

GENERAL STUDIES-1

INDIAN CULTURE

KUMBH MELA

Why in news?

UNESCO has inscribed 'KumbhMela' on the Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity during its 12th session being held at Jeju, South Korea.

This inscription is the third in two years following the inscriptions of 'Yoga' and 'Nouroz'.

What is Kumbh Mela?

Kumbh Mela is the largest peaceful congregation of pilgrims on earth. The festival, held in Allahabad, Haridwar, Ujjain and Nasik, represents a syncretic set of rituals related to worship and ritual cleansing in holy rivers in India. As a religious festival, the tolerance and inclusiveness that Kumbh Mela demonstrates are especially valuable for the contemporary world.

Intangible cultural heritage

The UNESCO Convention for Safeguarding the Intangible Cultural Heritage, adopted in 2003, defines intangible cultural heritage as the practices, representations, expressions as well as knowledge and skills that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognise as part of their cultural heritage.

GENERAL STUDIES-2

POLITY

BRINGING JUSTICE HOME

What is the issue?

In a decision intended to end the inordinate delay in the prosecution of politicians in criminal cases, the Centre has decided to set up special courts to deal exclusively with cases against 1,581 MPs and MLAs with the aim of disposing of them in a year. This decision has been conveyed by the centre to the Supreme Court.

Details of the proposal

Initially, 12 courts would be constituted. Two special courts would handle cases against MPs and the other 10 would be set up in 10 states where the number of MLAs booked for criminal acts is more than 65.

Need for special courts:

There are several high-profile cases against leaders from almost all political parties—regional and national, where investigations have dragged on for years and those facing trial have evaded prison.

The Centre's decision could be a setback to politicians who, despite facing serious charges, have remained members of Parliament and state assemblies due to time consumed in trials. Such cases will fall in the purview of special courts and their fate will be decided expeditiously.

TRIPLE TALAQ DRAFT BILL

Also known as: 'Muslim Women Protection of Rights on Marriage Bill'

Why in news?

Uttar Pradesh has become the first state to endorse the centre's draft bill that makes instant triple talaq a cognisable and non-bailable offence.

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SC's directive

The Supreme Court had struck down triple talaq, calling the practice unconstitutional and in violation of Article 14 of the Constitution, which provides for equality before the law. Following this, the Centre came out with the draft Bill on triple talaq.

Since marriage and divorce are subjects that fall under the concurrent list of the Constitution, the law ministry has also written to state governments seeking their views “urgently” on the proposed legislation.

What is triple talaq?

Talaq-e-biddat is a custom under Muslim personal law that allows a man to divorce his wife by uttering the word “talaq” thrice.

Key features of the Draft:

- Triple talaq or talaq-e-biddat will be a “cognisable and non-bailable” offence punishable with three years imprisonment and the wife will be entitled to maintenance and the custody of children if they are minor.
- Under the draft law, triple talaq in any form — spoken, in writing or by electronic means such as email, SMS and WhatsApp — would be bad or illegal and void.
- The provision of subsistence allowance and custody has been made to ensure that in case the husband asks the wife to leave the house she should have legal protection.

SINGLE MEMBER BENCHES AT NGT

The Centre has passed a notification allowing the NGT chairperson to “constitute a single-member bench” in “exceptional circumstances”, by making changes to National Green Tribunal (Practices and Procedure) Rules, 2011. However, the notification does not define the “exceptional circumstances”.

Prior to this, the rules insisted the bench consist “two or more members” with at least one judicial member and another expert.

Dec 4th to Dec 13th

National Green Tribunal (NGT):

NGT has been established under the National Green Tribunal Act 2010 for effective and expeditious disposal of cases relating to environmental protection and conservation of forests and other natural resources.

Ambit: The tribunal, with dedicated jurisdiction, deals with matters relating to the enforcement of any legal right relating to environment and giving relief and compensation for damages to persons and property.

- ✓ The Tribunal is not bound by the procedure laid down under the Code of Civil Procedure, 1908, but shall be guided by principles of natural justice.
- ✓ The Tribunal is mandated to make and endeavour for disposal of applications or appeals finally within 6 months of filing of the same.

Sanctioned strength: Currently, 10 expert members and 10 judicial members (although the act allows for up to 20 of each).

Chairman is the administrative head of the tribunal, also serves as a judicial member and is required to be a serving or retired Chief Justice of a High Court or a judge of the Supreme Court of India.

Selection of members: Members are chosen by a selection committee (headed by a sitting judge of the Supreme Court of India) that reviews their applications and conducts interviews. The Judicial members are chosen from applicants who are serving or retired judges of High Courts.

Expert members are chosen from applicants who are either serving or retired bureaucrats not below the rank of an Additional Secretary to the Government of India (not below the rank of Principal Secretary if serving under a state government) with a minimum administrative experience of five years in dealing with environmental matters. Or, the expert members must have a doctorate in a related field.

E-COURTS PROJECT

Dec 4th to Dec 13th

Why in news?

The e-Committee of the Supreme Court of India in association with the Department of Justice (DoJ) of the Government of India recently held a National Conference on e- courts project in New Delhi. The Conference focused on the progress, sharing of best practices, experiences, important issues and emerging challenges under the Project.

What is the project about?

The eCourts Mission Mode Project (Phase I 2010-15; Phase II 2015-19) is a national e-Governance project for ICT enablement of district and subordinate courts of the country.

Implementation: It is being implemented by the Government of India

Objectives

- To make whole judicial system ICT enabled by putting in place adequate and modern hardware and connectivity
- Automation of workflow management in all courts
- Electronic movement of records from taluka/trial to appeal courts
- Installation of video conferencing (VC) facility and recording of witness through Video Conferencing.

GOVERNANCE ISSUES AND POLICIES

UNIVERSAL SOCIAL SECURITY

Labour ministry's proposal for universal social security payments is facing resistance from other government sections because such a programme would raise overall wage costs.

How are they cutting the costs now?

Central ministries and the states have increasingly been hiring contract workers to save on costs as minimum wages are not mandatory in such cases. However, a social security programme would require the employers of contract workers to help pay for it.

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India's total workforce stands at 450 million, out of which a little over 10% is in the organised sector, enjoying social security of some sort.

Contract workers in the country:

The government appoints contract workers in three categories.

- First, for work of a routine nature such as housekeeping, maintenance and data entry that's bundled and entrusted to staffing agencies.
- Second, contractual appointments for select posts, particularly those that need high professional skills.
- The third category comprises retired government employees whose skills and expertise acquired during their tenure in government are found useful.

According to Seventh Pay Commission data, the union government is one of the biggest users of temporary staff or contract employees, including scheme workers. The scheme workers refer to the six million who are employed in flagship social sector programmes.

'Draft code on Social Security and Welfare':

The Centre, in March 2017, proposed a labour code on social security which will provide social security cover to the entire workforce in the country, including self-employed and agricultural workers.

- Every working person in the country will be covered under the social security code whether she belongs to the organised sector or the unorganised sector.
- For the first time, cover to agricultural workers is being provided along with self-employed people. The target is to provide social security benefits to 45 crore workers.
- The proposed code seeks to cover "any factory, any mine, any plantation, any shop, charitable organisations" and all establishments or households employing casual, part-time, fixed-term, informal, apprentice, domestic and home-based workers.
- All such establishments or factories will be liable to pay compensation if they fail to contribute towards the social security schemes of the workers.
- The total contribution to be made by employers towards Employees' Provident Fund and Employees' State Insurance

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Scheme is proposed to be capped at 30% of the workers' income. At present, employers contribute 31.5% of the workers' income towards these schemes.

- According to the proposed code, self-employed workers will contribute 20% of their monthly income towards provident fund, pension and other related schemes. Self-employed workers will also include "a person who takes land on share cropping or any other form of rent, and tills the same using his own or family members' labour."
- All the entities – whether factories or households – will have to register their workers through an Aadhaar-based registration system.
- A National Social Security Council, chaired by the Prime Minister, has been proposed to streamline and make policy on social security schemes related to all the Ministries.
- Other members would include: Finance Minister, Labour Minister, Health and Family Welfare Minister along with employer and employees' representatives.

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A RELOOK AT EVM

Why in news?

The issue of credibility of EVMs has become quite complicated with different parties raising serious objections about the functioning of the machines.

Ensuing this, an open challenge was given by EC to prove allegations of EVM tampering. However, in the recent local elections in U.P, not only has the reliability of the machines been questioned, so has the credibility of the EC.

EVM and its working

EVMs or electronic voting machines provide the voter with a button for each choice which is connected by a cable to an electronic ballot box.

