.

Background

- **Security Breach**
  - The new Parliament building was inaugurated on May 28, 2023, and was first used for official business in Sept 2023.
  - On December 13, 2023, two men carrying colour spraying canisters had jumped into the Lok Sabha chamber during Zero Hour from the visitors' gallery.
  - They did this in protest against the rising unemployment, the unending ethnic violence in Manipur and farmers' issues.
    - In all, six persons have been arrested and booked under various sections, including terror charges. The police are yet to file a chargesheet in the case.

- **CISF Roped in**
  - After the security breach, eight Delhi Police security personnel who were responsible for frisking and baggage scanning were suspended.
  - Later, the MHA has asked the CISF to carry out a survey of the Parliament premises for regular deployment.
- **Existing security system in Parliament (before May 2024)**
  - Access control such as frisking and scanning the baggage was the responsibility of the Delhi police.
  - The **Parliament Duty Group (PDG),** an armed component of the Central Reserve Police Force (**CRPF**) was deployed in case an armed intervention is required.
  - The **Parliament Security Service** under the Lok Sabha Speaker is the overall in-charge of security.

ECI's Letter On Deepfakes

- In its first formal response to the use of deepfakes in this election season, the Election Commission of India (ECI) has told political parties not to share deepfake content on social media.
  - Deepfake uses deep learning techniques in AI to generate videos, photos, or news that seems real but is actually fake.
- If they find any, they must remove it within **three hours** and *warn the person* who shared it.
- ECI hasn't told parties to stop using AI for campaign material. They just want them to avoid sharing *misleading or false content* that impersonates someone else.

Analysis Of The Statement Made By ECI

- **Real outcomes**
  - The ECI has chosen to react after two phases of the election are already over — whereas deepfakes have been shared by parties from long before that.
  - Also, what real impact the ECI's letter has in curbing the menace remains to be seen.
- **Uncertain language**
  - It is unclear what the Commission means by saying that parties should take down deepfakes when it comes to their notice, when it is the parties' official handles themselves that are sharing the content.
  - Also, the advice to warn the person responsible for sharing such content is vague. It appears to be lacking teeth.
- **Status on other social media platforms like WhatsApp**
  - ECI's letter covers content shared on social media platforms such as Facebook, X, and Instagram. However, it is unclear what is being done about deepfake-led disinformation being

circulated on secure messaging platforms like WhatsApp.
    - WhatsApp is used by more than 500 million users in India, and is perhaps the most effective way to spread misinformation/ disinformation.
- **Direct AI-based calls**
    - Parties have been using AI-based real-time calls to voters. These calls happen outside the purview of social media platforms, but can be potentially weaponised by parties or candidates.
    - The ECI's letter does not deal with this aspect.

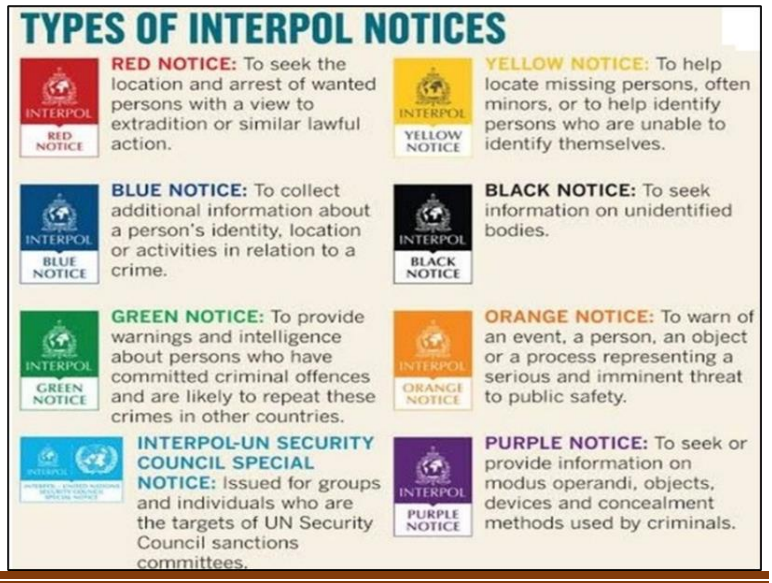
Blue Corner Notice Against Sitting MP

Amid a political storm in Karnataka over grave allegations of sexual abuse against Prajwal Revanna, sitting Hassan MP, Interpol has issued a Blue Corner notice against the absconding politician.

Interpol

- **About**
    - Full Name - International Criminal Police Organisation.
        - Interpol is the radio-telegraph code for the organisation.
    - Interpol is made up of 196 member countries. It does not work under UN.
        - It has enjoyed a special role – that of Permanent Observer at United Nations - since 1996.
    - It was founded in 1923 and is headquartered at Lyon, France.
- **Functions**
    - It is not a police force in the traditional sense—its agents are not able to arrest criminals.
    - It is more of an information-sharing network.
        - It provides a way for **national police forces** to co-operate effectively and tackle international crime ranging from human trafficking and terrorism to money laundering and illegal art dealing.

    - Sharing of information is done by issuing colour-coded notices in four languages - English, Spanish, French, and Arabic.
    - The organization operates centralised criminal databases that contain fingerprint records, DNA samples and stolen documents.



- **Functioning**

  The agency has a **National Central Bureau (NCB)** in all member countries, which is a single point of contact between law enforcement agencies of that country and Interpol.
- **Types of Interpol Notices**
    - Interpol issues different types of notices which have different

objectives. Types of notices issued – Red, Blue, Yellow, Black, Orange, Purple, Green etc.

- **Red Notice** - A notification that a member state would like someone arrested.
- A '**Blue Corner'** notice is issued when the case is related to missing persons.
  - Also called an enquiry notice, such an alert is sent for additional information from member States about a person, to verify their identity, location, or criminal record concerning a criminal investigation.
- The **'INTERPPOL-United Nations Security Council Special Notice'** is issued for entities and individuals who are the targets of the UN Security Council Sanctions Committees.
- States are not obliged to follow these notices, but will often treat them as a warrant for someone's arrest and extradition.
- In the present case, the investigating team moved for a Blue Corner alert against Mr. Revanna, considering that the investigation is in the early stages and the police are yet to file criminal charges.

Integrated Commands Structure Plan

The Armed Forces have finalized the structure for making integrated theater commands. They are now considering appointing a **Vice Chief of Defence Staff** and a **Deputy Chief of Defence Staff.**

Proposed Organisational Structure For Integrated Theatre Commands – Key Highlights

- **Organisational structure is ready**
  - The Armed Forces have finalised the organisational structure for the creation of integrated theatre commands.
  - However, the organisational structure plan may be finetuned after it gets government approval.
- **Appointment of a Vice Chief of Defence Staff (CDS)**
  - The Vice CDS is likely to be an officer of the rank of General or equivalent.
  - He is expected to look after *strategic planning, capability development and procurement-related matters.*
- **Appointment of a Deputy CDS**
  - The Deputy CDS is likely to be an officer of the rank of Lieutenant General or equivalent.
  - He will be responsible for operations, intelligence and will coordinate the allocation of assets between theatres.
- **Creation of commands**
  - The proposal entails creation of the **western theatre command** headquarters in Jaipur where the Army's South Western Command is located.
  - The **northern theatre command** is likely to be in Lucknow.
  - The **maritime theatre command** is likely to have its base in Coimbatore. It will involve the IAF's Prayagraj-headquartered Central Command and its Southern Air Command based in Thiruvananthapuram.
    - Earlier, the plans were to set up the maritime theatre command headquarters in Karwar.
- **Overall Plan is to create 3 adversary-based theatre commands**
  - one facing Pakistan,
  - another opposite China, and
  - a maritime theatre command to tackle maritime threats outside the coastal borders of the country.

- **Role of three service chiefs**
  - The three service chiefs will be responsible for raising, training and sustaining the individual services.
  - It is not known yet whether they will continue to retain some operational roles – the three theatre commanders will be responsible for operations.
- **No additional manpower is likely to be enrolled**
  - Only readjustments within organisations will be carried out to meet the requirements of the theatre commands.

Theatre commands and India

What Are The Recent Steps Taken By India Towards Theaterisation?

- **Proposal to create a national defence committee**
  - There is a proposal for theatre commanders under a national defence committee **likely to be headed by the Defence Minister**.
- **Inter-Services Organisation (Command, Control and Discipline) Act 2023**
  - The act empowers the commander-in-chief and the officer-in-command of inter-services organisations with *disciplinary and administrative powers* over personnel from the other services serving in them.
  - Limited cross-postings between the Army, Navy and IAF have already been implemented to promote jointness.
    - Restructuring of the headquarters and the subsequent postings will take place after the final approval from the govt.
- **First tri-service common defence station**
  - In March 2024, the decision was taken to transform Mumbai into the first tri-service common defence station.
    - A common defense station would merge all Army, Navy, and Air Force facilities, like logistics and maintenance, under one leadership.
  - It was also decided to set up additional joint logistics nodes across the country to boost integration in logistical needs and streamline their supply chains.

