

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

Why in News?

- India has recently hosted the Second Agriculture Ministerial-level meeting of the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC).

Highlights

- India urged the member countries to cooperate in developing a comprehensive regional strategy to strengthen cooperation for the transformation of agriculture.
- It also urged the member countries to adopt a conducive agricultural food system and a healthy diet for all by referring to the importance of millet as a nutritious food and the efforts made by India to promote millet and its products during the International Year of Millets – 2023.
- Natural and ecological farming should be promoted to conserve agricultural biodiversity and reduce the use of chemicals.
- Along with digital farming and precision farming, initiatives under the ‘One Health’ approach are also taking shape in India.
- Highlighted India’s statement at the 5th BIMSTEC Summit held in Colombo in March, 2022 on enhancing regional cooperation between BIMSTEC nations for food security, peace and prosperity in the region.
- Adopted the Action Plan for Strengthening BIMSTEC Agricultural Cooperation (2023-2027).
- An MoU (Memorandum of Understanding) between the BIMSTEC Secretariat and the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) has been signed and approval has been given to bring fisheries and livestock sub-sectors under the Agricultural Working Group.
- The BIMSTEC has huge potential as a natural platform for development cooperation in a rapidly changing geopolitical calculus and can leverage its unique position as a pivot in the Indo-Pacific region.
- The growing value of BIMSTEC can be attributed to its geographical contiguity, abundant natural and human resources, and rich historical linkages and a cultural heritage for promoting deeper cooperation in the region.

- The Bay of Bengal region has the potential to become the epicentre of the Indo-Pacific idea, a place where the strategic interests of the major powers of East and South Asia intersect.
- It serves as a bridge between two major high-growth centres of Asia — South and Southeast Asia.

2. Report on Municipal Finances

Why in News?

- The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has recently released the Report on Municipal Finances, compiling and analyzing budgetary data for 201 Municipal Corporations (MCs) across all States

Highlights

- The RBI Report explores ‘Alternative Sources of Financing for Municipal Corporations’ as its theme
- There have been several lacunae in the working of MCs and no appreciable improvement in their functioning despite institutionalisation of the structure of local governance in India.
- The availability and quality of essential services for urban populations in India has consequently remained poor.
- Most municipalities only prepare budgets and review actuals against budget plans but do not use their audited financial statements for balance sheet and cash flow management, resulting in significant inefficiencies.
- While the size of the municipal budgets in India are much smaller than peers in other countries, revenues are dominated by property tax collections and devolution of taxes and grants from upper tiers of government, resulting in lack of financial autonomy.
- MCs’ committed expenditure in the form of establishment expenses, administrative costs and interest and finance charges is rising, but capital expenditure is minimal.
- MCs mostly rely on borrowings from banks and financial institutions and loans from centre/ state governments to finance their resource gaps in the absence of a well-developed market for municipal bonds.

- MCs need to adopt sound and transparent accounting practices with proper monitoring and documentation of various receipt and expenditure items, and explore different innovative bond and land-based financing mechanisms to augment their resources.
- The rapid rise in urban population density, however, calls for better urban infrastructure, and hence, requires greater flow of financial resources to Local governments.
- With the revenue generation capacity of municipal corporations declining over time, dependence on the devolution of taxes and grants from the upper tiers has risen. This calls for innovative financing mechanisms.
- Municipalities in India need to balance their budgets by law, and any municipal borrowing needs to be approved by the State government.
- In order to improve the buoyancy of municipal revenue, the Centre and the States may share one-sixth of their GST (Goods and Services Tax).

3. SVAMITVA Scheme

Why in News?

- The Report of the Expert Committee on SVAMITVA Scheme was recently released during the National Conference on SVAMITVA Scheme and Rural Planning in Madhya Pradesh.

Highlights

- The report provides the guiding principles that States may adopt, in order to realize the objectives of the SVAMITVA Scheme holistically.
- The Expert Committee was formed in 2022 consisting of domain experts from Land Governance, Banking, Survey of India, National Informatics Centre (NIC) -Geographic information system (GIS), State Revenue and Panchayati Raj Departments, Industry and premier Planning and Architecture Institutes.
- To create systems that promote transparency in the implementation of the scheme.
- Promote the adoption of record of rights for availing bank loan.
- Develop linkages between different departments for informed decision-making related to property tax assessment and collection.
- Wider adoption of SVAMITVA data-sets by government and private agencies as per new geospatial guidelines.
- Adoption of RADPFI (Rural Area Development Plan Formulation and Implementation) Guidelines and SVAMITVA data for accurate village level-planning

- Increasing capacity at State, District and Block level for GIS skill sets, among others.
- SVAMITVA stands for Survey of Villages and Mapping with Improvised Technology in Village Areas.
- It is a center sector scheme which was launched nationally on the occasion of National Panchayati Raj Day on 24th April 2021.
- The demarcation of rural inhabited areas would be done using CORS (Continuously Operating Reference Stations) Networks which provides mapping accuracy of 5 cm.
- This would provide the ‘record of rights’ to village household owners possessing houses in inhabited rural areas in villages.
- It will cover around 6.62 Lakh villages of the entire country during 2021-2025

4. Universal Periodic Review (UPR) Working Group

Why in News?

- The Human Rights Council (HRC) Universal Periodic Review (UPR) session was recently held in Geneva, where India’s human rights record was examined by the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) Working Group.

Highlights

- The UPR is a unique process which involves a periodic review of the human rights records of all 193 UN Member States.
- Since its first meeting was held in April 2008, all 193 UN member States have been reviewed thrice within the first, second and third UPR cycles.
- The ultimate aim of this mechanism is to improve the human rights situation in all countries and address human rights violations wherever they occur. Currently, no other universal mechanism of this kind exists.
- During the review process, States outline specific steps they have taken to implement recommendations posed during their previous reviews and highlight their recent human rights developments.
- The three country representatives serving as rapporteurs (“troika”) for the review of India are: Sudan, Nepal and the Netherlands.
- This review marks the beginning of the UPR fourth cycle. India’s first, second and third UPR reviews took place in April 2008, May 2012 and May 2017, respectively.
- National report – information provided by the State under review

- Information contained in the reports of independent human rights experts and groups, known as the Special Procedures, human rights treaty bodies, and other UN entities
- Information provided by other stakeholders including national human rights institutions, regional organizations and civil society groups
- Greece, the Netherlands and Vatican City called upon the Government of India to ensure freedom of religion and end discrimination against human rights defenders and religious minorities.
- India appreciates the role of human rights defenders, journalists and activists in the democratic system but the activities of these groups and individuals should be in conformity with the law of the land.
- Germany expressed concern about the rights situation in India especially religious minorities as well as women and girls.
- Germany also said that the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act should not “unduly restrict” the “freedom of association” in India.
- The German representative called upon India to strengthen the National Human Rights Commission and said the discrimination against Dalits should end.
- Nepal called for India to strengthen measures to end violence against women and end child marriage.
- Russia asked India to continue to take policies that will eradicate poverty and called for “responsible corporate behaviour”.
- India said that actions were taken against some organizations due to their illegal practices including malafide re-routing of money and wilful and continuing violations of extant legal provisions, foreign exchange management rules and tax law of India.