An EVM consists of two units—control unit and balloting unit. When a voter presses a button against the candidate he/she wishes to vote for, the

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machine locks itself. This EVM can be opened only with a new ballot number. This way, EVMs ensure that one person gets to vote only once.

Production and Design

There are only two Indian PSUs (Bharat Electronic Limited (BEL), Electronics Corporation of Indian Limited (ECIL)) that manufacture EVM machines. The secret source code is only accessible to a few engineers. Engineers who are in the factory have no clue about the constituency wise deployment of the machine.

Purpose of using EVMs

Introduction of EVMs by due process of consultation and constitutional amendment in the 1980s and '90s was a step in the right direction to further strengthen the democratic process in India, which is by far the largest democracy in the world with more than 800 million voters.

Using EVMs means doing away with paper ballots, and in turn, saving millions of trees from being cut.

- It makes the entire process of voting simpler-a click on the button and your vote is registered.
- EVMs, in the long-run, have turned out to be cost-effective as well.
- These machines don't require electricity and run on batteries.
- At the same time, the EVMs are lighter and portable compared to the huge ballot boxes.
- And most importantly, EVMs have made the vote-counting process much faster, delivering results in hours as against manual counting of votes which could take days.

Introducing VVPAT

After concerns were raised on whether EVMs are tamper-proof, the Election Commission appointed a committee to look into the possibility of linking the EVMs to a paper trail machine to show voters a slip with the party symbol for which they have voted. As a result, voters can immediately check if their vote is cast for the person/party of their choice.

The Voter-Verified Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT) was first used in 2013 in Nagaland's Noksen Assembly constituency.

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Questions are raised on EVMs, Yet again

The EC has steadfastly maintained that the machines are perfect and that the software has been examined and re-examined by international experts.

On the other, some IIT-trained engineers have shown how the machines can actually be manipulated by remote devices, or by inserting pre-programmed chips, or by selectively tampering with only 20% of them to secure a simple majority. So, only a few constituencies will have those “chosen” machines and that would be enough to tilt the balance in favour of the ruling party.

The EC says these allegations are outrageous because the whole system and process have been shown to detractors and the matter is settled.

It is for the first time in India’s electoral history that the EC has been suspected of bias in favour of a ruling party.

Arguments that are in favour of Paper Ballot

We invariably come across reports of malfunctioning EVMs. The only way an EVM can be tampered with is by physically opening it up and replacing the chipset inside it. The chipset used is non-reprogrammable and data is ‘burnt’ into the device. So, today it is possible to replace the chip if we have access to EVMs

On the VVPAT (voter verifiable paper audit trail) front too, there are reports of malfunctioning. Also, as per the rules, paper ballots and VVPAT machines are not counted until the Returning Officer asks for it.

However, there are problems of paper ballot.

- Transporting them and guarding them is a problem.
- Ballot boxes can be captured.

Arguments in support of significance of EVMs

- EVMs led to a significant decline in electoral fraud, particularly in politically sensitive States as rigging elections became extremely expensive.

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- EVMs empowered those from the weaker sections of society who were victims of political or electoral violence. In particular, women, lower castes, and those less educated were more likely to participate in the electoral process when EVMs were used.
- EVMs made the electoral process more competitive.
- There has been a significant decline in the incidence of re-election, and winning margins have reduced dramatically.

However, this does not imply that we lower our guards. The very idea of democracy is based on trust and belief in the fairness of the electoral process where the losing party lives to fight another day. Any erosion of this trust and belief would be an irreversible process with an uncertain outcome.

In conclusion

The competitive electoral process checks the self-interest of political leaders in their quest for power. Our institutions, the EC, and the courts also share the responsibility to check the powers of popularly elected leaders to ensure that democracy does not become a mobocracy.

If EVMs are manipulated, all the votes could be captured with a greater degree of sophistication to favour one party. Tampering with EVMs would make booth capturing much easier. Besides, time and again the Election Commission (EC) has said that the machines cannot be hacked into as they are designed in such a manner so as to make that impossible.

To overcome the dangers of manipulation, we must remain sceptical and accept the reality that the EVM issue is not simple. The fact that the issue is complicated necessitates a measure of caution in its application.

ADULTERY LAW

Why in news?

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Supreme court has issued a notice to the Centre on a public interest litigation challenging the constitutionality of IPC section 497 dealing with adultery, saying it appeared to be “archaic” and did not appear to be gender-neutral and is unconstitutional as it discriminates against men and violates Article 14, 15 and 21.

Two aspects to be examined:

- One, why does Section 497 treat the man as the adulterer and the married woman as a victim?
- Two, the offence of adultery ceases the moment it is established that the husband connived or consented to the adulterous act. So, is a married woman the “property” of her husband, a passive object without a mind of her own?

Section 497 IPC says, “Whoever has sexual intercourse with a person who is and whom he knows or has reason to believe to be the wife of another man, without the consent or connivance of that man, such sexual intercourse not amounting to the offence of rape, is guilty of the offence of adultery, and shall be punished with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to five years, or with fine, or with both. In such case the wife shall not be punishable as an abettor.”

Section 198(2) CrPC says that “... no person other than the husband of the woman shall be deemed to be aggrieved by any offence punishable under Section 497 or Section 498 of the said Code: Provided that in the absence of the husband, some person who had care of the woman on his behalf at the time when such offence was committed may, with the leave of the Court, make a complaint on his behalf.”

In conclusion

Adultery is at best a violation of the terms of agreement between a married couple. The IPC version of criminalising adultery with five years imprisonment is just a more moderate version of the Islamic versions which see it as a grave offence that deserves barbaric punishments like stoning and lashing.

Most countries in the West have decriminalized adultery. India should follow their example rather than split hairs over making it gender just

PUBLICATION: CRIME IN INDIA 2016

Published by: The National Crime Records Bureau, which comes under the Union Ministry of Home Affairs

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Backgrounder

As the world encounters crime and criminality of a more and more complicated nature, adequate and up-to-date records on crime are necessary to tackle crime effectively. Low conviction rates and a lack of a lawful definition of crime mark criminal administration in India.

Details of the report

The latest report is the 64th edition. The annual report provides information on all the FIRs registered under the Indian Penal Code (IPC) as well as under Special and Local Laws (SLL) by the police all over India, including the disposal of the FIRs registered.

Latest report from NCRB has several additions – new entities, new accounting, new chapters, and new kinds of crime and/or new records on crimes hitherto undocumented in the report.

Together, these new features appear to show that an effort has been made, under the current administration, to evolve, expand and prioritise effective and adequate record-keeping, which will only help to bring India closer to global best practices in maintaining criminal and crime records.

What's New in 'Crime in India 2016'?

1. City-Wise Data

For the first time, city-wise incidence of crimes and disposal for 19 metropolitan cities having a population above 2 million has been included under different chapters like Crime against Women, Cyber Crimes and Economic Crimes. Such data incentivises city administrations to make a sense of their law and order situation.

Crimes reported: Delhi > Bengaluru > Mumbai

2. Seizure of Arms, Ammunitions, Drugs & Currency

It is also for the first time that statistics on the seizure of arms, ammunition, drugs and currency by the CAPFs/CPOs (Assam Rifles, CISF, BSF, CRPF, NIA and SSB) have been included.

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It is extremely important to collate data on arms and ammunitions to curb insurgency, gun violence, terrorism, smuggling and other arms-related crimes.

3. New Chapter on Missing Persons

A new chapter on Missing Persons & Children has been included. This data is available state-wise, which makes it easier for the administration to target specific states and counter problems like human trafficking, kidnapping, etc.

Also, there was a Supreme Court direction regarding data on “missing (and traced) persons and children”. This, too, has been met in the latest NCRB report.

Analysis of “Crime in India 2016” report

“Crime in India 2016” presents a dismal picture of the key performance statistic with only 47% convictions in Indian Penal Code (IPC) crimes at the national level.

1. Reporting and recording: The key statistic of police performance is not merely correct reporting and recording but charge sheets and convictions, as this impact on criminal behaviour.
2. DNA testing: DNA testing, which can secure higher conviction rates, is, inexplicably, a low priority. Delays in this crucial evidence, which plays an important factor in acquittals, are a setback as samples deteriorate with time.

Crime prevention is affected by conviction rate, beat patrolling, and by the police and community working together.

Unresolved issues

There is a need to distinguish between accountability and operational responsibility with focus on clear performance measures. In addition to those related to roles and responsibilities, there are also systemic issues.