{For more about Theaterisation of Armed Forces, Pls refer The Recitals- Oct 2023}

2023 UN Military Gender Advocate of the Year Award

- Major Radhika Sen, an Indian woman peacekeeper who served with the UN mission in Congo, was honoured with a prestigious military gender advocate award.
  - Major Sen is the second Indian peacekeeper to receive this award after Major Suman Gawani (in 2019), who had served with the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS).
- As a Platoon Commander, she helped foster a safe space for men and women to operate together under her command.

- She also ensured that peacekeepers under her command are engaged in a manner that is sensitive to gender and socio-cultural norms in eastern DRC.
    - This was necessary to help build trust and thereby increase her team's chance of success.
- Created in 2016, the UN 'Military Gender Advocate of the Year Award' recognises the dedication and efforts of an individual military peacekeeper in promoting the principles of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security.
    - This award was created by the Office of Military Affairs within the Department for Peace Operations (DPO).
    - It recognises a military peacekeeper who has best integrated a gender perspective into peacekeeping activities.
- India is currently the 11th largest contributor of women military peacekeepers to the United Nations with 124 Indian women now deployed.

Increase in Transnational Organised Cyber Crimes in India

- According to the Indian Cyber Crime Coordination Centre (I4C), 46% of scammed money is lost to cybercrimes originating from Southeast Asian countries, surpassing Jamtara and Mewat as the main centers of financial cyber fraud in India.
- Organised cybercrime gangs in **Cambodia, Myanmar and Lao PDR** are hiring Indian job-seekers and then compelling them to defraud fellow citizens in India (through investment, digital arrest, trading and dating scams).

Key Highlights

- The I4C found that **46% of such frauds** reported between January - April this year originated in these three countries, in which the **victims cumulatively lost an estimated Rs 1,776 crores.**
- **The Indian government had set up an inter-ministerial committee** comprising various law enforcement and intelligence agencies to tackle the recent 'spurt' in transnational organised cybercrimes.

Types Of Cybercrimes Originating From These Southeast Asian Countries

- **Trading scams:**
    - The alleged fraudsters issued ads on social media offering free trading tips, often using pictures of well-known stock market experts and fake news articles.
    - The victims would be asked to install some specific trading applications and start investing on the apps.
    - The victims deposited money in particular bank accounts to buy shares, and were shown some fake profits in their digital wallets. But when they tried to withdraw this money, they were unable to do so.
    - **Between January and April this year, Indians lost Rs 222 crore to 20,043 trading scams.**
- **Digital arrest*: (refer Polity section for detailed explanation)***
    - **Between January and April this year, Indians lost Rs 120 crore to 4,600 digital arrest scams.**
- **Investment/ task-based scams:**
    - Scammers target victims through WhatsApp, promising money for boosting social media ratings of some entities.
    - They are then asked for bank details, receive a small sum, and are lured into larger investments with promised returns.
    - Profits never materialise, leaving victims trapped in a fraudulent scheme.
    - **Between January and April this year, Indians lost Rs 1,420 crore to 62,587 investment scams.**
- **Dating scams:**
    - The male victims were seduced by individuals they mistook for foreign women.
    - These "women" would make preparations to meet in person after making marriage or relationship proposals.

- The victim would receive a call from the "woman" explaining that she had been held at the airport and needed money to be released.
- **Between January and April this year, Indians lost Rs 13 crore to 1,725 romance/dating scams.**

Army Set To Receive Igla-S Air Defence Systems

- The Army is all set to begin receiving another set of **Russian** Igla-S *Very short range air defence systems (VSHORAD).*
- Igla-S is a man-portable air defence system (MANPADS)
- It is designed to bring down low-flying aircraft and can also identify and neutralise air targets such as cruise missiles and drones.
- It has a range of 500 metres to 6 kilometres and attack targets up to an altitude of 3.5 kilometres. The speed of the missile is 400 metres per second and the deployment time is 13 seconds.

Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice

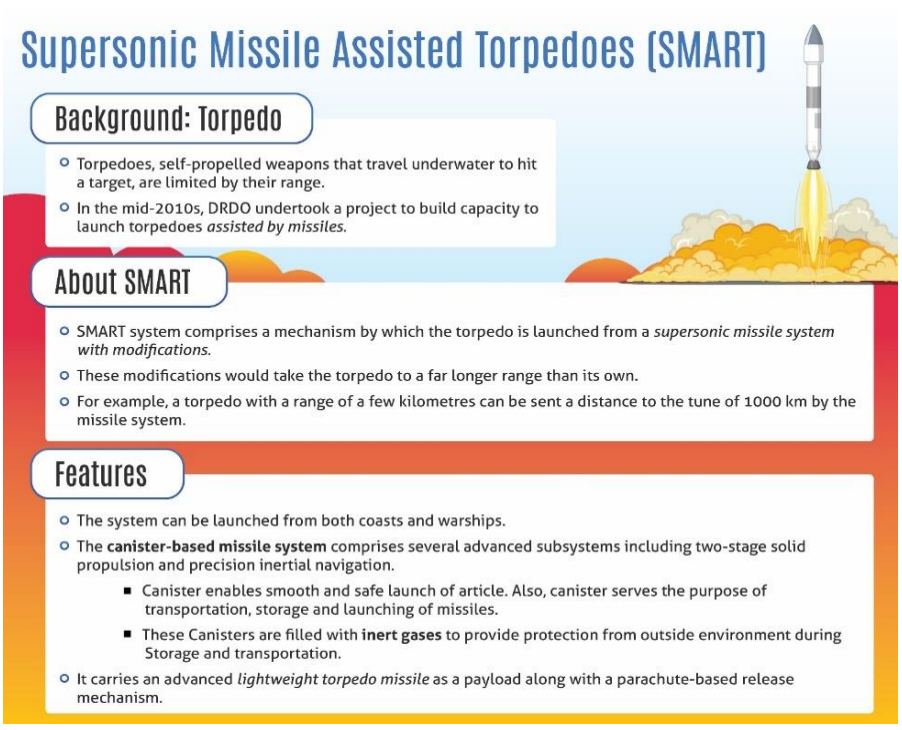
- The 33rd session of the *Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice (CCPCJ)* was held in Vienna, Austria.
- During this, the heads of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), Interpol, and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) called for countries to increase their efforts to target the illicit profits of transnational organized crime.
- They emphasized that these profits can fund terrorism, facilitate conflicts, and negatively impact vulnerable populations.

Navy Does Away With Terms Jackstaff & Jack

- The Indian Navy replaced the terms "Jack" and "Jackstaff" with "National Flag" and "National Flag Staff" on ships.
- The terms Jack and Jackstaff originated from the Royal Navy's traditions, and in naval parlance, Jack refers to the national flag and Jackstaff is the short pole on the bow of a ship that holds the flag.

DRDO Successfully Tests Missile-Assisted Torpedo Release System

- DRDO has successfully tested a long-range *Supersonic Missile Assisted Torpedo (SMART).*
- It is aimed at boosting the Navy's anti-submarine warfare capabilities.



RudraM-II Air-to-Surface missile

- DRDO successfully flight-tested the Rudram-II air-to-surface missile from the Su-30 MK-I platform of the Indian Air Force (IAF) off the coast of Odisha.
- RudraM-II is an indigenously-developed *solid-propelled* air-launched missile system meant for Air-to-Surface role.

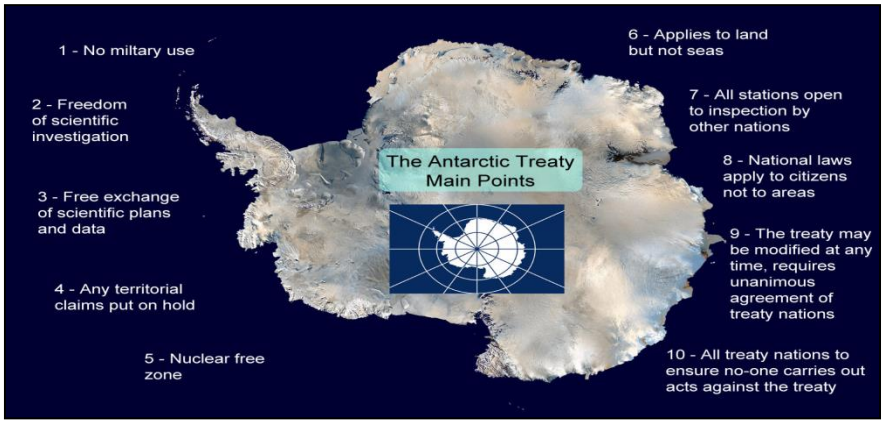
46th Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meeting (ATCM 46)

The Ministry of Earth Sciences (MoES) through the National Centre for Polar and Ocean Research (NCPOR) hosted the ATCM 46 from May 20 to 30, 2024, in Kochi, Kerala.

