

1. 1974 Joint Protocol on Religious Pilgrimages

Why in News?

- The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) has recently announced that India is “positive” and “willing to engage” in talks with Pakistan on upgrading the 1974 Joint Protocol on Religious Pilgrimages.

Highlights:

- It will allow air travel as well as increase the number of shrines pilgrims from both countries could visit.
- The Government also reopened the Kartarpur Sahib Gurudwara corridor to Pakistan to allow Sikh pilgrims to cross over, more than 20 months after it was shut down due to the Covid-19 pandemic.
- Earlier, India and Pakistan had exchanged a list of their nuclear installations.
- Under the protocol both the countries agreed on the following principles for facilitating **visits to such shrines** :
- Pilgrimage visits from one country to the other shall be allowed without discrimination as to religion or sect. The list of shrines to be visited shall be finalised shortly through correspondence.
- The agreed list may be enlarged from time to time by Mutual Agreement.
- The protocol currently includes five Muslim shrines on the Indian side and 15 shrines on the Pakistani side, a majority of them gurdwaras.
- Upto 20 parties may be allowed to visit from one country to the other every year. This number may be revised from time to time.
- Every effort should continue to be made to ensure that places of religious worship mentioned in the agreed list are properly maintained and their sanctity preserved.
- Such visitors will be given Visitor Category visas.
- The Kartarpur corridor connects the Darbar Sahib Gurudwara in Narowal district of Pakistan with the Dera Baba Nanak shrine in Gurdaspur district in India’s Punjab province.
- The corridor was built to commemorate 550th birth anniversary celebrations of Guru Nanak Dev, founder of Sikhism on 12th November 2019.

2. US Federal Reserve (central bank of US)

Why in News?

- The US Federal Reserve (central bank of US) has recently signalled a possible hike in interest rates. This has led to a nervous reaction in Indian markets.

Highlights:

- Rate hikes by the Federal Reserve affects not only the US economy, but also shapes the Macroeconomic Outlook and exerts a certain degree of influence on the monetary policies in other Emerging Economies.
- Emerging economies such as India tend to have higher inflation and higher interest rates than those in developed countries such as the US and many of the (primarily Western) European nations.
- As a result, financial institutions, particularly Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) would want to borrow money in the US at low interest rates in dollar terms and then invest that money in government bonds of emerging countries such as India in local currency terms to earn a higher rate of interest.
- When the US Federal raises its domestic interest rates, the difference between the interest rates of the two countries decreases.
- This makes India less attractive for the currency carry trade, consequently, some of the money may be expected to move out of the Indian markets and flow back to the US.
- A currency carry trade is a strategy whereby a high-yielding currency funds the trade with a low-yielding currency.
- Therefore decreasing the value of India's currency against the US dollar.
- Bond yields will rise due to growing dollar shortage in the global market.
- Previously, in India, the debt and equity markets witnessed outflows of over Rs 40,000 crore rupees, due to the strengthening dollar and uncertainties perpetrated by the trade war between the US, China, European Union, and other major nations.
- India's exports on the other hand, notably IT and IT-enabled services – will benefit to some extent from a stronger dollar with respect to the rupee.
- However, the same benefit may not fully accrue to exporters due to strong competition in the export market.

3. 'Fly Ash Management and Utilisation Mission

Why in News?

- The National Green Tribunal (NGT) has recently directed the constitution of a 'Fly Ash Management and Utilisation Mission.

Highlights:

- The order by the NGT takes note of the 'unscientific handling and storage' of the fly ash by coal thermal power stations.
- For example, the draining of industrial effluents and fly ash in the Rihand Reservoir.
- The Fly Ash Management and Utilisation Mission, besides monitoring the disposal of annual stock of unutilised fly ash, will also see how 1,670 million tonnes of legacy (accumulated) fly ash could be utilized in the least hazardous manner and how all safety measures could be taken by the power plants.
- The Mission will hold its first meeting within one month to assess the fly ash management situation in coal power plants and to prepare action plans to build road maps for ash utilisation by individual plants.
- These meetings shall be conducted each month, for a year.
- To 'coordinate and monitor issues relating to the handling and disposal of fly ash and associated issues.'
- The Mission is to be jointly headed by the secretaries of the Union Ministry of Environment, Forest & Climate Change (MoEF&CC), Union Ministry of Coal and Power, keeping on board chief secretaries of respective states where the mission is being implemented.
- The secretary of MoEF&CC will be the nodal agency for coordination and compliance.
- Fly Ash Notification 2021 was issued under the Environment (Protection) Act 1986.
- Prohibiting dumping and disposal of fly ash discharged from coal or lignite based thermal power plants on land or into water bodies, the Centre has made it mandatory for such plants to ensure 100% utilization of ash in an eco-friendly manner, and introduced for the first time a penalty regime for non-compliance based on 'polluter pays' principle.

4. Worries over the electoral bond scheme go beyond its unconstitutionality

Why in News?

- Ever since its introduction, the electoral bond scheme has Envenomed the Democratic process, by destroying altogether any notion of Transparency in political funding.