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- Despite the recommendations of Law Commissions and the Supreme Court, as well going by experience in the developed world, we do not have separate wings for investigation of crime and for law and order.
- Related to this reform is the debate whether the police are a functional “service” based on skills of investigation or a “force” oriented towards “effect” which on command will operate regardless of the cost to itself or the social fabric.
- The criminal justice system may be limited to crimes under the IPC, while enforcement of administrative law and social legislation requires a different approach involving summary trials, changing societal attitudes and modes of behaviour.
- The effectiveness of prisons is now being questioned. Nearly two-thirds of the prison population is awaiting trial and half the number of under trials is normally acquitted.

Criminologists now feel that short-term sentences expose such prisoners to criminal indoctrination in jail and social condemnation on release, with a strong case for greater reliance on compounding, probation and parole.

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MINORITY HINDUS

Why in news?

The National Commission for Minorities (NCM) has formed a three-member committee to look into whether Hindus should get minority status in eight states where they are not the dominant religious group. The committee will submit a report on this in three months.

Which are these states?

Hindus are in a minority in Lakshadweep, Mizoram, Nagaland, Meghalaya, J&K, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur and Punjab.

Why minority status?

It is argued that in the absence of the “minority” tag, benefits meant for the minority communities were being given away to majority community in each state in an illegal and arbitrary manner.

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NCM:

- Set up the National Commission for Minorities (NCM) under the National Commission for Minorities Act, 1992.
- Six religious communities, viz; Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists, Zoroastrians (Parsis) and Jains have been notified in Gazette of India as minority communities by the Union Government all over India.
- The NCM adheres to the United Nations Declaration of 1992 which states that “States shall protect the existence of the National or Ethnic, Cultural, Religious and Linguistic identity of minorities within their respective territories and encourage conditions for the promotion of that identity.”

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WELFARE SCHEMES AND DEVELOPMENTAL GROUPS

DISABILITY RIGHTS MOVEMENTS: A JUXTAPOSITION

The annual observance of International Day of Disabled Persons, on Dec 3rd, was first proclaimed in 1992. The United Nations General Assembly resolution brought this observance into being.

The observance of the day aims at bridging the gap in the society and brings an understanding of disability issues and brings dignity, rights, and well-being of persons with disabilities. It aims to bring the disabled people at the forefront in the society and get them included in every aspect of political, social, economic and cultural life

A sympathetic look creates a stereotype

- Disabled people are the most vulnerable section of society and have been ignored by state and society alike since long.
- Disabled people have always been dependent and, therefore, need helping hands and gracious charity.
- Disabled people are victims of their own bad luck.
- Disability is the punishment for sins he has never committed in this life.

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Such assumptions about the disabled do nothing to help them. This approach perpetuates the stereotype of the disabled as victims and objects of pity and charity.

The Disability Rights Movement:

Unlike other movements like Feminism or Lesbian Movements which have distinct agendas of either gender justice or the right to sexual orientation, the Disability Rights Movement does not have systematic path.

Disability Rights Movement even in the West has a very recent origin and tries to draw strength from the traditional legal order rather than by critiquing or deconstructing it.

The Disability Rights Movement in India and in Third World countries is disorganized and there are no written documents to trace its origin. Instead of coming together, sections of disabled viz. blind persons, persons with physical disability, deaf and dumb persons and those with mental disabilities have launched their movements and struggles separately, mainly through NGOs.

- The disability rights movement gained momentum in the 1970s when disability was started to be seen as a human rights issue. This is when the UN General Assembly proclaimed in 1976 that 1981 would be the International Year of Disabled Persons.
- Later, 1983-1992 was marked as the United Nations Decade of Disabled Persons.
- The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), 2006 was a big step towards viewing persons as “subjects with rights” and not “objects of charity”.
- Further, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development pledges to “leave no one behind”. It states that persons with disabilities must be both “beneficiaries and agents of change”.

However, attitudinal, institutional, and infrastructural barriers remain, with the World Bank stating that 15% of the world’s population experience some form of disability and that they “on average, as a group, are more likely to experience adverse socioeconomic outcomes than persons without disabilities”.

In 2011, the World Health Organisation came up with a world report on disability for the first time. Its introduction showed how disabled persons

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aren't "other people", but that all of us at some point will be "temporarily or permanently impaired" and those "who survive to old age will experience increasing difficulties in functioning."

Government's Relief for the disabled in India:

Until 1995 there was no law that even defined discrimination against people with disabilities. It is only with the 'Persons with Disabilities Act,' passed in 1995 that discrimination specifically against persons with disabilities came under the purview of the law.

Objective of the Act was to spell out the responsibility of the State towards the prevention of disabilities, protection of rights, provision of medical care, education, training, employment and rehabilitation of persons with disabilities.

In India, according to the 2011 Census, 2.21% of the population has one or multiple types of disabilities, making the country home to one of the largest disabled populations in the world.

Legislation moved forward last year in India when the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act was passed, replacing the Persons with Disabilities Act, 1995.

Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016

- The 2016 Act recognises 21 kinds of disabilities compared to the previous seven, including dwarfism, speech and language disability, and three blood disorders.
- It fulfils the obligations to the United National Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), to which India is a signatory.
- Responsibility has been cast upon the appropriate governments to take effective measures to ensure that the persons with disabilities enjoy their rights equally with others.
- Every child with benchmark disability between the age group of 6 and 18 years shall have the right to free education
- The new Act also increased the quota for disability reservation in higher educational institutions from 3% to 5% and in government jobs from 3% to 4%, for a more inclusive society.

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- The Act provides for grant of guardianship by District Court under which there will be joint decision – making between the guardian and the persons with disabilities.
- Broad based Central & State Advisory Boards on Disability are to be set up to serve as apex policy making bodies at the Central and State level.
- Creation of National and State Fund will be created to provide financial support to the persons with disabilities.

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In conclusion

The success of this Act would, however, depend much upon the extent to which the political leaders and bureaucratic executive internalizes the values, sensibilities and goals enshrined in the Act. If persons with disability are to be regarded as full citizens of India, their right to equal concern and respect must find its expression in the supreme law of the land.

While we have a long way to go in implementing these laws, we must also keep in mind that a one-size-fits-all approach is unhelpful for disabled persons. Levels and types of disabilities differ and so do needs.

WORLD'S FIRST IT CAMPUS FOR PWD

Where? Hyderabad

Who? The Telangana State government has entered into an agreement with Vindhya E-Infomedia Private Limited

What's the purpose?

The IT campus will focus on creating employment exclusively for PWDs. It will have all amenities like training, residential facility and delivery centers. The campus which will cater to various clients both domestic and international, is aimed to provide training and employment for 2,000 people in the next five years.

INDIA AND ITS INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

FINALLY, FROM MUMBAI TO ST. PETERSBURG

What's it about?

The International North South Transportation Corridor (INSTC) connecting Mumbai with St Petersburg and beyond – which has been 17 years in the making – is set to be operationalised with the first consignment from India to Russia.

INSTC:

India, Iran and Russia had in 2000 signed the INSTC agreement to build a corridor to provide the shortest multi-model transportation route linking the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf to the Caspian Sea via Iran and St Petersburg. From St Petersburg, North Europe is within easy reach via the Russian Federation.

- ✓ The route primarily involves moving freight from India, Iran, Azerbaijan and Russia via ship, rail and road.
- ✓ The objective of the corridor is to increase trade connectivity between major cities such as Mumbai, Moscow, Tehran, Baku, Bandar Abbas, Astrakhan, Bandar Anzali and etc.

Significance of the corridor:

Conceived well before China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), INSTC will not only help cut down on costs and time taken for transfer of goods from India to Russia and Europe via Iran but also provide an alternative connectivity initiative to countries in the Eurasian region.

- ✓ It will be India's second corridor after the Chabahar Port to access resource rich Central Asia and its market.
- ✓ The absence of viable surface transport connectivity is a serious impediment to trade with the Eurasian region.
- ✓ Currently, transport of goods between India and Russia mostly takes place through the sea route via Rotterdam to St Petersburg.
- ✓ In the case of the Central Asian region, goods are routed through China, Europe or Iran.
- ✓ The routes through China and Europe are long, expensive and time-consuming

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Therefore, there is a need to have a logistics route that would be shorter, cheaper and faster.

ASIAN DEVELOPMENT BANK (ADB)

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Why in news?

Asian Development Bank (ADB) will fund highway upgradation project in Karnataka.

About ADB

Headquarter: Philippines

It is a regional development bank established in 1966.

Aim: To facilitate economic development of countries in Asia. It also aims for an Asia and Pacific free from poverty.