- Kochi also hosted the 26th Meeting of the Committee for Environmental Protection (CEP 26).
- This is consistent with India's ability to foster positive international discourse on scientific cooperation, environmental responsibility and Antarctica cooperation.

About Antarctic Treaty

- The Antarctic Treaty was **signed in Washington on 1 December 1959** by the twelve countries whose scientists had been active in and around Antarctica during the International Geophysical Year (IGY) of 1957-58.
    - **12 original signatories were** - Argentina, Australia, Belgium, Chile, France, Japan, New Zealand, Norway, South Africa, Soviet Union, UK, and US.



- **It entered into force in 1961** and has since been acceded to by many other nations, taking the total number of Parties to the Treaty to 56 now.
- **There are two types of parties to Antarctic Treaty** - Consultative (29) and non-Consultative (27).
- **The latter** are invited to attend the Consultative Meetings but do not participate in the decision-making.
- **India** has been a **Consultative Party** (those demonstrate their interest in Antarctica by conducting substantial research activity there) to the Antarctic Treaty since **1983**.

What is ATCM and CEP Under the Antarctic Treaty?

- **Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meeting (ATCM) also known as Antarctic Parliament:**
    - **Convened annually**, these meetings serve as forums for Antarctic Treaty Consultative Parties and other stakeholders to address Antarctica's pressing environmental, scientific, and governance issues.
    - **From 1961 to 1994** the ATCM generally met once every two years, but **since 1994** the meetings have occurred annually.
    - **ATCM is hosted by the Consultative Parties** according to the alphabetical order of their English names.
- **Committee for Environmental Protection (CEP):**
    - The CEP was established under the *Protocol on Environmental Protection to the Antarctic Treaty (the Madrid Protocol)* in **1991**.
    - The CEP **advises** the ATCM on environmental protection and conservation in Antarctica.
- **The Antarctic Treaty Secretariat (ATS)**:
    - Established in **2004**, it serves as the administrative hub for the Antarctic Treaty System and coordinates the ATCM and CEP meetings.
    - **It also monitors compliance** with Antarctic Treaty provisions and agreements and provides assistance

on treaty implementation and enforcement matters.

Significance of Hosting ATCM 46	Challenges for India
○ Through open dialogue, collaboration, and consensus-building, ■ India remains committed to upholding the principles of the Antarctic Treaty and ■ Contributing to the sustainable management of one of Earth's last pristine wilderness areas. ○ The hosting of the 46th ATCM and 26th CEP meeting **reflects India's growing role as a responsible global stakeholder** in efforts to preserve Antarctica.	○ The Meeting begins **under the shadow of the Ukraine-Russia conflict**, an issue that has been affecting the discussions for the past two years. ○ **Russia's increase in surveys** of the Antarctic region for oil and gas reserves has also caused some anxiety among the partner nations. ○ **Canada and Belarus** are seeking consultative status but their petitions have run into opposition.

Baseflow In Rivers

The concept of baseflow emerged to be important in recent study (on six major river basins) Narmada, Tapi, Mahanadi, Godavari, Krishna, and Cauvery) delving into heavy rainfall, baseflow, and river floods in Peninsular.

About Baseflow (also called low-flow or fair-weather flow)

- It is the portion of a river's water that originates from groundwater and seeps into the streambed gradually, rather than from surface runoff caused by precipitation events like rain or snowmelt.
- **Benefits**: It plays a crucial role in maintaining streamflow & water levels in rivers during dry periods. Understanding baseflow dynamics is essential for water resources management, ecological conservation, and hydrological modeling.
- **Factors Affecting Baseflow:** Geology, Topography, Climate, Vegetation & Hydrogeology

Blood Minerals

Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) has raised serious concerns against Apple Company for using 'blood minerals' (illegally exploited minerals) extracted from the eastern region of the country.

About the Blood Minerals

- These are Minerals mined in areas of armed conflict and often used to fund those conflicts.
  - ✓ The mining of conflict minerals is often associated with human rights abuses, including forced labor, child soldiers, and violence against civilians.
- Important examples are tantalum, tin, tungsten, and gold, often referred to collectively as 3TG or 3TG minerals.
- These are essential components in many electronic devices like smartphones and laptops.
  - ✓ DRC is the world's leading **source of cobalt**, producing about 70% of the world's supply. The demand for cobalt is projected to increase 20-fold by 2040 due to the growing demand for electric vehicles (EVs).

Catatumbo Lightning

Catatumbo River in Venezuela is experiencing phenomenon of lightning strikes almost continuously.

About Catatumbo Lightning ("the lightning capital of the world")

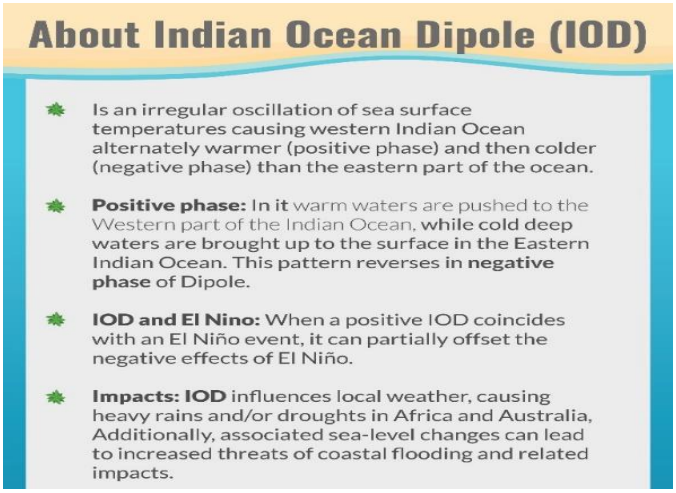
- It Primarily happens at the mouth of the Catatumbo River, where it meets Lake Maracaibo, the largest lake in Venezuela.
- **Catatumbo lightning is distinguished by its frequency and duration:** the strikes occur for up to 160 nights in a year, with an average of 28 lightning strikes per minute at its peak (there is the constant flow of current).

Formation:

- Warm, moist air from the Caribbean Sea is pushed towards the Andes mountains, where it collides with cooler air descending from the peaks.
- And warm air cools and condenses, forming towering cumulonimbus clouds.
- The interaction between powerful winds and variations in temperature creates electrical charges within cumulonimbus clouds. These clouds can soar to heights exceeding 5 km, carrying substantial static electricity. Once the electrical potential within these clouds reaches a critical point, it is released in the form of lightning.

Indian Ocean Dipole

Positive Indian Ocean Dipole (IOD) or Indian Nino set to re-emerge for the second consecutive year in the latter half of 2024 since 1960. It is for the first time the event is recurring for a second consecutive year.



Nitrogen Dioxide Pollution

Recently study has raised concerns about gas and propane stoves as it can increase indoor air pollution levels of nitrogen dioxide (NO2)

About NO2

- Nitrogen dioxide is a reddish-brown, pungent, acidic gas that is corrosive and strongly oxidizing.
- NO2 is not usually released directly into the air. Nitrogen dioxide forms when nitrogen oxide (NO) and other nitrogen oxides (NOx) react with other chemicals in the air to form nitrogen dioxide.

Sources of NO2 Pollution:

1. Burning fossil fuels: emissions from Vehicles & power plants that burn coal, oil, or natural gas.
2. Industrial processes: industrial activities like welding, metal refining

Environmental Impacts of NO2 Pollution & Ultimate Health Concerns:

- Acid rain: NO2 can combine with other air pollutants to form acid rain, harming plants, animals, and aquatic ecosystems.
- Smog formation: NO2 contributes to the formation of smog, a hazy layer of air pollution that can reduce visibility and further compromise air quality.

** Health Effects: Respiratory problems, Heart problems, Aggravated allergies

Initiatives & Mitigation Strategies for NO2 Pollution

- NO_2 is a criteria air pollutant that is tracked by the WHO by Global Air Quality Guidelines.
- In India, NO_2 is regulated as a criteria pollutant under National Air Quality Index (NAQI).
- Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) air quality standards in form of **NAAQS** (National Ambient Air Quality Standards) are notified for 12 parameters. (NO2 is one of them)

Mammoth

Mammoth the World's largest facility designed to remove carbon dioxide from the atmosphere started functioning in Iceland.

