

# CURRENT AFFAIRS

FORTNIGHTLY APRIL 01 - 15

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## 1. ECONOMY

### 1. Economic and Social Survey of Asia and the Pacific 2021

#### Why in News?

- Recently, a report 'Economic and Social Survey of Asia and the Pacific 2021: Towards post-Covid-19 resilient economies' has been released by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP).

#### Highlights Observation Regarding India:

- India's 2021 economic output, however, is expected to remain below the 2019 level despite a robust reduction in new Covid-19 cases and the start of vaccine roll-out.
- India entered the pandemic with already subdued GDP (Gross Domestic Product) growth and Investment. Moreover, one of the most stringent lockdowns in the world caused the severe economic disruptions that the country experienced in the year 2020.
- A subsequent change in lockdown policies and success in reducing infection rates supported an impressive economic turnaround in the later months of 2020.
- The report mentions two major challenges for India on its path to faster recovery. Maintaining low borrowing costs, and Keeping non-performing loans in check.
- According to the report, India is estimated to record an economic growth of 7% in 2021-22, over a contraction of 7.7% witnessed in the previous fiscal on account of the pandemic's impact on normal business activity.

#### Observation Regarding Asia Pacific Countries:

- The socio-economic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic was amplified due to lack of resilience and investments in people and the planet.
- China's swift and effective response to Covid-19 enabled it to become the only major economy worldwide to achieve a positive annual Economic Growth rate in 2020.
- On an average, developing Asia-Pacific economies are expected to grow 5.9% in 2021 and 5% in 2022. The prospect of a K-shaped recovery, characterized by uneven post-pandemic recovery across countries and widened inequality gaps within countries, is highlighted as a primary policy challenge.

#### K-Shaped Recovery:

- It occurs when, following a recession, different parts of the economy recover at different rates, times, or magnitudes. This is in contrast to an even, uniform recovery across sectors, industries, or groups of people.

- It leads to changes in the structure of the economy or the broader society as economic outcomes and relations are fundamentally changed before and after the recession.
- This type of recovery is called K-shaped because the path of different parts of the economy when charted together may diverge, resembling the two arms of the Roman letter "K."

### Suggestions:

- For a more robust and inclusive recovery, the report calls for a more synchronised Covid-19 vaccination programme across countries. There is a need to leverage regional cooperation. It recommends that fiscal and monetary support should be sustained, as premature tightening could increase long-term scars.
- Continuity in policy support is a must and recovery policy packages should focus on building resilience and investing in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.
- To deal with various economic and non-economic shocks, a more integrated risk Management Approach to planning and policymaking is needed.

## 2. Cabinet approves PLI scheme to boost Solar Module Manufacturing

### Why in News?

- The Union Cabinet recently approved two production-linked incentive schemes for white goods (air-conditioners and LED lights) and high-efficiency solar photovoltaic modules.

### About the News:

- The Cabinet, at a meeting chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, took another step towards the vision of “Atmanirbhar Bharat” (self-reliant India) with the approval for the ₹6,238-crore PLI scheme for air-conditioners and LEDs.

### What is its Significance?

- The scheme would extend an incentive of 4% to 6% on incremental sales of goods made in India for five years. The statement said the scheme was estimated to lead to incremental investment of ₹7,920 crore over five years and lead to production worth ₹1.68 lakh crore, as well as lead to 4 lakh jobs.
- The Cabinet also approved a proposal of the Ministry of New and Renewable Energy for a PLI scheme for high efficiency solar PV modules with an outlay of ₹4,500 crore.

### Solar Capacity in India:

- Solar capacity addition presently depends largely upon imported solar PV cells and modules as the domestic manufacturing industry has limited operational capacities of solar PV cells and modules.

- The National Programme on High Efficiency Solar PV Modules will reduce import dependence in a strategic sector like electricity. It will also support the Atmanirbhar Bharat initiative.
- The scheme was expected to lead to 10,000 MW of additional capacity of solar PV plants and investment of around ₹17,200 crore in solar PV manufacturing projects. The scheme would lead to direct employment of 30,000 people and indirect jobs to 1.2 lakh.

#### About the PLI scheme:

- The scheme aims to make India a global hub for manufacturing telecom equipment.
- Its eligibility criteria include achievement of a minimum threshold of cumulative incremental investment and incremental sales of manufactured goods.
- The incentive structure ranges between 4% and 7% for different categories and years. Financial year 2019-20 will be treated as the base year for computation of cumulative incremental sales of manufactured goods net of taxes.
- Minimum investment threshold for MSMEs has been kept at Rs 10 crore and for others at Rs 100 crore.
- Once qualified, the investor will be incentivised up to 20 times of minimum investment threshold enabling them to utilise their unused capacity.

### 3. RBI Keeps Policy Rates Unchanged

#### Why in News?

- RBI Governor Shaktikanta Das recently announced that the Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) of the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) voted unanimously to leave the policy repo rate unchanged at 4%.

#### About the News:

- It unanimously decided to continue with the accommodative stance as long as necessary to sustain growth on a durable basis and continue to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on the economy, while ensuring that inflation remains within the target going forward.
- Thus, the marginal standing facility (MSF) rate and the bank rate remain unchanged at 4.25% and the reverse repo rate stands unchanged at 3.35%.
- A key aspect of this strategy will be to strengthen the bedrock of macroeconomic stability that has anchored India's revival from the pandemic. This will help stakeholders in taking efficient spending decisions over longer horizons, thereby improving the investment climate.

- Public investment in key infrastructure sectors is a force multiplier with historically proven ability to revive the broader economy by directly enhancing capital stock and productivity, and by attracting private investment.
- Taking various factors into consideration, the projection of real GDP growth for 2021-22 has been retained at 10.5% consisting of 26.2% in Q1; 8.3% in Q2; 5.4% in Q3; and 6.2% in Q4, Mr. Das announced.

### **What are the Optimistic Plans for Future?**

- The Reserve Bank is optimistic about a pick-up in demand and expansion of business Activity into Financial Year 2021-22.
- The juxtaposition of high frequency lead and coincident indicators reveals that economic activity is Normalising in spite of the surge in Infections.
- Rural demand remains buoyant and record agriculture production in 2020-21 bodes well for its resilience. Urban demand has gained traction and should get a fillip with the ongoing vaccination drive.

### **What are the Concerns?**

- The Recent surge in COVID-19 infections, however, adds uncertainty to the domestic Growth outlook amidst Tightening of restrictions by some State Governments, he added.
- In India, we are now better prepared to meet the challenges posed by this resurgence in infections. Fiscal and monetary authorities stand ready to act in a coordinated manner to limit its spill overs to the economy at large and contain its fallout on the ongoing recovery.

### **What about Inflation?**

- The RBI Governor said that while headline inflation at 5.0% in February 2021 remained within the tolerance band, some underlying constituents were testing the upper tolerance level. Taking into consideration various factors, RBI has revised the projection for CPI inflation to 5.0% in Q4: 2020-21; 5.2 % in Q1:2021-22; 5.2% in Q2; 4.4% in Q3; and 5.1% in Q4, with risks broadly balanced, he said.

### **About G-sec Acquisition:**

- Drawing on its experience in the previous year, the RBI, for the year 2021-22, has decided to put in place a secondary market G-sec acquisition programme or G-SAP 1.0, to give it a distinct character.
- Under the programme, the RBI will commit upfront to a specific amount of open market purchases of government securities with a view to enabling a stable and orderly evolution of the yield curve amidst comfortable liquidity conditions.

- For Q1 of 2021-22, therefore, it has been decided to announce a G-SAP of ₹1 lakh crore. The first purchase of government securities for an aggregate amount of ₹25,000 crore under G-SAP 1.0 will be conducted on April 15, 2021.

### What is Monetary Policy Committee?

- Strong recommendations to set monetary policy committee in India had come from Urjit Patel panel report.
- Monetary Policy Committee is an executive body of 6 members. Of these, three members are from RBI while three other members are nominated by the Central Government.
- Each member has one vote. In case of a tie, the RBI governor has casting vote to break the tie. MPC is required to meet for two days before deciding on rates. Further, it is needed to meet at least four times a year and make public its decisions following each meeting.
- The core mandate of MPC is to fix the benchmark policy interest rate {Repo Rate} to contain inflation within the target level.
- In that context, RBI is mandated to furnish necessary information to the MPC to facilitate its decision. Government also, if wishes to convey its views, can do so in writing to MPC.

### Different Terminologies in Banking Sector:

- Loan moratorium period refers to a particular period of a loan tenure during which the borrower does not have repay anything. It can be described as a waiting period before the borrower will have to start paying the equated monthly instalments (EMIs) for his or her loan. It doesn't mean that he is completely waived off his loans.
- REPO rate (now 4%) denotes Re Purchase Option – the rate by which RBI gives loans to other banks. In other words, it is the rate at which banks buy back the securities they keep with the RBI at a later period.
- Bank gives loan to the public at a higher rate, often 1% higher than REPO rate, at a rate known as Bank Rate.
- RBI at times borrows from banks at a rate lower than REPO rate, and that rate is known as Reverse REPO rate (now 3.35%).
- CRR or Cash Reserve Ratio corresponds to the percentage of cash each bank have to keep as cash reserve with RBI (in their current accounts) corresponding to the deposits they have. For example, say if State Bank of India (SBI) got a total deposit of Rs. 1 crore with them, they need to keep 3 % of that as cash reserve with RBI (around 3 lakh rupees).

- The banks and other financial institutions in India have to keep a fraction of their total net time and demand liabilities in the form of liquid assets such as G-secs, precious metals, approved securities etc. The Ratio of these liquid assets to the total demand and time liabilities is called Statutory Liquidity Ratio (18%).

## 1.1. ECONOMY SNIPPETS

### 1. Millet Cultivation

#### Why in News?

- Recently, An International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) supported initiative to revive Kodo and Kutki Millets cultivation, started in the year 2013-14 in Dindori district of Madhya Pradesh, has given new life to the Forgotten Crops.

#### Highlights:

- IFAD is a specialized agency of the United Nations and was one of the major outcomes of the 1974 World Food Conference.
- Founded in 1977, IFAD focuses on rural poverty reduction, working with poor rural populations in developing countries to eliminate poverty, hunger, and malnutrition.
- The project was started with 1,497 women-farmers from 40 villages – mostly from the Gonda and Baiga tribes – growing these two minor millets (Kodo and Kutki) on 749 acres.
- The identified farmers were supplied good-quality seeds and trained by scientists from the Jawaharlal Nehru Agricultural University in Jabalpur and the local Krishi Vigyan Kendra – on field preparation, line-sowing (as opposed to conventional broadcasting by hand) and application of compost, zinc, bavistin fungicide and other specific plant protection chemicals.

#### Millets:

- Millets are often referred to as Superfood and its production can be seen as an approach for sustainable agriculture and a healthy world.
- The three major millet crops currently grown in India are jowar (sorghum), bajra (pearl millet) and ragi (finger millet).
- Along with that, India grows a rich array of bio-genetically diverse and indigenous varieties of “small millets” like kodo, kutki, chenna and sanwa.
- Major producers include Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, Gujarat and Haryana.

## 2. Harmonized System of Nomenclature Code

### Why in News?

- It has been made mandatory for a GST taxpayer having a turnover of more than Rs 5 crore in the preceding financial year, to furnish 6 digits HSN Code (Harmonized System of Nomenclature Code). This comes into effect from April 1.

### HSN Code:

- The Harmonized System, or simply 'HS', is a six-digit identification code developed by the World Customs Organization (WCO).
- Called the “universal economic language” for goods, it is a Multipurpose International Product Nomenclature.
- Over 200 countries use the system as a basis for their customs tariffs, gathering international trade statistics, making trade policies, and monitoring goods.
- The system helps in harmonizing customs and trade Procedures, thus reducing costs in International Trade.

### What makes the 6-digit Code?

- A unique six-digit code has numbers arranged in a legal and logical structure, with well-defined rules to achieve uniform classification.
- Of the six digits, the first two denote the HS Chapter, the next two give the HS heading, and the last two give the HS subheading.
- The HS Code for pineapple, for example, is 0804.30, which means it belongs to Chapter 08 (Edible fruit & nuts, peel of citrus/melons), Heading 04 (Dates, figs, pineapples, avocados, etc. fresh or dried), and Subheading 30 (Pineapples).

## 3. How Updated Land Records can Help Revive Rural Economy

### Why in News?

- Updated land record system could help the landowner in many ways. However, there is a lack of an updated land record system in India. There are several factors responsible for it.

### Need for Updated Land Record:

- For a significant section of the rural poor, land is both an asset and a source of livelihood.
- With livelihoods affected, the importance of land ownership for access to formal loans as well as government relief programmes became even more evident.
- But the relatively poor availability of clear and updated land titles remains a hurdle.

- The government of India's Digital India Land Records Modernisation Programme (DI-LRMP) scheme is the most recent effort in encouraging Updating of Land Record.

### Reasons for Lack of Updated Land Record Data:

- The National Council of Applied Economic Research made a pioneering effort in this direction by launching NCAER Land Records and Services Index (N-LRSI) in 2020.
- Following are the finding of NCAER about the poor state of land records.
- The dismal state of land records is due to the failure of the Indian administration to evolve from British-era land policies. In addition, land record regulations and policies vary widely across Indian states/union territories.
- Though DI-LRMP provides a common framework for reporting the progress of land record management by states/UTs, the heterogeneous nature of regulations/guidelines for land record management in India makes the progress non-uniform.
- One of the major roadblocks in ensuring continuous updation of land records is the lack of skilled manpower in land record departments in states.
- Another dimension relates to the poor synergy across land record departments.
- There is a lack of synergy between the revenue department as the custodian of textual records, the survey and settlement department managing the spatial records and the registration department, which is responsible for registering land transactions.
- The swiftness of the process of updating ownership as the result of the registration of a transaction is commonly known as mutation.
- The information obtained from all the state/UT sources in this regard revealed that no state/UT has the provision for online mutation on the same day as the registration.

### Way Forward:

- With poor inter-departmental synergy, aspiring for updated and accurate records will always be a Distant Goal and states/UTs should take necessary actions to have the Appropriate Systems in place.
- The improved system of land records is likely to facilitate the efforts that some states/UTs are making to ease land transactions — like lowering stamp duties by the Maharashtra Government.
- Finally, these efforts are going to be Instrumental for the health of India's Rural Economy.

## 4. Chenab Bridge

### Why in News?

- Indian Railways has recently completed the arch closure of the iconic Chenab Bridge in Jammu & Kashmir.



### Highlights:

- It is the world's highest railway bridge and is part of the Udhampur-Srinagar-Baramulla rail link project (USBRL).
- The Project was declared as a Project of National Importance in March 2002.
- This bridge is 1,315-metre long and is the highest railway bridge in the world being 359 metres above the River Bed Level.
- The completion of the steel arch is a major leap towards the completion of the 111 km long winding stretch from Katra to Banihal.
- It is arguably the biggest civil-engineering challenge faced by any railway project in India in recent history.

### Features of this Bridge:

- Bridge designed to withstand high wind speed up to 266 Km/Hour.
- Bridge designed for blast load in consultation with DRDO for the first time in India.
- Bridge designed to bear earthquake forces of highest intensity zone-V in India.
- First time on Indian Railways, Phased Array Ultrasonic Testing machine used for testing of welds. First time on Indian Railways, National Accreditation Board for Testing and Calibration Laboratories (NABL) accredited lab established at site for weld testing.
- Extensive Health Monitoring and Warning Systems planned through state of art Instrumentation.

### Chenab River:

- It rises in the upper Himalayas in the Lahaul and Spiti district of Himachal Pradesh state.
- The river is formed by the confluence of two rivers, Chandra and Bhaga, at Tandi, 8 km southwest of Keylong, in the Lahaul and Spiti district.
- The Bhagariver originates from Surya taal lake, which is situated a few kilometers west of the Bara-lacha la pass in Himachal Pradesh. The Chandra river originates from glaciers east of the same pass (near Chandra Taal). It flows through the Jammu region of Jammu and Kashmir into the plains of Punjab, Pakistan, before flowing into the Indus River.

## 5. National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD)

### Why in News?

- Recently, National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD) closed its business at Rs. 6.57 lakh crore in FY 2020-21, recording a growth rate of 23.5%.

### Highlights:

- Under Aatmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyan, NABARD released amounts to cooperative banks, Regional Rural Banks (RRBs) and to NBFC-MFIs (Non-Banking Financial Company: Micro Finance Institution) through a Special Liquidity Facility (SLF).
- The SLF was with a view to augment the resources of the Cooperative banks and RRBs to enable them to extend credit to farmers.
- NABARD registered a total refinance disbursement of Rs. 2.23 lakh crore to support agriculture and rural development activities during the pandemic.
- A refinance facility of Rs. 500 crore was introduced to support the Government of India's Water, Sanitisation and Hygiene (WASH) programme.

### About NABARD:

- It came into existence on 12th July 1982 by transferring the agricultural credit functions of the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) and refinance functions of the then Agricultural Refinance and Development Corporation (ARDC).
- It is a statutory body established under 'National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development Act, 1981'. It is a development bank focussing primarily on the rural sector of the country. It is the apex banking institution to provide finance for Agriculture and rural development.
- The RBI provides 3 directors to NABARD's Board of Directors.
- NABARD provides recommendations to RBI on issue of licenses to Cooperative Banks, opening of new branches by State Cooperative Banks and RRBs.
- Its Headquarters is located in Mumbai

### Functions of NABARD:

- It provides refinance support for building rural infrastructure.
- Refinancing institutions are important institutions who give loans to other institutions who ultimately give loans to the end customers.
- It provides short-term, medium-term and long-term refinance to Cooperative banks and RRBs to supplement their resources for providing adequate credit for supporting Investment Activities of Farmers and Rural Artisans.

## 6. Indian Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ)

### Why in News?

- India has recently protested against the US decision to conduct a patrol in the Indian Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in the western Indian Ocean, rejecting the US' claim that India's domestic maritime law was in violation of International Law.

### Highlights:

- The US Seventh Fleet announced that one of its warships, USS John Paul Jones (DDG 53), had carried out a Freedom of Navigation Operation (FONOP) west of Lakshadweep Islands, inside India's EEZ, without requesting India's prior consent, consistent with international law.
- It is the largest of the US Navy's forward deployed fleets. India had a close encounter with the 7th fleet during the 1971 war with Pakistan.

### Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOP):

- It involves passages conducted by the US Navy through waters claimed by coastal nations as their exclusive territory.
- It reaffirms the US policy of exercising and asserting its navigation and overflight rights and freedoms around the world.
- About United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea 1982
- It is an international treaty that provides a regulatory framework for the use of the world's seas and oceans.
- It lays down a comprehensive regime of law and order in the world's oceans and seas establishing rules governing all uses of the oceans and their resources.
- It enshrines the notion that all problems of ocean space are closely interrelated and need to be addressed as a whole.
- Exclusive Economic Zone
- It is an area beyond and adjacent to the territorial sea, subject to the specific legal regime under which the rights and jurisdiction of the coastal State and the rights and freedoms of other States are governed by the relevant provisions of this Convention.
- It is defined as generally extending 200 nautical miles from shore, within which the coastal state has the right to explore and exploit, and the responsibility to conserve and manage, both living and non-living resources.