Membership: It admits members of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP, formerly known as the United Nations Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East) and non-regional developed countries.

Voting: ADB was modeled closely on the World Bank, and has a similar weighted voting system where votes are distributed in proportion with member's capital subscriptions.

Board of Governors:

- It is the highest policy-making body of the bank.
- It is composed of one representative from each member state.
- The Board of Governors also elect the bank's President who is the chairperson of the Board of Directors and manages ADB.

Nature of loans

It offers both Hard Loans and Soft loans. The ADB offers "hard" loans from ordinary capital resources (OCR) on commercial terms, and the Asian

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Development Fund (ADF) affiliated with the ADB extends “soft” loans from special fund resources with concessional conditions.

BODHI PARVA

Host of 2017 edition: New Delhi

Organised by: Ministry of External Affairs (MEA)

What is it?

Bodhi Parva is BIMSTEC Festival of Buddhist Heritage. The 2017 edition also marks 20th Anniversary of BIMSTEC.

Purpose of the festival

It aims to look at the different aspects of Buddhism, in today’s context. BIMSTEC has a deep connect with Buddhism, which originated in South Asia and then travelled and rooted itself in South East Asia. Buddhism constitutes a bridge between South and South-East Asia.

- To emphasise and raise awareness of this rich and common heritage.
- A mélange of international performances, films, art, chanting, meditation and philosophical dialogues by known practitioners and scholars will bring out the essence of Buddhism.
- The universal message of peace and tolerance practiced by Buddhism can address the growing sense of inadequacy in the face of changes and conflicts that people and the world face.

BIMSTEC:

The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) is an international organization involving a group of countries in South Asia and South East Asia.

Seven members: Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Thailand.

Objective: Technological and economical cooperation among South Asian and South East

ASEAN-INDIA CONNECTIVITY SUMMIT (AICS)

Dec 4th to Dec 13th

Where? New Delhi

Theme: “Powering Digital and Physical Linkages for Asia in the 21st Century”.

Aim: The AICS aims to accelerate existing connectivity prospects, identify issues of concern, evolve suitable policy recommendations and develop strategies to enhance economic, industrial and trade relations between ASEAN and India.

Focus areas: Infrastructure, roadways, shipping, digital, finance, energy and aviation.

Participants: The AICS would be bringing together policymakers, senior officials from the government, investors, industry leaders, representatives of trade associations and entrepreneurs on the same platform.

ASEAN:

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations, or ASEAN, was established in 1967 in Bangkok, Thailand, with the signing of the ASEAN Declaration (Bangkok Declaration) by the Founding Fathers of ASEAN, namely Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand. At present there are 10 members namely, Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Viet Nam.

INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

ASIAN INFRASTRUCTURE INVESTMENT BANK

Why in news?

India will host the 3rd Annual Meeting of the Board of Governors of AIIB at Mumbai in June 2018. In this regard, the Government of India and Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) Secretariat have signed the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU).

Theme: “Mobilizing Finance for Infrastructure: Innovation and Collaboration”.

What is AIIB?

Dec 4th to Dec 13th

The AIIB is a multilateral financial institution aimed at providing “financial support for infrastructure development and regional connectivity in Asia.”

Established: 2014

Headquarters: Beijing.

Goals: To boost economic development in the region, create wealth, prove infrastructure, and promote regional cooperation and partnership.

Funding: The value of AIIB’s authorized capital amounts to \$100 billion, with almost \$30 billion invested by China. India is not only one of the founding members of AIIB but is also the 2nd largest shareholder in AIIB.

IMT HIGHWAY

Why in news?

India is planning to hold talks with Asean countries to extend the India-Myanmar-Thailand highway up to Vietnam via Laos and Cambodia.

Why expand?

Connecting India with the South eastern countries through a network of road will create jobs, market for crops grown in hilly regions of the Northeast which will also help growers in getting better price for their produce.

About IMT highway:

The India–Myanmar–Thailand Trilateral Highway is a highway under construction under India’s Look East policy that will connect Moreh, India with Mae Sot, Thailand via Myanmar.

The road is expected to boost trade and commerce in the ASEAN–India Free Trade Area, as well as with the rest of Southeast Asia. It is important to note that the project already missed its first deadline in 2015 and India has consistently faced difficulty in implementing its projects in Myanmar.

WASSENAAR ARRANGEMENT

Why in news?

The elite export control regime, Wassenaar Arrangement, has decided to admit India as its new member, which is expected to raise New Delhi's stature in the field of non-proliferation besides helping it acquire critical technologies.

What is the arrangement about?

The Wassenaar Arrangement on Export Controls for Conventional Arms and Dual-Use Goods and Technologies, commonly known as the Wassenaar Arrangement, is a multilateral export control regime established to ensure regional and international security and stability promoting transparency in transfer of arms and dual-use goods and technologies.

What do the participating nations do?

The participating nations make sure that the export of ammunition does not contribute to the development or enhancement of military capabilities undermining regional security. In order to achieve the aim of stable defence deals, the participatory nations apply export controls to all items listed in the List of Dual-Use Goods and Technologies and the Munitions List.

How will this membership help India?

India's entry into the export control regime would enhance its credentials in the field of non-proliferation despite not being a signatory to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). The WA membership is also expected to build up a strong case for India's entry into the 48-member Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG).

Dec 4th to Dec 13th

Jerusalem. Israel established its seat of government in the western half of the city, while, across a no man's land lined with barbed wire, Jordan took control of the city's eastern half, including the Old City.

After 1967

Israel captured East Jerusalem in 1967 and subsequently annexed it, redrawing its municipal borders to include surrounding Arab villages. In 1980, Israel's parliament, the Knesset, designated the united city as Israel's capital.

By contrast, the West Bank, also captured in 1967, was not annexed; it remains under military occupation and Palestinians have partial self-government there, through the Palestinian Authority (PA). While Israel controls the city, the Oslo Accords, signed by Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in 1993, stipulated that Jerusalem's disposition would only be decided on in permanent-status negotiations between the parties. Other major issues under negotiation concern refugees' right of return, security arrangements, borders, and mutual recognition.

Who lives in Jerusalem?

Jerusalem is home to nearly one million residents. West Jerusalem's population is almost entirely Jewish. The eastern half of the city, which comprises the Old City, Palestinian neighborhoods, and refugee camps, along with some newer Jewish settlements, is home to both Arabs and Jews.

Unlike Palestinians who live elsewhere in Israel, most Palestinian East Jerusalemites have permanent residency, but not citizenship, since they do not recognize Israeli sovereignty over the city.

How have other countries reacted?

The Islamic world is outraged and has warned of "dangerous consequences". China has said it "could sharpen regional conflict". The Arab League and several European nations have expressed grave

Dec 4th to Dec 13th

India, Pakistan, Israel and South Sudan are among the four UN member states which have not signed the NPT, the international pact aimed at preventing the spread of nuclear weapons.

India's case

- India has not indulged in any dubious/ clandestine activity and its programme has been developed solely by years of hard work indigenously.
- India has shown that developing a credible nuclear weapons programme through honest and civilian means is possible for any country.
- Besides, by declaring a voluntary moratorium on further underground nuclear tests India has effectively acted in sense and spirit of NPT/CTBT provisions.
- By steering its programme only as a minimum deterrence and pledging No First Use unless faced with an attack of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), India has established itself as a responsible nuclear state.

Benefits associated with NSG membership

- Timely information on nuclear matters.
- Contributes by way of information.
- Has confirmed credentials.
- Can act as an instrument of harmonization and coordination.
- Is part of a very transparent process.

INTERNATIONAL SOLAR ALLIANCE

With 19 countries ratifying its framework agreement, the International Solar Alliance (ISA) has become the first treaty-based international government organisation to be based in India.

This marks the culmination of India's efforts, which had taken a lead role in setting up the ISA—an alliance of 121 countries situated between the Tropics of Cancer and Capricorn. ISA also signals that New Delhi would employ it as a foreign policy tool to cement its leadership among developing countries.

Dec 4th to Dec 13th

- It will be recognized by UN legally to become fully functional.
- Other prominent intergovernmental organisations in the energy sector include the Vienna-based Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (Opec) and Paris-based International Energy Agency (IEA).

ISA:

The ISA is an Indian initiative, jointly launched by the Indian Prime Minister and the president of France in 2015 in Paris, on the sidelines of COP-21, the UN climate conference.

The Paris Declaration, establishing the ISA, states that the countries share the collective ambition to undertake innovative and concerted efforts for reducing the cost of finance and cost of technology for immediate deployment solar generation assets.