About Mammoth (Aims to remove 36,000 tons of carbon annually)

- It is the second commercial *direct air capture (DAC)* facility in Iceland. Situated on a dormant volcano and 50 kilometers from an active volcano. (larger than its predecessor, Orca).

- It Draws in air and chemically extracts captured carbon by turning it into stone beneath the earth's surface, utilizing Iceland's abundant geothermal energy to power the process.
- The captured CO2 is then mixed with water and injected deep underground into basalt rock formations, where it mineralizes and permanently transforms into stone within two years.

Oleander Flowers

Temples in Kerala ban oleander flower offerings following a woman's suspected poisoning death from consuming oleander leaves.

About Oleander Flower (Nerium oleander or rosebay)- Arali and kanaveeram (In Kerala)

- Its Poisonous plant containing toxic compounds throughout its parts, including leaves & flowers.
- They are fast-growing evergreen shrubs or small trees native to Europe and Asia, upon Ingestion of its leaves leads to symptoms: vomiting, nausea, bloody diarrhoea, and irregular heart rhythm.
- Tolerant to heat, drought, wind, air pollution, salt, and poor soil.

Soil Nailing

A geotechnical engineering technique soil nailing is being undertaken by the State highways department in the Nilgiris.

About Soil Nailing

- Soil nailing is a construction technique that uses steel bars or nails to reinforce and stabilize unstable soil slopes, embankments, excavations, and vertical cuts.
- Soil nailing is a top-down process that involves drilling and grouting steel tendons into the soil to create a composite mass similar to a gravity wall.
- It is used in a variety of applications, including: Highway and railway cuttings, Landslide repair, Tunnel portals, and Retaining walls for both temporary and permanent support.

Nor'Wester

India's first research testbed to study Nor'westers getting ready. It will be joint initiative by India Meteorological Department (IMD), Indian Institute of Tropical Meteorology (IITM), Pune, and National Centre for Medium-Range Weather Forecasting (NCMRWF)

About Nor'Wester (Locally known as Kalbaisakhis in India and bordoisilas in Assam):

- They are severe thunderstorms that occur during the pre-monsoon season (March to May) in Bangladesh and the Indian states of Bihar, Jharkhand, Odisha, Tripura, Assam, and West Bengal

Formation

Warm, Moist Southerly Winds: These winds originate from the Bay of Bengal and carry significant moisture.
As they move inland, they encounter Cool, Dry Westerly Upper-Level Flow

World Wildlife Crime Report 2024

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime has released the World Wildlife Crime Report 2024.

Key Findings

- Most affected species by global illegal wildlife trade during 2015-2021 are the rhino & the cedar
- An illegal Market for rhino horn (29 percent) constituted the biggest chunk among animal species. It was followed by the market for pangolin scales at 28 percent, followed by the market for elephant ivory at 15 percent.

- Other animal species most affected by the global illegal animal trade: eels , crocodilians , parrots and cockatoos , carnivores , turtles and tortoises , snakes ,seahorses and others

Chir Pine

Chir pine Forests are in the news due to recent forest fire in Uttarakhand

About Chir Pine (Conifer – Height upto 30 meter)

- It covers almost 16.5 per cent of Uttarakhand's total forested area.
- Scientific name- Pinus roxburghii, to William Roxburgh
- Spread : all over the Western Himalayas at an elevation between 1,000 and 2,000 metres, it covers large parts of Garhwal and Kumaon where it can be seen growing on steep slopes and can be identified by its three needles and its round cone (unlike the elongated cones of other pines).
- Other vegetation doesn't grow near Chir pine as it makes the soil more acidic through its fallen needles.

Forest Fire Prevention Techniques For Chir Pine

- Controlled Burning: Traditionally, controlled burns were conducted during the cooler months to remove dry needles and undergrowth, reducing fuel load for wildfires
- Needle Management: Regularly removing fallen needles through controlled raking or prescribed burning (under controlled conditions) can significantly reduce fire risk.
- Species Diversification: Planting broad-leaved trees like oak or rhododendron amongst chir pines can create a mixed forest that's less susceptible to large-scale fires.
- Public Awareness Campaigns, Early Detection Systems etc.

Species Threat Abatement and Restoration (STAR) Metric

The Species Threat Abatement and Restoration (STAR) Metric is a tool developed by the IUCN Red List to estimate the potential reduction in species extinction risk

About STAR

- It measures the contribution that investments can make to reducing species' extinction risk.
- It helps governments, cities, civil society, the finance industry, investors and companies to target their investments and activities to achieve conservation outcomes and contribute to global policy aims.
- STAR measures the potential contribution of two kinds of action to reduce species extinction risk: Threat abatement, Habitat restoration
- This metric aligns with international agreements such as the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework and the Sustainable Development Goals.

Extreme Weather Events In Dubai

Dubai experienced over a year and a half's worth of rainfall in just one day. The heavy rain flooded the city's airport and major roads, causing widespread damage.

Causes

It was linked to a large anticyclonic system (a western disturbance) that covered a vast area from West Asia to the Himalayan foothills that caused rainfall and lightning.

Other Possible Reasons

- Some reports suggest that the UAE National Centre of Meteorology's cloud seeding operations might have intensified the rainfall from the storm system.
- Excessive dust in the region could also act as natural cloud seeders, contributing to the heavy rainfall. Dust **acts as condensation nuclei, contributing to cloud formation, similar to man-made cloud seeding.**
- Other factors, like the transition from El Nino to La Nina, could have influenced the weather.

Funga Campaign

United Nations Biodiversity has started a campaign urging the global community to incorporate the term funga alongside flora and Fauna.

About Funga Campaign's Objectives

- Increase recognition of fungi's critical role in ecosystems, alongside plants and animals
- Encourage the use of the term "funga" alongside "flora and fauna" to highlight their significance
- Advocate for the inclusion of fungi in legal conservation frameworks and policies

About Fungi (Fungus)

- They are Diverse group of eukaryotic microorganisms or macroscopic organisms (include yeasts, molds, and mushrooms) that belong to their own biological kingdom, distinct from plants, animals, and bacteria.
- They are found nearly everywhere on Earth, from the frozen tundra to the scorching desert

Application & Significance (play essential roles as decomposers, symbionts, and pathogens.)

- Fungi play a critical role in the environment by decomposing organic matter, recycling nutrients, and forming symbiotic relationships with plants.
  - ✓ Lichens are composite organisms that arise from a symbiotic relationship between a fungus and a photosynthetic partner, usually algae or cyanobacteria.
- Fungi also form mycorrhizal partnerships with the roots of many plants, helping them to absorb water and nutrients from the soil.
- Some fungi are even used in food production, such as yeast (Saccharomyces cerevisiae) in bread and beer making, and truffles, which are prized for their culinary value.
- Antibiotic Production (derived from fungi): The mold Penicillium produces penicillin (immunosuppressants), one of the first antibiotics discovered.

Harmful effects: (Some fungi are pathogens of plants, animals, and humans)

1. Plant Diseases: Many fungal species are plant pathogens, meaning they cause diseases in plants. Eg: powdery mildew, rust, and blight.
2. Human Diseases: These infections can range from mild skin conditions like athlete's foot and ringworm to more serious illnesses like fungal pneumonia and meningitis.
3. Allergic Reactions: Mold spores can trigger allergic reactions with symptoms like sneezing, runny nose, itchy eyes, and difficulty breathing.
4. Material Damage: Fungi can also damage buildings and other structures

Darjeeling Zoo's Snow Leopard Conservation Programme

Darjeeling zoo also known as The Padmaja Naidu Himalayan Zoological Park (PNHZP), West Bengal has achieved international recognition from the World Association for Zoos and Aquariums (WAZA) for its successful conservation breeding programme (CBC) for snow leopards.

About Programme (Established in 1985- first and only program of its kind in India)

- The program has seen remarkable success, breeding over 77 snow leopards since its inception.
- As of 2024, the Darjeeling Zoo houses the world's largest population of snow leopards in captivity, with around 14 individuals including cubs.
- **Key Factors behind success:** Careful breeding pair selection, Naturalistic enclosures, Proper nutrition, Veterinary care Etc.

World Association for Zoos and Aquariums (WAZA): The global alliance of regional associations, national federations, zoos and aquariums, dedicated to the care and conservation of animals and their habitats around the world.