## 7. Shaphari Scheme

### Why in News?

- Commerce Ministry wants to build confidence in quality, antibiotic-free shrimp products from India for the Global Market.

### Shaphari Scheme:

- The Marine Products Exports Development Authority (MPEDA) has developed a certification scheme for aquaculture products called 'Shaphari', a Sanskrit word that means the superior quality of fishery products suitable for Human Consumption.
- The Shaphari scheme is based on the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization's Technical Guidelines on Aquaculture Certification.
- It will have two components — certifying hatcheries for the quality of their seeds and, separately, approving shrimp farms that adopt the requisite good practices.
- The certification of hatcheries will help farmers easily identify good quality seed producers.
- Those who successfully clear multiple audits of their operations shall be granted a certificate for a period of two years.
- The entire certification process will be online to minimize human errors and ensure higher Credibility and Transparency.

### Bolstering Confidence in India's Shrimp production:

- To bolster confidence in India's frozen shrimp produce, the country's biggest seafood export item, the Centre has kicked off a new scheme called 'Shaphari' to certify hatcheries and farms that adopt good aquaculture practices.
- Frozen shrimp is India's largest exported seafood item.
- But a combination of factors had hurt export volumes in recent months, including container shortages and incidents of seafood consignments being rejected because of food Safety Concerns.
- Some recent consignments sourced from Indian shrimp farms being rejected due to the presence of antibiotic residue and this is a matter of concern for exporters.
- The National Residue Control Programme for food safety issues in farm produce and pre-harvest testing system is already in place.
- But this certification was proposed as a market-based tool for hatcheries to adopt good aquaculture practices and help produce quality antibiotic-free shrimp products to assure Global Consumers.

## Frozen Shrimp Export Potential:

- Frozen shrimp is India's largest exported seafood item. It constituted 50.58% in quantity and 73.2% in terms of total U.S. dollar earnings from the sector during 2019-20.
- India exported frozen shrimp worth almost \$5 billion in 2019-20, with the U.S. and China its the biggest buyers.
- Andhra Pradesh, West Bengal, Odisha, Gujarat and Tamil Nadu are India's major shrimp producing States, and around 95% of the cultured shrimp produce is exported.

## 8. Sagarmala Project

### Why in News?

- Recently, the Union Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways seeks to develop 65 lighthouses on public-private-partnership mode. Odisha's five lighthouses present huge potential for tourism. The Ministry wants to develop lighthouses as hubs of tourism under the Sagarmala project.

### Highlights:

- 'False Point' island lighthouse is situated off the Kendrapara coast. It is the British era lighthouse and its location close to massive mangrove vegetation infested with crocodiles makes it an Adventurous Tourist place on the Eastern Coast.
- Paradip lighthouse, which holds tourism potential because of its proximity to the port town and Cuttack and Bhubaneswar cities (100 km). It was commissioned in the 1980s.
- Gopalpur lighthouse is located in Ganjam district. If it is developed as a place of tourist interest, the Chilika Lake and the Gopalpur beach will be added attractions.
- Chandrabhaga lighthouse is 10 km from the world famous Konark temple. It had withstood the severity of cyclones such as the Super Cyclone (1999), Phailin (2013) and Fani (2019).
- Puri lighthouse is 4 km from the 12th century Shree Jagannath Temple, which is also a tourist place.

### About Sagarmala Project:

- The Sagarmala Programme was approved by the Union Cabinet in 2015 which aims at holistic port infrastructure development along the 7,516-km long coastline through modernisation, mechanisation and computerisation.
- The vision of the Sagarmala Programme is to reduce logistics cost for EXIM (Export-Import) and domestic trade with minimal infrastructure investment.

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- Sagarmala could boost India's merchandise exports to USD 110 billion by 2025 and create an estimated 10 million new jobs (four million in direct employment).
  - **Port Modernization & New Port Development:** De-bottlenecking and capacity expansion of existing ports and development of new Greenfield ports.
  - **Port Connectivity Enhancement:** Enhancing the connectivity of the ports to the hinterland, optimizing cost and time of cargo movement through multi-modal logistics solutions including domestic waterways (inland water transport and coastal shipping).
  - **Port-linked Industrialization:** Developing port-proximate industrial clusters and Coastal Economic Zones to reduce logistics cost and time of EXIM and domestic cargo.



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## 2. ENVIRONMENT

### 1. NRC will have no Impact on Gorkhas, says Amit Shah

#### Why in News?

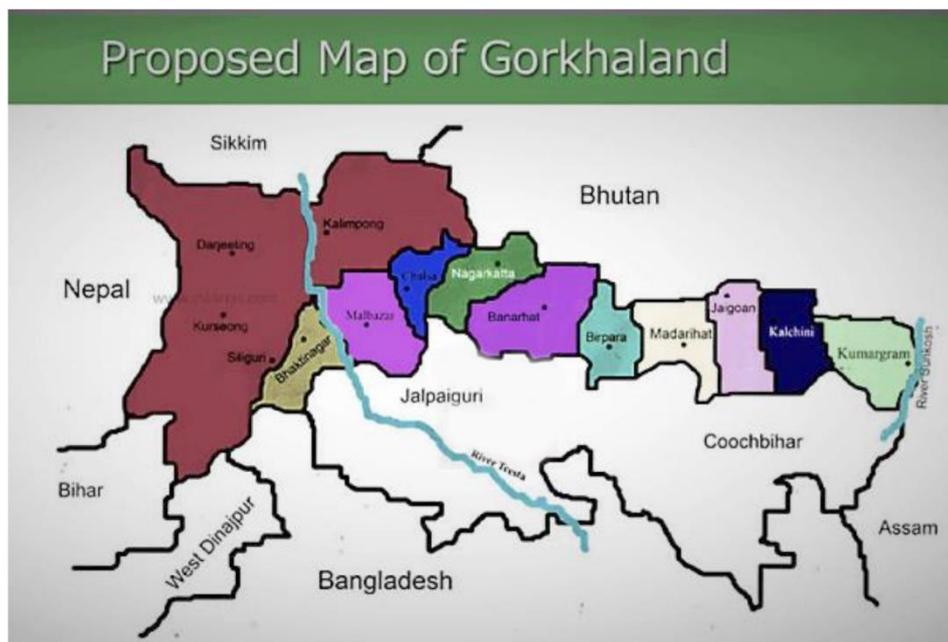
- Union Home Minister Amit Shah recently asserted that the National Register of Citizens (NRC) will have no impact on the Gorkhas.

#### What is the Gorkhaland Issue?

- Gorkhaland consists of Nepali-speaking people of Darjeeling, Kalimpong, Kurseong and other hilly districts of West-Bengal. The people belonging to these areas have ethical, cultural and language differences with the Bengali community of West-Bengal.
- The demand of Darjeeling as a separate administrative region dates back to 1907. But, the term “Gorkhaland” was coined recently, in the 1980s, by Subhash Ghising, the founder of Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF).
- The Gorkhaland Movement is a movement mainly focused in the Darjeeling Hills of West Bengal, which demands the creation of a separate state of Gorkhaland.
- The area covers Duars and Terai region of West Bengal. And is famous for its tea and beauty, which are the Main Sources of its Income.

#### Why is there a Demand for Separate Statehood for Gorkhaland?

- The main reason for the separate Gorkhaland movement is due to the differences in ethnicity, culture and language.
- The people of Nepali-Indian Gorkha ethnic origin on the Northern part of West Bengal demands a state on basis of their cultural identity, which is very different from Bengali culture.
- In addition to an identity crisis, there is also an issue of poverty, under-development and politicisation of the issue.
- According to Rajat Ganguli (author of ‘Poverty, Malgovernance and Ethnopolitical Mobilization: Gorkha Nationalism and the Gorkhaland Agitation in India’), it was a failure of governance combined with politicisation that bred the Gorkhaland issue. He cites the historical trend, especially post-independence, where the issue erupts only when it’s pampered by Political Aspirations.



### Major Post-Independence Movements Related to Gorkhaland:

- The All India Gorkha League (AIGL) came into Existence in 1943 as the first political party in the Darjeeling hills. After India's independence, it demanded the addition of Darjeeling to Assam and started 'Assam Chalo' movement. It worked on petitions, like the moderates, and had submitted memorandums to the President of India and the Prime Minister of India. It was never violent, except few exceptions.
- The biggest and most violent agitation took place in 1986 under the banner of GNLF, led by Subhash Ghising. Between 1986-88, Darjeeling witnessed most violent phase in its post-independence history of India. As per one estimate, more than 1200 people lost their lives. It ended with DGHC accord (discussed above).
- In 2004, the fourth elections for DGHC didn't take place. Instead, in 2005, Darjeeling was added to the sixth schedule and a tribal council was set up with Ghising as its head. It leads to revolt by Bimal Gurung, who launched GJM in 2007. Thereby, the second biggest agitation in Gorkhaland movement took place. As evident from the turn of events, it was a politically motivated rather than identity driven.
- In 2010-2011, the Gorkhaland agitation saw a new turn after local leaders fought among themselves as one of the leader of the Akhil Bharatiya Gorkha League (ABGL), was allegedly stabbed to death by GJM supporters.
- In 2013, the demand for separation rose high again due to the division of Andhra Pradesh. The movement was peaceful under the leadership of GJM. GJM adopted the innovative method of protest called "Janta Bandh".

- People were told to voluntarily stay inside on 13th and 14th August. There was no force used but the silence on streets was an evident sign of revolt. It was portrayed as an Embarrassment to the Government.

### Why Gorkhaland Movement Matters?

- It is one of the oldest movement in India (began in 1907)
- What happens in Gorkhaland will affect India-Nepal relations too. How India treats the problems of the Nepali people of hill origin in Darjeeling will affect how Nepal deals with the people of Indian origin in Nepal, i.e. Madhesi in Terai.
- Gorkhaland has a strategic location, it's vicinity to the chicken neck that connects rest of India with North East. Its stability is must for India's strategic and economic interests of the nation. Darjeeling is a tea and tourist hot-spot with a high level of poverty. It needs and has potential to become the economic engine of the East with a sustainable economic model. But such things will be possible only if there is stability in the region.

## 2.1. ENVIRONMENT SNIPPETS

### 1. Flash floods

#### Why in News?

- According to Indonesia's disaster relief agency, Landslips and flash floods from torrential rain in eastern Indonesia has killed at least 41 people and Displaced Thousands.

#### Flash Floods:

- A flash flood is a rapid flooding of low-lying areas: washes, rivers, dry lakes and depressions. It may be caused by heavy rain associated with a severe Thunderstorm, Hurricane, Tropical storm, or meltwater from ice or snow flowing over ice Sheets or Snowfields.
- Flash floods may also occur after the collapse of a Natural ice or debris dam, or a human structure such as a man-made dam.
- Flash Floods are highly localized events of short duration with a very high peak and usually have less than six hours between the occurrence of the Rainfall and Peak Flood.

#### Concerns:

- Flash floods induce severe impacts in both the built and the natural environment. Especially within urban areas, the effects of flash floods can be catastrophic and show Extensive Diversity, ranging from damages in buildings and infrastructure to impacts on vegetation, Human lives and Livestock.

- There is a general lack of flash flood warning capabilities and capacities of the nations Across the World.

## India's Flash Flood Guidance services for South Asian countries

- In 2020, India launched Flash Flood Guidance services for South Asian countries — India, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal and Sri Lanka — to issue impact-based forecasting of floods, which are very sudden and of short duration, at watershed and also city level.
- The Flash Flood Guidance is a robust system designed to provide the necessary products in real-time to support the development of warnings for flash floods about 6- 12 hours in advance at the watershed level with a resolution of 4kmx4km for the Flash Flood prone South Asian countries. The guidance for flash floods in the form of threats (6 hours in advance) and risks (24 hours in advance) will be provided by the Regional Centre to the National Meteorological and Hydrological Services, National and State Disaster Management Authorities and all other stakeholders for taking necessary mitigation measures to reduce the loss of life and Property.

## 2. Red Sea

### Why in News?

- An Iranian cargo ship believed to be a base for the paramilitary Revolutionary Guard and anchored for years in the Red Sea off Yemen has been attacked recently.

### About:

- The Red Sea (also the Erythraean Sea) is a seawater inlet of the Indian Ocean, lying between Africa and Asia. The connection to the ocean is in the south through the Bab el Mandeb strait and the Gulf of Aden.
- To the north lie the Sinai Peninsula, the Gulf of Aqaba, and the Gulf of Suez (leading to the Suez Canal). The sea is underlain by the Red Sea Rift which is part of the Great Rift Valley.

The salinity of the Red Sea is greater than the world average, approximately 4 percent. This is due to several factors:

- ✓ Lack of significant rivers or streams draining into the sea.
- ✓ Limited connection with the Indian Ocean, which has lower water salinity.
- ✓ High rate of evaporation and very little precipitation.
- The six countries bordering the Red Sea proper are Saudi Arabia and Yemen in the Eastern shore and Egypt, Sudan, Eritrea, Djibouti in the Western shore.



### 3. Dolphin Boom in Odisha's Chilika Lake

#### Why in News?

- Dolphin census data released by wildlife wing of the Odisha State Forest and Environment Department.



#### Highlights:

- The population estimation exercise for dolphins and other cetacean species covered almost the Entire Coast of Odisha.
- Three dolphin species were recorded during the census- Irrawaddy, bottle-nose and humpback dolphins.
- The population of dolphins in Chilika and along the Odisha coast has doubled this year compared with last year, thus indicating a spectacular growth in numbers.
- Of particular interest is the sizeable growth in the population of endangered Irrawaddy dolphins. The Irrawaddy dolphins are mostly found in Chilikalake. Apart from Chilika, Irrawaddy dolphins were also sighted in the Rajnagar mangrove division.
- Chilikalake is India's largest brackish water lake.
- The highest growth has been noticed in the case of humpback dolphins. Large groups of humpback dolphins have been spotted near Ekakula and Habelikhati areas, close to the Gahirmatha Olive Ridley nesting ground.
- The humpback dolphins are not part of any riverine systems and so they cannot be identified as Residential Mammals.

### 4. Navegaon-Nagzira Tiger Reserve (NNTR)

#### Why in News?

- Recently, the three labourers were killed and two others injured during an operation to douse a forest fire at Navegaon-Nagzira Tiger Reserve (NNTR) in Maharashtra.

#### Highlights:

- It is situated in Gondia and Bhandara districts of Maharashtra.
- Gondia District shares common boundaries with the state of Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh in the north and eastern side respectively.
- Strategically, the Tiger Reserve is located in the heart of central Indian Tiger landscape which contributes almost one sixth of the total tiger population of the country.
- It was notified as the 46th Tiger Reserve of India in December 2013.

- NNTR comprised of the notified area of Nawegaon National Park, Nawegaon Wildlife Sanctuary, Nagzira Wildlife Sanctuary, New Nagzira Wildlife Sanctuary and Koka Wildlife Sanctuary.
- The NNTR has connectivity with the major tiger reserves in Central India like, Kanha and Pench tiger reserve in Madhya Pradesh, Tadoba-Andhari Tiger reserve in Maharashtra, Indravati Tiger Reserve in Chhattisgarh,
- Indirectly with the Kawal and NagarjunaSagar in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh and, Achanakmar Tiger reserve in Chhattisgarh.
- It is also connected to important tiger bearing areas like Umred-Karhandla sanctuary and Brahampuri Division (Maharashtra).
- The major forest type is "Southern Tropical Dry Deciduous Forest". Few thorny plants are also found. Bamboo occurs in abundance.
- The important herbivore includes Cheetal, Sambar, Nilgai, Chousingha, Barking deer, Wild pig and Indian gaur. Mouse deer has also been recorded from the area.

## 5. Danube Sturgeon

### Why in News?

- Recently, a report released by the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), illegal sale of Danube Sturgeon, one of the most endangered species in the world, is rampant in the lower Danube (River) region, especially in Bulgaria, Romania, Serbia and Ukraine.

### Highlights:

- Sturgeons have existed since the time of dinosaurs, for about 200 million years. Some of the species can grow up to eight metre in length and live more than a century.
- Danube is the second longest river in Europe after the Volga. It rises in the Black Forest mountains of western Germany and flows for some 2,850 km to its mouth on the Black Sea. They are called 'living fossils' because their appearance has altered very little over the years. Living Fossil is an organism that has remained unchanged from earlier geologic times and whose close relatives are usually extinct.
- Other than Sturgeons, Horseshoe crab and ginkgo trees are examples of living fossils.
- Because the sturgeons live for so many years, mature late and spawn with long intervals, they take a long time to recover from environmental and human pressures, according to WWF. This makes them great indicators for the health of the river and other ecological parameters.

- There are 27 species of sturgeons and paddlefishes distributed across the Northern hemisphere. While some species inhabit only freshwater, most species are anadromous, spawning in freshwater but spending much of their life history in marine or brackish environments. Danube sturgeons live mostly in the Black Sea, migrating up the Danube and other major rivers to spawn. Over-exploitation and poaching (exacerbated by poor fishery management and insufficient legal enforcement of fishing bans). Blocked migration routes through dams. Loss or degradation of habitats.
- Its Protection Status are IUCN Red list: There are 6 species of sturgeon in the Danube River. Five of them are now listed as critically endangered and CITES: Appendix-II.

## 6. Doomsday Glacier

### Why in News?

- Recently, Researchers from Sweden's University of Gothenburg have been able to obtain data from underneath Thwaites Glacier, also known as the 'Doomsday Glacier'.

### Doomsday Glacier:

- It is called the Thwaites Glacier, it is 120 km wide at its broadest, fast-moving, and melting fast over the years.
- Its size is 1.9 lakh square km, which contains enough water to raise the world sea level by more than half a Metre.
- Studies have found the Amount of ice flowing out of it has nearly doubled over the past 30 years. Today, Thwaites's melting already contributes 4% to global sea level rise each year.
- It is estimated that it would collapse into the sea in 200-900 years. Thwaites is important for Antarctica as it slows the ice behind it from freely flowing into the ocean.

### Highlights:

- In 2020, researchers from New York University (NYU) detected warm water at a vital point below the Glacier. In the NYU study, scientists dug a 600-m-deep and 35-cm-wide access hole, and deployed an ocean-sensing device called Icefin to measure the waters moving below the glacier's surface.
- The NYU study reported water at just two degrees above freezing point at Thwaites's "grounding zone" or "grounding line".
- The grounding line is the place below a glacier at which the ice transitions between resting fully on bedrock and floating on the ocean as an ice shelf. The location of the line is a pointer to the rate of retreat of a glacier.

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- When glaciers melt and lose weight, they float off the land where they used to be situated. When this happens, the grounding line retreats. That exposes more of a glacier's underside to seawater, increasing the likelihood it will melt faster.
  - This results in the glacier speeding up, stretching out, and thinning, causing the grounding line to retreat ever further.



## 3. POLITY AND GOVERNANCE

### 1. Plea in SC Against UCC on Divorce and Alimony

#### Why in News?

- A petition has been filed in the Supreme Court against a “blatant attempt” being made to take away the fundamental right of Muslim women to practice their religion, all in the guise of providing a “uniform law” across all faiths.