Aim: Addressing obstacles to deployment at scale of solar energy through better harmonization and aggregation of demand from solar rich countries lying fully or partially between the tropics of Cancer and Capricorn.

Headquarter: India and has its secretariat located in the campus of the National Institute of Solar Energy, Gurgaon, Haryana.

WORLD CONFERENCE ON TOURISM AND CULTURE

Where? Muscat, Sultanate of Oman

Organised by: UNWTO/UNESCO

Objective of the conference: It will bring together, for the second time, Ministers of Tourism and Ministers of Culture as well as private sector stakeholders and experts with the objective of building and strengthening partnerships between the Tourism and Culture sectors and enhance their role in the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

The conference aims to address a wide range of topics, including governance models, tourism development and protection of cultural heritage, and exploring cultural landscape in tourism as a vehicle for sustainable development in destinations worldwide.

Dec 4th to Dec 13th

Backgrounder:

This Conference is a sequel to the First UNWTO/UNESCO World Conference on Tourism and Culture, held in Siem Reap, Cambodia in February 2015 and will provide the platform to reflect upon the Siem

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UNWTO:

The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) is the United Nations agency responsible for the promotion of responsible, sustainable and universally accessible tourism.

UNWTO's membership includes 158 countries, 6 Associate Members and over 500 Affiliate Members representing the private sector, educational institutions, tourism associations and local tourism authorities.

- UNWTO promotes tourism as a driver of economic growth, inclusive development and environmental sustainability and offers leadership and support to the sector in advancing knowledge and tourism policies worldwide.
- UNWTO encourages the implementation of the Global Code of Ethics for Tourism
- It endeavors to maximize tourism's socio-economic contribution while minimizing its possible negative impacts, and is committed to promoting tourism as an instrument in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), geared towards reducing poverty and fostering sustainable development worldwide.

UNWTO generates market knowledge, promotes competitive and sustainable tourism policies and instruments, fosters tourism education and training, and works to make tourism an effective tool for development through technical assistance projects in over 100 countries

Reap Declaration that pledged to explore the synergies of the tourism and culture sectors to work in harmony for sustainable development.

ROHINGYA ISSUE: AN ICE-BREAKER?

Why in news?

Bangladesh and Myanmar recently signed a Memorandum of Agreement to begin the repatriation of more than 6,20,000 Rohingya refugees who have fled to Bangladesh in the past few months.

A trigger for exodus

Since August, the Myanmar military began a crackdown on Rohingya villages in Rakhine in retaliation to a series of terror strikes on army camps. Scores of Rohingya people escaped burning homes and alleged

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atrocities by the authorities and have been seeking shelter across the border in Bangladesh's Cox's Bazaar. The UN has condemned the violence as a case of "ethnic cleansing" and "genocide", putting pressure on Myanmar's leadership to end it.

What is China's role?

Following China's announcement of its favour for 3 step solution, talks between Bangladesh and Myanmar appear to have been guided not by international agencies, but by China.

The 3-step solution comprises a ceasefire in Rakhine, a bilateral repatriation deal for the Rohingya to Myanmar and long-term solutions including the economic development of the Rohingya areas.

In China's interest too

Beijing has deep interests in Rakhine, especially in the Kyaukpyu Port, with oil and energy pipelines to Yunnan province forming part of its Belt and Road Initiative. China has been protective of Myanmar regime from international sanctions at the UN thus far.

What could be the possible outcome?

Myanmar has committed not to delay sending those repatriated back to their original homes, but this task will be made more difficult by the fact that that many of the Rohingya villages have been burnt down.

Also of concern is the stipulation that those who will be accepted by Myanmar must show their Myanmar-issued identity cards, not just their Bangladesh-issued refugee cards. Finally, international human rights agencies have warned that refugees cannot be forced to return while threat of violence against them persists, even as they process the trauma borne of the atrocities they fled from.

GLOBAL HUNGER INDEX: IS IT ALRIGHT?

Prepared by: International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI)

What's the issue?

Per capita food production in India has increased by 26% (2004-05 to 2013-14), while it has doubled in the last 50 years. While this kind of growth rate in food production is expected to reduce hunger significantly over time, the Global Hunger Index (GHI) shows India's hunger level in very poor light ranking it at 100th among 119 developing countries, behind North Korea, Bangladesh and Nepal.

The design of Global Hunger Index

It measures and tracks hunger globally and by country and region. The GHI highlights successes and failures in hunger reduction and provides insights into the drivers of hunger thus triggering actions to reduce hunger.

GHI combines four component indicators:

1. Undernourishment: the proportion of the undernourished as a percentage of the population;
2. Child wasting: the proportion of children under the age of five suffering from wasting (low weight-for-height);
3. Child stunting: the proportion of children under the age of five suffering from stunting (low height-for-age);
4. Child mortality: the mortality rate of children under the age of five

GHI 2017- 12th in annual series

It points to the fact that the world has made progress in reducing hunger since 2000, but this progress has been uneven, with levels of hunger still serious or alarming in 51 countries and extremely alarming in one country.

The report draws attention to the inequalities underlying hunger—including geographic, income, and gender as also of social, political, and economic inequalities in which they are rooted.

- ✓ In early 2017, the United Nations declared that more than 20 million people were at risk of famine in four countries: Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan, and Yemen. These crises are largely “manmade,” the result of violent conflict and internal strife that are preventing people from accessing food and clean water and keeping aid organizations from reaching people in need.

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- ✓ At the regional level, South Asia and Africa south of the Sahara have the highest 2017 GHI scores. Given that three-quarters of South Asia's population resides in India, the situation in that country strongly influences South Asia's regional score.

India has implemented a “massive scale-up” of two national programs that address nutrition—the Integrated Child Development Services and the National Health Mission—but these have yet to achieve adequate coverage.

“Hunger Index” is highly misleading?

Undernourishment and child mortality each make up a third of the GHI score, while child stunting and child wasting make up a sixth of the score, and together make up a third of the score.

- Three of the four indicators, refer only to children below five who constitute only 11.5% of India's population.
- The term “Hunger Index” is highly biased towards under nutrition of children rather than representing the status of hunger in the overall population.
- Evidence shows that weight and height of children are not solely determined by food intake but are an outcome of a complex interaction of factors related to genetics, the environment, sanitation and utilisation of food intake.

Calculating hunger

The incidence of hunger is taken as the proportion of the population whose food intake provides less than its minimum energy requirements. The figure of the incidence of hunger depends on energy norms and the methodological approach used in its estimation.

- At a global level, the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO) has an average norm of 1,800 kcal, while the Indian Council of Medical Research-National Institute of Nutrition (ICMR-NIN) specified average norm of 2,400 kcal for rural areas and 2,100 kcal for urban areas in India, varies across age, gender and activity-level.
- There is a strong case to revise the ICMR-NIN norms as the actual requirement of energy is decreasing due to a shift towards mechanisation and more congenial work conditions and environment.

Dec 4th to Dec 13th

Policy Recommendations

Although enough food is produced globally to feed the world, hunger persists—largely the product of various and severe inequalities often perpetuated and exacerbated by laws, policies, attitudes, and practices.

The following recommendations aim at redressing such power imbalances in order to alleviate hunger among the most vulnerable:

- Governments must actively include in the policy-making process underrepresented groups, such as small-scale farmers, that are involved in producing food and feeding people.
- International bodies must ensure the meaningful participation of people’s movements and civil society organizations to generate more productive debates around paradigms of food systems.
- Governments must ensure space for civil society to play its role in holding decision makers to account on their obligation to protect and ensure the Right to Food.
- Governments should create and enforce regulatory frameworks to safeguard citizens from the negative impacts of international trade and agriculture agreements.
- National governments must provide access to education and create social safety nets.

In conclusion

The 2017 Global Hunger Index shows positive developments on many fronts, but there are still deep inequalities in hunger and under nutrition at the regional, national, and subnational levels.

The United Nations’ Sustainable Development Agenda includes the goal of ending hunger worldwide, while “leaving no one behind” (UN 2015). As we make progress in combating hunger, we should apply lessons learned and concentrate attention and resources on the areas where hunger and under nutrition are still unacceptably high in order to further decrease hunger in the future

UN’S GLOBAL COMPACT ON MIGRATION

Dec 4th to Dec 13th

Why in news?

The administration of President Donald Trump has withdrawn the United States from the United Nations pact to improve the handling of migrant and refugee situations.

The US has been a part of the non-binding New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants since it was unanimously adopted by the UN General Assembly last year.

Why has the US withdrawn?