Extra Mile: India's first The Snow Leopard Population Assessment in India (SPAI)

** conducted by the Wildlife Institute of India (WII) in the country's six mountainous regions.

- The survey estimated that 718 snow leopards live in India, which is about 10–15% of the global population. Ladakh: 477; Uttarakhand: 124; Himachal Pradesh: 51; Arunachal Pradesh: 36; Sikkim: 21 & Jammu and Kashmir: 9
- The 12 snow leopard range countries are namely, India, Nepal, Bhutan, China, Mongolia, Russia, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan.

Global Species Action Plan (GSAP SKILLS)

Global Species Action Plan, known as GSAP SKILLS launched by IUCN at the Fourth meeting of Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD).

About GSAP SKILLS (the Species Conservation Knowledge, Information, Learning, Leverage and Sharing (SKILLS) platform))

- It Is an online resource designed to combat biodiversity loss by facilitating species conservation efforts (primarily supported by the Ministry of Environment, Republic of Korea)
- It Provides clear information on: Species conservation interventions, Specific actions and sub-actions for each GBF target, Relevant technical tools

Objectives

1. It aims to bridge the gap between policymakers, conservationists & experts at all levels.
2. The platform wants to align with the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF), offering practical guidance for achieving its goals and targets for species conservation

Species in News		
1.	**Golden trevally**	• The ICAR-Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute, Kochi has developed seed production technology for golden trevally. • It is also known as the golden kingfish. • It is a silver grey fish with yellowish colouration on the belly, with scattered black patches and all fins coloured yellow and a black tail. • It is distributed throughout the Indo-West Pacific. • **IUCN status :** Listed as Least Concern.
2.	**Marine tardigrade species**	• A new marine tardigrade species discovered on the southeast coast of Tamil Nadu has been named Batillipeschandrayaani after the Chandrayaan-3 moon mission. • These are extremely tiny animals whose size is measured in micrometres. • It is the third marine tardigrade species discovered from Indian waters. • It features a trapezoid-shaped head and four pairs of legs with sharp-tipped sensory spines. Both sexes are similar in terms of morphology and size.

3.	**Sea Anemones** 	• Sea anemone bleaching has been observed for the first time in the Lakshadweep group of islands. • They are a group of predatory marine invertebrates of the order Actiniaria. They are an aquatic animal marked by soft bodies and an ability to sting. • Habitat: Anemones usually attach themselves to rocks and underwater structures, although some species burrow into mud or sand.
4.	**Semal Trees** 	• Semal trees are disappearing from south Rajasthan. • It is a silk cotton tree which is known locally as semal. • It flowers spectacularly in spring. • It is characterised by its spiked trunk and fluffy seed pods, and is native to India. • Its roots, fruits, seeds, stem, stem bark, and gum are all medicinally valuable. • Various parts of semal trees are used to treat gastrointestinal, skin, gynaecological and urogenital diseases.
5.	**Iberian lynx** 	• The number of endangered Iberian lynx in the wild in Spain and Portugal has nearly doubled since 2020 to surpass 2,000 last year. • The Iberian lynx is a medium-sized nocturnal cat with a short tail, a short body, long legs, tufted ears, and a relatively small head. • Spread: Once distributed throughout the Iberian Peninsula, the species is now sparsely distributed in Spain and Portugal. • **IUCN status:** Endangered • **CITES** – Appendix II
6.	**Sea otters** 	• Sea Otters have learned to use tools to help them eat. • The Sea Otter is the smallest marine mammal. • It is a very social animal, and floats in single-sex groups known as 'rafts'. • Habitat and Diet: Sea Otters live in coastal areas with shallow water. They find their food on the ocean floor, and carry out all other activities, such as eating and grooming, at the surface. • **IUCN status:** Endangered
7.	**Manipuri Pony** 	• Government of Manipur has recently joined hands with various organisations and associations to save the Manipuri Pony or Meitei Sagol. • It is one of the seven recognised horse and pony breeds of India. • They are used in Traditional events like Lai haraoba, polo and horse races. • The Manipur government declared the Manipuri Pony as an Endangered Breed in 2013. • Threats: Shrinkage of wetlands, rapid urbanisation and encroachment; restriction of pony usage except in the game of polo.

8.	**Giant Leatherback Turtle** 	• Recently, in a rare occurrence, a leatherback sea turtle was seen after a gap of seven years in Visakhapatnam. • It is the largest turtle in the world. • It is the only species of sea turtle that lack scales and a hard shell. • They are named for their tough rubbery skin and have existed in their current form since the age of the dinosaurs. • Conservation status ○ **IUCN status**: Endangered; **CITES:** Appendix I
9.	**Spotted Deer** 	• As many as 40 spotted deer (axis axis) have been translocated from Chamarajendra Zoological Gardens (Mysuru Zoo) to the Panasoli range of Kali Tiger Reserve (KTR) recently. • The spotted deer, or chital/ cheetal is a deer species native to the Indian subcontinent. • It is the most common deer species in Indian forests. • Distribution: It is widely distributed in Asia, especially in India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Bhutan, and a small group in Pakistan. • **IUCN status**: Least Concern
10	**ARMOURED SAILFIN CATFISH (ASC)/ Rakashi /devil fish** 	• Scientists from CCMB -CSIR have discovered that the armoured sailfin catfish has infiltrated 60% of Eastern Ghats water bodies, causing damage to fishing nets and the ecosystem • It is large predatory freshwater catfish native to the Amazon and Orinoco basins in South America. It has been introduced to other parts of the world, including India, for the aquarium trade and algae control. • It has a long, slender body with a bony head and a large dorsal fin that resembles a sail. • ASC is an omnivorous fish that feeds on a variety of plants and animals, including insects, crustaceans, fish, and even small mammals • IUCN Red List: Least Concern **Centre for Cellular & Molecular Biology (CCMB):** It is a premier research & training organisation of Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) in *frontier areas of modern biology*, working under the Ministry of Science and Technology.

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Bisphenol A (BPA)

Bisphenol A (BPA) chemical that leach out from plastics during use have caused serious concerns.

About Bisphenol A (BPA)

- BPA is a synthetic chemical used to make plastics and resins, including polycarbonate plastics and epoxy resins.
  - ✓ Polycarbonates (PC) are strong and hard thermoplastics that can maintain rigidity up to 140°C and toughness down to -20°C.
  - ✓ PC is typically used for baby bottles, sippy cups, water bottles, water gallon, metal food can liner, ketchup container, and dental sealants.
- **Health Concerns:** BPA can contaminate food, air, soil, and beverages. It can also accumulate in human organs. It is an endocrine disruptor that can alter hormonal & enzyme synthesis. Ultimately, it can cause reproductive disorders, obesity, and increased risk of certain cancers.

Salmonella Bacteria

The US government has taken stringent measures in response to salmonella contamination in shipments.

About Salmonella

- It is a genus of rod-shaped, gram-negative bacteria responsible for causing salmonellosis, a common foodborne illness worldwide.
- **Transmission and Sources:** Salmonella bacteria are found in the gastrointestinal tracts of humans and animals and can contaminate food, water, and the environment, although direct contact with infected animals or their feces can also lead to transmission.
- **Pathogenesis:** Upon ingestion, Salmonella bacteria traverse the acidic environment of the stomach and colonize the intestines, where they adhere to and invade the intestinal epithelial cells, leading to the characteristic symptoms of salmonellosis
- **Symptoms:** Diarrhea, Fever, Nausea, Vomiting, Stomach cramps, Headache, Blood in the stool
- **Diagnosis and Treatment:** Culture-based methods, serological testing, and molecular techniques (e.g., polymerase chain reaction) are commonly employed for diagnosis.
- **Prevention & Control:** Food Safety Practices, Hygiene Measures, Public Health Interventions etc.

Liquid Nitrogen

The Tamil Nadu government has banned the use of liquid nitrogen in food.

About Liquid Nitrogen (LN2)

LN2 is a colorless, odorless, and non-toxic liquid form of nitrogen. It is produced by cooling gaseous nitrogen to extremely low temperatures, resulting in its **liquefaction**.

Safety Considerations:

- **Extreme Cold:** Liquid nitrogen is extremely cold and can cause frostbite or cold burns upon contact with skin or tissue.
- **Asphyxiation Hazard:** Liquid nitrogen vaporizes rapidly at room temperature, displacing oxygen and creating an oxygen-deficient atmosphere.

Properties of LN2	Respective Applications
Low Boiling Point: It boils at a temperature of -196 degrees Celsius (-321 degrees Fahrenheit) at atmospheric pressure.	This extremely low boiling point enables scientists to study the behavior of materials and substances at ultra-low temperatures.