Issue of Anonymity in Electoral Bond:

- The electoral bond scheme is designed to allow an individual, or any “artificial juridical person”, including body Corporates, to purchase bonds issued by the State Bank of India during notified Periods of time.
- These instruments are issued in the form of promissory notes, and in denominations ranging from ₹1,000 to ₹1 crore.
- Once purchased, the buyer can donate the bond to any political party of their choice and the party can then encash it on demand.

Supreme Court's Opinion:

- The Supreme Court has allowed the scheme to continue unabated and has denied an interim stay on its operation.
- In one such provisional order, the Court asserted that the bonds were not, in fact, Anonymous.
- According to the Court, since both the purchase and the encashment of bonds are made through banking channels, all it would take for a person to glean the identity of a donor was for her to look through every corporation's financial statement — these records, the Court said, ought to be available with the Registrar of Companies.
- What the order ignored was that there is no attendant obligation on political parties to provide details to the public on each donation received by them through electoral bonds.
- Companies are also under no obligation to disclose the name of the party to whom they made the Donation.

Violation of Voter's Right:

- The Supreme Court has consistently held that voters have a right to freely express themselves during an election and that they are entitled to all pieces of information that give purpose and vigour to this right.

- Surely, to participate in the electoral process in a meaningful manner and to choose one's votes carefully, a citizen must know the identity of those backing the candidates.
- Electoral bond does not eliminate the role of black money in funding elections:
- As affidavits filed by the Election Commission of India in the Supreme Court have demonstrated, the scheme, if anything, augments the potential role of black money in Elections.
- It does so by, among other things, removing existing barriers against shell entities and dying concerns from donating to political parties.
- Moreover, even if the bonds were meant to eliminate the presence of unaccounted currency, it is difficult to see what nexus the decision to provide complete anonymity of the Donor bears to this objective.
- It is for this reason that the Reserve Bank of India reportedly advised the Government against the scheme's introduction.

Conclusion:

- The worries over the electoral bond scheme, however, go beyond its patent unconstitutionality. This is because in allowing anonymity it befouls the basis of our democracy and prevents our elections from being truly free and fair.

5. Anganwadis should provide early childhood care and education

Why in News?

- The National Education Policy, 2020 has rightly highlighted the importance of early childhood care and education (ECCE), vital for the young child's early cognitive, social, and emotional development.
- Need for focus on early childhood care and education (ECCE):
- The National Family Health Survey-5 (NFHS-5) finds only 13.6 per cent of children enrolled in pre-primary schools.
- With its overriding focus on health and nutrition, ECCE has hitherto been the weakest link of the anganwadi system.
- Multiple administrative duties have left anganwadi workers with little time for ECCE.
- A child's early learning begins at birth, initially through stimulation, play, interactions, non-verbal and verbal communication.

- Unfortunately, due to a lack of parental awareness compounded by the daily stresses of poverty, disadvantaged households are unable to provide an early learning environment.
- The existing system at best serves the age group of 3-6 years, ignoring infants and toddlers.

Way forward:

1. A meaningful ECCE Programme in Anganwadis

- A meaningful ECCE programme in anganwadis is not only a more intelligent and cost-effective strategy but is also feasible to implement through seven concerted actions.
1. Activity-based framework which reflect local context: To design and put in place a meaningful activity-based ECCE framework that recognises the ground realities with autonomy to reflect the local context and setting.
 2. Remove non-ICDS work: Routine tasks of anganwadi workers can be reduced and non-ICDS work, such as surveys, removed altogether.
 3. Extend Anganwadi time: Anganwadi hours can be extended by at least three hours by providing staff with an increase in their present remuneration, with the additional time devoted for ECCE.

Karnataka has already taken the lead; its anganwadis work from 9.30 am to 4 pm.

This will have the added benefit of serving as partial daycare, enabling poor mothers to earn a livelihood.

4. Change in policy mindset: ICDS needs a change in policy mindset, both at central and state levels, by prioritising and monitoring ECCE.
5. Engagement with parents: Anganwadi workers must be re-oriented to closely engage with parents, as they play a crucial role in the cognitive development of young children.
Responsive parenting requires both parents to play an active role in ECCE activities at home; therefore, anganwadi workers should be asked to consciously engage with fathers too.
Appropriate messaging and low-cost affordable teaching materials can be designed and made accessible to parents.
6. Activity-based play material: ICDS must supply age-appropriate activity-based play material in adequate quantities regularly, and anganwadi workers encouraged to utilise them in a liberal manner.
7. Invest in research and training: States should invest in research and training to support early childhood education, and ensure that the ECCE programme is not a downward Extension of School Education.

2. Pre-primary sections in Government Primary Schools:

- Some educationists have suggested that owing to the high workload of anganwadi workers, ECCE in anganwadis would remain a non-starter.
- Therefore, all government primary schools should open pre-primary sections, with anganwadis limiting themselves to the 0-3 age group.
- Challenges: It would require a massive outlay to build over a million classrooms with a million nursery teachers and helpers — even a conservative estimate would put the additional annual outlay at over Rs 30,000 crore.
- Moreover, with child stunting levels at 35 per cent in India, would children enrolled in pre-schools would require supplementary nutrition and health monitoring.
- This would overburden the nursery teacher.
- Nearly 1.4 million anganwadis of the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) across India must provide ECCE for the millions of young children in low-income households.