The United States says the pact undermines the sovereign right of the country to enforce immigration laws and secure its borders. However, the country has assured its support to international cooperation on migration issues.

UN compact on Migration:

The global compact for migration is the first, intergovernmentally negotiated agreement, prepared under the auspices of the United Nations, to cover all dimensions of international migration in a holistic and comprehensive manner.

In the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants, adopted in 2016, the General Assembly decided to develop a global compact for safe, orderly and regular migration.

The global compact is framed consistent with target of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in which member States committed to cooperate internationally to facilitate safe, orderly and regular migration

38TH GCC SUMMIT

Where? Kuwait

Dec 4th to Dec 13th

Why is the summit important?

This Gulf Cooperation Council summit comes at a delicate time after Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt all cut ties with Qatar, accusing Doha of backing extremism and fostering ties with Iran – charges that Qatar vehemently denies.

Kuwait has played mediator and acted as a conduit for communication between the boycotting countries and Qatar.

GCC

It is a political and economic alliance of six countries in the Arabian Peninsula: Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

- The GCC promotes economic, security, cultural and social cooperation between the six states and holds a summit every year to discuss cooperation and regional affairs.
- Due to their geographic proximity, similar political systems and common sociocultural stances, the immediate goal was for these countries to protect themselves from threats after the Iran-Iraq War.

Relevance of the council questionable

Though it was created for the purpose of solidifying the region, the blockade imposed on Qatar by its neighbours has largely annulled these principles. The Gulf states have in the past differed in their views on several issues that have unfolded in the region over the past two decades.

The role of the GCC has also been diminishing ever since the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq, with the six states illustrating various approaches to the war and its consequences. This has been enhanced during the wave of protests that swept the Middle East in 2011, known as the Arab Spring. Saudi Arabia has gained a dominant role within the GCC today.

GENERAL STUDIES-3

INDIAN ECONOMY

FAME INDIA SCHEME

Dec 4th to Dec 13th

Why in news?

Original equipment manufacturers will have to seek approval from the Department of Heavy Industry before accepting any proposal to supply electric buses for availing incentives under the FAME India scheme.

What is FAME India?

With an aim to promote eco-friendly vehicles, the government had launched the Faster Adoption and Manufacturing of (Hybrid &) Electric Vehicles in India (FAME-India) scheme in 2015.

It is a part of the National Electric Mobility Mission Plan.

Objective

The FAME India Scheme is aimed at incentivising all vehicle segments, including two-wheelers, three wheeler auto, passenger four-wheeler vehicle, light commercial vehicles and buses. The scheme covers hybrid and electric technologies like a strong hybrid, plug-in hybrid and battery electric vehicles.

FINANCIAL RESOLUTION AND DEPOSIT INSURANCE BILL 2017

Status of the bill: Introduced in the Lok Sabha, presently under consideration of the Joint Committee of Parliament.

It is noteworthy that the bill was opposed by the bank unions who have also requested the Finance Minister to withdraw this legislation.

What is the bill all about?

The Bill would provide for a comprehensive resolution framework to deal with bankruptcy situation in banks, insurance companies and financial sector entities.

- The Bill when enacted, will pave the way for setting up of the Resolution Corporation. It will also result in the repealing of the Deposit Insurance and Credit Guarantee Corporation Act, 1961 to

Dec 4th to Dec 13th

transfer the deposit insurance powers and responsibilities to the Resolution Corporation.

- The Resolution Corporation would protect the stability and resilience of the financial system; protecting the consumers of covered obligations up to a reasonable limit; and protecting public funds, to the extent possible.

Merits of the Bill

- It seeks to give comfort to the consumers of financial service providers in financial distress.
- It also aims to inculcate discipline among financial service providers in the event of financial crises by limiting the use of public money to bail out distressed entities.
- It would help in maintaining financial stability in the economy by providing the necessary instruments for dealing with an event of crisis.
- The Bill aims to strengthen and streamline the current framework of deposit insurance for the benefit of a large number of retail depositors.
- The Bill seeks to decrease the time and costs involved in resolving distressed financial entities.

INSOLVENCY AND BANKRUPTCY BOARD OF INDIA (IBBI)

Why in news?

The Insolvency and Bankruptcy Board of India (IBBI) has notified the regulations for handling of grievances and complaints against Insolvency-related service providers.

Who are service providers?

The service provider could be an insolvency professional agency, Insolvency professional, Insolvency professional entity or information utility.

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The regulations provide for an objective and transparent procedure for disposal of grievances and complaints by the IBBI.

What is IBBI?

Insolvency and Bankruptcy Board of India was set up on in 2016 under the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code, 2016. It is a unique regulator: regulates a profession as well as transactions.

Functions:

- It has regulatory oversight over the Insolvency Professionals, Insolvency Professional Agencies and Information Utilities.
- It writes and enforces rules for transactions, namely, corporate insolvency resolution, corporate liquidation, individual insolvency resolution and individual bankruptcy under the Code.
- It is a key pillar of the ecosystem responsible for implementation of the Code that consolidates and amends the laws relating to reorganization and insolvency resolution of corporate persons, partnership firms and individuals.
- This is done in a time bound manner for maximization of the value of assets of such persons, to promote entrepreneurship, availability of credit and balance the interests of all the stakeholders.

Organizational structure of IBBI:

The IBBI has a ten-member board including a Chairman.

- Three members from Central Government officers not below the rank of Joint Secretary or equivalent.
- One nominated member from the RBI.
- Five members nominated by the Central Government; of these, three shall be whole-time members.

Q2 GDP NUMBERS PROMISING

Released by: CSO (Central Statistics Office)

A sigh of relief

Dec 4th to Dec 13th

The national income numbers for the second quarter of 2017-18 released by has come as a relief with Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growing at 6.3% year-on-year compared to 5.7% in the first quarter but still lower than 7.5% a year ago.

The trend of declining growth rate quarter after quarter, which was seen in the last one year, has been reversed, paving way for sustained growth going further. However, doubts and concerns persist for some.

Significance of Q2 data

It is true that development has many dimensions and for a balanced view, one must look at all of them. Nevertheless, GDP is an important indicator of the performance of the economy, and a faster rate of growth is most often a prerequisite for rapid social development.

- This growth happened on the back of good growth in manufacturing sector, electricity, gas, water supply and other utilities.
- The manufacturing sector in the second quarter of 2017-18 grew by 7 per cent against 1.2% in the previous quarter. This is really a turnaround. In the corresponding quarter in the previous year, the growth rate was 7.7%.
- Agriculture, forestry and fishing sectors are estimated to have grown by 1.7 per cent.
- The services component of trade, hotels, transport and communications also grew smartly at 10.5% for the half year, as compared to 8.3% a year ago.
- Three other sectors which have grown strongly are the two subsectors under services — trade, hotels, etc., and public administration — besides electricity and other utility services.
- The growth rate in agriculture was low at 1.7%. This was to be expected because the growth rate in agriculture was very strong the previous year. Even though the monsoon has been good, one should not expect a much stronger growth over a good year.
- The construction sector grew at 2.6% only. It is yet to recover from the impact of demonetisation. But that should not come as a surprise as demonetisation was directly meant to hurt the way business was being done in this sector.

It appears that the manufacturing sector has come out of the disruptions caused by demonetisation and more particularly, the implementation of the goods and services tax.

Discouraging signals

1. Behaviour of Gross Fixed Capital Formation (GFCF):

GFCF (which stands for investment activity) refers to the net increase in physical assets within the measurement period. It does not account for the consumption (depreciation) of fixed capital, and also does not include land purchases.

It is true that GFCF at current prices grew at 6.3% in Q2 against 2.9% in the corresponding period last fiscal. This shows an improvement in terms of sentiment.

However, as the growth rate of GFCF fell below the growth rate of GDP, the ratio of GFCF to GDP has fallen from 27.1% to 26.4%. This is truly disturbing. The fall must be due to a decline in private investment, as public investment during this period has done reasonably well. Without a rise in the private investment rate, sustained high growth cannot be maintained.

2. Doubts about the high growth in manufacturing

Manufacturing too grew faster at 7% compared to only 1.2% during the previous quarter. This data is a bit puzzling since it seems inconsistent with the data on the Index of Industrial Production (IIP), whose growth is only 2.2% during this quarter.

There is, of course, a difference between the national income and IIP figures, the former dealing with value added and the latter with total production. Nevertheless, such sharp differences raise some concerns.

In the new methodology in estimating value added in the manufacturing sector, corporate data play a major role. This approach is not incorrect. Though many committees on savings have recommended the use of corporate sector data, some cross-checking is needed.