Non-Reactive: It is chemically inert at low temperatures.	It is compatible with a variety of metals, plastics, and other materials for various applications.
Cryogenic Preservation: It is commonly used for cryogenic preservation of biological samples, tissues, and cells.	In medicine, LN2 is utilized for cryosurgery, a medical procedure that involves freezing & destroying abnormal tissues, such as warts, skin lesions, and certain types of tumors.

Oxytocin

The Delhi High Court has expressed serious concerns against continued use of the Oxytocin in dairies across the national capital which amounts to 'animal cruelty'.

- ✓ Indian government had banned the use of Oxytocin in 2018, citing its misuse on milch cattle to increase milk yield.

About Oxytocin

Oxytocin as a Natural Hormone

- Oxytocin is a hormone and neurotransmitter often referred to as the "love hormone" or "bonding hormone" due to its role in social bonding, attachment, and reproduction.
- **Synthesis and Release:** Oxytocin is primarily synthesized in the hypothalamus. It is released into the bloodstream from the posterior pituitary gland in response to various stimuli, such as childbirth, breastfeeding, and social interactions.
- **Childbirth and Breastfeeding:** Oxytocin plays a crucial role in childbirth by stimulating uterine contractions and facilitating labor. It also promotes milk ejection during breastfeeding, supporting maternal-infant bonding and lactation.
- **Psychiatric Disorders:** Dysregulation of oxytocin signaling has been implicated in psychiatric disorders such as autism spectrum disorder, social anxiety disorder, Schizophrenia & depression.

Oxytocin as a Synthetic Hormone

- Oxytocin as a synthetic hormone that is often used by dairy farmers in India to facilitate lactation after childbirth in cattle. It can improve milk ejection, especially in farms that lack optimal milk production practices.
- Side effects of oxytocin injections include Allergic reactions, such as skin rash, itching, hives, or swelling of the face, lips, tongue, or throat

Extra Mile: Happy Hormones in Human Being

Dopamine, serotonin, oxytocin, and endorphins are hormones (produced in the Human Body) that are often called "feel-good" hormones because they promote mental well-being and happiness.

- **Dopamine:** It is associated with the brain's reward system and produces pleasant sensations. It's also linked to learning and memory.
- **Serotonin:** It helps regulate mood, sleep, appetite, digestion, learning ability, and memory. Serotonin can also help increase happiness by alleviating depression and anxiety.
- **Oxytocin:** Often called the "love hormone", oxytocin is essential for childbirth, breastfeeding, and strong parent-child bonding. It can also help promote trust, empathy & bonding in relationships.
- **Endorphins:** The body's natural painkillers which can also help reduce stress & improve mood.

Chloropicrin

US government accuses Russia of using Chloropicrin chemical against Ukrainian military violating the Chemical Weapons Convention.

About Chloropicrin (used both as a warfare agent and pesticide.)

- It's colorless to slightly yellow oily liquid synthetic chemical compound with a strong, irritating odor and can be absorbed through inhalation, ingestion, and the skin.
- It's Broad-spectrum antimicrobial, fungicide, herbicide, insecticide, and nematicide.
  - ✓ Nematicide refers to chemical compounds that kill, inhibit, or repel nematodes or manipulate their behavior to mitigate crop damage.
- It is primarily used as a soil fumigant in agriculture and used extensively as a chemical warfare agent in World War I. (by both the Allied and the Axis Powers.)
  - ✓ The use and large-scale production of the choking compound is banned by the Hague-based Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) which prohibits use of chemical weapons globally.

Health Effect: Chloropicrin causes irritation to eyes, skin, respiratory tract & gastrointestinal tract on contact. On severe exposure, Chloropicrin may lead to pulmonary edema, possibly causing death.

Chemical Weapon Convention (Entered into force in 1997 + 193 states-parties)

- It prohibits the development, production, stockpiling, and use of chemical weapons. It Monitors the elimination of chemical weapons.
- India is a signatory and party, and it enacted the Chemical Weapons Convention Act, 2000.

Goldene

For the first time, researchers have created a free-standing 2D sheet of gold named 'Goldene'.

About Goldene

- It is a groundbreaking one-atom-thick sheet of gold.
- Since the 2004 development of graphene, the atom-thin material made of carbon, scientists have identified hundreds of 2D materials. But Gold is the first metal to be formulated into (freestanding) 2D sheets.

Key features:

1. A 2D allotrope of gold: it's a different arrangement of gold atoms compared to the usual 3D structure we find in gold jewelry or nuggets.
2. First free-standing 2D metal: Unlike previous attempts at ultra-thin metallic sheets, Goldene is free-standing, not requiring support from other materials.

Properties:

1. Extremely thin: Goldene is roughly 100 nanometers thick, about 400 times thinner than the thinnest commercially available gold leaf.
2. Unexpected conductivity

Applications: Electronics industry, Catalysis, hydrogen conversion, carbon dioxide capture, and water purification. (It holds promise as **a great catalyst** because it is much more economically viable than thicker, three-dimensional gold.)

Semi Cryogenic Pre-Burner Ignition Test Article (PITA)

ISRO has recently conducted the first *Pre-Burner Ignition trial* for the Semi-Cryogenic Engine (SCE)-200.

About PITA (crucial in developing liquid rocket engine systems)

- Semi Cryogenic Engines Uses liquid oxygen (LOX) as an oxidizer and refined kerosene as fuel, aiming to produce a thrust of 2,000 kilonewtons (kN).
- Compared to cryogenic engines SCE has easier storage and handling, increased thrust capacity, and eco-friendliness, making them more cost-effective.

Caenorhabditis Elegans Worm

Researchers found that after C. elegans worms ate a disease-causing bacterium, its children inherited from birth to avoid making the same mistake

About Caenorhabditis Elegans Worm

- It is a free-living, transparent nematode worm widely used in biological research.
- It has a relatively simple body plan with about 1,000 cells This allows scientists to easily study the development, function, and interactions of individual cells within the organism.
- It has a very short life cycle, taking only about 3 days from egg to adult at room temperature.
- It's being the first multicellular organism to have its entire genome sequenced
- Most C. elegans are hermaphrodites, meaning they have both male and female reproductive organs. This allows them to reproduce quickly and easily in the lab without the need for a mate
- C. elegans shares a surprising number of genes with humans. This makes them a valuable model for studying human diseases and biological processes

AlphaFold 3

Alpha Fold 3 is an Artificial intelligence tool for *protein structure prediction*, developed by a collaboration between Google DeepMind and Isomorphic Labs (both subsidiaries of Alphabet)

About Alpha Fold3

- It can predict the 3D structure of proteins with unprecedented accuracy, even surpassing some traditional methods in certain cases.
- Unlike its predecessors (AlphaFold 1 and 2), AlphaFold 3 is not limited to proteins but can also predict the structures of other biomolecules like DNA, RNA, and small molecules (ligands) crucial in drug design.

Working:

- It relies on deep learning, a type of machine learning inspired by the structure and function of the brain.
- It's trained on massive datasets of known protein structures and their corresponding amino acid sequences (the building blocks of proteins).
- By analyzing these patterns, AlphaFold 3 learns to predict how a protein's amino acid sequence folds into its unique 3D structure.
    - Applications: Protein Structure Prediction, Drug Discovery, Understanding Diseases, Biomaterial Design, Genomics Research

High Energy Photon Source

China will be a first country from Asia to complete the High Energy Photon Source (HEPS) with a 4th generation synchrotron light source. It will begin operations by the end of this year.

✓ Compared to 3rd-generation synchrotrons like the Shanghai Synchrotron Radiation Facility, HEPS will provide a time resolution that is 10,000 times better.

About HEPS (High Energy Photon Source –Near Beijing)

- It's designed to be a diffraction-limited storage ring synchrotron light source that will produce high-energy X-rays for various scientific applications.
- The HEPS is designed to accelerate electrons up to energies of 6 gigaelectron volts within its 36-kilometer circumference storage ring with 1.36 Km of circumference.
    - ✓ A synchrotron is a type of circular particle accelerator, where charged particles (electrons) move almost at the speed of light to produce very bright light (mainly X-Rays), called synchrotron light (10 billion times brighter than the Sun).

- ✓ Photons are the fundamental particles of light. They are the carriers of electromagnetic radiation and possess both wave-like and particle-like properties

Applications:

- Materials science: Studying the structure and properties of materials at the atomic level.
- Chemistry & Nanotechnology: Investigating the mechanisms of chemical reactions.
- Biology: Understanding the structure and function of biological molecules.
- Environmental science: Analyzing environmental pollutants and contaminants.
- Medical science: Developing new medical imaging techniques and treatments.

