7. Bhutan Ends Free Entry for Indian Tourists

Prelims Level: India & Bhutan

Mains Level: GS-II India and its Neighbourhood- Relations.

Why in News?

- The Government of Bhutan has decided to levy a daily RS.1,200 ($17) fee for regional tourists from India, the Maldives and Bangladesh, beginning July 2020.

Highlights:

- The fee, called a Sustainable Development Fee (SDF), is meant to help the government deal with burgeoning numbers in tourist traffic, which it is seeking to regulate through a new tourism policy.
- The decision was passed by the National Assembly as a 'Tourism Levy and Exemption Bill of Bhutan', 2020.
- The SDF is considerably lower than the $65 charged to other foreign tourists, who are also charged a compulsory flat "cover charge" of $250 per day.
- Indians mainly travel to the more developed western region of Bhutan. In a move to promote tourism in Bhutan's eastern region as well, the government has decided to drop SDF charges for tourists visiting 11 of 20 total districts that fall in the east from Trongsa to Trashigang.
- Regional tour operators, especially from West Bengal have expressed concerns that the SDF will have dampening effect on numbers, and impact the heavy rush during the October.
- India's hesitation also comes as the new SDF, while a seemingly small amount compared to the fees charged to other nationalities, could be seen as a way of making Indian tourists feel unwelcome.
- In the past year, Bhutanese newspapers have often complained about Indian tourists who don't pay heed to local customs and picnickers who litter the country's pristine Environment.
- In 2018, of the 2,74,000 tourists visiting Bhutan, the council estimated that about 2,00,000 were from the region, of which about 1,80,000 were from India.