The government has set up the National Statistical Commission to give credibility to the Indian Statistical System. It must make effective use of it. Perhaps a clear statement from the National Statistical Commission will help to put the doubts at rest.

Exports are the key

The world at large is experiencing one of its strongest growth phases. Indeed, the International Monetary Fund has revised its growth projections upwards for most countries. In such a scenario, India's sluggish exports are a cause of worry. When the world economy does well, India's exports should be flourishing. World trade in 2017 is expected to grow at 1.7% compared to 0.8% in 2016. Improvement in the external environment may help to raise our exports.

The exporting sectors fortunes are closely linked with the manufacturing sector. Exports create jobs, especially in small and medium enterprises.

Need of Private sector investment

In the next two quarters, there is not much space for public administration to push the economy. Last year, a reasonable rate of growth was achieved because of the strong growth of government expenditure in all quarters. This year, at the end of the third quarter, fiscal deficit has almost reached the budgeted level. At this stage of the fiscal year, the deficit is running at 96.1% of the annual target. Last year at this stage it was only at 79.3%. However, as chief statistician of India said, pre-pone of the Budget calendar to allow government expenditure to start from April 1 may be one of the reasons.

Even after allowing for some slippage, it is unlikely that government expenditure can act as a driver of growth.

Thus, while one can expect the growth rate to pick up in the second half, any substantial increase depends on the behaviour of private investment which remains intractable. All the improvements in the Ease of Doing Business (EODB) ranking are meaningless unless we see substantial pick-up in private sector investment.

In conclusion

Dec 4th to Dec 13th

The excess capacity built up during the boom period must have been used up by now. A complex set of factors is keeping down the private investment rate. These factors need to be addressed in order to push up private investment, even as the pace of public capital expenditures, which have shown a pick up recently, is maintained.

We need to acknowledge that unlike last year, this year the government has less fiscal room to pump prime growth. Oil prices have gone up in the past few months, taking away the fiscal dividend.

GST, Real Estate (Regulation and Development) Act, Insolvency Code are all great reforms for the medium to long term. But the next few quarters call for sustaining consumption, inviting private investment, energising agriculture, and giving a big fillip to exports.

AN OFFICIAL CRYPTOCURRENCY

Who has launched it? Venezuela

Name: Petro

Value of Petro:

The value of the new cryptocurrency will be pegged to the country's vast reserves of oil and gas as well as its mineral wealth, including gold. The country has also approved the creation of a BlockchainBase observatory to oversee the development and rollout of the new cryptocurrency.

Backgrounder:

As an OPEC member, Venezuela boasts the largest proven reserves of crude oil in the world, but has struggled against the plunge in oil prices which began in 2014.

Purpose

The purpose of Petro will be to advance the country's monetary sovereignty, to carry out financial transactions and to defeat the financial blockade imposed by the US against the country.

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The blockade has caused the country's national currency, the Bolivar, to lose around 57% of its value in the last four weeks.

Cryptocurrencies

Founded as a peer-to-peer electronic payment system, cryptocurrencies enable transfer of money between parties, without going through a banking system. These digital payment systems are based on cryptographic proof of the chain of transactions, deriving their name, Cryptocurrency. These employ cryptographic algorithms and functions to ensure anonymity (privacy) of the users (who are identified by an alphanumeric public key), security of the transactions and integrity of the payment systems. "Decentralised Digital Currency" or "Virtual Currency" is also interchangeably used for a cryptocurrency.

How are they used?

It is fundamentally a decentralised digital currency and the transactions are confirmed in a public ledger, accessible to all the users. The process of maintaining this ledger and validating the transactions, better known as mining, is carried out in a decentralised manner. The underlying principle of the authenticity of the present to historical transactions is cryptographic proof, instead of trust; different from how it happens in the case of traditional banking systems.

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AGRICULTURE AND CROPPING PATTERNS

SOIL HEALTH CARD

Why in news?

Soil Health Card mobile App has been launched by the government to help the farmers.

Details

It will benefit field-level workers as it will automatically capture GIS coordinates while registering sample details at the time of sample collection in the field and indicate the location from where the sample has been collected.

This app works like other Geotagging apps developed for the Rashtriya Krishi Vikas Yojana. The app contains farmers' details including name, Aadhaar card number, mobile number, gender, address, crop details, etc.

Soil Health Card Scheme:

It is a scheme to provide every farmer a Soil Health Card in a Mission mode. The Central Government provides assistance to State Governments for setting up Soil Testing Laboratories for issuing Soil Health Cards to farmers for development of nutrient management practices.

- The state governments will prepare yearly action plan on the issue and the cost will be shared in the ratio of 75:25 between the Centre and states.
- The scheme assumes importance as the imbalanced application of fertilisers have caused deficiency of primary nutrients (nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium), secondary nutrients (such as sulphur), and micro-nutrients (boron, zinc, copper etc.) in most parts of country.

A Soil Health Card displays soil health indicators and associated descriptive terms. The indicators are typically based on farmers' practical experience and knowledge of local natural resources.

- ✓ The card lists soil health indicators that can be assessed without the aid of technical or laboratory equipment.
- ✓ The card, which will carry crop-wise recommendation of fertilisers required for farm lands, will help farmers identify health of soil and judiciously use soil nutrients.

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

INDIA'S FIRST EVER MOBILE FOOD-TESTING LAB

Goa state government has launched the country's first ever mobile food testing laboratory. It is entirely funded by the Centre, which will also bear the maintenance cost for five years.

What is it for?

The laboratory, mounted on a bus will travel across the state and check food samples on the spot and curb adulteration. This would be the first ever 'Food Safety on Wheel' vehicle in the country. Besides this, it will also educate people about nutrition and importance of safe food.

SENTINEL-5P

What is it?

An European satellite and latest spacecraft in a fleet of Earth observers tracking the levels air pollutants around the world. The Sentinel-5P satellite is designed to make daily global maps of the gases and particles that pollute the air.

It carries an instrument called Tropomi – a spectrometer that observes the reflected sunlight coming up off the Earth, analysing its many different colours. This helps detect the presence of trace gases such as nitrogen dioxide, ozone, sulphur dioxide, methane, and carbon monoxide in the atmosphere.

Commissioned by: The European Union and the European Space Agency.

Why in news?

It has beamed back new views of the Earth’s atmosphere, including images of pollution drifting away from power plants in India. The worst of this pollution runs from north of Patna in Bihar to south of Raipur in Chhattisgarh.

AKASH MISSILE

It is a supersonic surface-to-air missile. It has an indigenous radio frequency seeker. With this, India has achieved the capability of making any type of surface to air missile.

- It is a short range missile with a strike range of about 25 km and carries a 55- kg warhead that is triggered by proximity fuse.
- It is an all-weather air defence weapon system for defending vulnerable areas against medium range air targets penetrating from low, medium and high altitudes.
- Developed by the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO), the Akash missile system has the capability to neutralise aerial targets like fighter jets, cruise missiles and air-to-surface missiles as well as ballistic missiles, attacking from several directions simultaneously.

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- The system is autonomous and its operation is fully automated. There is flexibility in deployment.
- It uses state-of-the-art integral ram jet rocket propulsion system and the onboard digital autopilot ensures stability and control.

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NEW GRAPHENE-BASED BATTERY

Who has developed it? Samsung Electronics

What has it developed?

A core battery technology using graphene to make lithium-ion batteries last longer and charge more quickly, a potential industry milestone if mass produced.

Importance

Standard lithium batteries require charging time of at least an hour to fully charge, even with quick charging technology, so numerous attempts to explore new innovative materials have been started.

Among the materials looked at, graphene, a material with high strength and conductivity, has widely become the primary source of interest. In theory, a battery based on the “graphene ball” material requires only 12 minutes to fully charge.

Graphene:

Graphene has been touted in the global electronics industry as a “miracle material” given its strength, electrical conductivity and elasticity, and is seen as an alternative to lithium-ion batteries since its discovery in 2004. It is a form of carbon that can be used to develop smaller, slimmer batteries but with higher capacity.

- Graphene is a carbon material that is one atom thick. Its thin composition and high conductivity means it is used in applications ranging from miniaturised electronics to biomedical devices.
- These properties also enable thinner wire connections; providing extensive benefits for computers, solar panels, batteries, sensors and other devices.
- The potential applications of graphene include water filtration and purification, renewable energy, sensors, personalised healthcare and medicine, to name a few.

Graphene has excellent electronic, mechanical, thermal and optical properties as well. Its uses range from improving battery performance in energy devices, to cheaper solar panels.

'EXCITONIUM'

Discovered by: University of Illinois

What is it?

It is a new form of matter. The existence of this matter has been theorized for 50 years.

- ✓ It is made up of excitons – unusual particles made up of an escaped electron and the hole it has left behind in a material.
- ✓ This quirky quantum-mechanical pairing is possible because, in semiconductors, electrons on the edge of one energy level in an atom are able, when excited, to jump into the next energy level, leaving behind a “hole” in the previous level.
- ✓ This hole acts like a positively charged particle, attracting the negatively charged electron that escaped.

Scientists used a novel technique called momentum-resolved electron energy-loss spectroscopy (M-EELS) for the study.

Potential applications

- ✓ It can be used as a superconductor and superfluid to further existing technologies.
- ✓ Can enhance our understanding of quantum mechanics, thus demystify current quantum puzzles.

INDIA IS TRACHOMA FREE

The National Trachoma Survey Report (2014-17) has been released and it declares India free from 'infective trachoma'.

The survey findings indicate that the active trachoma infection has been eliminated among children in all the survey districts with overall prevalence of only 0.7%. This is much below the elimination criteria of infective trachoma as defined by the WHO.

An achievement

India has now met the goal of trachoma elimination as specified by the WHO under its GET2020 program. This has been possible due to decades of inter-sectoral interventions and efforts that included provision of antibiotic eye drops, personal hygiene, availability of safe water, improved environmental sanitation, availability of surgical facilities for chronic trachoma, and a general improvement in the socio economic status in the country.

Trachoma:

Trachoma is a chronic infective disease of the eye and is the leading cause of infective blindness globally. Trachoma is a disease of poor environmental and personal hygiene and inadequate access to water and sanitation.

It affects the conjunctiva under the eyelids. Repeated infections cause scarring leading to in-turning of the eyelashes and eyelids. This further causes damage to the cornea and blindness

SOLAR STORMS

Why in news?

A group of researchers from Ahmedabad, have, for the first time, figured out the conditions under which certain types of solar storms can flow towards the earth and affect its atmosphere.

What are solar storms?

Solar storms are violent events on the sun which can temporarily distort the earth's magnetosphere – the region around the earth which is influenced by its magnetic field.

Effects of solar storms:

These temporary disturbances, called geomagnetic storms, can generate shock waves in the interplanetary medium that can accelerate charged particles to very high energies and which, in turn, can harm the satellites placed by humans in space.

Causes

Such solar storms have two causes: Coronal Mass Ejections (CME) and Corotating Interaction Regions (CIR).

CMEs are huge explosions of charged particles extending beyond the sun's corona or outer layer and can be observed. CMEs can be detected by a coronagraph when they are ejected from the Sun.

CIRs: Charged particles are being spewed continually out of the sun's corona, forming the solar wind. Some parts of these winds move faster than others. Since they contain charged particles in a plasma state, these different regions physically interact with each other to form wavelike disturbances called CIRs that emanate from the sun and spiral outwards. CIRs are generated in the interplanetary medium and there are no visual signatures for CIRs. They are called "corotating" interaction regions as they rotate along with the sun, attached to it at one end.

NOBEL PEACE PRIZE

Why in news?

The International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (Ican) has received the Nobel Peace Prize.

ICAN had campaigned for a UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons.

About Ican:

Ican, a coalition of hundreds of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), is 10 years old and is based in Geneva, Switzerland.

Ican set about an alternative approach – to raise popular awareness of the issue and to pressure governments to open up a new treaty for signature earlier this year that would seek an outright ban on nuclear weapons.

After pressure from Ican, 122 nations backed a UN treaty designed to ban and eventually eliminate all nuclear weapons. But none of the nine known nuclear powers in the world – including the UK and the US – endorsed it.

ENVIRONMENT

GREEN HABITAT CONCEPT

The concept is being considered by the Kerala government to give thrust to eco-friendly and reusable building materials, natural water storage and solid waste management.

Salient features

- ✓ The buildings are designed in such a way that natural sunlight and wind would be used to maximum, and the usage of electricity reduces to the minimum.
- ✓ A rainwater harvesting or natural water storage system would be mandatory in the design. Even kitchen and drainage water would be recycled and reused for other household purposes.

Why is it needed?

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We are witnessing unscientific construction practices as also the scarcity of conventional building materials. Time is ripe to draw up an alternative green habitat concept.

What is to be done?

Grassroot level campaign is inevitable to create awareness about this among public and inculcate a green culture among them. Laws and legislation alone are not enough to implement the green habitat concept.

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PETCOKE IMPORTS CHOKES INDIA

Mostly from the US

India has emerged as the biggest importer of U.S. oil refinery by-product 'petcoke'. Unable to sell a dirty, fuel waste product at home, the US refineries are exporting vast quantities of it to India instead, which last year got almost a fourth of all the fuel-grade "petcoke" the U.S. shipped out.

What is petcoke?

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

Used in these industries: Cement, Paper, Textiles, Brakes, Batteries, Glass

Concerns:

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

- ✓ Petcoke's use was further encouraged by low import tariffs and a lack of regulations on its most potent pollutants.

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- ✓ Industries also like that petcoke, which is around 90% carbon, burns hot. So they can use less of it to produce the same heat as coal — though coal still overshadows petcoke in factory furnaces.

Within a decade, India's petcoke appetite grew so voracious that it began producing and selling its own, and Indian refineries today are making about as much as the country is importing.

Institutional measures:

The government's environment ministry has dismissed the idea that petcoke threatens public health in the nation's capital. But the country's Supreme Court, which has consistently demanded or enacted tougher pollution control measures, recently banned petcoke use by some industries as of November 1 in the three states surrounding pollution-choked New Delhi. It also demanded tighter pollution standards that if enforced could further limit its use nationwide.

SECURITY CHALLENGES

BORDER PROTECTION GRID (BPG)

Why in news?

The concept was highlighted during the recently held meeting of the Chief Ministers of the Indo-Bangladesh Border (IBB) States, in Kolkata.

What is it?

Border Protection Grid (BPG) is a multi-pronged and foolproof mechanism to secure border. The grid will comprise of various elements namely physical barriers, non-physical barriers, surveillance system, Intelligence agencies, State Police, BSF and other State and Central agencies.

Supervision: BPG will be supervised by a State level Standing Committee under the Chairmanship of respective Chief Secretaries.

Why is it needed?

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Border security is important to facilitate legitimate trade and commerce between the countries.

- BPG will ensure greater help for the States in the overall border security, thus facilitating safe passage for genuine trade while curbing radicalization, illegal migration, and smuggling of cattle, fake Indian currency notes and drugs etc.

Backgrounder:

The Indo-Bangladesh Border covering 5 states of India including Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Tripura and West Bengal. So far border security infrastructure of fence, roads, floodlights and border out posts (BOPs) are in place for most part. Although bulk of the infrastructure is in place or under construction, construction in some parts is yet to commence mainly due to land acquisition issues.

NIC-CERT

Why in news?

The Centre has unveiled the NIC-CERT centre that would monitor and help in early detection and mitigation of cyberattacks on government networks i.e National Informatics Centre (NIC).

NIC:

NIC, which comes under the IT ministry, has a key role in e-governance at the national, state and district levels. Almost all Indian-government websites are developed and managed by NIC.

CERT-In:

CERT-In is the national nodal agency under the IT ministry, which deals with cyber security threats such as hacking and phishing. It is tasked with the collection, analysis and dissemination of information on cyber incidents and even taking emergency measures for handling cyber security incidents.

Role:

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NIC-CERT will work to ensure early detection and immediate mitigation of cyber attacks by monitoring data across the NIC platform, including communication between all the levels of government and between governments to citizens. NIC-CERT will operate in close coordination and collaboration with sectoral CERTs and more so with CERT-IN.

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AIEYA WARRIOR 2017

It is a joint exercise between the Indian Army and Royal British Army.

- held once in two years, alternatively in India and the UK.
- The 3rd edition of this joint military exercise is being held in Rajasthan.

Aim: To build and promote positive military relations between Indian and UK Army and to enhance their ability and interoperability to undertake joint tactical level operations in Counter Insurgency/Counter Terrorism Environment under United Nations Charter. The exercise further focuses on enhancing and exchanging skills and experience between the Indian Army and the Royal British Army.

DISASTER MANAGEMENT

OP SAHAYAM:

It is an Indian Navy exercise for undertaking Search and Rescue (SAR) and providing Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster relief (HADR) material support, over Southeast Arabian Sea and L& M islands in the aftermath of Very Severe Cyclonic Storm 'OCKHI'.