Extra Mile: India's synchrotron

- India previously developed its own synchrotron, Indus-1 & Indus-2 (third generation) at the Raja Ramanna Centre for Advanced Technology (RRCAT) in Indore.
- India is an associate member of the European Synchrotron Radiation Facility (ESRF) in Grenoble, France.

PREFIRE Mission

NASA is set to launch its climate science mission, the Polar Radiant Energy in the Far-Infrared Experiment (PREFIRE), which aims to capture brand new data on how heat is lost to space from Earth's polar regions.

About PREFIRE Mission (Consisting of a pair of CubeSats)

- It consists of launching two shoebox-sized climate satellites to study Earth's polar regions, specifically the Arctic and Antarctic (Observe the understanding of how heat exits from regions).
- This mission is aimed at providing data to improve predictions of climate change & sea level rise.
- ✓ Earth absorbs a lot of energy from the Sun at the tropics. This heat energy is moved towards the poles by the stirring of winds and water, through weather and ocean currents. From here, it is radiated upward into space.
- ✓ Some 60 per cent of the heat energy that flows out to space in far-infrared wavelengths have never been systematically measured.
- ✓ **Earth's Heat Budget:** The difference between the incoming and the outgoing energy determines Earth's temperature and shapes our climate.

Benefits: Improved climate models, understanding ice loss, Developing mitigation strategies

- ✓ It will help understand the reasons why the Arctic has warmed more than 2½ times faster than the rest of the planet since the 1970s.

Nucleosynthesis

It is a process by which the nuclei of atoms are created from the fusion of lighter nuclei or the breakdown of heavier ones.

- It is a fundamental process in astrophysics and cosmology, as it explains the origin and abundance of elements in the universe.

Types of Nucleosyntheses

1. Big Bang Nucleosynthesis (BBN): This occurred in the first few minutes after the Big Bang when the universe was hot and dense enough for nuclear reactions to occur
2. Stellar Nucleosynthesis: Most of the elements heavier than hydrogen and helium are created within stars. Stars are giant balls of hot, burning gas, primarily hydrogen.
3. Cosmic Ray Spallation: High-energy cosmic rays can collide with atomic nuclei in interstellar space, breaking them apart and creating new, lighter elements.
4. Supernova Nucleosynthesis: It refers to the process by which elements heavier than iron are formed during the explosive death theories of massive stars known as supernovae.

Giant Viruses

Giant viruses dating back 1.5 billion years were found in Yellowstone's geothermal springs

About Giant Viruses (also known as giruses)

- **Size & Structure:** Unlike typical viruses that are microscopic, giant viruses are much larger. Their size ranges from 200 to 400 nanometers in diameter, which can be bigger than some bacteria.
- **Genome Complexity:** Giant viruses share some similarities with regular viruses. They have a capsid (protein shell) that encloses their genetic material, which can be DNA or RNA.
- **Diversity of Giant Viruses:** Mimi viruses (the largest known virus), Pandora viruses, Pitho viruses Mega viruses, etc.
- **Ecological Impact:** They can infect a variety of organisms (particularly in aquatic environments), including amoebas, algae & even other single-celled eukaryotes. (affect the food web & energy flow)

Evolutionary Significance: Discovery is beneficial as it gives insight into: Viral evolution, The origins of life, The diversity of biological entities

ART AND CULTURE

Saint Lalan Shah Fakir

- A three-day long Indo-Bangla music festival was recently held in Sherpur, Bangladesh to celebrate the 250th birth anniversary of the mystic Saint Lalan Shah Fakir.
- Lalon also known as Fakir Lalon Shah, Lalon Shah, Lalon Fakir or Mahatma Lalon was a prominent Bengali philosopher, Baul saint, mystic, song composer, social reformer and thinker from the Indian subcontinent.
- Born in 1774 at **Horishpur in Jhenaidah district of modern Bangladesh**, he is considered the most prominent figure of the Baul tradition of Bangladesh and India.
- Regarded as an icon of Bengali culture, he inspired and influenced people like Rabindranath Tagore, Kazi Nazrul Islam and the American poet Allen Ginsberg among others.
- Lalon's philosophy of humanity rejects all distinctions of caste, class, and creed and takes stand against theological conflicts and racism.
- It denies all worldly affairs in search of the soul and embodied the socially transformative role of sub-continental Bhakti and Sufism.

Memory of World Register

- Three Indian literary works, **Ramcharitmanas, Panchatantra, and Sahṛdayaloka-Locana**, were added to UNESCO's Memory of the World Asia-Pacific Regional Register.
- The inclusion took place during the tenth meeting of the Memory of the World Committee for Asia and the Pacific (MOWCAP), held in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia.
- These three works have deeply influenced Indian literature and culture, shaping the nation's moral fabric and artistic expressions.

Ramcharitmanas	•Ramcharitmanas (literal meaning: lake of the deed of the Rama) was composed by **Goswami Tulsidas** in **Awadhi language** in the **16th century**. •Composed of seven Kands ((literally "books" or "episodes"), it is considered as one of the greatest works of Hindu literature. •The seven Kands are Bal Kand, Ayodhya Kand, Aranya Kand, Kiskindha Kand, Sundar Kand, Lanka Kand and Uttar Kand
Panchatantra	•It is an ancient Indian collection of interrelated animal fables in Sanskrit poetry and prose. It was written by **Pandit Vishnu Sharma**. •The Panchatantra fables were selected due to their universal moral values.
Sahṛdayaloka-Locana	•The 15th century Sahṛdayaloka-Locana, by **Kashmiri scholars Acharya Anandvardhan** and **Abhinavagupta**, was chosen because of its aesthetics. •It includes text and discussions related to poetics, dramaturgy and theatrical insights.

Memory of World (MOW) Register

- UNESCO's MOW programme is an international cooperation strategy aimed at safeguarding, protecting, and facilitating access to and the use of documentary heritage, especially heritage that is rare and endangered.
- UNESCO launched the initiative in **1992** "to guard against collective amnesia" (forgetfulness).
- The programme recognises documentary heritage of international, regional and national significance, maintains registers of it, and awards a logo to identified collections.
- Inscription on the register affirms the significance of the documentary heritage, makes it better known, and allows for greater access to it, thereby facilitating research, education, entertainment, and preservation over time.

- It campaigns to raise awareness of the documentary heritage to alert governments, the general public, businesses and commerce to preservation needs and to raise funds.

Memory of the World Asia-Pacific Committee (MOWCAP)

- MOWCAP was set up in **1998** during its first MOWCAP general meeting held in Beijing, China.
- MOWCAP brings together the Asia Pacific region (one of five UNESCO regions) of 43 countries to pursue the MoW Program's objectives.

Kutch Ajrakh

- The Office of the Controller General of Patents, Designs, and Trademarks (CGPDTM) has given the Geographical Indication (GI) tag to 'Kutch Ajrakh', from the region of Kutch in Gujarat.
- Ajrakh is an ancient form of hand-block printing and is a part of the cultural fabric of Gujarat.
- The term **Ajrakh** is derived from the word 'Azrak,' which means indigo, a primary dye used in the printing process.
- This artisanal technique involves a laborious process of printing on cotton fabric, using natural dyes derived from local vegetables and minerals.
- Its roots are widespread, reaching into the historical regions of Sindh, Barmer and notably Kutch, where it has been practised for centuries.
- The craft is centered in the villages of Dhamadka and Ajrakhpur. Originating about 400 years ago with the Sindhi Muslim communities, Ajrakhpur has become a focal point for this textile art.

Virupaksha Temple

- A portion of the Virupaksha temple in Karnataka collapsed following torrential rains.
- Virupaksha Temple is a **Shiva temple in Hampi, Karnataka**. It is part of the **Group of Monuments** at Hampi, designated as a **UNESCO World Heritage Site**.
- Lord Virupaksha, also referred to as Pampapathi is the main deity.
- It is a prime example of Dravidian temple architecture, characterised by its grand gopurams (towering gateways), the shikhara towering over the sanctum sanctorum, its intricate carvings and pillared halls.
- Despite legends about its origins going further back, the temple gained prominence and underwent extensive expansion in the 14th century during the **Vijayanagara Empire** (1336 to 1646).

Vijayanagara Empire

- The Vijayanagara empire expanded from a strategic position on the banks of the Tungabhadra river to become one of the most powerful kingdoms of its time.
- Vijayanagara Empire was a medieval Hindu empire.
- It was established in 1336 by the brothers **Harihara I and Bukka Raya I of the Sangama dynasty**, members of a pastoralist cowherd community that claimed Yadava lineage
- At its height it ruled the lands of the modern states of Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Goa, and some parts of Telangana, Maharashtra and some parts of Sri Lanka.
- The empire lasted until 1646, although its power greatly declined after a major military defeat in the **Battle of Talikota** in 1565 by the combined armies of the Deccan sultanates.