#### What is a Uniform Civil Code?

- A Uniform Civil Code is one that would provide for one law for the entire country, applicable to all religious Communities in their personal matters such as marriage, divorce, inheritance, adoption etc. Article 44, one of the Directive Principles of the Constitution lays down that the state shall endeavour to secure a Uniform Civil Code for the citizens throughout the territory of India.
- These, as defined in Article 37, are not justiciable (not enforceable by any court) but the principles laid down therein are Fundamental in Governance.

#### What are the Alimony and Maintenance?

- Alimony and maintenance both connote the existence of a duty on the part of one person to provide for the needs of another person or persons who are dependent on them.
- **Interim Maintenance:** While the legal proceedings are still underway, a husband is required to pay maintenance for the wife, along with the expenses of the proceedings. The interim maintenance is payable from the date the petition is filed, till the time the final order is passed.
- **Permanent Maintenance:** When a decree of dissolution of marriage or judicial separation is obtained by the wife, the court may order that the husband shall pay the wife any particular amount fixed by the court, either periodically.
- Section 125 of the Code of Criminal Procedure, 1973, which applies to all communities lays down the provision for maintenance of wives, children, and parents if they do not earn enough and reasonable means to maintain themselves, or suffer from any physical or mental incapacity.

Under this section, even a wife who has not divorced her husband has the right to get maintenance from her husband.

#### Role of State in this Regard:

- Fundamental rights are Enforceable in a court of law.

- While Article 44 uses the words “the state shall endeavour”, other Articles in the ‘Directive Principles’ chapter use words such as “in particular strive”; “shall, in particular, direct its policy”; “shall be the Obligation of the state” etc.
- Article 43 mentions “state shall endeavour by suitable legislation” while the phrase “by suitable legislation” is absent in Article 44.
- All this implies that the duty of the state is greater in other directive principles than in Article 44.

### What are more Important – Fundamental Rights or Directive Principles?

- There is no doubt that fundamental rights are more important.
- **The Supreme Court held in Minerva Mills (1980):** Indian Constitution is founded on the bedrock of the balance between Parts III (Fundamental Rights) and IV (Directive Principles).
- To Give absolute primacy to one over the other is to disturb the harmony of the Constitution.
- Article 31C inserted by the 42nd Amendment in 1976, however, lays down that if a law is made to implement any directive principle, it cannot be challenged on the ground of being violative of the FRs under Articles 14 and 19.

### Does India not Already have a Uniform Code in civil Matters?

- Indian laws do follow a uniform code in most civil matters – Indian Contract Act, Civil Procedure Code, Sale of Goods Act, Transfer of Property Act, Partnership Act, Evidence Act etc.
- States, however, have made hundreds of amendments and therefore in certain matters, there is diversity even under these secular civil laws.
- Recently, several states Refused to be Governed by the uniform Motor Vehicles Act, 2019.

### What about Personal Laws?

- If the framers of the Constitution had intended to have a Uniform Civil Code, they would have given exclusive jurisdiction to Parliament in respect of personal laws, by including this subject in the Union List.
- But “personal laws” are mentioned in the Concurrent List.
- Last year, the Law Commission concluded that a Uniform Civil Code is neither feasible nor desirable.

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## Is there one Common Personal law for any Religious Community Governing all its Members?

- All Hindus of the country are not governed by one law, nor are all Muslims or all Christians.
- Not only British legal traditions, even those of the Portuguese and the French remain operative in some parts.
- In Jammu and Kashmir until August 5, 2019, local Hindu law statutes differed from central enactments.
- The Shariat Act of 1937 was extended to J&K a few years ago but has now been repealed.

### Various Customary Laws:

- Muslims of Kashmir were governed by a customary law, which in many ways was at variance with Muslim Personal Law in the rest of the country and was, in fact, closer to Hindu law.
- Even on the registration of marriage among Muslims, laws differ from place to place. It was compulsory in J&K (1981 Act), and is optional in Bengal, Bihar (both under 1876 Act), Assam (1935 Act) and Odisha (1949 Act).
- In the Northeast, there are more than 200 tribes with their own varied customary laws.
- The Constitution itself protects local customs in Nagaland. Similar protections are enjoyed by Meghalaya and Mizoram.
- Even reformed Hindu law, in spite of codification, protects Customary Practices.

### How does the idea of a Uniform Civil Code relate to the Fundamental Right to religion?

- Article 25 lays down an individual's fundamental right to religion;
- Article 26(b) upholds the right of each religious denomination or any section thereof to "manage its own affairs in matters of religion";
- Article 29 defines the right to conserve distinctive culture.
- An individual's freedom of religion under Article 25 is subject to "public order, health, morality" and other provisions relating to FRs, but a group's freedom under Article 26 has not been subjected to other Fundamental Rights.
- In the Constituent Assembly, there was division on the issue of putting UCC in the fundamental rights chapter. The matter was settled by a vote.

- By a 5:4 majority, the fundamental rights sub-committee headed by Sardar Patel held that the provision was outside the scope of FRs and therefore the UCC was made less important than freedom of religion.

### Minority opinion in the Constituent Assembly

- Some members sought to immunize Muslim Personal Law from state regulation.
- Mohammed Ismail, who thrice tried unsuccessfully to get Muslim Personal Law exempted from Article 44, said a secular state should not interfere with the personal law of people.
- B PockerSaheb said he had received representations against a common civil code from various organisations, including Hindu organisations.
- Hussain Imam questioned whether there could ever be uniformity of personal laws in a diverse country like India.
- B R Ambedkar said, “no government can use its provisions in a way that would force the Muslims to revolt”.
- AlladiKrishnaswami, who was in favour of a UCC, conceded that it would be unwise to enact UCC ignoring strong opposition from any community.
- Gender justice was never discussed in these debates.

### How did the debate on a Common code for Hindus Play Out?

- In June 1948, Rajendra Prasad, President of the Constituent Assembly, warned Nehru that to introduce “basic changes” in personal law was to impose “progressive ideas” of a “microscopic minority” on the Hindu community as a whole.
- Others opposed to reforms in Hindu law included Sardar Patel, PattabhiSitaramayya, M Ayyangar, M Malaviya and Kailash NathKatju.
- When the debate on the Hindu Code Bill took place in December 1949, 23 of 28 speakers opposed it.
- On September 15, 1951, President Prasad threatened to use his powers of returning the Bill to Parliament or vetoing it. Ambedkar Eventually had to resign.
- Nehru agreed to trifurcation of the Code into separate Acts and diluted several provisions.

## 2. Haryana's Quota Law

### Why in News?

- Haryana's private job reservation law which provides 75 per cent employment opportunities in private sector for people belonging to the state will come into force from May 1.

## About Haryana State Employment of Local Candidates Bill, 2020:

- It requires private companies to set aside for domiciles 75% of jobs up to a monthly salary of Rs 50,000 or as may be notified by the government from time to time.
- The law is applicable to all the companies, societies, trusts, limited liability partnership firms, partnership firms and any person employing 10 or more persons and an entity, as may be notified by the Government from time to time shall come under the ambit of this Act.

## What are the legal issues in such laws?

- While domicile quotas in education are fairly common, courts have been reluctant in expanding this to public employment. It raises questions relating to the fundamental right to equality of citizens.
- The issue of forcing the private sector to comply with reservations in employment. For mandating reservation in public employment, the state draws its power from Article 16(4) of the Constitution.
- But the Constitution has no manifest provision for private employment from which the state draws the power to make laws mandating reservation.
- It may not be able to withstand judicial scrutiny on the touchstone of Article 19(1)(g).

## What is the Government's Rationale in Bringing Such Laws?

- Public sector jobs constitute only a minuscule proportion of all jobs. Therefore, talks about extending the legal protections to the private sector to really achieve the constitutional mandate of equality for all citizens has been on.
- Since private industries use public infrastructure in many ways — from accessing land through subsidised allotment to receiving credit from public banks, tax exemptions and in many cases subsidies for fuel etc, the state has a legitimate right to require them to comply with the Reservation Policy.

## Do Other Countries take such Affirmative Action in Employment?

- Affirmative action is adopted in many countries in the context of race and gender.
- For example, in the US, although there is no statutory requirement for employers to have quotas, courts can order monetary damages and injunctive relief, including “such affirmative action as may be appropriate”, for victims of discrimination.
- The Employment Equity Act in Canada also protects minority groups, especially aboriginals from discrimination in federally regulated industries, even in the private sector.

## Concerns and Challenges Ahead:

- It poses challenges for industrial development and private investment in Haryana.
- It could also provide a shield to some firms indulging in unethical practices to retrench the existing workforce.
- Investors and Businesses may start moving out of the state in search for best human resources.
- Against the spirit of the Constitution, which gives citizens of India the freedom to work anywhere in the country.

## 3. National Policy for Rare Diseases, 2021

### Why in News?

- Caregivers to patients with rare diseases and affiliated organisations are dissatisfied with the National Policy for Rare Diseases, 2021.

### What's the Issue?

- The policy specifies increasing the government support for treating patients with a 'rare disease'— from ₹15 lakh to ₹20 lakh. But, caregivers say this doesn't reflect actual costs of treatment.
- Advocacy groups, however, have expressed concerns about the lack of funding support in the policy for patients diagnosed with life-threatening Rare, Genetic Disorders.

### Highlights of the National Policy for Rare Diseases, 2021:

- Patients of rare diseases will soon be eligible for a one-time treatment under the Ayushman Bharat Pradhan Mantri Jan ArogyaYojana (AB-PMJAY).
- Beneficiaries for financial assistance would not be limited to below poverty line (BPL) families, but extended to about 40% of the population, who are eligible as per 23 norms of Pradhan Mantri Jan ArogyaYojana (PMJAY), for their treatment in Government tertiary hospitals only.
- The policy has categorized rare diseases in three groups – disorders amenable to one-time curative treatment; those requiring long term or lifelong treatment; and diseases for which definitive treatment is available but challenges are to make optimal patient selection for benefit.

### What is a rare disease?

- A rare disease, also referred to as an orphan disease, is any disease that affects a small Percentage of the population.

- Most rare diseases are genetic, and are present throughout a person's entire life, even if symptoms do not Immediately Appear.
- **The commonly reported rare Diseases, Include:**
  - ✓ Primary Immunodeficiency disorders, Lysosomal storage disorders (Gaucher's disease, Mucopolysaccharidoses, Pompe disease, fabry disease etc.) small molecule inborn errors of metabolism (Maple Syrup urine disease, organic acidemias, etc.), cystic fibrosis, osteogenesis imperfecta, certain forms of muscular dystrophies, and spinal muscular atrophy.

### About Orphan Drug Act, 1983:

- Rare diseases became known as orphan diseases because drug companies were not interested in adopting them to develop treatments.
- **In the U.S., under the Orphan Drug Act**, companies are provided incentives to develop therapies, or orphan drugs, for rare diseases.
- The Act allows seven years of market exclusivity and financial incentives to innovators of these drugs. As a result, orphan drugs are often exorbitantly priced.
- Privileges under the Act may be conferred to companies for drugs to treat a disease that affect less than 200,000 people in the U.S., or for a disease that affects more than 200,000 people but for which there is no hope of recovering R & D costs.
- The idea is that without these incentives, companies would find it difficult to recover their R&D costs given the small number of people suffering from the Rare Disease.

### Impacts on Declaring as Orphan Disease:

- Had Gilead not sought that orphan drug status be repealed, generic manufacturers would not have been able to market a drug to treat COVID-19 with the same active ingredient till the seven-year period of market exclusivity had ended.
- This would have given Gilead free rein on pricing and licensing which would have had disastrous consequences on the healthcare system.
- However, **orphan drug status of Remdesivir would have no impact on India as Gilead Sciences holds patents in India and patents are open to challenge.**
- As far as its patent rights are concerned, Indian law permits the government to issue a compulsory licence in certain circumstances of a public health crisis under **Section 92 of the Patents Act.**
  - ✓ This would allow third parties to manufacture a patented drug without permission of the Patent Holder.

## 4. CVC Officers to be Transferred Every 3 Years

### Why in News?

- The Central Vigilance Commission (CVC) has modified the guidelines pertaining to the transfer and posting of officials in the Vigilance units of government organisations, restricting their tenure to Three Years at one place.

### The Organisation of Central Vigilance Commission:

THE ORGANISATION OF THE CENTRAL VIGILANCE COMMISSION (CVC)		
Secretariat	Chief Technical Examiners' (CTE) wing	Wing of Commissioners for Departmental Inquiries (CDIs)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Secretary</li> <li>Joint Secretary</li> <li>Deputy Secretary</li> <li>Under-Secretary</li> <li>Office Staff</li> </ul>	It is the technical wing, having: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Chief Engineers</li> <li>Supporting Engineers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Inquiry Officers</li> </ul>

### Why this Order?

- The CVC, in its order, said undue long stay of an official in a vigilance department had the potential of developing vested interests, apart from giving rise to unnecessary complaints or Allegations.
- In order to Emphasis on the importance of the issue and to ensure transparency, objectivity and Uniformity in approach, the Commission has decided to modify its earlier Guidelines.

### How it functions?

- Personnel can have two continuous postings in vigilance units, at different places of posting, each Running into a Maximum of Three Years.
- Personnel who have worked for over three years at one place should be transferred in phases, with priority given to those who have served for the maximum period. Those having completed over five years at one place should be shifted on top priority basis, it added.
- The Commission said in the first phase, at least 10% of such personnel should be shifted in a sequential order without any exception.
- In case someone has served at one place for over three years, his tenure at the next place would be curtailed to ensure that the combined tenure was limited to six years.

- The order said after transfer from the vigilance unit, there would be a compulsory cooling off period of three years before anyone could be considered again for posting in the unit.
- Personnel, having completed three years in the vigilance unit of an organisation, could be considered for transfer on deputation basis in the unit of another organisation, subject to the laid down rules.

### What is the Central Vigilance Commission (CVC)?

- It is an agency constituted to curb corruption in offices of the Indian government.
- Complaints from whistleblowers (an employee of the firm/public office informing the public about frauds/wrongdoings in the office) under 'Whistleblower Resolution' are received by CVC after which the commission can take actions on motivated acts.
- CVC being the apex vigilance institution, it is free of control from any executive authority.
- Its role is to monitor all vigilance activity under the Central Government and advising various authorities in Central Government organizations in planning, executing, reviewing and reforming their Vigilance Work.

### How many members are there in Central Vigilance Commission?

- **CVC has Three Members:**
  - ✓ Central Vigilance Commissioner
  - ✓ Two Vigilance Commissioner (Maximum number of commissioners is 2)

### How they are Appointed?

- President of India appoints CVC members by warrant under his hand and seal.
- The President's appointment comes after the recommendation by a three-member committee:
  - ✓ Prime Minister
  - ✓ Minister of Home Affairs (MHA)
  - ✓ Leader of Opposition in Lok Sabha
- **Term of Office:** Four years or if they attain 65 years of age (whichever is earlier)
- After they retire, they are not eligible for reappointment in any central or state government Agency.

### Can Central Vigilance Members be removed?

- Yes, the CVC members can be removed in the following circumstances:
  - ✓ If the member is adjudged as an insolvent
  - ✓ If the Central government holds him responsible for an offence involving moral turpitude/ or he is convicted for such an offence

- ✓ If he becomes a part of the office of profit
  - ✓ If he is declared unfit by reason of infirmity of mind or body, by the President
  - ✓ If he is found interested in financially driven activities or other such interests which can likely affect prejudicially his official functions
- CVC members can also be removed by the President on the grounds of proved misbehaviour. However, the Supreme Court is referred by President only after which CVC member can be removed.

## 5. Justice N V Ramana to be Sworn in as New CJI

### Why in News?

- Justice N V Ramana, the most senior judge of the Supreme Court after Chief Justice S A Bobde, was appointed as the next Chief Justice of India with effect from April 24.

### How it works?

- The Chief Justice of India is traditionally appointed by the outgoing Chief Justice of India on the day of his (or her) retirement.
- By convention, the outgoing Chief Justice of India selects the most senior then-sitting Supreme Court judge. Seniority at the apex court is determined not by age, but by:
  - The date a judge was appointed to the Supreme Court.
  - If two judges are elevated to the Supreme Court on the same day.
  - The one who was sworn in first as a judge would trump another.
- If both were sworn in as judges on the same day, the one with more Years of high court service would 'win' in the Seniority Stakes.
- An appointment from the bench would 'trump' in seniority an Appointee from the bar.

### Is it a Part of the Constitution?

- The Constitution of India does not have any provision for criteria and procedure for appointing the CJI. Article 124(1) of the Indian Constitution says there "shall be a Supreme Court of India consisting of a Chief Justice of India".
- The closest mention is in Article 126, which deals with the appointment of an acting CJI.
- In the absence of a constitutional provision, the procedure relies on custom and Convention.

### What is the Procedure?

- The procedure to appoint the next CJI is laid out in the Memorandum of Procedure (MoP) between the Government and the Judiciary:

- ✓ The procedure is initiated by the Law Minister seeking the recommendation of the outgoing CJI at the 'appropriate time', which is near to the date of retirement of the incumbent CJI.
- ✓ The CJI sends his recommendation to the Law Ministry; and in the case of any qualms, the CJI can consult the collegium regarding the fitness of an SC judge to be elevated to the post.
- ✓ After receiving recommendation from the CJI, the law minister forwards it to the Prime Minister who then advises the President on the same.
- ✓ The President administers the oath of office to the new CJI.

### Does the Government Get a Say?

- Except for the law minister seeking the recommendation from the incumbent CJI, and forwarding it to the Prime Minister, the government has no say in the Appointment of the CJI.
- Vis-a-vis the appointment of the CJI and the appointment of SC judges, the key difference is that in the former, the government cannot send the recommendation of the CJI (or the collegium) back to them for reconsideration; while in the latter, the government can do so. However, if the Collegium Reiterates those names, then the Government Cannot Object any Further.

## 6. Supreme Court Collegium Meeting on vacancies inconclusive

### Why in News?

- A meeting of the five-member Supreme Court Collegium led by Chief Justice Sharad A. Bobde recently on names to fill up the five judicial vacancies in the apex court ended on an inconclusive note.

### What is Collegium System?

- It is the system of appointment and transfer of judges that has evolved through judgments of the SC, and not by an Act of Parliament or by a provision of the Constitution.
- The SC collegium is headed by the CJI and comprises four other senior most judges of the court.
- A HC collegium is led by its Chief Justice and four other senior most judges of that court.
- Names recommended for appointment by a HC collegium reaches the government only after approval by the CJI and the SC collegium.

- Judges of the higher judiciary are appointed only through the collegium system and the government has a role only after names have been decided by the collegium.
- The government's role is limited to getting an inquiry conducted by the Intelligence Bureau (IB) if a lawyer is to be elevated as a judge in a High Court or the Supreme Court.
  - ✓ **Intelligence Bureau (IB):** It is a reputed and established intelligence agency. It is Authoritatively Controlled by the Ministry of Home Affairs.
  - ✓ It can also raise objections and seek clarifications regarding the collegium's choices, but if the collegium reiterates the same names, the government is bound, under Constitution Bench judgments, to appoint them as judges.

### Evolution of the Collegium System:

- **First Judges Case (1981):**
  - ✓ It declared that the "primacy" of the Chief Justice of India (CJI)s recommendation on judicial appointments and transfers can be refused for "cogent reasons."
  - ✓ The ruling gave the Executive primacy over the Judiciary in judicial appointments for the next 12 years.
- **Second Judges Case (1993):**
  - ✓ SC introduced the Collegium system, holding that "consultation" really meant "concurrence".
  - ✓ It added that it was not the CJI's individual opinion, but an institutional opinion formed in consultation with the two senior-most judges in the SC.
- **Third Judges Case (1998):**
  - ✓ SC on President's reference expanded the Collegium to a five-member body, comprising the CJI and four of his senior-most colleagues.

### Procedure for Various Judicial Appointments:

- **For CJI:**
  - ✓ The President of India appoints the CJI and the other SC judges.
  - ✓ As far as the CJI is concerned, the outgoing CJI recommends his successor.
  - ✓ In practice, it has been strictly by seniority ever since the supersession controversy of the 1970s.
- **For SC Judges:**
  - ✓ For other judges of the SC, the proposal is initiated by the CJI.
  - ✓ The CJI consults the rest of the Collegium members, as well as the senior-most judge of the court hailing from the High Court to which the recommended person belongs.

- ✓ The consultees must record their opinions in writing and it should form part of the file.
- ✓ The Collegium sends the recommendation to the Law Minister, who forwards it to the Prime Minister to advise the President.
- **For Chief Justice of High Courts:**
  - ✓ The Chief Justice of High Court is appointed as per the policy of having Chief Justices from outside the respective States.
  - ✓ The Collegium takes the call on the elevation.
  - ✓ High Court judges are recommended by a Collegium comprising the CJI and two senior-most judges. The proposal, however, is initiated by the outgoing Chief Justice of the High Court concerned in consultation with two senior-most colleagues.
  - ✓ The recommendation is sent to the Chief Minister, who advises the Governor to send the proposal to the Union Law Minister.

### Criticism of the Collegium System:

- Opaqueness and a lack of transparency.
- Scope for nepotism.
- Embroilment in public controversies.
- Overlooks several Talented Junior Judges and Advocates.

### Attempts to reform the Appointment System:

- The attempt made to replace it by a 'National Judicial Appointments Commission' was struck down by the court in 2015 on the ground that it posed a threat to the independence of the judiciary.

### Related Constitutional Provisions:

- Article 124(2) of the Indian Constitution provides that the Judges of the Supreme Court are appointed by the President after consultation with such a number of the Judges of the Supreme Court and of the High Courts in the States as the President may deem necessary for the purpose.
- Article 217 of the Indian Constitution states that the Judge of a High Court shall be appointed by the President consultation with the Chief Justice of India, the Governor of the State, and, in the case of appointment of a Judge other than the Chief Justice, the Chief Justice of the High Court.

### Way Forward:

- Filling up of vacancies is a continuous and collaborative process involving the executive and the judiciary, and there cannot be a time frame for it. However, it is time to think of a

permanent, independent body to institutionalize the process with adequate safeguards to preserve the Judiciary's independence guaranteeing judicial primacy but not judicial Exclusivity.

- It should ensure independence, reflect diversity, demonstrate professional competence and integrity.
- Instead of selecting the number of judges required against a certain number of vacancies, the collegium must provide a panel of possible names to the President to appoint in order of preference and other valid criteria.

## 7. Madras HC Stays Appointment of Former Chief Secretary to NGT

### Why in News?

- The Madras High Court recently stayed the operation of an order on appointing former Tamil Nadu Chief Secretary GirijaVaidyanathan as an Expert Member of the National Green Tribunal (NGT).

### What did the court observe?

- The judges said the former Chief Secretary did not appear to have five years of experience in dealing with Environmental Matters either in the Central government or in a State Government or in any National or State institution, as stipulated under Section 5(2)(b) of the NGT Act, 2010. The first Division Bench pointed out that the Act lists the qualifications required to be appointed as the Chairperson, Judicial Member as well as Expert Member of NGT. According to the law, the Expert Member must have had administrative experience of 15 years, including five years in dealing with environmental matters in the Central or State Government or in a reputed National or State Institution.

### About NGT:

- Established on 18th October, 2010 under the National Green Tribunal Act 2010.
- Established for effective and expeditious disposal of cases relating to environmental protection and conservation of forests and other natural resources.
- New Delhi is the Principal Place of Sitting of the Tribunal and Bhopal, Pune, Kolkata and Chennai shall be the other four places of sitting of the Tribunal.
- 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.
- NGT is mandated to make disposal of applications or appeals finally within 6 months of Filing of the Same.

- With the establishment of the NGT, India became the third country in the world to set up a specialised environmental tribunal, only after Australia and New Zealand, and the first developing country to do so.

### Composition of NGT:

- **Sanctioned Strength:** The act allows for up to 40 members (20 expert members and 20 judicial members).
- **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.

### How these Members are Selected?

- 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.

## 8. People are Free to Choose Religion, says SC

### Why in News?

- The Supreme Court recently said people are free to choose their own religion, even as it lashed out at a “very, very harmful kind” of “public interest” petition claiming there is mass religious conversion happening “by hook or by crook” across the country.

### What is the Issue?

- The petition alleged that the court should direct the Centre and the States to control black magic, superstition and religious conversion being done through threats, intimidation or bribes. There is not even one district which is free of black magic, superstition and religious conversion. Incidents are reported every week throughout the country where conversion is done by intimidating, threatening, luring through gifts and monetary benefits, the petition had alleged.
- Further, the petition said the Centre and States were obligated under Article 46 to protect the SC/ST community from social injustice and other forms of exploitation.

## What were the Observations made by the Apex Court?

- SC Bench led by Justice Rohinton F. Nariman said people have a right under the Constitution to profess, practise and propagate religion.
- The fundamental right under Article 25 of the Constitution to freely profess, practise and propagate religion, subject to public order, morality and health.
- Every person is the final judge of their own choice of religion or who their life partner should be. Courts cannot sit in judgment of a person's choice of religion or life partner. Religious faith is a part of the fundamental right to privacy.
- Justice Nariman reminded the Constitution Bench judgment which upheld inviolability of the right to privacy, equating it with the rights to life, of Dignity and Liberty.

## Constitutional Provisions Regarding Right to Freedom of Religion:

- The Constitution of India guarantees the right to freedom of religion to not only individuals but also religious groups in India. This is enshrined in Articles 25 to 28.
- **Article 25 (Freedom of conscience and free profession, practice, and propagation of religion)**
  - ✓ Article 25 Guarantees the freedom of conscience, the freedom to profess, practice, and Propagate Religion to all citizens.
  - ✓ The above-mentioned freedoms are subject to public order, health, and morality.
  - ✓ This article also gives a provision that the State can make laws:
    - ✓ That regulates and restricts any financial, economic, political, or other secular activity associated with any religious practice.
    - ✓ That provides for the social welfare and reform or opening up of Hindu religious institutions of a public character to all sections and classes of Hindus. Under this provision, Hindus are construed as including the people professing the Sikh, Jain, or Buddhist religions, and Hindu institutions shall also be construed accordingly.
  - ✓ People of the Sikh faith wearing & carrying the kirpan shall be considered as included in the profession of the Sikh religion.
- **Article 26 (Freedom to Manage Religious Affairs)**
  - ✓ This Article provides that every religious denomination has the following rights, subject to morality, health, and public order.
  - ✓ The right to form and maintain institutions for religious and charitable intents.
  - ✓ The right to manage its own affairs in the matter of religion.
  - ✓ The right to acquire the immovable and movable property.

- ✓ The right to Administer such Property According to the law.
- **Article 27 (Freedom as to payment of taxes for promotion of any particular religion)**
  - ✓ According to Article 27 of the Constitution, there can be no taxes, the proceeds of which are directly used for the promotion and/or maintenance of any particular religion/religious denomination.
- **Article 28 (Freedom as to attendance at Religious Instruction or religious worship in Certain Educational Institutions)**
  - ✓ This article permits educational institutions that are maintained by religious groups to disseminate Religious Instruction.
  - ✓ This provides that no religious instruction shall be provided in State-run Educational Institutions.
  - ✓ Educational institutions administered by the State but that were established under any endowment or trust which requires that religious instruction shall be imparted in such institutions are exempt from the above clause (that no religious instruction shall be provided). Any person who attends any educational institution recognized by the State or receiving State aid shall not be required to participate in any religious instruction that may be imparted in such institution, or also attend any religious worship in such institutions unless he/she has given consent for the same. In the case of minors, the guardians should have given consent for the same.

## 9. Gauhati HC Clears Man of Foreigner Tag under NRC

### Why in News?

- The Gauhati High Court has set aside a two-year-old order of a Foreigners' Tribunal (FT) declaring a man a foreigner for failing to establish linkage with all relatives in the pre-1971 voters' lists.

### What is NRC?

- The NRC is the list of Indian citizens and was prepared in 1951, following the census of 1951. The process of NRC update was taken up in Assam as per a Supreme Court order in 2013.
- In order to wean out cases of illegal migration from Bangladesh and other adjoining areas, NRC updation was carried out under The Citizenship Act, 1955, and according to rules framed in the Assam Accord.

- The Assam government released the final draft of NRC on July 30, 2018. The list incorporates names of 2.89 crore people out of 3.29 crore applicants. The names of 40.07 lakh people have been left out.

### Why it was Carried Out?

- **Crisis of Identity:** Influx of immigrants has created a crisis of identity among the indigenous. Locals fear that their cultural survival will be affected, political control weakened and employment opportunities undermined because of immigrants.
- **Environmental Degradation:** Large areas of forest land were encroached upon by the immigrants for settlement and cultivation. The state experienced declining percent of land area under forest from 39% in 1951-52 to about 30% now.
- **Increase Financial Burden:** Immigration has increased pressure on the part of state Government, as the Government has to increase the expenditure on education and health facilities to the Immigrants.

### Why is this Worrisome?

- The official presumption that people residing in Assam areas are foreigners has reduced several million of these highly impoverished, mostly rural, powerless and poorly lettered residents to a situation of helplessness and extreme poverty, destitution, hardship.
- It has also caused them abiding anxiety and uncertainty about their futures. They are required to convince a variety of usually hostile officials that they are citizens, based on vintage documents which even urban, educated, middle-class citizens would find hard to muster. Women are especially in danger of exclusion from the citizenship register. Typically, they have no birth certificates, are not sent to school, and are married before they become adults. UN experts are warning continuously that the National Register of Citizens (NRC) in Assam could render millions of citizens stateless and create instability in India.

### What can the Left out do Now?

- According to the Centre's standard operating procedures, a rejected person would have 120 days from the date of receiving the rejection slip to approach a Foreigners' Tribunal (FT) for judging their Citizenship Status.

### About Foreigners Tribunals in Assam:

- The tribunals are quasi-judicial bodies, to determine if a person staying illegally is a "foreigner" or not.

- Every individual, whose name does not figure in the final National Register of Citizens (NRC), can represent his/her case in front of the appellate authority i.e. Foreigners Tribunals (FT).
- Assam has set up FTs, specifically to handle the cases of 19.06 lakh people left out of the updated NRC.
- Under the provisions of Foreigners Act 1946 and Foreigners (Tribunals) Order 1964, only Foreigners Tribunals are empowered to declare a person as a foreigner.
- The Assam Police Border Organisation, a wing of the State police tasked with detecting foreigners, readies the cases for the tribunals to decide who is a foreigner and who is not.

### Way Ahead:

- A person's citizenship is a basic human right. Declaring people foreigners in haste without judicially verifying their credentials can leave many Human Beings Stateless.
- The need of the hour is that Union Government should clearly chart out the course of action regarding the fate of excluded people from final NRC data and political parties should refrain from colouring the entire NRC process through electoral prospects that may snowball in to communal violence. There is a need for a robust mechanism of legal support for the four million who have to prove their citizenship to India with their limited means.

## 10. Sushil Chandra Appointed Chief Election Commissioner

### Why in News?

- President Ram Nath Kovind appointed Election Commissioner Sushil Chandra to take over as Chief Election Commissioner from Sunil Arora, whose Tenure Ended Recently.

### About Election commission of India:

- The constitution under article 324 provides for an Election Commission for the superintendence, direction and control of the preparation of the electoral rolls for the conduct of elections to parliament, state legislatures and to the offices of president and Vice President.

### Composition of the Election Commission of India:

- The constitution provides for the following provisions in relation to the composition of the Election Commission:
- The Election Commission shall consist of the Chief Election Commissioner and a such number of other election Commissioners, if any, as the president may from time to time fix.

- The appointment of the chief election commissioner and other election commissioners shall be made by the president.
- When any other election commissioner is so appointed the chief election commissioner shall act as the chairman of the election commission.
- The president may also appoint after consultation with the election commission such regional commissioners as he may consider necessary to assist the election commission.
- The conditions of service and tenure of office of the election commissioners and the regional commissioners shall be such as the President may by Rule Determine.

### **CEC vs ECs:**

- Though the Chief Election Commissioner is the chairman of the election commission, however, his powers are equal to the other election commissioners. All the matters in the commission are decided by the majority amongst its members. The Chief Election Commissioner and the two other election commissioners receive equal salary, allowances and Other Benefits.

### **Tenure:**

- The Chief Election Commissioner and other election commissioners hold office for 6 years or till they attain the age of 65 years, whichever is earlier. They can resign at any time by addressing their Resignation to the President.

### **Removal:**

- They can resign anytime or can also be removed before the expiry of their term.
- The Chief Election Commissioner can be removed from his office in the same manner and on same Grounds as a Judge of the Supreme Court.
- Any other Election Commissioner or a regional commissioner cannot be removed from office except on the recommendation of the Chief Election Commissioner.

### **Limitations:**

- The Constitution has not prescribed the qualifications (legal, educational, administrative or judicial) of the members of the Election Commission. The Constitution has not specified the term of the members of the Election Commission. The Constitution has not debarred the retiring Election Commissioners from any further Appointment by the Government.

## 11. Indian Rhino Vision 2020

### Why in News?

- The ambitious Indian Rhino Vision 2020 (IRV 2020) came to a close with the release of two rhinos — an adult male and a female — in Assam's Manas National Park transported from Pobitora Wildlife Sanctuary about 185 km east.

### What is Indian Rhino Vision 2020?

- Launched in 2005, Indian Rhino Vision 2020 is an ambitious effort to attain a wild population of at least 3,000 greater one-horned rhinos spread over seven protected areas in the Indian state of Assam by the year 2020.
- Seven protected areas are Kaziranga, Pobitora, Orang National Park, Manas National Park, Laokhowa wildlife sanctuary, Burachapori wildlife sanctuary and Dibrusaikhowa wildlife sanctuary.
- It is a collaborative effort between various organisations, including the International Rhino Foundation, Assam's Forest Department, Bodoland Territorial Council, World Wide Fund - India, and the US Fish and Wildlife Service.

### Other Conservation Efforts:

- **National Rhino Conservation Strategy:**
  - ✓ It calls for active engagement between India and Nepal to conserve the Greater one-horned rhinoceros.
  - ✓ The plan said the single population of rhinos in Sukla-Phanta (Nepal), Valmiki Tiger Reserve (India) and Chitwan National Park (Nepal) and Dudhwa (India) is separated by the political boundary between the two countries.
  - ✓ It asks for the management of the two population under the same protocol, instead of managing the Two Population Separately.
  - ✓ The plan calls for expanding distribution range as the occurrence of 90% of the rhino in one protected area is a cause of concern and conservation of existing and potential rhino habitats need to be made a National Priority.
- **DNA Database for Indian Rhinos:**
  - ✓ The project is a subset of the Centre's larger, ongoing rhino conservation programme.
  - ✓ By 2021, the project's deadline, the Indian rhino could be the first wild animal species in India to have all its members DNA-sequenced.
  - ✓ The project will help in curbing poaching and gathering evidence in wildlife crimes involving rhinos.

- ✓ The database will be hosted in the Wildlife Institute of India (WII) headquarters in Dehradun.

### What are the Different Rhino species in Asia?

- There are three species of rhino in Asia – Greater one-horned, Javan and Sumatran. Javan and Sumatran Rhino are critically endangered and the Greater one-horned (or Indian) rhino is vulnerable In IUCN Red List.
- All three listed under Appendix I (CITES).
- They are spread across India, Nepal, Bhutan, Indonesia and Malaysia. These countries are also known as Asian Rhino Range Countries.
- The five rhino range nations (India, Bhutan, Nepal, Indonesia and Malaysia) have signed a declaration ‘The New Delhi Declaration on Asian Rhinos 2019’ for the conservation and protection of the species.
- Poaching for the horns and habitat loss are the two greatest threats to the survival of Asia's rhinos.

### About the Greater One-Horned Rhino:

- Only the Great one-horned rhino is found in India.
- The species is restricted to small habitats in Indo-Nepal terai and northern West Bengal and Assam.
- In India, rhinos are mainly found in Kaziranga NP, Pobitora WLS, Orang NP, Manas NP in Assam, Jaldapara NP and Gorumara NP in West Bengal and Dudhwa TR in Uttar Pradesh.
- At present more than 90% of the population of Indian rhinos in India is concentrated in Assam’s Kaziranga National Park.
- The Greater one-horned (or Indian) rhino is vulnerable in IUCN Red List and listed under Appendix I (CITES).
- Greater one-horned rhino is listed under the Schedule I of the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972.

## 3.1. POLITY AND GOVERNANCE SNIPPETS

### 1. Rawat Launches Joint logistics hub

#### Why in News?

- Chief of Defence Staff General Bipin Rawat operationalised the third joint logistics node (JLN) in Mumbai.

## Highlights:

- Until recently, the Three Armed forces had separate facilities for logistics and maintenance. But there was a demand for enhancing interoperability, and synergy among the three services was a long-standing issue.
- Joint logistical nodes were planned in areas where two or more services are located to cater to Logistical Needs.
- Operationalising the JLN comes as a part of measures to boost tri-service integration and Resource Optimisation.
- The Initiative would accrue advantages in terms of saving of manpower, economise utilisation of resources, besides financial savings.
- The Establishment and operationalisation of JLN is a very important first step in the direction of logistics integration of the Three Services.

## Joint Logistics Node (JLN):

- These JLN will provide integrated logistics cover to the armed forces for their small arms ammunition, rations, fuel, general stores, civil hired transport, aviation clothing, spares and also engineering support in an effort to synergise their operational efforts.
- The JLN will function on a 'Lead Service Concept' wherein the provisioning and procurement actions in respect of common items for all services will be done by the lead Service of that station, like at Mumbai (lead Service Navy), Guwahati (lead Service Army) and Port Blair (ANC). The government sanction letter for the establishment of the JLN in Mumbai, Guwahati and Port Blair was signed in 2020.
- The JLN in Guwahati and Tri-Services, Andaman and Nicobar Command, Port Blair, were operationalised in January this year.

## 2. National Green Tribunal (NGT)

### Why in News?

- The National Green Tribunal (NGT) has recently directed the Haryana State Pollution Control Board (HSPCB) to strengthen its capacity and the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) to form a uniform Recruitment Criteria.

### Highlights:

- The NGT passed an order for the Haryana government to revisit its inspection policy and make it adequate to ensure effective enforcement of law.

- The Haryana government, in compliance to the NGT order, proposed a revised policy with increased frequency of inspection, installation of online monitoring devices to capture real-time data and pre-verification of documents before issuing renewal.
- The order was to ensure better monitoring for improved compliance of environmental norms.
- Earlier in January 2021, the Supreme Court (SC) had taken suo motu cognizance of pollution of water bodies by untreated sewage in Haryana.
- The current orders are
  - ✓ Inspection at higher frequencies.
  - ✓ Capacity enhancement of SPCBs/Pollution Control Committees (PCCs) with consent funds. Capacity enhancement of CPCB utilising environment compensation funds.
  - ✓ Annual performance audit of state PCBs/PCCs.
  - ✓ CPCB to prepare a format containing qualifications, minimum eligibility criteria and required experience for Key Positions.

#### Advantages:

- In the name of 'ease of doing business', powers and authorities of SPCB have been compromised. The latest judgement of NGT is a fresh start to the long-delayed initiative of strengthening CPCB/SPCBs/PCCs. The judgment of NGT could be termed as landmark. The NGT has tried to erase the bottlenecks, which were being used to halt the strengthening of environmental regulation. The important part of the judgement is asking CPCB to come out with standard recruitment rules which can be followed by all states. The existing SPCBs recruitment rules have not been updated for decades.

### 3. Unique Land Parcel Identification Number (ULPIN) scheme

#### Why in News?

- Recently, the Centre plans to issue a 14-digit identification number to every plot of land in the country within a year's time. The Unique Land Parcel Identification Number (ULPIN) scheme has been launched in 10 States in the year 2021 and will be rolled out across the country by March 2022.

#### Highlights:

- Being described as "the Aadhaar for land", it is a number that would uniquely identify every surveyed parcel of land and prevent land fraud, especially in the hinterlands of rural India, where land records are outdated and often disputed.

- The identification will be based on the longitude and latitude coordinates of the land parcel, and is dependent on detailed surveys and geo-referenced cadastral maps.
- This is the next step in the Digital India Land Records Modernisation Programme (DILRMP), which began in 2008.
- Proper land statistics and land accounting through ULPIN will help develop land banks and lead towards Integrated Land Information Management System (ILIMS).

### Significance:

- To ensure uniqueness in all transactions and keep the land records always up-to-date.
- A link of all property transactions will get established.
- Delivery of citizen services of land records through the single window.
- Sharing of land records data across departments, financial institutions and all stakeholders.

### About Digital India Land Records Modernisation Programme:

- It is a Central Sector scheme that has been extended up to 2020-21 at a total cost of Rs. 950 crores.
- The Department of Land Resources (Ministry of Rural development) has proposed a further extension to 2023-24, to complete its original targets as well as expand its ambit with a slew of new schemes.
- It attempts to build upon the commonalities that exist in the arena of land records in various States to develop an appropriate Integrated Land Information Management System (ILIMS) across the country, on which different States can also add State-specific needs as they may deem relevant and Appropriate.
- The system will contain information on parcel ownership, land use, taxation, location boundaries, land value, Encumbrances and many more.

## 4. Emergency Credit Line Guarantee Scheme (ECLGS)

### Why in News?

- The government has recently extended the Rs. 3-lakh-crore Emergency Credit Line Guarantee Scheme (ECLGS) until 30<sup>th</sup> June 2021, and also widened its scope to new sectors, including hospitality, travel and tourism.

### Highlights:

- It was rolled out in May 2020 as part of the Centre's Atmanirbhar package in response to the Covid-19 crisis.

- The objective was to support small businesses struggling to meet their operational liabilities due to the imposition of a nationwide lockdown.

#### About ECLGS 1.0:

- It provides fully guaranteed and collateral free additional credit to MSMEs, business enterprises, MUDRA borrowers and individual loans for business purposes to the extent of 20% of their credit outstanding as on 29<sup>th</sup> February, 2020.
- The MSMEs with up to Rs 25. crore outstanding and Rs. 100 crore turnover were eligible.
- The turnover cap was removed post amendment to ECLGS 2.0 in November 2020.

#### About ECLGS 2.0:

- The amended version focused on entities in 26 stressed sectors identified by the Kamath Committee along with the healthcare sector with credit outstanding of more than Rs. 50 crore and up to Rs. 500 crore as of 29th February, 2020.
- It also mandated borrower accounts to be less than or equal to 30 days past due as of 29th February, 2020, that is, they should not have been classified as SMA 1, SMA 2, or NPA by any of the lenders as of 29th February 2020.
- The SMAs are special mention accounts, which show signs of incipient stress, that lead to the borrower defaulting in servicing the debt.
- While SMA-0 are accounts having payments partially or wholly overdue for 1-30 days, SMA-1 and SMA-2 accounts have payments overdue for 31-60 days and 61-90 days respectively. The revised scheme also has a five-year repayment window up from four years in ECLGS 1.0.

#### About ECLGS 3.0:

- It involves extending credit of up to 40% of total credit outstanding across all lending institutions as on 29<sup>th</sup> February 2020.
- The tenor of loans granted under ECLGS 3.0 would be 6 years, including a moratorium period of 2 years. The Covers business enterprises in Hospitality, Travel & Tourism, Leisure & Sporting sectors, Which had, as on 29<sup>th</sup> February 2020, Total credit outstanding not exceeding Rs. 500 crore and overdues, if any, were for 60 days or less.
- National Credit Guarantee Trustee Company (NCGTC) is the guarantee provider under the ECLGS scheme.
- About National Credit Guarantee Trustee Company Ltd
- It is a private limited company Incorporated under the Companies Act, 1956 in 2014, established by the Department of Financial Services, Ministry of Finance, as a wholly

owned company of the Government of India, to act as a common trustee company for multiple credit guarantee funds.

- Credit guarantee programmes are designed to share the lending risk of the lenders and in turn, facilitate access to finance for the prospective borrowers.

## 5. Exercise 'ShantirOgroshena'

### Why in News?

- Indian Army team comprising officers, junior commissioned officers (JCOs) and soldiers from the Dogra regiment will participate in the multilateral exercise 'ShantirOgroshena' (front runner of peace).

### ShantirOgroshena:

- Indian Army will participate in Multinational Military Exercise namely SHANTIR OGROSHENA -2021 in Bangladesh. The nine days exercise will start on the 4th of this month to commemorate the birth centenary of Bangladesh Father of the Nation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and mark glorious 50 years of liberation.
- The theme of the exercise is 'Robust Peace Keeping Operations'. Military observers from the US, UK, Turkey, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Singapore will also be in attendance throughout the Exercise. Military observers from the USA, UK, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Singapore will also be in Attendance throughout the Exercise.

## 6. Prime Minister's KisanUrja Suraksha EvamUtthanMahabhiyan (PM-KUSUM) Scheme

### Why in News?

- The first farm-based solar power plant under the Prime Minister's KisanUrja Suraksha EvamUtthanMahabhiyan (PM-KUSUM) scheme has recently come up in Jaipur (Rajasthan) district's Kotputli tehsil with a provision for production of 17 lakh units of electricity Every Year.

### Highlights:

- It was launched by the Ministry of New and Renewable Energy (MNRE) to support installation of off-grid solar pumps in rural areas and reduce dependence on grid, in grid-connected areas. The Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs (CCEA) had in February 2019 approved the launch of the scheme with the objective of providing financial and water security.

- The government's Budget for 2020-21 expanded the scope for the scheme with 20 lakh farmers to be provided assistance to install standalone solar pumps; another 15 lakh farmers to be given help to solarise their grid-connected pump sets.
- This will enable farmers to set up solar power generation capacity on their barren lands and to sell it to the grid.
- It consists of three components and aims to add a solar capacity of 30.8 GW by 2022:
  - ✓ **Component-A:** 10,000 MW of decentralised ground-mounted grid-connected renewable Power Plants.
  - ✓ **Component-B:** Installation of two million standalone solar-powered agriculture pumps.
  - ✓ **Component-C:** Solarisation of 1.5 million grid-connected solar-powered agriculture pumps.

### Significance:

- Supports the financial health of electricity distribution companies (discoms) by reducing the burden of subsidy to the agriculture sector.
- Help them meet the RPO (Renewable Purchase Obligation) targets.
- Promotes decentralised solar power production, and reduces Transmission Losses.
- A potential way to reduce their subsidy outlay Towards Irrigation.
- If farmers are able to sell surplus powers, they will be incentivised to save power and, in turn, it will mean the reasonable and efficient use of groundwater. This will also increase their income.
- This may also provide water security to farmers through the provision of assured water sources through solar water pumps – both off-grid and grid-connected.
- Expansion of the irrigation cover by providing decentralized solar-based irrigation and moving away from Polluting Diesel.

## 7. Xenobots: Robots Developed from Stem Cells of Frogs

### Why in News?

- Researchers have Developed Robots from Stem Cells of Frogs called Xenobots.

### Xenobots:

- Xenobots, named after the African clawed frog are synthetic organisms that are automatically designed by computers to perform some desired function and built by combining together different biological tissues.

- They are less than a 1 millimeter (0.039 inches) wide and composed of just two things: skin cells and heart muscle cells, both of which are derived from stem cells harvested from early (blastula stage) frog embryos.
- They can self-heal after damage, record memories and work together in groups.
- These biological robots can record Information about their surroundings and move using cilia – minute hair like Particles Present on their Surface.

### **Its Applications:**

- These soft-body living machines can have several applications in biomedicine and the environment. They could be made from a human patient's own cells, which would bypass the immune response challenges of other kinds of micro-robotic delivery systems.
- Such xenobots could potentially be used to scrape plaque from arteries and with additional cell types and bioengineering, locate and Treat Disease.

## **8. What are Wolf-Rayet Stars?**

### **Why in News?**

- Indian astronomers have tracked a rare supernova explosion and traced it to one of the hottest kind of stars called Wolf-Rayet stars or WR stars.

### **Wolf-Rayet Stars:**

- Wolf-Rayet stars represent a final burst of activity before a huge star begins to die.
- These stars, which are at least 20 times more massive than the Sun, “live fast and die hard”. Wolf-Rayet stars are divided into 3 classes based on their spectra, the WN stars (nitrogen dominant, some carbon), WC stars (carbon dominant, no nitrogen) and WO where oxygen is in dominant quantities.
- The average temperature of a Wolf-Rayet star is greater than 25,000 Kelvin, and they can have luminosities of up to a million times that of the Sun.

### **What have Indian researchers studied?**

- Indian astronomers have conducted the optical monitoring of one such stripped-envelope supernova called SN 2015d hosted in the galaxy NGC 7371 which was spotted in 2015.
- They calculated the mass of the star that collapsed to form the supernovae as well as the Geometry of its Ejection.

### **Their Findings:**

- The scientists found that the original star was a combination of two stars – one of them is a massive WR star and another is a star much less in mass than the Sun.

- Supernovae (SNe) are highly energetic explosions in the Universe releasing an enormous amount of energy.
- Long-term monitoring of these transients opens the door to understand the nature of the exploding star as well as the Explosion Properties.
- It can also help enumerate the number of Massive Stars.

## 9. India's Gender Deficit Crisis

### Why in News?

- The recently released Gender Gap Report paints a grim picture for India.

### Where India Stands:

- The World Economic Forum's (WEF) Global Gender Gap Report 2021 was released last week.
- The report lays bare our silent crisis of gender inequality, aggravated by the covid pandemic.
- India has slipped 28 places to 140th position among 156 countries on the WEF's Global Gender Gap Index.
- The country is now 37.5% short of an ideal situation of equality, by its index, last year it was a 33.2% deficit on the whole.
- Back in 2006, we were almost 40% short, but even the slight progress made over the past 15 years has been highly uneven.
- Gains were made on the education and political empowerment of women, we slid sharply on health and economic parameters.

### Factors to consider:

- Though pandemic has been responsible for the decline to a significant extent, many of our deficiencies are pre-covid.
- Some of the drop in India's international rank over the past two years, for example, has to do with regression in the Field of Political Power.
- The Proportion of Women Ministers more than halved to 9.1% of the total, though our count of female Parliamentarians did not budge from its long stagnancy.
- Our performance over the past decade-and-a-half has been poor on women's economic opportunities and participation.
- Indian workforce has been turning more Predominantly male.

- Senior managerial positions in the corporate sector have not seen sufficient female appointees.
- At the Aggregate Level, our Income Disparity is Glaring.
- Women earn only a fifth of men, which puts India among the world's worst 10 on this indicator.
- We fare worse on women's health and survival, with India beaten to the last rank only by China.

### Why Proportionally Fewer Indian Women in jobs?

- One explanation is that sociocultural attitudes go against women going out to work, unless the family lacks sustenance, and deprivation has been in decline for decades.
- Another is that families prefer Educated mothers to invest time in teaching their kids.
- Both these motives are said to be influenced by upward income mobility and a quest for better lives.
- Yet, the covid setback to both Family Incomes and Gender progress would suggest the reasons are Mostly Attitudinal.

### Way Forward:

- If the reasons are attitudinal, tax incentives and other schemes are unlikely to get women taking up more Jobs.
- What we need are new forms of social persuasion, which must go with credible assurances of Gender Equity in Every Sphere.

## 10. Sankalp se Siddhi

### Why in News?

- Recently, The Tribal Cooperative Marketing Development Federation of India (TRIFED), under the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, has launched "Sankalp se Siddhi" - Village and Digital Connect Drive.

### Highlights:

- The drive will entail 150 teams (10 in each region from TRIFED and State Implementation Agencies/Mentoring Agencies/Partners) visiting ten villages each.
- Thus, 100 villages in each region and 1500 villages in the country will be covered.
- The main aim of this drive is to activate the Van DhanVikasKendras (VDVKs) in the villages.

- The visiting teams will also identify locations and shortlist potential Van DhanVikasKendras for clustering as TRIFOOD, and SFURTI units as larger enterprises.
- The Scheme of Fund for Regeneration of Traditional Industries (SFURTI) is a scheme of the Ministry of Micro, Small & Medium Enterprises (MSME).
- Rs. 200 crore Sales during the next 12 months is targeted as a result of this initiative once the VDVKS are activated in these 1500 villages.
- The teams will also identify tribal artisans and other groups and empanel them as suppliers so that they can have access to larger markets through the Tribes India network – both physical outlets and TribesIndia.com.
- Tech For Tribals:
- It aims to transform 5 crore Tribal Entrepreneurs by capacity building and imparting entrepreneurship skills to tribal forest produce gatherers enrolled under the Pradhan Mantri Van DhanYojana (PMVDY).
- The Van DhanVikasYojana is an initiative of the Ministry of Tribal Affairs and TRIFED. It was launched to improve tribal incomes through value addition of tribal products.
- The program will ensure higher success rate of the Tribal Entrepreneurs by enabling and empowering them to run their business with marketable products with quality Certifications.

### Van DhanVikasKendras:

- It has been provided by Van DhanVikasYojana.
- It is providing skill upgradation and capacity building training to tribals and setting up of primary processing and value addition facilities.
- Tribals are trained here and then provided with working capital to add value to the products, which they collect from the jungle.
- TRIFOOD Scheme is a joint initiative of the Ministry of Food Processing Industry, Ministry of Tribal Affairs and TRIFED and it promotes value addition to MFP.

## 11. Indian Energy Exchange

### Why in News?

- Recently, the electricity market at Indian Energy Exchange (IEX) achieved an all-time high volume of 8,248.52 MU (million units) in the month of March 2021 surpassing all the previous milestones.

## Highlights:

- It is the first and largest energy exchange in India providing a nationwide, automated trading platform for physical delivery of electricity, Renewable Energy Certificates and Energy Saving Certificates.
- The exchange platform enables efficient price discovery and increases the accessibility and transparency of the power market in India while also enhancing the speed and efficiency of trade execution.
- It is a publicly listed company with National Stock Exchange (NSE) and Bombay Stock Exchange (BSE).
- It is approved and regulated by Central Electricity Regulatory Commission (CERC) and has been operating since 2008.
- To leverage technology and innovation to establish transparent and efficient energy marketplaces for delivering affordable, reliable energy to consumers.

## Different Trading Platform are:

- **Physical Delivery of Electricity:**
  - ✓ Day-Ahead Market (DAM) is a physical electricity trading market for deliveries for any/some/all 15 minute time blocks in 24 hours of the next day starting from midnight.
  - ✓ **Term-Ahead Market (TAM):** The contracts under TAM cover a range for buying/selling electricity for duration up to 11 days. It enables participants to purchase electricity for the same day through intra-day contracts, for the next day through day-ahead contingency, on a daily basis for rolling seven days through daily contracts.
- **Renewable Energy Certificates (REC):**
  - ✓ Under the REC mechanism, a generator can generate electricity through the renewable resources in any part of the country.
  - ✓ For the electricity part, the generator receives the cost equivalent to that from any conventional source while the environment attribute is sold through the exchanges at the market determined price.
  - ✓ The obligated entity from any part of the country can purchase these RECs to meet its RPO (Renewable Purchase Obligation) compliance.
  - ✓ Obligated entities may either purchase renewable energy or can purchase RECs to meet their RPO set under RPO of their respective States.

## Energy Saving Certificates (ESCs):

- These are the tradable certificates under the Perform, Achieve, Trade (PAT) Scheme of the Bureau of Energy Efficiency (BEE).
- It is a market-based mechanism to incentivise energy efficiency in large Energy-Intensive Industries.

## 12. Supreme Court Portal for Assistance in Court's Efficiency (SUPACE)

### Why in News?

- The Supreme Court has unveiled its Artificial Intelligence (AI) portal SUPACE, designed to make research easier for judges, thereby easing their Workload.

### SUPACE:

- A pet project of the former Chief Justice of India S A Bobde, the SUPACE is a tool that collects relevant facts and laws and makes them available to a judge.
- The Supreme Court's system is not designed to take decisions, but only to process facts and to make them available to judges looking for input for a decision.
- The CJI had then said that AI is to the intellect, what muscle memory is to the mind.
- Its' utility
- SUPACE will produce results customized to the need of the case and the way the judge thinks.
- This will be time-saving. It will help the judiciary and the court in reducing delays and pendency of cases.
- AI will present a more streamlined, cost-effective and time-bound means to the fundamental right of access to justice.
- It will make the service delivery mechanism transparent and cost-efficient.

## 13. National Supercomputing Mission (NSM)

### Why in News?

- Recently, The second phase of the National Supercomputing Mission (NSM) will be completed by September 2021, taking India's total computational capacity to 16 Petaflops.

### About the National Supercomputing Mission (NSM):

- It was announced in 2015, with an aim to connect national academic and R&D institutions with a grid of more than 70 high-performance computing facilities at an estimated cost of Rs. 4,500 crores over the period of seven years by 2022.

- It supports the government's vision of 'Digital India' and 'Make in India'.
- It is jointly steered by the Ministry of Electronics and IT (MeitY) and Department of Science and Technology (DST - Ministry of Science and Technology) and implemented by the Centre for Development of Advanced Computing (C-DAC), Pune and the Indian Institute of Science (IISc), Bengaluru.
- It is also an effort to improve the number of supercomputers owned by India.
- These supercomputers will also be networked on the National Supercomputing grid over the National Knowledge Network (NKN). The NKN connects academic institutions and R&D labs over a high-speed network.
- Under NSM, the long-term plan is to build a strong base of 20,000 skilled persons over the next five years who will be equipped to handle the Complexities of Supercomputers.
- The NSM envisages setting up a network of 70 high-performance computing facilities in the country but skewed funding for the mission during the initial years slowed down the overall pace of building Supercomputers.
- Only 16.67% of the total budget of Rs. 4,500 crore, was utilised during the first four-and-a-half years for execution of the Mission.

## 4. SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

### 1. Centre bans export of Remdesivir

#### Why in News?

- Centre has prohibited the exports of injection Remdesivir and Remdesivir Active Pharmaceutical Ingredients (API) in an order issued recently stating that there has been a sudden spike in demand for injection Remdesivir used in treatment of COVID patients.

#### About the News:

- India is witnessing a recent surge in COVID cases and there is a potential of further increase in demand for injection Remdesivir in the coming days.
- Export of injection Remdesivir and Remdesivir Active Pharmaceutical Ingredients (API) prohibited till the COVID-19 situation in the country improves.
- Seven Indian companies are producing injection Remdesivir under voluntary licensing agreement with M/s. Gilead Sciences, USA. They have an installed capacity of about 38.80 lakh units per month.
- The release issued by the Health Ministry noted that to ensure easy access to the injection all domestic manufactures of Remdesivir have been advised to display on their website, details of their stockists/distributors to facilitate access to the drug.

#### What is Voluntary Licensing?

- Voluntary licensing is the arrangement between the parties where the patent holder and the third party from any of the country come to an agreement of making affordable medicines in their respective countries and sometimes with discounts.
- A patent holder may give license to the third party either with an exclusive or non-exclusive right, the right to manufacture, import and distribute a pharmaceutical product and much more. The licensee of the patent will act as an agent of the company. The terms in a voluntary license, they may set price ranges or could include other terms like the holder royalty from the distribution of the sales.
- Voluntary licensing arrangements, at the discretion of the holder, are usually made for strategic reasons rather than as price gestures and they may not entail any price reduction at all.

#### What is Remdesivir?

- It is a drug with antiviral properties that was manufactured by a US-based biotechnology company in 2014, to treat Ebola cases.

- It was also tried on patients of MERS and SARS, both caused by members of the Corona virus family, but experts said it did not show promising results back then.
- Coronaviruses have a single-strand RNA as their genetic material. When the novel coronavirus SARS-CoV2 enters a human cell, an enzyme called RdRp helps the virus to replicate. Remdesivir works by inhibiting the activity of RdRp.
- Globally, it is one of the four possible lines of treatment being investigated in the Solidarity trials under the aegis of the World Health Organization (WHO).

### Who is responsible for the Seamless Production of the Medicines in India?

- The **Department of Pharmaceuticals** under the **Ministry of Chemicals and Fertilizers** is entrusted with ensuring the seamless production and distribution of critical life-saving medicines to contain the COVID-19 pandemic.

## 4.1. SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY SNIPPETS

### 1. Apophis Asteroid

#### Why in News?

- The National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) has recently ruled out the possibility of the dreaded asteroid Apophis causing Any Damage to the Earth for the next 100 years.

#### Highlights:

- Apophis is a near-Earth asteroid with a relatively large size (about 335 meters wide).
- It is named after the ancient Egyptian god of chaos and darkness, it was discovered in 2004, after which NASA had said that it was one of the asteroids that posed the greatest threat to Earth.
- Apophis was predicted to come threateningly close to us in the years 2029 and 2036, but NASA later ruled these events out.
- However, there were still fears about a possible collision in 2068.
- Recently, the asteroid flew past Earth on 5<sup>th</sup> March 2021, coming within 17 million km of our planet. During this approach, scientists used radar observations to study in detail the asteroid's Orbit Around the sun.

#### About Asteroids:

- Asteroids are rocky objects that orbit the Sun, much smaller than planets.
- They are also called Minor Planets.

- According to NASA, 9,94,383 is the count of known asteroids, the remnants from the formation of the solar system over 4.6 Billion Years Ago.

## 2. VAJRA PRAHAR

### Why in News?

- Special Forces of India and the USA has recently conducted the joint military exercise ‘VAJRA PRAHAR 2021’ in Himachal Pradesh.

### Highlights:

- The joint exercise by the Special Forces of both the countries is conducted alternatively between India and the United States. Special Forces are the units of a country's armed forces that undertake covert, counterterrorist, and other specialized operations.
- This is the 11th edition of the exercise conducted at Special Forces Training School located at Bakloh, Himachal Pradesh.
- The 10th edition of VAJRA PRAHAR was held in 2019 at Seattle, USA. Earlier, India and the USA navy had carried out a two-day Passage Exercise (PASSEX) in the eastern Indian Ocean Region. To share the best practices and experiences in areas such as joint mission planning and Operational Tactics as also to improve interoperability between the Special Forces of both Nations.

## 3. ACT-Accelerator

### Why in News?

- Recently, Carl Bildt has been appointed as WHO Special Envoy for the Access to Covid-19 Tools Accelerator (ACT-Accelerator).

### Highlight:

- It was launched in the month of April, 2020 at an event co-hosted by the Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO), the President of France, the President of the European Commission, and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.
- It brings together Governments, Scientists, Businesses, Civil Society, and Philanthropists and Global Health Organizations.
- The participants include the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, CEPI, Foundation for Innovative New Diagnostics (FIND), Gavi, The Global Fund, Unitaid, Wellcome Trust (London), the WHO and the World Bank.

- It aims to end the pandemic, restore full societal and economic activity globally and facilitate high-level control of Covid-19 Disease.
- **The ACT-Accelerator is organized into Four Pillars of work:**
- Diagnostics, treatment, vaccines and health system strengthening.
- Each pillar is vital to the overall effort and involves innovation and collaboration.

#### About COVAX:

- It is one of **Four Pillars** of the ACT Accelerator.
- It is an effort to ensure that people in all corners of the world will get access to Covid-19 vaccines, regardless of their wealth.
- The initial aim is to have 2 billion doses available by the end of 2021, which should be enough to protect high risk and vulnerable people, as well as frontline healthcare workers.
- It is co-led by Gavi, the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI) and the World Health Organisation (WHO), working in partnership with vaccine manufacturers of developed and developing countries.
- Corticosteroids
- It is a class of drug that lowers inflammation in the body. They also reduce immune system activity. Corticosteroids ease swelling, itching, redness, and allergic reactions, thus used in the Treatment of diseases like asthma, arthritis, lupus, allergies etc.
- Corticosteroids resemble cortisol, a hormone naturally produced by the body's adrenal Glands. The body needs cortisol to stay healthy.
- Cortisol is a major player in a wide range of processes in the body, including metabolism, Immune Response, and Stress.

## 4. Exercise La Perouse

### Why in News?

- Recently, Indian Navy Ships INS Satpura and INS Kiltanalongwith P8I Long Range Maritime Patrol Aircraft are participating, for the first time in multilateral maritime exercise La Pérouse, being conducted in the Eastern Indian Ocean Region from 5th to 7th April 2021.

### Highlights:

- Post conduct of La Perouse, the Indo-French Naval exercise “Varuna“ is scheduled in the Western Indian Ocean, wherein UAE too shall be participating.

- The first edition of La Pérouse joint exercise, initiated by France in 2019, included ships from Australia, Japan and the US. It is named after the eighteenth century French Naval explorer.
- India's participation in 2021 completed the QUAD force representation in the French led Naval Exercise.
- QUAD is a grouping of India, USA, Australia and Japan which aims to safeguard the interests of democratic nations in the Indo-Pacific region and address global challenges.
- It will witness complex and advanced naval operations including surface warfare, anti-air warfare and air defence exercises, weapon firing exercises, cross deck flying operations, tactical manoeuvres and seamanship evolutions such as replenishment at sea.
- It will provide an opportunity for these five like-minded, high-end naval forces to develop closer links, sharpen their skills, and promote maritime cooperation throughout a free and open Indo-Pacific.

#### About QUAD+:

- The region of Pacific Islands stretches from Hawaii in the north to Tonga in the south, and Easter Island in the east to New Caledonia in the west.
- US interest in the Indo-Pacific region has always been well illustrated with the fact that US Indo-Pacific Command established after World War II is the largest unified command.
- France has a direct strategic and economic stake in New Caledonia, French Polynesia, and Wallis and Futuna. France is a member of the Pacific Community and the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP).
- Japan although has trade ties with China but has always been suspicious of China's growth as a military power. China's assertiveness closer to Japanese waters and airspace have been a testing time for Japan.
- Indian Navy has always maintained a tactical advantage over the IOR to ensure compliance to the internationally established Rules of the Road (ROR) for the seas.
- This has been respected by the world (like declaration of warships transiting IOR etc.), but Indian Navy has observed and reported multiple sightings of undeclared Chinese ships and submarines suspiciously lurking within the IOR.

#### 5. SUPACE Portal

##### Why in News?

- The Chief Justice of India (CJI) has recently launched an Artificial Intelligence (AI) based portal 'SUPACE' in the Judicial System aimed at Assisting Judges with Legal Research.

## Highlights:

- SUPACE is short for Supreme Court Portal for Assistance in Court's Efficiency.
- Earlier, the E-Courts Project was conceptualised on the basis of "National Policy and Action Plan for Implementation of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in the Indian Judiciary - 2005" submitted by the e-Committee of the Supreme Court.
- It is a tool that collects relevant facts and laws and makes them available to a judge.
- It is not designed to take decisions, but only to process facts and to make them available to judges looking for an input for a decision.
- Initially, it will be used on an experimental basis by the judges of Bombay and Delhi High Courts who deal with Criminal Matters.

## Significance:

- It will produce results customized to the need of the case and the way the judge thinks.
- This will be time saving. It will help the judiciary and the court in reducing delays and pendency of cases. AI will present a more streamlined, cost effective and time bound means to the fundamental right of access to justice. It will make the service delivery mechanism transparent and cost-efficient. Redundancy of certain posts after introduction of SUPACE.

## E-Courts Project:

- It was conceptualized with a vision to transform the Indian Judiciary by ICT (Information and Communication Technology) enablement of Courts.
- It is a pan-India Project, monitored and funded by the Department of Justice, Ministry of Law and Justice, for the District Courts across the country.
- The objectives of the Project are
  - ✓ To provide efficient & time-bound citizen-centric services delivery.
  - ✓ To develop, install & implement decision support systems in courts.
  - ✓ To automate the processes to provide transparency and accessibility of information to its stakeholders. To enhance judicial productivity, both qualitatively & quantitatively, to make the justice delivery system affordable, accessible, cost-effective, predictable, reliable and transparent.

## 6. Xenobots: Robots Developed from Stem Cells of Frogs

### Why in News?

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- Long-term monitoring of these transients opens the door to understand the nature of the exploding star as well as the Explosion Properties.
- It can also help enumerate the number of Massive Stars.

## 8. B.1.617 Double Mutant Virus

### Why in News?

- Recently, the ‘double mutant’ virus that is having a bearing on the spread of the pandemic in India, has been formally classified as B.1.617.

### Highlights:

- The Mutation is an alteration in the genetic material (the genome) of a cell of a living organism or of a virus that is more or less permanent and that can be transmitted to the cell's or the virus's descendants.
- This double mutant from India has been scientifically named as B.1.167. However, it is yet to be classified as ‘Variant of Concern’.
- Till now only three global ‘Variants of Concern’ have been identified: the U.K. variant (B.1.1.7), the South African (B.1.351) and the Brazilian (P.1) lineage.
- Spread of B.1.617: According to the INSACOG, sequencing a sample of genomes from coronavirus patients in India, B.1.617 was first detected in India in December, 2020.
- Today, nearly 70% of the genome sequences with the mutations characterising B.1.617 are from India.

- This is followed by the United Kingdom (23%), Singapore (2%) and Australia (1%).

### Issues with Mutants:

- The virus is associated with large spikes of Covid-19 cases in some countries.
- It enables viruses to become more infectious as well as evade antibodies.
- It has also been associated with a reduction in vaccine efficacy. International studies have shown reduced efficacy of vaccines particularly those by Pfizer, Moderna and Novavax to certain variants.
- However, the vaccines continue to be significantly protective in spite of this.

### About Indian SARS-CoV-2 Consortium on Genomics:

- Indian SARS-CoV-2 Consortium on Genomics (INSACOG) is a multi-laboratory, multi-agency, pan-India network to Monitor Genomic Variations in the SARS-CoV-2.
- It helps in the understanding of how the virus Spreads and Evolves.
- Genomic surveillance can generate a rich source of information for tracking pathogen transmission and evolution on both national and International Levels.

## 9. Muon G-2 Experiment

### Why in News?

- The results from the Muon g-2 experiment show that fundamental particles called muons behave in a way that is not predicted by the Standard Model of particle physics.

### Muon:

- Fermilab, the American particle accelerator, has released first results from its “muon g-2” experiment.
- These results spotlight the Anomalous Behaviour of the elementary particle called the muon. The muon is a heavier cousin of the electron and is expected to have a value of 2 for its magnetic moment, labelled “g”.
- Now, the muon is not alone in the universe.
- It is embedded in a sea where particles are popping out and vanishing every instant due to quantum effects.
- So, its g value is altered by its interactions with these short-lived excitations.

### Main Characteristic: Anomalous Magnetic Moment:

- The Standard Model of particle physics calculates this correction, called the anomalous magnetic moment, Very Accurately.

- The muon g-2 experiment measured the extent of the anomaly and announced that “g” deviated from the amount predicted by the Standard Model.
- That is, while the calculated value in the Standard Model is 2.00233183620 approximately, the experimental results show a value of 2.00233184122.
- They have measured “g” to an accuracy of about 4.2 sigma when the results are combined with those from a 20-year-old experiment.
- This makes physicists sit up and take note, but it is not yet significant enough to constitute a discovery – for which they need a significance of 5 sigma.

### The g factor:

- The muon is also known as the fat electron.
- It is produced copiously in the Fermilab experiments and occurs naturally in cosmic ray showers. Like the electron, the muon has a magnetic moment because of which, when placed in a magnetic field, it spins and precesses, or wobbles, slightly, like the axis of a spinning top. Its internal magnetic moment, the g factor, determines the extent of this wobble.
- As the muon spins, it also interacts with the Surrounding Environment, which consists of short-lived particles popping in and out of a Vacuum.

## 5. ART AND CULTURE & MISCELLANEOUS

### 1. 102<sup>nd</sup> Anniversary of JallianwalaBagh Massacre

#### Context:

- More than a century ago on 13<sup>th</sup> April 2019, the JallianwalaBagh massacre shook the nation and the world.

#### How it Started?

- The Rowlattact officially known as the Anarchical and Revolutionary Crimes Act, 1919 was passed in 1919 by the Imperial Legislative Council.
- It had authorised the British government to arrest anybody suspected of terrorist activities.
- It also authorised the government to detain such people arrested for up to 2 years without trial.
- It empowered the Police to search a place without a warrant. It also placed severe restrictions on the Freedom of the Press.
- The primary intention colonial govt. was to repress the growing nationalist movement in the country.
- The British were also afraid of a Ghadarite revolution in Punjab and the rest of the country.

#### About the Incident:

- April 13, 1919, marked a turning point in the Indian freedom struggle. It was Baisakhi that day, a harvest festival popular in Punjab and parts of north India.
- Local residents in Amritsar decided to hold a meeting that day to discuss and protest against the confinement of Satya Pal and SaifuddinKitchlew, two leaders fighting for Independence, and implementation of the Rowlatt Act, which armed the British Government with powers to detain Any Person Without Trial.
- The crowd had a mix of men, women and children. They all gathered in a park called the JallianwalaBagh, walled on all sides but for a few small gates, against the orders of the British. The protest was a peaceful one, and the gathering included pilgrims visiting the Golden Temple who were merely passing through the park, and some who had not come to protest.
- While the meeting was on, Brigadier-General Reginald Edward Harry Dyer, who had crept up to the scene wanting to teach the public assembled a lesson, ordered 90 soldiers he had brought with him to the venue to open fire on the crowd. Many tried in vain to scale the walls to escape. Many jumped into the well located inside the park.

## Outcomes of the Incident:

- Considered the ‘The Butcher of Amritsar’ in the aftermath of the massacre, General Dyer was removed from Command and exiled to Britain.
- Rabindranath Tagore and Mahatma Gandhi, as a sign of condemnation, renounced their British Knighthood and Kaiser-i-Hind Medal Respectively.
- In 1922, the infamous Rowlett Act was repealed by the British.
- Michael O’Dwyer, the then Lieutenant-Governor of Punjab, who had approved the actions of Dyer, was assassinated by Udham Singh in London in 1940 as revenge against the massacre.

## 5.1. ART AND CULTURE & MISCELLANEOUS SNIPPETS

### 1. Pangong Tso

#### Why in News?

- The south bank of Pangong Tso — one of the two locations from where Indian and Chinese troops disengaged in February has become a “no-man’s land” for the local cattle grazers of Chushul in Eastern Ladakh.

#### About:

- Pangong Tso or Pangong Lake is an **endorheic lake** (also called closed or terminal basins or internal drainage systems or basins) in the Himalayas is situated at an elevation of 4,225 m (13,862 ft).
- It is 134 km (83 mi) long and extends from Ladakh, India to the Tibetan Autonomous Region, China.
- It is formed from Tethys geosyncline. The Karakoram Mountain range ends at the north bank of Pangong Tso. Its southern bank too has high broken mountains sloping towards Spangur Lake in the south.
- Approximately 60% of the length of the lake lies within the Tibetan Autonomous Region.
- The lake is 5 km (3.1 mi) wide at its broadest point. All together it covers 604 km<sup>2</sup>.
- During winter the lake freezes completely, despite being **saline water**.
- It is **not a part of the Indus River basin** area and geographically a separate landlocked river basin.
- The lake is in the process of being identified under the Ramsar Convention as a wetland of international importance. This will be the first trans-boundary wetland in South Asia under the convention.

## 6. INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

### 1. Global Gender Gap Report 2021

#### Why in News?

- Recently, India has fallen 28 places in the World Economic Forum's (WEF) Global Gender Gap Report 2021.

#### About Global Gender Gap Report:

- It was first published in 2006 by the WEF.
- It benchmarks 156 countries on their progress towards gender parity in four dimensions Economic Participation and Opportunity, Educational Attainment, Health and Survival and Political Empowerment.
- Over the Index, the highest possible score is 1 (equality) and the lowest possible score is 0 (inequality).
- To serve as a compass to track progress on relative gaps between women and men on health, education, economy and politics. Through this annual yardstick, the stakeholders within each country are able to set priorities relevant in each specific economic, political and Cultural Context.

#### Highlights:

- India is now one of the worst performers in South Asia, it is now ranked 140 among 156 countries.
- In South Asia, Bangladesh ranked 65, Nepal 106, Pakistan 153, Afghanistan 156, Bhutan 130 and Sri Lanka 116. India had ranked 112th among 153 countries in the Global Gender Gap Index 2020.
- India has declined on the political empowerment index as well by 13.5 percentage points, and a decline in the number of women ministers, from 23.1% in 2019 to 9.1% in 2021.
- However, it has still performed relatively well compared to other countries, ranking at 51 in women's Participation in Politics.
- In the index of Education Attainment, India has been ranked at 114.
- The report notes that the economic participation gender gap actually widened in India by 3% this year.
- The share of women in professional and technical roles declined further to 29.2%.
- The share of women in senior and managerial positions also is at 14.6% and only 8.9% firms in the country have top female managers.

- The estimated earned income of women in India is only one-fifth of men's, which puts the country among the bottom 10 globally on this indicator.
- In Pakistan and Afghanistan, the income of an average woman is below 16% of that of an average man, while in India it is 20.7%.
- BetiBachaoBetiPadhao, One Stop Centre (OSC) Scheme, Ujjawala Scheme are some the initiatives launched by the government to address the issue of gender inequality.
- Further, the principle of gender equality is enshrined in the Indian Constitution in its Preamble, Fundamental Rights, Fundamental Duties and Directive Principles.

### About Health and Survival index:

- On this India has fared the worst, ranking at 155.
- The only country to have fared worse is China.
- The report points to a skewed sex ratio as the major factor.
- It says the ratio can be attributed to norms of son preference and gender-biased prenatal sex-selective practices. China and India together account for about 90 to 95% of the estimated 1.2 to 1.5 million missing female births annually worldwide due to gender-biased prenatal sex selective practices.

### Key points in Global Scenario:

- South Asia incidentally is one of the worst performing regions, followed only by the Middle East and northern Africa.
- The gender gap in political empowerment remains the largest: women represent only 26.1% of some 35,500 parliament seats and just 22.6% of over 3,400 ministers worldwide.
- In 81 countries, there has never been a woman head of state, as of 15th January, 2021.
- Bangladesh is the only country where more women have held head-of-state positions than men in the past 50 years. The countries with the largest gender gaps in economic participation include Iran, India, Pakistan, Syria, Yemen, Iraq, and Afghanistan.
- It will take South Asia 195.4 years to close the gender gap, while Western Europe will take 52.1 years.

### World Economic Forum

- It is the International Organization for Public-Private Cooperation.
- It was established in 1971 as a not-for-profit foundation and is headquartered in Geneva, Switzerland. It is independent, impartial and not tied to any special interests.
- The Forum strives in all its efforts to demonstrate entrepreneurship in the global public interest while upholding the highest Standards of Governance.

## 2. India Stands for Revival of Democracy in Myanmar

### Why in News?

- India recently said it stood for revival of democracy in Myanmar and argued that violence would not solve the Prevailing Situation in the Country.

### Background of the Issue:

- The November 2020 election of Myanmar resulted in a landslide victory for the National League for Democracy (NLD), which won over 82% of parliamentary seats at the union, regional and State Levels
- The army-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) claimed the elections as a Widespread Fraud.
- Without offering any concrete evidence, the military has overthrown the winning party and has detained the political leader including Myanmar's de facto head Aung San Suu Kyi.
- The activists used social media to oppose the military coup and organize protests.
- Myanmar's junta blocked Facebook and WhatsApp in the name of ensuring stability even as street protests were Reported from Some Cities.

### Democracy in the Context of India and Myanmar:

- Democracy is a form of government in which a substantial proportion of the citizenry participates in ruling the state and the representatives elected by the people run the country on their behalf.
- However, this ideal statement is not being followed everywhere. Turning the attention to international affairs and diving deep into Myanmar, the military has once again taken over the country, declaring a year-long state of emergency and placing elected leaders under detention. In this predicament, it is a tightrope walk for India. Being itself the world's largest democracy, India has to back democracy in Myanmar but it must secure its security and Developmental Interests too.

### Myanmar's Significance to India:

- India and Myanmar are neighbours with close cultural and people-to-people ties, bolstered by trade, economic, security and defence-related exchanges.
- India has extended assistance to Myanmar in its fight against COVID-19 by providing Medicines, test kits and Vaccines.
- India has committed to continuing its humanitarian support for the people in Myanmar in mitigating the health and economic impact of the pandemic.

- India has also sent 15 lakh doses of the Covishield vaccine to assist Myanmar in fighting the pandemic. Myanmar has begun to vaccinate itself with COVID vaccine sent by India, while putting China's 300,000 doses on hold.
- **The Submarine Gift:** India handed over a kilo-class submarine INS Sindhuvir (UMS MinyeTheinkhathu) to the Myanmar navy. The Indian gift is the first and only submarine of the Myanmar navy.
- **Myanmar as India's Cornerstone:** India's military-diplomatic outreach to Myanmar became a cornerstone of its Act East policy. India's security relationship with the Myanmar military has become extremely close, and it would be difficult to "burn bridges" with them given their assistance in securing the North East frontiers from insurgent groups.
- **Infrastructure and Developmental Projects:** Apart from strategic concerns, India has cultivated several infrastructure and development projects with Myanmar, which it sees as the "gateway to the East" and ASEAN countries. These include the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral highway and the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project as well as a plan for a Special Economic Zone at the Sittwe deep-water port.

#### Way Forward:

- India was treating the flow of displaced people from Myanmar as per Indian laws and "humanitarian considerations."
- India is watching the internal situation in Myanmar as reports indicate that an armed resistance movement is emerging as the military continues with repressive measures.
- India is also concerned about the possible emergence of various armed groups in Myanmar as it may trigger security implications for the north-eastern States.

### 3. US, Iran to Hold Indirect Talks on Returning to Nuclear Deal

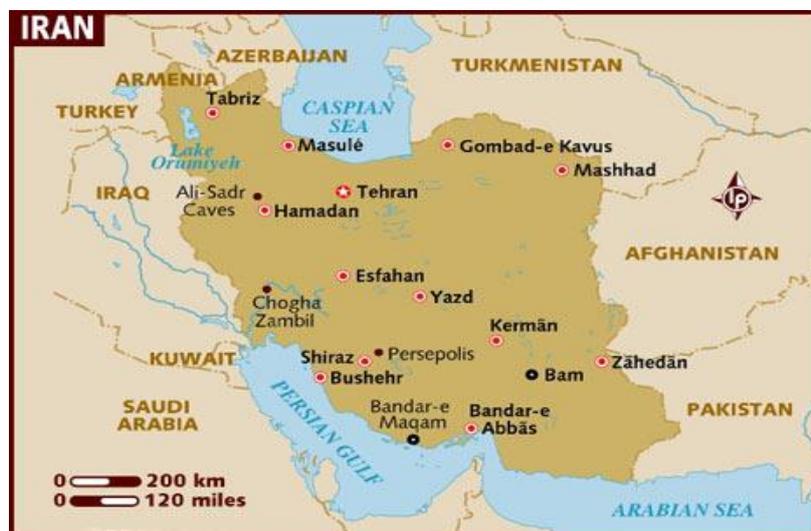
#### Why in News?

- The U.S. and Iran will take part in indirect talks next week on how to return to the 2015 Nuclear Deal.

#### What is the Iran Nuclear Deal?

- Iran agreed to rein in its Nuclear Programme in a 2015 deal struck with the US, UK, Russia, China, France and Germany.
- Under the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPoA) Tehran agreed to significantly cut its stores of centrifuges, enriched uranium and heavy-water, all key components for nuclear weapons.

- The JCPOA established the Joint Commission, with the negotiating parties all represented, to monitor implementation of the agreement.



### JCPOA: Timeline & Background

- The JCPOA was the result of prolonged negotiations from 2013 and 2015 between Iran and P5+1 (China, France, Germany, Russia, the United Kingdom, the United States, and the European Union, or the EU).
- It happened after the backchannel talks between the U.S.(U.S. President Barack Obama) and Iran, quietly brokered by Oman, in an attempt to repair the accumulated mistrust since the 1979 Islamic revolution.
- The JCPOA obliged Iran to accept constraints on its enrichment program verified by an intrusive inspection regime in return for a Partial Lifting of Economic Sanctions.
- However, faced with a hostile Republican Senate, President Obama was unable to get the nuclear deal ratified but implemented it on the basis of periodic Executive Orders to keep sanction waivers going.
- When Donald Trump became president, he withdrew from the deal and called it a “horrible, one-sided deal that should have never, ever been made”.
- The U.S. decision was criticized by all other parties to the JCPOA (including the European allies) because Iran was in compliance with its obligations, as certified by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). Tensions rose as the U.S. pushed ahead with its unilateral sanctions, widening its scope to cover nearly all Iranian banks connected to the global financial system, industries related to
- metallurgy, energy, and shipping, individuals related to the defense, intelligence, and nuclear establishments.

- For the first year after the U.S. withdrawal, Iran's response was muted as the E-3 (France, Germany, the U.K.) and the EU promised to find ways to mitigate the U.S. decision. The E-3's promised relief Instrument in Support of Trade Exchanges (INSTEX), created in 2019 to facilitate limited trade with Iran.
- However, by May 2019, Iran's strategic patience ran out as the anticipated economic relief from the E-3/EU failed to materialize. As the sanctions began to hurt, Tehran shifted to a strategy of 'maximum resistance'.

### Iran's Policy of 'Maximum Resistance':

- Beginning in May 2019, Iran began to move away from JCPOA's constraints incrementally: exceeding the ceilings of 300kg on low-enriched uranium and 130 MT on heavy-water; raising enrichment levels from 3.67% to 4.5%; stepping up research and development on advanced centrifuges; resuming enrichment at Fordow, and violating limits on the number of centrifuges in use.
- In January 2020, following the drone strike on Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps commander Gen. Qasem Soleiman, Iran announced that it would no longer observe the JCPOA's restraints.
- The collapse of the JCPOA drags Iran towards nuclear brinkmanship, like North Korea, which has created major Geopolitical Instability in the region and beyond.

### Impacts on India For Restoration of JCPOA:

- Restoration of JCPOA may ease many restrictions over the Iranian regime, which may directly or indirectly help India. This can be reflected in the following examples:
- **Boost to Regional Connectivity:** Removing sanctions may revive India's interest in the Chabahar option, Bandar Abbas port, and other plans for Regional Connectivity.
- This would further help India to neutralize the Chinese Presence in Gwadar port, Pakistan.
- Apart from Chabahar, India's interest in the International North-South Transit Corridor (INSTC), which runs through Iran, which will improve connectivity with five Central Asian republics, may also get a boost.
- **Energy Security:** Due to the pressure linked to the US' Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA), India has to bring down oil imports to zero.
- Restoration of ties between the US and Iran will help India to procure cheap Iranian oil and aid in Energy Security.

## 4. South China Sea Dispute

### Why in News?

- The Philippine defence department recently said it was keeping its options open as a diplomatic row with Beijing grows over hundreds of Chinese vessels in the contested South China Sea.

### About the News:

- Tensions over the resource-rich waters have spiked in recent weeks after over 200 Chinese boats were detected at Whitsun Reef in the Spratly Islands, where China and the Philippines have Rival Claims.
- China, which claims almost the entirety of the sea, has refused repeated appeals by the Philippines to withdraw the vessels, which Manila says unlawfully entered its exclusive Economic Zone.

### About South China Sea:

- South China Sea is an arm of western Pacific Ocean in Southeast Asia.
- It is south of China, east & south of Vietnam, west of the Philippines and north of the island of Borneo.
- Bordering states & territories (clockwise from north): the People's Republic of China, the Republic of China (Taiwan), the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, Indonesia, Singapore and Vietnam.
- It is connected by Taiwan Strait with the East China Sea and by Luzon Strait with the Philippine Sea.
- It contains numerous shoals, reefs, atolls and islands. The Paracel Islands, the Spratly Islands and the Scarborough Shoal are the most important.

### What makes it so Important?

- This sea holds tremendous strategic importance for its location as it is the connecting link between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean. (Strait of Malacca)
- According to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) one-third of the global shipping passes through it, carrying trillions of trade which makes it a significant geopolitical water body.
- According to the Department of Environment and Natural Resources, Philippines, this sea has one-third of the entire world's marine biodiversity and contains lucrative fisheries providing food security to the Southeast Asian nations.

- South China Sea is believed to have huge oil and gas reserves beneath its seabed.



### What are the Issues Involved?

- China claims most of the contested sea, reaching almost to the Philippines shores and has built artificial islands with heavy military developments on them which worries the neighbouring nations and it rejects the UN backed international tribunal ruling as well.
- The nine dash line asserted by China violates the principle of Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ).
- The stalled negotiations between China and ASEAN made headway on Code of Conduct as four of the ASEAN nations also made territorial claims on the disputed waters which adds to the problem with already non-negotiable behaviour of China.

### What are its Key Challenges?

- China's behaviour of negligence, denial and the sense of superiority while overlooking international laws and regulations like the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea.
- Along with China's bullying tactics, North Korea's provocative behaviour has attracted US aircrafts in the already troubled waters. The growth of military vessels and planes in the area makes it more challenging to handle.
- Undefined geographic scope of the South China Sea; disagreement over dispute settlement mechanisms; different approaches to conflict management (self-restraint, mutual trust, and confidence building); and the undefined legal status of the Code of Conduct (COC) add to it.
- The different histories of distant, largely uninhabited archipelagos of the sea make the matter more Complicated and Multifaceted.

## India's Stand on South China Sea Issue:

- In a Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and the Indian Ocean Region, India and the USA talked about ensuring freedom of navigation and resolving disputes according to UNCLOS referring to the South China Sea but after Philippines won the arbitration award in its favour in 2016, India has clearly separated itself from the dispute.
- India has not conducted any defence cooperation, navigational patrols and naval exercises with the claimant states in the South China Sea (only recently it conducted a naval exercise with Vietnam).
- After the recent development of affairs with Japan and Russia, it might appear that India wants to raise its strategic presence in the South China Sea but it is not so. Firstly, because India is not a party to the maritime territorial disputes in the region and does not want to interfere. Secondly, India wants to preserve its “Wuhan Consensus” with China, in which both nations respect each other's' spheres of influence in their adjacent water bodies.

## Suggestions:

- New arbitration processes to bring necessary mediation, facilitation and binding resolution mechanism which can move the military dispute to border management and to joint Development Finally.
- Adopting the concept of joint development zones, which resolves the territorial disputes and allows to pursuit of joint commercial activities, environmental protection, disaster relief and humanitarian perspective and counter-piracy Control.
- International disputes should be settled by peaceful means in line with international laws on the principle of safeguarding maritime security, navigation and over flight rights and freedoms.

## Way Forward:

- Forming an overarching authority like NATO or European Union (EU) with China as a member, in Asia to settle grievances and specifically find solutions to Asian problems, might help resolve disputes like this.
- The sense of power of China needs to be checked so that it abides by the intergovernmental and international agreements and conventions.
- Peaceful bilateral or multilateral talks and negotiations can be used because aggression or war is not a solution to this or any problem at all.

## 5. 60% Enrichment by Iran in Response to Israel's Terrorism

### Why in News?

- Iran's President Hassan Rouhani recently said the decision to boost uranium enrichment to 60 percent was a response to arch-foe Israel's "nuclear terrorism" against its Natanz Facility.

### About the Issue:

- Iran said it would start producing 60%-enriched uranium, which could bring Tehran a step closer to Building a Nuclear Bomb. The announcement comes after the Islamic Republic accused Israel of being behind attack on Natanz, a key atomic site. It also casts a shadow over diplomatic efforts in Vienna to revive the 2015 deal that former US President Donald Trump withdrew from three years ago.

### What is Uranium Enrichment?

- Natural uranium consists of two different isotopes - nearly 99% U-238 and only around 0.7% of U-235.
- U-235 is a fissile material that can sustain a chain reaction in a nuclear reactor.
- Enrichment process increases the proportion of U-235 through the process of isotope separation (U-238 is separated from U-235).
- For nuclear weapons, enrichment is required upto 90% or more which is known as Highly Enriched Uranium/weapons-grade Uranium.
- For nuclear reactors, enrichment is required upto 3-4% which is known as Low Enriched Uranium/reactor-grade Uranium.

### Iran Nuclear Program and JCPOA:

- In 2015, Iran with the P5+1 group of world powers - the USA, UK, France, China, Russia, and Germany agreed on a long-term deal on its Nuclear Programme.
- The deal was named as Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and in common parlance as Iran Nuclear Deal.
- Under the deal, Iran agreed to curb its nuclear activity in return for the lifting of sanctions and access to global trade.
- The agreement allowed Iran to accumulate small amounts of uranium for research but it banned the enrichment of uranium, which is used to make reactor fuel and nuclear weapons.

- Iran was also required to redesign a heavy-water reactor being built, whose spent fuel would contain plutonium suitable for a bomb and to allow international inspections.
- In May 2018, the USA abandoned the deal criticizing it as flawed and reinstated and tightened its sanctions.
- The USA held that it would attempt to force all countries to stop buying Iranian oil and put pressure on Iran to negotiate a new nuclear accord.
- The top Iranian general Qassem Soleimani (the commander of the Al-Quds Force of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, IRGC) was assassinated by the USA during his visit to Iraq. This escalated tensions in the international arena.
- Amid rising tensions, Britain, France and Germany declared that Iran was violating the 2015 pact and launched a dispute mechanism that could eventually see the matter referred back to the Security Council and the reimposition of UN sanctions.
- Since sanctions were tightened, Iran has been steadily breaking some of its commitments to pressure the remaining signatories to find a way to provide sanctions relief.

### What is the Concern?

- The move will bring Iran closer to the 90 percent purity threshold for military use and shorten its potential "breakout time" to build an atomic bomb.
- Under the previous administration, relations between Washington and Tehran sank to a record low that included maritime skirmishes and the United States assassinating military leader Qassem Soleimani in a drone strike in January 2020.
- Relations between the two sank to their lowest level in decades on Jan. 11, 2020, when Iran, in a heightened state of alert after it fired multiple missiles at two U.S. military bases in Iraq in retaliation for Soleimani's death, shot down an Ukrainian passenger jet leaving Tehran airport, killing all 176 on board.

### Way Forward:

- All countries part of the 2015 deal should engage constructively and resolve all issues peacefully and through dialogue.
- Both the USA and Iran must act with strategic restraint as any crisis in West Asia will not only affect the region as a whole but will have a detrimental impact on global affairs as well.

## 6. NATO to Exit Afghanistan along with U.S.

### Why in News?

- Foreign troops under NATO command will withdraw from Afghanistan in coordination with a U.S. pull-out by September 11, after Germany said it would match American plans to leave after Two Decades of War.

### Why this Move?

- A key reason for a coordinated withdrawal is the fact that NATO relies on U.S. airlift capabilities and shipping to move valuable equipment back home out of landlocked Afghanistan.
- NATO also wants to avoid any hardware falling into the hands of militants, as happened after the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq.

### What does this mean?

- After withdrawing, the United States and NATO aim to rely on Afghan military and police forces, which they have developed with billions of dollars in funding, to maintain security though peace talks are Struggling and the Insurgency is Resilient.

### About North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO):

- It is an intergovernmental military alliance.
- Established by Washington treaty.
- Treaty that was signed on 4 April 1949.
- Headquarters — Brussels, Belgium.
- Headquarters of Allied Command Operations — Mons, Belgium.

### Significance:

- It constitutes a system of collective defence whereby its independent member states agree to mutual defence in response to an attack by any External Party.

### Composition:

- Since its founding, the admission of new member states has increased the alliance from the original 12 countries to 30. The most recent member state to be added to NATO was North Macedonia on 27 March 2020.
- NATO membership is open to “any other European state in a position to further the principles of this Treaty and to contribute to the security of the North Atlantic area.”

## Objectives:

- **Political** – NATO promotes democratic values and enables members to consult and cooperate on defence and security-related issues to solve problems, build trust and, in the long run, Prevent Conflict.
- **Military** – NATO is committed to the peaceful resolution of disputes. If diplomatic efforts fail, it has the military power to undertake crisis-management operations.
- These are carried out under the collective defence clause of NATO's founding treaty – Article 5 of the Washington Treaty or under a United Nations mandate, alone or in cooperation with other countries and International Organisations.

## 7.1. INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS SNIPPETS

### 1. China Cuts Hong Kong's Elected Seats

#### Why in News?

- China's legislature formally approved sweeping changes to Hong Kong's electoral system that will see a sharply reduced share of directly elected representatives and a tightening of Beijing's control in the Special Administrative Region (SAR).

#### Highlights:

- The changes were passed by the 167 members of the National People's Congress (NPC) Standing Committee.
- China's President signed orders to promulgate the amended annexes to Hong Kong's Basic Law, the constitution that has governed the SAR under the "one country, two systems" model since its return to China in 1997.

#### What has Changed?

- The amendments mark the biggest changes to Hong Kong's political system since the handover, and reduce the share of directly elected representatives in its Legislative Council (LegCo).
- While previously, 35 of its 70 members were directly elected, that number has been reduced by 15.
- Now, Hongkongers will only be able to directly vote for 20 representatives while the size of LegCo has been expanded to 90, thereby drastically reducing the share of elected representatives.
- The 70 others will be broadly chosen from pro-establishment bodies.

- The other big change is the setting up of a Candidate Eligibility Review Committee “for reviewing and confirming the eligibility of candidates”.
- Also, a Committee for Safeguarding National Security will be set up that will make findings as to whether a candidate for Election Committee member or for the office of Chief Executive meets the legal requirements.
- There will be no scope for legally challenging the findings.
- District Councillors, who are directly elected, will no longer have a place either in the Election Committee or in LegCo.

### Concerns-Erosion of Autonomy:

- Pro-democracy figures in Hong Kong have seen the political changes, as well as national security law that punishes subversion as the most significant changes in the “one country, two systems” model and as dramatically eroding the autonomy enjoyed by the SAR previously.
- The National Security Law allows Beijing to draft national security laws for Hong Kong and also operate its national security organs in the Special Administrative Region (SAR).
- **“One country, two systems”:**
- Since the return to China in 1997, Hong Kong, a former British colony, has been governed by the Basic Law, which allows the territory “to enjoy executive, legislative and independent judicial power, including that of final adjudication”, barring matters of defence and foreign affairs.
- Article 23 of the Basic Law requires Hong Kong to pass national security legislation, but past attempts to do so were shelved amid protests.

## 2. Pakistan Allows Import of Cotton, Sugar from India

### Why in News?

- Partially reversing a two-year-old decision to suspend all trade with India, Pakistan recently announced that it would allow the import of cotton and sugar from across the border.

### India-Pakistan Trade Relations:

- Trade between the sub continental neighbours has always been linked to their political Interactions, given their Tumultuous Relationship.
- For instance, India’s exports to Pakistan dropped by around 16 per cent to \$1.82 billion in the 2016-17 financial years from \$2.17 billion in 2015-16.

- This coincided with the rise in tensions between the two countries following the terrorist attacks in Uri in 2016 and the surgical strikes by India against Pakistan-based militants.

### How much is the Volume of Trade?

- Trade between the Two Countries grew marginally in subsequent years despite continuing tensions. India's exports to Pakistan increased to nearly 6 per cent to \$1.92 billion in 2017-18, and by around 7 per cent to \$2.07 Billion in 2018-19.
- Imports from Pakistan, though much lower than India's exports to the country, also increased by 7.5 per cent to \$488.56 Million in 2017-18 from \$454.49 Million in 2016-17.
- Growth of imports from Pakistan slowed to around \$494.87 Million in 2018-19 — an increase of around 1 per cent — before political relations between the two countries took a turn for the worse in 2019.

### Why did Pakistan ban Trade with India?

- Pakistan's decision to suspend bilateral trade with India in August 2019 was primarily a fallout of India's decision to scrap Article 370.
- Pakistan called the move "illegal", and took this trade measure as a way of showing its dissatisfaction.
- However, an underlying reason for suspending trade between the two countries was also the 200 per cent tariff imposed by New Delhi on Pakistani imports.
- This was a move that India implemented earlier that year after revoking its status as a Most Favoured Nation following the suicide bomb attack on the CRPF in Pulwama.
- Pakistan's Announcement, coupled with India's decision to revoke its MFN status and hike duties on its goods, was considered by some experts to be one of the most drastic measures ever taken in Diplomatic Tensions.

### Why is Pakistan Allowing Cotton and Sugar Import Now?

- Textiles from Pakistan are its value-added export.
- The proposal to lift the ban on cotton imports came in the backdrop of a shortfall in raw material for Pakistan's textile sector, which has reportedly been facing issues due to a low domestic yield of cotton in the Country.
- On top of this, imports from other countries like the US and Brazil have reportedly been more expensive and takes longer to arrive in the Country.

### Why only these Two Commodities?

- Even when we had a very small positive list (of goods for trade with Pakistan), agricultural commodities were always there in the list.

- Cotton has been one of Pakistan's major imports from India. In 2018-19, Pakistan imported \$550.33 million worth of cotton from India.
- When coupled with \$457.75 million worth of organic chemicals, these products made up around half of its total imports from India.
- Where sugar is concerned, trade experts feel it is a result of a long-standing interdependence between India and Pakistan over such agricultural commodities and a potential shortage in domestic supply.
- If finally approved, cotton and sugar would be the second and third commodities allowed for export from India after Islamabad lifted the ban on medicine and related raw material imports during the Covid-19 pandemic.

### 3. Whitsun Reef

#### Why in News?

- China's aggressive expansion in the South China Sea has found a new ground, Whitsun Reef, where 220 Chinese vessels are currently anchored under the Philippines' Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ).

#### Whitsun Reef:

- Whitsun Reef is a reef at the northeast extreme limit of the Union Banks in the Spratly Islands of the West Philippine Sea.
- It is the largest reef of the Union Banks.
- The reef is V-shaped with an area of about 10 sq. km.
- Until at least the 1990s it was submerged most of the time and was visible above the water only during the low tide, at other times the reef could be detected due to the pattern of breaking waves.
- At the end of the 20th-century small sand dunes had developed on the reef making a territorial claim possible (an International Court of Justice judgment in 2012 stated that "low-tide elevations cannot be appropriated").
- The development of the dunes could have occurred naturally, but the rumours had it that the island was being built up by Vietnam and China.



## Territorial Disputes:

- As of 2016, the reef was unclaimed, the reports to the contrary (Chinese control) were based on confusion.
- However, due to the reef's strategic importance, it was expected that the reef would be occupied "soon".
- On 21 March 2021, about 220 Chinese fishing ships were moored at the reef ostensibly taking shelter due to the sea conditions.

## Why is the Philippines Concerned?

- The Philippines considers the reef to be a part of its exclusive economic zone and continental shelf and protested the Chinese Presence.
- Currently, Philippine Military Aircraft and navy are monitoring the situation daily, and China has been warned that there will be an increased military presence to conduct 'sovereignty patrols'.
- If China is successful with its moves, the Philippines may lose another fishing ground, similar to what happened in 2012 when China took control of Scarborough Shoal.

## The Larger Dispute:

- China and the Philippines, along with other Southeast Asian countries, have long been part of disputes over sovereign claims over the region's islands, reefs and seabeds.
- A third of the world's maritime trade travels through the South China Sea annually.
- The seabeds here are believed to be reserves of oil and natural gas while being home to fisheries essential for the Food Security of millions in South Asia.
- The majority of the disputes concern the lack of adherence to the international 'Exclusive Economic Zones' which stretch up to 200 nautical miles from the coast of any state.
- China, especially, has been notorious for disregarding the law on various occasions.

## What does China have to Say?

- On the present matter, the Chinese have reiterated that the vessels are mere fishing boats seeking shelter from unruly weather, though no bad weather has been reported in the area.
- It is also unlikely that Fishermen would have the financial capital to remain stationary for weeks on end. Experts say through their present occupation, China might be looking to create a civilian base on the reef, an artificial island or even just control the airspace.
- It is widely assessed that Philippines's soft approach has further strengthened China's ambitions in the South China Sea.

## 4. World Cities Culture Forum (WCCF)

### Why in News?

- Recently, the Chief Minister of Delhi will represent Delhi and India at the World Cities Culture Forum (WCCF). The date for this year's annual summit is yet to be announced on the forum's Website.

### Highlights:

- It was established in London in 2012 with eight cities. It has 43 participating member cities.
- The Participating member cities include London, Hong Kong, Amsterdam, Edinburgh, Lisbon, San Francisco, Shanghai, etc.
- Delhi is invited this year but it is not a part of member cities. It enables the policy makers of member cities to share research and intelligence, and explores the vital role of culture in their future prosperity.
- The activities of the World Cities Culture Forum are organised and delivered by BOP Consulting, a specialist consulting firm, on behalf of the Greater London Authority, London's Municipal Government.
- BOP conducts comparative research to measure the impact and importance of culture and creativity, and shares it with the Forum so members can make evidence-based policy decisions.
- World Cities Culture Summit: Forum members collaborate via a programme of events including themed symposia, regional summits and workshops. These events feed into the annual World Cities Culture Summit.
- Hosted on a rotating basis by member cities, this unique gathering allows city leaders to share ideas and knowledge about the role of culture as an organising principle for the sustainable city of the future.
- It is attended by Deputy Mayors for Culture and Heads of Culture from the member cities.
- **The 2021 Theme:** The Future of Culture.
- World Cities Culture Report: Delhi will also be part of the World Cities Culture Report - the most comprehensive global dataset on culture in cities.
- It is published by the forum every three years, with data and details on Innovative Projects from Cities Across the world. The last report was published in 2018.

## 5. International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination.

### Why in News?

- Recently, International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination is observed on 21<sup>st</sup> March Every Year. The day calls for solidarity against Racism and Racial Discrimination.

### Highlights:

- The United Nation General Assembly in October 1966 proclaimed 21<sup>st</sup> March as the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, to be commemorated annually.
- On that day, in 1960, police opened fire and killed 69 people at a peaceful demonstration in Sharpeville, South Africa, against the apartheid pass laws.
- It was a policy which governed relations between South Africa's white minority and non-white majority. It sanctioned racial segregation, political and economic discrimination against non-whites.
- Proclaiming the Day in 1966 which signifies the struggle to end the policy of apartheid in South Africa. Its 2021 Theme is 'Youth standing up against racism'
- Racial discrimination, beyond being a breach of human rights, has harmful effects on human health and well-being, and risks wider disruptions to social cohesion.

### Racism:

- Racism, also called racialism, the belief that humans may be divided into separate and exclusive biological entities called "races"; that there is a causal link between inherited physical traits and traits of personality, intellect, morality, and other cultural and behavioral features; and that some races are innately superior to others.
- The term is also applied to political, economic, or legal institutions and systems that engage in or perpetuate discrimination on the basis of race or otherwise reinforce racial inequalities in wealth and income, education, health care, civil rights, and other areas.
- Xenophobia and Racism mostly overlap, but the stark difference is racism is discrimination based on physical characteristics whereas xenophobia is discrimination based on the perception that someone is foreign or originating from another community or nation.
- The word Xenophobia originates from the Greek word Xeno.

## 6. Ukraine Urges NATO to Speed up Membership

### Why in News?

- Ukrainian President has urged NATO to speed up his country's membership in the alliance, saying it was the only way to end fighting with pro-Russia separatists.

### North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO):

- The NATO, also called the North Atlantic Alliance, is an Intergovernmental Military alliance between 30 European and North American Countries.
- The organization implements the North Atlantic Treaty that was signed on 4 April 1949.
- NATO constitutes a system of collective defence whereby its independent member states agree to mutual defence in response to an attack by any external party.
- NATO's Headquarters are located in Haren, Brussels, Belgium, while the headquarters of Allied Command Operations is near Mons, Belgium.

### Its Members:

- Since its founding, the admission of new member states has increased the alliance from the original 12 countries to 30.
- The most recent member state to be added to NATO was North Macedonia on 27 March 2020. NATO currently recognizes Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, and Ukraine as aspiring members.
- An additional 20 countries participate in NATO's Partnership for Peace program, with 15 other countries involved in institutionalized dialogue programs.

### Why NATO Matters?

- The combined military spending of all NATO members constitutes over 70% of the global nominal total. Members agreed that their aim is to reach or maintain the target defence spending of at least 2% of their GDP by 2024.

## 7. World Economic Outlook

### Why in News?

- Recently, World Economic Outlook has raised its Financial Year (FY) 2021 growth forecast for India to 12.5% from 11.5% estimated earlier in January 2021.

### Highlights:

- Growth rate for India in 2021 is stronger than that of China. Indian economy is expected to grow by 12.5% in 2021 and 6.9% in 2022.

- In 2020, India's economy witnessed an estimated contraction of 8%. China was the only major economy to have a positive growth rate of 2.3% in 2020, and is expected to grow by 8.6% in 2021 and 5.6% in 2022.
- The IMF predicted stronger recovery in 2021 and 2022 with growth projected to be 6% in 2021 and 4.4% in 2022. In 2020, the global economy contracted by 3.3%

### **The Contraction for 2020 is 1.1% Points smaller than Previous Projection, reflecting:**

- Higher-than-expected growth outturns in the second half of the year for most regions after lockdowns were eased and as economies adapted to new ways of working.
- Additional fiscal support in a few large economies and the anticipated vaccine-powered recovery in the second half of the year.
- The emphasis should be on escaping the health crisis by prioritising health care spending, on vaccinations, treatments, and health care infrastructure. Fiscal support should be well targeted to affected households and firms.
- Monetary policy should remain accommodative (where inflation is well behaved), while proactively addressing financial stability risks using macroprudential tools.
- Policymakers will need to continue supporting their economies while dealing with more limited policy space and higher debt levels than prior to the pandemic.
- This requires better targeted measures to leave space for prolonged support if needed. With multi-speed recoveries, a tailored approach is necessary, with policies well-calibrated to the stage of the pandemic, the strength of the economic recovery, and the structural characteristics of individual countries.

### **International Monetary Fund:**

- It was set up along with the World Bank after the Second World War to assist in the reconstruction of war-ravaged countries.
- The two organisations were agreed to be set up at a conference in Bretton Woods in the US. Hence, they are known as the Bretton Woods twins.
- It is created in 1945, the IMF is governed by and accountable to the 189 countries that make up its near-global membership. India joined on 27th December, 1945.
- The IMF's primary purpose is to ensure the stability of the international monetary system – the system of exchange rates and international payments that enables countries (and their citizens) to transact with each other.
- The Fund's mandate was updated in 2012 to include all macroeconomic and financial sector issues that bear on Global Stability.

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## World Economic Outlook:

- It is a survey by the IMF that is usually published twice a year in the months of April and October.
- It analyzes and predicts global economic developments during the near and medium term.
- In response to the growing demand for more frequent forecast updates, the WEO Update is published in January and July between the two main WEO publications released usually in April and October.

## 8. E9 Countries

### Why in News?

- A consultation meeting of Education Ministers of E9 countries was recently held. The meeting was held on the theme 'E9 initiative: Scaling up digital learning to accelerate progress towards SDG4'.

### Highlights:

- The United Nations (UN) is spearheading a global initiative on digital learning and skills for all, targeting marginalized children and youth and aiming to close the digital divide and drive rapid change in education systems.
- This initiative focuses on three of the five priorities of the 2020 Global Education Meeting (GEM) Declaration: supporting teachers; investing in skills; and narrowing the digital divide.

### About E9 Countries:

- They offer a starting gate to accelerate progress on digital learning and skills in the immediate term and ultimately on the SDG4 agenda in the longer term.
- Their Partnership was first established in 1993, formed to achieve the goals of UNESCO's Education For All (EFA).
- A group of E9 countries (Bangladesh, Brazil, China, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Nigeria, and Pakistan) aims at strengthening political will and collective effort to ensure quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all.
- E9 Partnership is working for the achievement of SDG4 – Education 2030.
- An international initiative, first launched at the World Conference on Education for All by UNESCO, UNDP, UNFPA, UNICEF and the World Bank in Thailand in 1990.

- Participants endorsed an 'expanded vision of learning' and pledged to universalize primary education and massively reduce illiteracy by the end of the decade.
- Ten years later, with many countries far from having reached this goal, a broad coalition of national governments, civil society groups, and development agencies met again in Dakar, Senegal, and affirmed the commitment to achieving EFA by the year 2015.
- They identified six key education goals which aim to meet the learning needs of all children, youth and adults by 2015 (e.g. the Dakar Framework for Action).

#### About SDG4:

- To bring sustainable development in the mainstream, the United Nations (UN) member states, in 2015, adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
- There are 17 goals and 169 specific targets to be achieved by 2030.
- It is not legally binding. It is to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.

### 9. 'Suspicious' Blackout Hits Iran Nuclear Site

#### Why in News?

- Iran's underground Natanz nuclear facility lost power just hours after starting up new advanced centrifuges capable of Enriching Uranium Faster.

#### Highlights:

- Iran described the blackout as an act of Nuclear Terrorism, raising Regional Tensions.
- Multiple Israeli media outlets reported that an Israeli cyberattack caused the blackout.
- Israeli media maintains a close relationship with the country's Intelligence Agencies.
- Public broadcaster Kan said the Mossad (the national intelligence agency of Israel) was behind the attack.
- The head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran emphasised the need for a confrontation by the international bodies and the International Atomic Energy Agency against the act.

#### Concerns:

- If Israel caused the blackout, it further heightens tensions between the two nations, already engaged in a shadow conflict across the wider West Asia.
- The latest incident comes amid Negotiations over the crumbling atomic accord with world powers.

- The developments also complicate the efforts by the U.S., Israel's main security partner, to re-enter the atomic accord aimed at limiting Tehran's nuclear programme.
- Natanz was built largely underground to withstand enemy airstrikes.
- It became a flashpoint for Western fears about Iran's nuclear plan in 2002 when satellite photos showed Iran building its Underground Centrifuges facility at the site.

## 10. India's South Asian opportunity

### Why in News?

- India-Pakistan relations weigh down heavily on the SAARC. This affects the economic development of the region. The highlight opportunity for India and Pakistan to separate politics from Economics.

### Economic Integration:

- There is a growing, but unstated, Realisation that neither India nor Pakistan can wrest parts of Kashmir that each Controls from the other.
- A fair peace between India and Pakistan is not just good for the two states but for all the nations constituting the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC).
- While SAARC has facilitated limited collaborations among its members, it has remained a victim of India-Pakistan posturing.
- World Bank publication titled 'A Glass Half Full' conclude that there is explosive value to be derived from South Asian economic integration.
- An economically transformed and integrated South Asian region could advantageously link up with China's Belt and Road Initiative and even join the RCEP.

### Important Role of India:

- Collectively with a population of slightly over 1.9 billion, South Asia has a GDP (PPP) of \$12 Trillion.
- However, India's enjoys an overwhelming 'size imbalance' in South Asia.
- The shares of India in the total land area, population, and real GDP of South Asia in 2016 are 62%, 75%, and 83%, respectively.
- The two other big countries in South Asia are Pakistan and Bangladesh with shares in regional GDP of only 7.6% and 5.6%, respectively.
- Given its size and heft, only India can take the lead in transforming a grossly under-performing region like South Asia.