Notable Developments

- Different temple building traditions in South and Central India were merged into the Vijayanagara architecture style. This synthesis inspired architectural innovations in the construction of Hindu temples.
- Efficient administration and vigorous overseas trade brought new technologies to the region such as water management systems for irrigation.

- The empire's patronage enabled fine arts and literature to reach new heights in Kannada, Telugu, Tamil, and Sanskrit with topics such as astronomy, mathematics, medicine, fiction, music, historiography and theatre gaining popularity.

Vivekananda Rock Memorial

- The Prime Minister recently visited the Vivekananda Rock Memorial in Kanyakumari, Tamil Nadu.
- The Vivekananda Rock is a tiny rocky islet located some 500 metres from Kanyakumari's Vavathurai beach, the southern tip of mainland India.
- The Rock is surrounded by the Laccadive Sea where the three oceans Bay of Bengal, the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Sea meet.
- In 1892, Swami Vivekananda, the Hindu philosopher-saint, swam from the shores of Kanyakumari to the rocky islet to meditate.
- It is believed that he meditated there for three days and three nights and attained enlightenment.
- On the eve of Swami Vivekananda's birth centenary in 1963, the Vivekananda Rock Memorial Committee made efforts to commemorate the site of his enlightenment.
- The memorial on the rock was formally inaugurated by the President V V Giri in 1970.

Coins Discovered From Ikshvaku Dynasty

During recent excavations, officials of the Department of Archaeology and Museums have found a hoard of lead coins belonging to the Ikshvaku period, at the Phanigiri **Buddhist site** in Suryapet district, Telangana.

- The coins have an elephant symbol on on one side and Ujjain symbol on the reverse.

Phanigiri

- Phanigiri village lies on the left bank of the **Bikkeru rivulet, a tributary of the river Musi**. The village had a vibrant life from 1000 BCE to late 18th century CE.
- Previously the name of the village was **Dharmachakrapuram** but later it was changed to Phanigiri.
- The name is derived from the shape of a hillock located in the village which appears to be like a snake hood. In Sanskrit, **Phani means snake and Giri means hillock**.
- The early historic site at Phanigiri was first discovered and protected during the period of Nizam and was excavated from 1941 to 1944 by **Sri Khaja Mahamad Ahmad**.
- It has one of the important Buddhist monasteries strategically located on the hilltop, on the ancient trade route (Dakshinapatha) connecting the west and the east coast of the Deccan.

Earlier Discoveries At Phanigiri

- A Mahastupa, Chaityagrihas, votive Stupas, congregation hall Viharas.
- Life size Stucco of Bodhisatva and a rare Octagonal-shaped Stupa.
- Brahmi label inscriptions of the Satavahana and Ikshvaku times, (2nd – 3rd Century A.D.).
- Punch marked coins, and coins issued by the Kshatrapas, Romans, Mahatalavara chiefs.
- Several lime stone sculptural panels depicting the great events of Siddhartha – Gautama's life, Jataka tales, and Buddhapada slabs, Buddha and Bodhisattva images.

Ikshvaku Dynasty

- It ruled in the eastern **Krishna River valley**, from its **capital at Vijayapuri** (modern Nagarjunakonda) for over a century during **3rd and 4th centuries CE**.
- The remains of its capital city, Vijayapuri, and its monuments, were discovered only in 1920.
- It was founded by a chieftain called **Chamtamula**, a feudatory of the Satavahanas. As the Satvahana Empire declined, he claimed legitimacy as a sovereign king by performing an Ashwamedh yagya—the royal Brahminical ritual that ended with a horse sacrifice.

- The kingdom patronised Buddhism, Brahminism, as well as older folk religions.
- Vijayapuri is also where the **famous thinker Nagarjuna** lived in his later years. Often called '**the second Buddha**', he is one of the greatest philosophers of all time.
- He expanded on the Buddha's ideas and pioneered a new school of Mahayana Buddhism called Madhyamaka, or The Middle Way school, which later became influential around the world.

Bodhisattva

- A bodhisattva is a Buddhist deity who has attained the highest level of enlightenment, but who delays its entry into paradise in order to help the earthbound.
- The bodhisattva, known in Sanskrit as Avalokiteśvara, takes both male and female form and is associated with the qualities of mercy and compassion.
- Its Chinese incarnation, Guanyin – who is always represented as female – translates as the 'perceiver of sounds'.

Indulekha

- The first true copy of the painting Indulekha by legendary artist Raja Ravi Varma was recently unveiled on his 176th birth anniversary celebrations.
- Indulekha is the protagonist of the **first modern novel (Indulekha) in Malayalam literature** by **O. Chandu Menon** published in 1889.
- The painting has Indulekha holding a letter addressing her lover Madhavan, the hero of the novel.
- It is believed that the famous painting '**Reclining Lady**' by Ravi Varma was modelled on Indulekha.

Raja Ravi Varma

- Raja Ravi Varma (1848-1906) was a great Indian painter and artist. He was born in an aristocratic family in **Kilimanoor palace**, in the erstwhile princely state of Travancore.
- As an artist, Varma fused two styles together: European art's technical and aesthetic knowledge, and the emotional sensibilities and storytelling from Indian art.
- He was famous for his oil portrait paintings and narrative paintings of Indian history, mythology, and paintings of Gods, which he recreated from historical sources, like Hindu epics Ramayana, Mahabharata, and the Puranas.
- In 1894, he established the **Ravi Varma Fine Arts Lithographic Press**. He was notable for making affordable lithographs of his paintings available to the public.
- **Lithography** is a printing process that uses a flat stone or metal plate on which the image areas are worked using a greasy substance so that the ink will stick to them, while the non-image areas are made ink-repellent
- His 1873 painting, **Nair Lady Adorning Her Hair**, won Varma prestigious awards including Governor's Gold Medal when it was presented in the Madras Presidency, and Certificate of Merit at an exhibition in Vienna.
- In 1904, the British colonial government awarded Varma with the **Kaiser-i-Hind Gold Medal**. In 2013, a crater on the planet Mercury was named in his honour.
- His **most famous works** include Damayanti Talking to a Swan, Shakuntala Looking for Dushyanta and Shantanu and Matsyagandha.

AWARDS/ PERSONALITIES IN NEWS

International Booker Prize 2024

- German author Jenny Erpenbeck and translator Michael Hofmann won the International Booker Prize 2024 for fiction for "**Kairos**".
- The International Booker Prize (formerly known as the Man Booker International Prize) is an international literary award hosted in the United Kingdom.
- From 2005 until 2015 the award was given every 2 years to a living author of any nationality for work published in English/ generally available in English translation.
- Since 2016, the award has been given annually to a single work of fiction or collection of short stories, translated into English and published in the United Kingdom or Ireland, with a £50,000 prize for the winning title, shared equally between author and translator.

Sahitya Akademi Fellowship

- Eminent author Ruskin Bond has been awarded the Sahitya Akademi Fellowship, the highest honour given by the literary organisation.
- Born in 1934 in Kasauli, Himachal Pradesh, Mr. Bond has been active in the world of writing for more than 50 years.
- His notable works include Vagrants in the Valley, Once Upon a Monsoon Time, Angry River, Strangers in the Night, All Roads Lead to Ganga, Tales of Fosterganj, Leopard on the Mountain and Too Much Trouble.
- The 1978 Hindi film Junoon is based on Ruskin's historical novel A Flight of Pigeons (Indian Rebellion of 1857).
- Adaptations of his stories were aired on Doordarshan as the TV serial Ek Tha Rusty.
- Several of his stories The Night Train at Deoli, Time Stops at Shamli and Our Trees Still Grow in Dehra (Sahitya Akademi Award 1992) were included in the school curriculum in India. In 2005, his popular children's novel The Blue Umbrella was made into a film.
- He has been honoured with Padma Shri in 1999 and Padma Bhushan in 2019, and the Sahitya Akademi Bal Sahitya Puraskar in 2012.

Sahitya Akademi

- Inaugurated in 1954, Sahitya Akademi - **India's National Academy of Letters**, is the central institution for literary dialogue, publication and promotion in the country.
- Functioning as an **autonomous organization**, it is the only institution that undertakes literary activities in 24 Indian languages, including English.
- It also gives special awards called **Bhasha Samman** to significant contribution to the languages not formally recognized by the Akademi and for contribution to classical and medieval literature.

Sunil Chhetri

- Sunil Chhetri recently announced that he will retire after the FIFA World Cup qualifying match against Kuwait in Kolkata.
- He is the third-highest international goal scorer among active players (fourth overall) behind only Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi.