

CURRENT AFFAIRS – NOVEMBER 2017

POLITY, GOVERNANCE AND PUBLIC POLICY

Karnataka Private Medical Establishments (Amendment) Bill

In News: The private health sector in Karnataka is protesting against the state government proposed KPME (Amendment) Bill 2017.

About the Bill

- The Karnataka Private Medical Establishments Act was passed in 2007.
- The legislation aimed at being a legal control over private medical establishments (PMEs) in the state.
- 2017 amendment is intends to bring the PME's under the purview of the government.
- The proposed amendments are based on the recommendations of former Supreme Court judge Vikramajit Sen.
- Passing the bill would facilitate the rolling out of the State government's Universal Health Coverage (UHC) scheme called 'ArogyaBhagya'.

Proposed Amendments

- Primarily, the Bill makes the **registration of PME's mandatory** and lays down guidelines to ensure their quality.
- The main amendments include increasing the fine for running a non-registered private medical establishment.
- Similarly, the fine and term of imprisonment for non-adherence to the rules regarding maintenance of clinical records and payments has been increased.
- The amendments make it mandatory to provide lifesaving emergency measures without insisting on advance payment as in the current practice.
- And in the event of death, the body of the deceased should be released immediately without insisting on payment of dues.
- Every PME should display prominently the **Patient's Charter** and Private Medical Establishment's Charter.
- The amendments will pave the way for the government to fix the rates for each class of treatment, and also provide grievance Redressal systems.

Concerns

- The amendments have been met with fierce criticism from the private doctors' associations.
- The private health sector finds contentious the provisions like price capping of various procedures, imprisonment of doctors and setting up of a grievance redressal cell.
- There are demands for making the provisions applicable to the government hospitals as well.
- The protests call for enhancing the standards of health care at government hospitals before regulating private medical establishments.

Way Forward

- The amendment law for governing private medical establishments is a logical step to provide universal health coverage in the State.
- However, there is a need to ensure parity in services offered by government and private institutions and end the neglect of public facilities especially in rural areas.
- Beyond regulation of prices for some drugs, streamlining the processes for centralised procurement and free distribution of essential medicines to all is essential.
- All health institutions participating in a universal access programme should be governed by common regulations and regulators to eliminate fragmentation of functions.
- The country as a whole should try bringing in such measures to make a transition to universal health access in line with the Sustainable Development Goal.

Role of Parliament in Governance

In News: The Parliament's Winter Session has been delayed this year.

Role of Parliament in Democracy

- The Constitution provides for the legislature to make laws, scrutinize the functioning of the executive, and hold the executive accountable for its decisions.
- The Constitution provides for MPs to raise issues of public importance in Parliament, and examine the Government's response to problems being faced by citizens through -
 1. **Debate** - which entails a reply by the concerned minister
 2. **Motion** - which entails a vote
- Motions are made for discussing important issues such as inflation, corruption, drought, etc. or adjourning the business in the house or to express no confidence in the Government.

- The Government is collectively responsible to Parliament for its actions.
- The Parliament may use various methods including, debates on Bills and issues, questioning ministers during Question Hour and in parliamentary committees.
- Question Hour is one of the forums of holding the Government accountable for its actions.
- During this hour, MPs pose questions to the ministers regarding the implementation of laws and policies by the Government.

Who Convenes Parliament?

- The constitution provide for the President to convene the Parliament atleast once in 6 months.
- Since the President acts on the advice of the central government, the duration of the session is decided by the Government.
- However, this practice of allowing the Government to convene Parliament differs from those followed in other countries.
- In a parliamentary democracy, the executive is accountable to Parliament, so there must limited role for the Government in summoning the Legislature.

Frequency of the Session

- Lok Sabha met for an average of 130 days in a year during the 1950s but these sittings came down to 70 days in the 2000s.
- This decline indicates that Parliament was able to transact less business compared to previous years.
- To address this, the National Commission to Review the Working of the Constitution has recommended that Lok Sabha should have at least 120 sittings in a year, while Rajya Sabha should have 100.
- There is a lower rate of functioning Question Hour due to the disruptions, which reduce the number of questions that may be answered orally.
- While Parliament may sit for extra hours to transact other business, time lost during Question Hour is not made up.

Way Forward

- Given the legislature's role in keeping the executive accountable for its actions, the Parliament should convene itself, so that it can effectively exercise its oversight functions.
- There can be a mechanism which scrutinizes and answers the questions asked in the Question Hour with required inter-ministerial expertise and broader government policies.
- UK has the Prime Minister's Question Time on weekly basis to address the questions posed by MPs. Such measures can be adopted.

Need for an Anti-Superstition Law

Context

- There are many regions in the country which still witness human sacrifices, abuses and exploitation in the name of religion.
- India needs a targeted legislation to effectively curb such inhuman superstitious practices.

Need for the Law

- **IPC** - The provisions in the Indian Penal Code (IPC) is not equipped to take care of crimes committed on account of black magic and other superstitious practices.
- The cognisance of human sacrifice is in the Indian Penal Code (IPC) only after the murder is committed.
- **Nature** - The relationship between a devotee and so-called godman is of a peculiar nature, often marked by subtly identifiable violence.
- Also, the acts involving human sacrifice cannot be stopped as they are often preceded by some puja and offerings.
- These religious ceremonies are certainly not banned under any law.

Maharashtra's Legislation

- Maharashtra has implemented the Maharashtra Prevention and Eradication of Human Sacrifice and Other Inhuman, Evil and Aghori Practices and Black Magic Act, 2013.
- This anti-superstition law primarily addresses exploitation in the name of religion.
- The legislation has a capacity to act as a deterrent for many inhuman practices.
- It has considerably curbed the act of human sacrifice as it is banned under the law.
- A section in the legislation specifically addresses and checks claims made by 'godmen' who say they have supernatural powers.
- The law also makes it possible to curtail activities of so-called godmen before they become too powerful.

Way Forward

- Opponents to the legislation in Maharashtra had claimed that the law would affect the religious practices of the Hindus.
- However, superstitious practices that are utterly dehumanising, brutal and exploitative need to be dealt with by a specific law.
- India should seriously consider bringing in place a legislation similar to that of the Maharashtra anti-superstition law.
- It is not to be denied that every superstition could not be removed by the force of law; social and mental changes are also necessary.

Children's Safety

In News: Humanitarian Aid Organization's survey reports that one out of every two Indian children has experienced sexual abuse.

Cause

- In large cities, children spend as many as 8 to 9 hours a day away from home, and those in smaller towns and rural areas spend 5 to 6 hours outside the home.
- There is a three-way trust deficit between schools, parents and the Government, especially when there is a gruesome incidence of violence against children, gets aggravated.

Measures Needs to be taken

- An open dialogue involving all three stakeholders will go a long way towards to enable the building preventive response mechanisms.
- There is a need to develop a Uniform Child Protection Policy for all schools private or government, and even tribal ashrams in remote parts of the country.
- The policy should emphasize on 'gatekeeping' to ensure that the recruitment of both teaching and non-teaching staff is done after thorough police verification and psycho-social assessment.
- Also trained counselors must be enrolled mandatorily in schools that can both prevent and detect abuse of children.
- All teachers need to be sensitized about child abuse, taught to recognize it and made aware of laws such as the POCSO Act.
- Awareness Sessions for children on safety and prevention of abuse also ought to become part of the curriculum.

Existing Mechanisms

- **National Policy for Children, 2013** - recognises every person below the age of eighteen years as a child and covers all children within the territory and jurisdiction of the country.
- Four key priority areas in Policy are
 1. Survival, Health and Nutrition.
 2. Education and Development.
 3. Protection and Participation.
 4. Focused Attention
- **Prevention of Children from Sexual Offences (POSCO) Act 2012** - It protects children from offenses of sexual abuse, sexual harassment and pornography and to provide a child-friendly system for the trial of these offences.
- **Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Amendment Act 2015**

Concerns in Child labour Eradication

In News: It is estimated recently that it would be difficult to achieve the child labour eradication target by 2025.

Global Status

- The International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates those eight years from now, around 121 million boys and girls would still be engaged in various occupations.
- The present figure is around 152 million children aged 5-17.
- Around 71% of working children are concentrated in the agriculture sector, with 69% of them undertaking unpaid work in family units.

Implications of India's Target

- In 2015 union government set a target to eradicate child labour by 2025.
- At a recent conference in Buenos Aires India told that it will miss the deadline.
- The implication is also that realizing the objective could take well over 20 years after the expiry of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
- It is a shame that the goal to eradicate child labour by 2025 seems intangible

India's challenge

- If countries resolve to reinvigorate their efforts to reach the target, they would be looking at a reduction each year of 19 million.
- That is close to five times the prevalent pace of decline.

- There was a slowdown in the reduction of child labour, just one percentage point, during the four years until 2016.
- More worrisome is that there was almost no progress with respect to the rescue of children under 12 years in the four years since 2012.
- Equally, the decline in child labour among girls was only half the proportion of that of boys during this period.

Reasons for Lack of Progress

- There is an absence of national legislation to give effect to global conventions on the employment of children in hazardous industries, as well as on the minimum age of work.
- The fact that the two instruments have received the largest number of ratifications brings into sharp focus the lack of harmony between global commitments and domestic priorities.
- Incoherency between laws that prescribe a minimum age for employment and those for completion of compulsory school education.
- Due to absence of strong collective bargaining mechanisms and effective social protection policies it is tedious to implement social policies.

Upgraded TRAI's rules

In News: The Telecom Regulatory Authority of India has proposed to raise the cap on the quantum of spectrum held by a mobile operator.

Spectrum

- Telecom spectrum is about the frequencies that are used to transmit sound and data across the country to our phones.
- Every telecom operator has been assigned certain portions of spectrum to use in India, through auctions and administrative allocations.

Existing Rules

- The existing rule allows an operator to own only 50 per cent of the spectrum in a particular frequency band, and not more than 25 per cent of the overall spectrum available.
- For example, 1800 MHz band was allocated to offer GSM-based 2G services while 800 MHz band was for CDMA services.
- This rule was effective when there were seven to twelve operators in each circle and different frequency bands were used for offering different services.
- Having a lower spectrum cap made sense as it prevented concentration of a particular frequency band with one player.

Need for New Set of Rules

- The technological developments enable operators to utilize multiple frequency bands for the same service.
- For example, both 1800 MHz band and 800 MHz band are used for offering 4G services.
- Therefore, it does not make sense to put a cap when it comes to spectrum ownership in specific frequency bands.
- Also, the average spectrum holdings of mobile operators in India is low in comparison with international standards, when the average data usage per subscriber per month is expected to shoot up from 6 GB to 11 GB in the next few years.
- Any limitations due to spectrum cap may also dampen the bidding intensity in future auctions, as most large operators are nearing the existing cap.

White Paper on Data Protection Framework

In News: Srikrishna Committee recently released a white paper as part of its mandate to draft a data protection and privacy Bill.

Need for Data Protection

- The Committee was set up by the Ministry of Electronics and IT following the decision to make Aadhaar compulsory for many government services.
- Private entities are also increasingly using Aadhaar for the purpose of authentication and financial transactions.
- Notably, the Aadhaar is being issued by the UIDAI after collecting individual's personal and biometric data.
- Despite an obligation to adopt adequate security safeguards, no database is 100 per cent secure.
- Evidently, despite UIDAI's various in-built data protection mechanisms, it is not bound to inform an individual in cases of misuse or theft of his or her data.
- Thus, the interplay between any proposed data protection framework and the existing Aadhaar framework will have to be analysed.

Key Highlights

- The committee has identified seven key principles for the data protection law, which include:
 1. **Technology agnosticism** - flexibility of the law for adapting to changing technologies and standards of compliance.
 2. **Holistic application** - governing both private sector entities and the government; differential obligations for certain legitimate state aims.
 3. **Informed consent** - informed and meaningful consent of the individual must be ensured by the law.
 4. **Data minimization** - Data that is processed ought to be minimal, only for targeted and other compatible purposes.
 5. **Controller accountability** - The data controller shall be held accountable for any processing of data.
 6. **Structured enforcement** - There should be a high-powered statutory authority with sufficient capacity and decentralized mechanisms for enforcement of the data protection framework.
 7. **Deterrent penalties** - Penalties on wrongful processing of data must be adequate to ensure deterrence.
- **SPDI** - The white paper has laid down for the protection of sensitive personal data or information (SPDI) by which a person is identifiable.
- This essentially means that any social media site, search engine, telecom operator or government agency cannot sell or disclose SPDI of individuals.
- It has identified health and genetic information, religious beliefs and affiliation, sexual orientation, and racial and ethnic origin as SPDI.
- It has also placed caste and financial information in this category.
- The committee prescribes punishments in case of violations of regulations in using SPDI.
- At present, the IT Act rules on security practices and sensitive personal data are applicable only to private or corporate entities.
- **Data Breaches** - The law may require that individuals be notified of data breaches where there is a likelihood of privacy harms.
- However the paper noted that fixing too short a time period for individual notifications might be too onerous on smaller organisations.
- As, such an organisation may not have the necessary information about the breach and its likely consequences.
- Thus it is suggested that both government and the private entities be brought under the ambit of the proposed law.
- **Exemptions** - The Committee has made certain exemptions in relation to collecting information.
- This is in reference to investigating a crime, apprehension or prosecution of offenders, and maintaining national security and public order.
- But, the committee also insists on devising an effective review mechanism.
- **Penalty** - A civil penalty of a specific amount may be imposed on the data controller for each day of violation.
- **Besides**, it suggested setting up a data protection authority, data audit, registration of data collectors, enacting provisions for protecting children's personal data, etc.

Net Neutrality: Constitutional Doctrines and Stake Context

- The Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) has recently rolled out a series of recommendations in strong support of Net neutrality.
- TRAI's support for Net neutrality comes as an adaptation to backing the constitutional principles in the emerging era of Internet.
- Federal Communications Commission (FCC) of the US announced the 'Restoring Internet Freedom Order'. This could potentially end the content neutral era of the internet.

Net Neutrality

- It is the concept in which all online content providers (all websites or apps) are treated equally by telecom operators.
- Notably, a consumer gets access to all websites equally and speed of access is not differentiated for any content.
- ISPs are mandated to not interfere with or block the content that a consumer accesses, views or posts online.
- This also specifically outlaws content specific offers/charges on consumers in order to ensure equality.

Upholding Constitutional Values

- **Equality** - The government, as a trustee of public interest, is bound to devise mechanisms for an **equal distribution of resources**.
- Net neutrality, by facilitating a free and open Internet, contributes to equality in the use of a common resource that has almost become an **essential good**.
- It has ensured that there are no technical imbalances in a way of distorting **equality and reasonableness**.
- **Liberty** - The Internet is now affordable to millions of Indians without the traditional costs of distribution.
- The non-discriminatory principle for Internet content through net neutrality has upheld the liberty of making choice by the user.
- **Speech and Expression** - Allowing citizens the benefit of plurality of views and opinions on public issues is an essential component of the right to free speech.
- Net neutrality thus defends the freedom of speech and expression by ensuring both the right to express and the right to receive information.

Significance

- Content in Internet today is potential of sparking a spontaneous campaign, mobilizing huge crowd, roping in civil society and even necessitating governmental intervention.
- In this context, the ideas of **equality, reasonableness and liberty are more than mere limitations** on state power in favor of individuals.
- They can transform into more meaningful doctrines when put into motion by the positive actions of the regulators and governments.
- The whole concept of Net neutrality is one way of positive actions that has tuned constitutional doctrines to the needs of the modern world.
- It comes as an indication of deepening participatory democracy in an emerging digital era by retuning the nature of constitutional values.

TRAI Recommendations

- **Discrimination** - Service providers are restricted from entering into any arrangement that has the effect of discriminatory treatment in Internet access.
- The discrimination should not be based on the content, sender or receiver, protocols being used, or user equipment being deployed.
- Any “discriminatory treatment” including blocking, degrading, slowing down or granting preferential speeds is restricted.
- **Content** - Non-discriminatory treatment applies specifically to ‘Internet Access Services’ which are generally available to the public.
- The content mentioned includes applications, services and any other data, including its end-point information.
- **Monitoring** - TRAI has recommended the establishment of a collaborative mechanism in the form of a multi-stakeholder body.
- This would be responsible for developing technical standards for monitoring violations and enforcement of the principles.

Significance

- Internet has become a basic infrastructure and an egalitarian platform that advances the free **speech rights of citizens**.
- The recommendations have thus upheld the **democratic principles** of the country by granting the freedom and choice of access for the end users.
- TRAI has also taken the leadership position globally in ensuring that access to internet remains non-discriminatory.
- This is especially given that many other telecom regulators including that of the US have faltered in ensuring equality in cyberspace.

Shortfalls and Solutions

- **Special Services** - A communications network connecting hospitals may rightly be classified as a specialized service.
- The operators may have to ensure a higher grade of service for these kinds of areas compared to the mass internet.
- TRAI has excluded specialized services from the purview of net neutrality but without specifying what falls under this category.
- This could be a cause of concern given that the operators can exploit policy loopholes.
- E.g. a telecom operator could enter into private deals with a healthcare mobile application provider to get unfair access to users.
- TRAI should have set up a monitoring platform to ensure that telecom companies make adequate disclosures about such specialised services.

- **Traffic management** - TRAI has also allowed telecom companies to carry out reasonable traffic management practices, for delivering internet traffic.
- Traffic management practices such as those used for protecting network security are legitimate, but it can also lead to discriminatory practices.
- TRAI could have specified what type of traffic management is allowed automatically, and which ones need approval.
- **Enforcement** - TRAI has failed to put in place a neutral enforcement body.
- The multi-stakeholder body led by industry, as proposed by TRAI, may not be enough to ensure implementation of net neutrality, exceptions and transparency measures.
- This is because the industry-led bodies have seldom protected the rights of consumers in the past.
- **Besides**, the regulations are criticized to be unnecessarily bureaucratic and not conducive for the ease of doing business.
- The Department of Telecom, while accepting the regulator's overall recommendations, should also iron out these concerns.

USA's Initiatives

- FCC rules issued in 2015 aimed at upholding neutrality neutrality.
- Federal Communications Commission (FCC) of the US announced the 'Restoring Internet Freedom Order'
- The current ruling undoes this and favors giving sweeping powers to ISPs over the content consumers can access.
- This ruling is almost certain be cleared in FCCs next open meeting.
- **Reasons** - FCC claims that the ruling is to remove what it calls "heavy-handed Internet regulations".
- These regulations, it believes is holding back investment, innovation, and job creation in the sector.
- FCC also noted that it didn't want to micromanage the Internet.
- **Criticism** - This allows ISPs could give preferential treatment to particular sites and apps, and to their own digital content.
- ISPs could also block access to sites or cap network speeds by segregating the Internet into fast and slow lanes.
- Charging consumers extra for better access to some sites and distorting fair trade is also a possibility.
- This would also lead to blocking of or slowing down of competitor's content and unfavourable political opinions.

Addressing Distortions

- FCC might no longer regulate content that ISPs provide.
- Hence, the job of protecting consumers from detrimental business practices will go to the Federal Trade Commission (FTC).
- Notably, FTC neither has any telecommunications expertise nor rule-making authority in this area.

Benefits

- Big ISPs such as AT&T Inc, Comcast Corp and Verizon Communications Inc, stand to benefit due to these changes.
- They can now design schemes to charge consumers as well as content providers.
- Notably, in recent years, ISPs have tried offers such as discounts on their service in exchange for browsing history of users.
- Some ISPs are reported to have tried to drive users to their own apps by excluding them from mobile data usage limits.
- On the contrast, Alphabet Inc, Facebook Inc, Amazon and Netflix Inc were among the big firms that are currently opposed to the ruling.

Right against Torture

In News: The Law Commission, as part of its 273rd Report, submitted a draft Prevention of Torture Bill, 2017 for the consideration of the government.

Major Recommendations

- **Ratifying the UN Convention** against Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman and Degrading Treatment or Punishment.
- **Defining 'torture'** in a broader way to include any physical, mental or psychological injury.
- Considering as torture an injury that is either inflicted intentionally or involuntarily, or even an attempt to cause such an injury.

- **Amending** the Criminal Procedure Code, 1973, and the Indian Evidence Act, 1872, to accommodate provisions regarding compensation and burden of proof respectively.
- Inserting a new section in the Indian Evidence Act to ensure that in case a person in police custody sustains injuries, it is presumed that those injuries have been inflicted by the police.
- Curbing the menace of torture and having a deterrent effect on such acts through imposing **fine and stringent punishment** like life imprisonment.
- Placing the burden of proof on the authority concerned to explain such injury.
- Authorizing the courts to decide upon a "justiciable compensation" to victims after considering the socio-economic background of the victim.
- Taking into account the nature, purpose, extent and manner of injury, including mental agony caused to the victim for compensations.
- Putting in place an effective mechanism to protect victims of torture, complainants and witnesses against possible threats or ill-treatment.
- Making **State owns the responsibility** for injuries caused by its agents on citizens as per the idea of 'liability follows negligence'.
- Acknowledges the principle that sovereign immunity could not override the rights assured by the Constitution to an individual.

Significance

- **Extradition request** - India has made many requests for extradition of offenders from other countries.
- However, conditions in India's prisons, especially over-crowding and torture, are a reason for **extradition requests failing**.
- E.g. extradition courts in the UK refused to send two persons to India to face trial, on the ground of ineffective system of protection from torture.
- Having an anti-torture legislation in place is thus a practical necessity in India's interest to make countries accede to extradition requests.
- **Moral Commitment** - Custodial violence continues to be prevalent in the country.
- Suspects being forced to confess for undone wrongs is a continuing practice against individual right; the most recent instance is the faulty accusation in Ryan school murder case.
- Enacting a law to eliminate all forms of torture and other cruel, inhuman and degrading forms of treatment is thus a moral liability for India.
- Ratifying the UN Convention and following it up with a domestic law against torture can give shape to these moral and legal commitments.

ECONOMIC AFFAIRS

15th Finance Commission

In News: The Union Cabinet has approved the setting up of the 15th Finance Commission.

It will decide on the distribution of tax proceeds among centre, states and local bodies in the post-goods and services tax (GST) era.

Finance Commission

- The setting up of the finance commission for every 5 years is a Constitutional obligation under **Article 280 (1)** of the Constitution.
- Finance Commission is a quasi-judicial body, constituted by the president of India every fifth year or at such earlier time as he considers necessary.
- It consists of a Chairman and four other members.
- They hold office for such period as specified by the president in his order.
- They are eligible for reappointment.
- As per Article 280 of the Constitution, the commission is required to make recommendations on the distribution of the net proceeds of taxes between the centre and the states.
- It suggests the principles which should govern the grants in aid of the revenues of the states out of the consolidated fund of India.

- The recommendations of the 14th Finance Commission are valid from 2015 to 2020.
- The recommendations of the 15th Finance Commission will be implemented in the period 2020 to 2025.
- The 14th Finance Commission had raised the untied share of states in net central taxes to 42% from 32% after ending discretionary resource transfers from the centre to the states.

Members

- Former Planning Commission member **N.K. Singh** was appointed chairman of the 15th Finance Commission.
- The other members of the commission are:
 - Shaktikanta Das former economic affairs secretary,
 - Ashok Lahiri former chief economic adviser,
 - Ramesh Chand Niti Aayog member and
 - Anoop Singh Georgetown University professor.

Mandates

- The commission will review the current status of the finance, deficit, debt levels, cash balances and fiscal discipline efforts of the union and the states.
- Apart from mandate given under Article 280 of the Constitution, this commission will study and suggest measures on following issues.
- It will also study “the impact of the GST, including
 - payment of compensation for possible loss of revenues for five years,
 - abolition of a number of cesses,
 - Earmarking for compensation and other structural reforms programme.
- Commission will examine progress made in promoting ease of doing business by related policy and regulatory changes and promoting labour intensive growth.

Challenge and Opportunity

- Since inception Finance Commissions has been focusing mainly on the vertical (between center and states) and the horizontal distribution (to ensure regional equity).
- This time it actually comes when there exists GST Council- India’s first genuinely federal institution where the center and states are equal stakeholders.
- GST favors the spread of regional growth—and consequently tax revenues and in the next five years we will see a GST type structure for development challenges.
- Challenge of urbanization is one of the pertinent importance as the public policy has failed to keep pace and it moving forward through trial and error.
- Each Finance Commission has recognized that India is transforming and made its recommendations accordingly.
- The 15th Finance Commission provides an enormous opportunity in setting out a blueprint for India’s future that rests on the foundation of a strong federal polity.
- Presumably, the Union government, especially one which has championed cooperative federalism, is thinking similarly. The terms of reference of the this Finance Commission is one of the signals, nomination of its chairperson and of course its members is also 2nd signal in this regard.

N. K. Singh

He has held the following important positions for policy making and financial decision making

- He was the principal interlocutor with multilateral institutions during India’s Balance of Payment Crisis.
- He Represented India at GATT, UNACTD, UN and the Common Wealth Secretariat.
- Member Planning Commission
- Secretary, Task Force on Telecommunications.
- Mr. Singh is on the Governing bodies of research organizations like the Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations (ICRIER), the International Management Institute (IMI) etc..
- Chairman of Review Committee to evaluate the FRBM Act, 2003

GST and Cash less economy

In News: Union government is now proposing to offer a 2% point GST rebate for consumers who make digital payments instead of cash.

Significance

- GST Council has taken several decisions that are expected the taxation simpler.
- The recent move means that the effective tax rate for items the 18 per cent GST slab will come down to 16 per cent for those paying through the digital mode.

- The recent proposal of rebate is expected to be taken up in January when the GST Council meets next.
- The reason for the proposed incentive is to encourage Indians to move towards a cashless economy.
- By this GST council have taken steps to sort out the problems in the technological architecture and filing of returns. In that sense, the GST is a work in progress.

Concerns

- Regardless of the noble intentions, this proposed intervention is likely to create another round of confusion for all concerned.
- The tricky part here, implementing this will result in customers being offered two prices one with the normal GST rate and the other with a 2% lower rate.
- The move will require altering both the tax computation process as well as return-filing templates.
- This will only complicate the ground-level implementation of the GST as sellers will need to segregate digital and cash transactions from the beginning.
- What further complicates matters is that this concession will be limited to Rs100 per transaction and will not apply to retailers who have registered in the composition scheme, wherein they only face a single tax rate instead of the normal GST structure.

Composition Scheme of GST

- Large organizations have the requisite resources and expertise to address GST requirements.
- On the flip side, many start-ups and Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) may struggle to comply with these provisions.
- To resolve such scenarios, the government has introduced Composition Scheme under GST, which is merely an extension of the scheme under VAT law.
- When opting for the Composition Scheme under GST, a taxpayer will be required to file summarized returns on a quarterly basis, instead of three monthly returns (as applicable for normal businesses).
- Businesses dealing only in goods can only opt for composition scheme.
- Services providers have been kept outside the scope of this scheme. However, restaurant sector taxpayers may also opt for the scheme.

Way forward

- The government has repeatedly assured taxpayers that it is trying to make the GST a good and simple tax in the true sense of the term.
- There is a genuine intention to move towards a two-rate structure possibly 12% and 18%.
- India obviously needs to move towards a less-cash regime, but the introduction of incentives that complicate things further is avoidable.

Ordinance to Amend the IBC

Context

- Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code (IBC) came into force in 2016 with the goal of easing the resolution of stagnant corporate debt.
- Recently, an ordinance was passed, which significantly amends the original law and risks defeating the very intent of IBC.

Intent of the Amendment

- IBC was enacted to ensure time bound corporate debt resolution through proceeding initiated by either the creditor or debtor with the 'National Company Law Tribunal – NCLT'.
- In the original IBC, there was a possibility for defaulters to apply as bidders in the liquidation (auctioning assets) process.
- This would have helped them regain control of their own companies with a reduced loan burden than before.
- This was seen as a clever way to gain loan reductions that could possibly impact the credibility of the insolvency resolutions.
- It has hence been considered necessary to prohibit unscrupulous defaulters from submitting resolution plans under IBC.
- The current ordinance specifies the categories of persons who are deemed ineligible henceforth to ensure credible debt resolution.

Panel to reform IBC

- The Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code became operational in December 2016.
- It provides for a market-determined and time-bound insolvency resolution process.
- With rising number of cases under the IBC, the government has set up a 14-member panel to identify and suggest ways to address issues faced in its implementation.
- This committee will be chaired by Corporate Affairs Secretary InjetiSrinivas.

- The move also comes against the backdrop of concerns about the possibility of promoters wresting back control of a company under insolvency process.

Concerns

- **Purpose of IBC** - IBC is not merely an instrument for liquidation.
- Instead, it is also envisioned as an enabling legal framework for the “reorganisation and insolvency resolution of corporate entities”.
- In fact, it even prescribes a time bound procedure for “maximising the asset value of such entities and to promote entrepreneurship”.
- **Amendment** - Wilful defaulters have put creditors to substantial financial hardships and barring them from bidding is a good move.
- But the category of people barred under the current ordinance is too broad and risks defeating the very objectives of IBC.
- The ordinance’s scope & wording is such that all loans that have become NPAs can be branded as wilful default.
- Even, the promoters and members of the management board of companies whose loan accounts are classified as non-performing for just 1 year (or more) have also been barred from bidding.
- Notably, the amendments have been made with retrospective effect to also cover the more than 600 cases already referred to NCLT.
- **The Business** – Also, the complete barring of all original owners from bidding for assets might not make economic sense.
- This is because they would have a better knowledge of the market dynamics and might have nurtured a clientele that might be difficult to emulate for other bidders.
- Barring them could potentially prolong debt servicing as the new management might take time to set in.

All NPAs are not wrong

- The central bankers have often pointed out that not all bad loans are a result of intentional default on the borrower’s part.
- Companies in some sectors have struggled to service debts due to unpredictable external factors that adversely impacted their finances.
- Promoters of such firms should be given a chance to restructure and turnaround their business.
- Barring them merely because their loans have turned sour is unfair to both the entrepreneur and the enterprise itself.
- **Steel Industry’s Case** - Steel companies were among the worst hit in the wake of the global downturn in commodity prices.
- It has been reported that the promoters of some of these debt-laden steelmakers were considering participating in bids.
- They wanted to restructure debts and their businesses and were hoping to run them again – which the current amendment hinders.

Way Forward

- The ordinance is expected to be tabled in the winter session of the parliament in December.
- It needs to be debated thoroughly and a more rational debt resolution framework needs to be evolved.
- Else, instead of solving the NPA problem, IBC could aggravate it.
- The robustness of the insolvency framework is bound to have a significant impact on investments in the economy.

Protecting Borrowers in Informal Lending

In News: Alleged harsh treatments by moneylenders have recently led to a number of suicides in Tamil Nadu.

Real Problem

- **Formal lending** - Even in the formal financial system, lenders can offer loans at relatively higher interest rates.
- In the case of default, however, the lenders know that they cannot torture borrowers to get back their money.
- So, they are generally wary of making high-risk loans unless they have access to collateral or are ready to negotiate a proper settlement in the case of default.
- **Informal lending** - Given the above regulations informal borrowing naturally becomes the option.
- Notably, the lending standards in the informal sector are generally looser.
- As, the lenders have little reason to worry about the creditworthiness of the borrower.

- This is because of the possibility of the chance to resort to violence to extort money in case of a default.
- **Political affluence** - When aggressive and politically powerful lenders deal with weak borrowers, the inability to repay leads to violence.
- In many cases, even the local law enforcement authorities function hand in glove with these lenders.
- This ultimately leaves the borrowers in extreme distress with no legal recourse.

Way Forward

- Both the above cases have been linked to **harassment by financiers**.
- It thus has to be understood that high-interest lending per se is not the problem but the harsh dealing resorted to by some informal lenders is.
- Any attempt to outlaw all high-interest or usurious lending would impact the borrowers who genuinely benefit from informal lending.
- Overall lending rates can be lowered, particularly in rural India, by allowing the free flow of capital in search of investment opportunities in the untapped markets.
- E.g. Deregulation of microfinance by RBI led several microfinance institutions to enter the rural market attracted by the high return on capital offered by the sector and eventually helped lower borrowing rates.
- Despite the source being a financial one, the recent incidence of deaths is more a law and order problem.
- It is for the governments to bring in mechanisms to protect the borrowers.

Enhancing GI Act

Context

- The existing law for Geographical Indications in India leans too heavily on documentary proof.
- This is a major hurdle for many traditional products from getting the GI Tag.

“Geographical Indication”

- Geographical Indications (GIs) are recognitions for traditionally produced products that are specific to a region.
- It intends to link the quality of a product to the territory from where it originates from.
- GIs support local production and are an important economic tool for the uplift of rural and tribal communities.
- Unlike other Intellectual Property Rights (IPRs) which guarantee the protection of individual interest, GI is a collective right.
- If their products qualify, producers can use the collective GI mark while commercially exploiting their products.

Shortcomings in the Indian GI Act

- India executed a law on GI in 1999 as per the WTO’s “Trade Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights - TRIPS” guidelines.
- TRIPS only prescribe a minimum standard and there is no insistence on a particular framework for the grant of a GI Tag.
- Against this backdrop, proof of origin is a mandatory criterion for registering GIs in India – a provision borrowed from the EU’s act.
- While a historic proof in itself is a good safeguard, the Indian Act also stresses on documentary evidence for the same.
- Documented evidence would indeed be foolproof in ensuring the link between the product and territory.
- But in India, where oral history has had far wider convention over written history, this provision will prove to be a formidable hurdle.
- **Assam Example** - Assam has been exploring its natural, agricultural and traditional products as potential GI material.
- But a stumbling block has been the difficulty in gathering documentary evidence as proof of origin.
- The recent product in focus has been “Judima”, a traditional rice wine made by the Dimasa tribe of DimaHasao.
- For most products, especially those of tribal communities, the lack of documentary evidence is bound to be a recurrent problem.

Way Forward

- In a particular instance, the GI Registry considered studying its evolution to establish proof of origin.

- But as the existing law insists on documentary proof, it is difficult to make authorities adopt similar stands for other products.
- Hence, India should consider amending the current law to enable easier GI registration and enhance the marketability of our rich tradition.

Issues with currency trading platform

Context

- The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) issued a discussion paper that proposes to establish a spot currency trading platform.
- The scheme for setting up the platform is riddled with few problems.

Currency Trading Platform

- Banks often decide the buying and selling rates for foreign exchange at the opening of business hours and retain the same rate through the day.
- Most banks do not transparently disclose their charges for currency dealings.
- Direct access to an exchange-like platform for currency trading means when one goes to buy or sell foreign exchange from or to a bank, the buyer or seller dictates the price.
- The bank will place the order on the exchange platform for execution.
- It places more control in the hands of the consumer and will bring down the costs associated with the forex service.

Problems with Draft on Trading Platforms

- **Bifurcation** - The discussion paper proposes a segment the trading platforms for retail consumers and banks, which are the institutional participants in a currency market.
- Bifurcating an exchange into retail and institutional segments dilutes the principle underlying an exchange platform, which is to aggregate, buy and sell orders of all sizes and kinds.
- This gives buyers and sellers of assets the benefits of liquidity and efficient price discovery.
- It is difficult to envisage a financial market where retail market participants would be deprived of the liquidity provided by institutional participants.
- **Biased to one player** - The discussion paper proposes to allow only one player, namely, the Clearing Corporation of India Limited (CCIL), to offer the spot currency trading platform.
- Other vendors will be allowed to offer similar platforms in due course.
- The proposal to monopolies the platform through CCIL in the beginning will deprive other players from the first mover's advantage, which is critical as the value of the service directly depends on the number of users.
- To migrate users from one exchange to another at a later stage is costly and difficult.

Regulating spot Currency Exchanges

- The proposal must be revisited in favor of a single platform that pools all orders, retail and institutional.
- In a Capital account economy, the rules governing inflows and outflows are laid down in the regulatory framework that imposes capital controls.
- The regulator's job is to ensure people buy foreign currency and repatriate it abroad in compliance with these rules.
- In India this is done through authorised dealer banks which report the inflows and outflows of foreign exchange in the accounts held with them under the provisions of the Foreign Exchange Management Act, 1999.
- Systemic risk issues arising out of default in honoring matched trades can be taken care of through appropriately designed margining systems, as are applied for the membership of every central counterparty clearing platform.
- Risk of market abuse that is price manipulation, which can similarly be dealt with by an appropriate market abuse regime.
- Consumer protection issues involved in the sale and advisory of foreign exchange needs regulatory oversight akin to any other financial product that is sold or bought in India.

Reviewing Income Tax Act

In News: Union government has decided to set up a panel to review the Income Tax Act, 1961.

Income Tax Act 1961

- The Income-tax Act, 1961 is the charging Statute of Income Tax in India.
- It provides for levy, administration, collection and recovery of Income Tax.
- The Government of India brought a draft statute called the "Direct Taxes Code" intended to replace the Income Tax Act 1961 and the Wealth Tax Act, 1957.
- However, the bill was later scrapped because of wealth tax act being repealed.

Importance

- There is a controversial section in the Income Tax Act in India which states the Special provision relating to incomes of political parties.
- By which any income of a political party which is chargeable under the head,
- "Income from house property" or "Income from other sources" or any income by way of voluntary contributions received by a political party from any person shall not be included in the total income of the previous year of such political party.
- Recently, there has been lot of uproar by the civil society against this act, as Political parties have deposited huge cash after demonetization.
- The current law is unwieldy, and multiple court rulings over the past five decades have made Indian tax law confusing and opaque.

Concerns

- The recommendations of panel will go through close scrutiny by all stakeholders, it is unlikely that the new Direct Tax Code Bill can take final shape before 2019, which is an election year.
- This means the next government will have to take a call on piloting the Bill, leading many to question the timing of the constitution of the committee.
- Previous governments diluted several of recommendations by earlier panels, notably in terms of ignoring the proposals to reduce exemptions, and the added complication of multiple cesses.
- There is a critical demand from trade and industry is for a sea change in the nature of the tax administration, from being enforcement-oriented to focusing on simplicity and clarity.

Sagarmala Project: Concern Area

In News: The government has approved creating 14 coastal economic zones (CEZs) in JNPT, Maharashtra under Sagarmala Project.

Sagarmala Project

- Sagarmala project is a strategic and customer-oriented Rs 8,000,000 million investment initiative.
- It aims to modernize India's Ports so that port-led development can be augmented and coastlines can be developed to contribute in India's growth.
- It also aims for transforming the existing Ports into modern world class Ports and integrate the development of the Ports and efficient evacuation systems.
- Development of mines, industrial corridors, rail, road and airport linkages with these water ports are also part of the project.

Recent Announcement

- The Jawaharlal Nehru Port Trust in Maharashtra has approved for the creation of 14 CEZs.
- Reports suggest that 45 companies from the telecom, technology, and automobile industries are expected to bid for them.
- Since the JNPT accounts for 40% of India's trade, the zone expects to attract investment worth Rs 15,000 crore and create 1, 50,000 jobs in the first phase.

Lesson from SEZs

- The SEZ policy appeared to have largely been a success as evident from accounting for a third of the country's exports.
- However, it is to be noted that much of this was on account of the IT and ITeS sectors which merely shifted location when the sunset clause on their sector-specific tax breaks kicked in.
- The enthusiasm for SEZs waned considerably once the government imposed the minimum alternate tax and the dividend distribution tax.
- It is thus difficult to gauge the real performance of SEZs, and they highlight the risk of creating islands of "Doing business".
- The model's excellence is less likely to generate the kind of all-round economic development that India urgently needs.
- Also, political and social dynamics differ significantly making this Chinese developmental model a least optimum solution for India.

CEZ Model for Sagarmala

- Sagarmala project which is based on CEZ seems to have become a casualty of the chronic problem of land acquisition.
- For Sagarmala project, the land requirement could extend from 300 km to 500 km adjacent to deep-water ports.
- Reports suggest that several projects have hit roadblocks either on account of high prices or limited land availability.
- Investors are very cautious of investing in CEZs because they do not attract the provisions of "Eminent domain".
- This provides for some 13 exceptions such as railways and coal-bearing tracts from the requirement of prior consent.

- In all, the feasibility of these economic models for infrastructure projects is uncertain without tax concessions and relaxations in labour laws that investor community expects.

SEZ

- Special economic zone (SEZ) refers to designated areas with special economic regulations that differ from other areas.
- These regulations are especially conducive to foreign direct investment.
- A company doing business in an SEZ usually receives tax incentives and the opportunity to pay lower tariffs.

CEZ

- Similar to SEZ, the CEZ focuses on coastal development.
- CEZs are aimed at promoting development of port-proximate industrial clusters, encouraging port-led development, reduction of logistics cost and time for movement goods.

INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

Yemen Blockade

In News: Saudi Arabia has recently imposed a blockade on Yemen, which was already reeling from a humanitarian crisis.

Contours of the War

- Yemen's civil war broke out when Shia Houthi Rebels captured large swathes of land in the western regions.
- They've captured the capital Sanaa and also enjoy the patronage of the country's Shia community and the previously deposed President 'Ali Abdullah Saleh'.
- The Saudi-backed 'Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi' government which actually operates from the southern coastal city of Aden.



- Saudis see Houthis as Iranian proxies and have been bombing their territory with impunity for almost 3 years.
- Saudis also enjoy the steadfast support of successive U.S. administrations for their Yemenese aggression.
- While the war has entered a stalemate, more than 10,000 people have been killed and many more displaced.
- Notably, Al-Qaeda has grown in strength in the midst of this chaos.

Cause of blockade

- The Saudi-led coalition closed all air, land and sea access to Yemen on November 6.
- This was done following the interception of a missile fired towards the Saudi capital.
- Presumably, the blockade was imposed to prevent the Houthi rebels from smuggling high-end weaponry from Iran.
- But as a consequence, it led to one of the worst famines.

Famine Warning

- The American alert on Yemen said that a prolonged closure of key ports in Yemen led "unprecedented deterioration in food security" to the worst category of **Phase 5**.
- 17 million people who are already dependent on international aid for food and drugs will starve.
- Notably, about 80% of Yemen's basic food supplies are imported through ship deliveries along the Red Sea coast.
- Further, incessant bombing and the failure to provide basic services have resulted in a medical emergency.
- Incidentally, there is already a major cholera outbreak in the country due to non availability for clean water supply.

Way Ahead

- There has been no meaningful effort thus far, from the international community to end this humanitarian crisis.
 - While the Saudis don't want the Houthis to control the country, they lack strategic depth and resources to shape Yemen's future.
 - Hence, UN and other international bodies need act soon to prevent this man-made disaster from reaching catastrophic proportions.
- The five-stage scale, with Phase 5 being famine, is used by humanitarian aid groups to anticipate the severity of potential hunger emergencies.
 - Famine is defined as existing in areas in which at least one in five households suffers "an extreme lack of food and other basic needs where starvation, death and destitution are evident."

Rohingya Diplomacy

- **In News:** Recently China announced that "as a friend of both Myanmar and Bangladesh, Beijing is willing to keep playing a constructive role for the appropriate handling of the Rakhine State issue" and mediating between Bangladesh and Myanmar to resolve the crisis.

Background

- A military operation by Myanmar in Rakhine, resulted in around 600,000 Rohingya fleeing the province to Bangladesh.
- This snowballed into a humanitarian crisis and a war of words between Dhaka and Naypyidaw.
- In this background that China stepped in with its three-point plan.
- Subsequently, an agreement was reached between Myanmar and Bangladesh to repatriate Rohingya refugees.
- If the agreement took effect successfully, China had promised economic assistance for the long-term development of Rakhine.

China's Strategy

- China has put pressure on Myanmar because a protracted conflict in Rakhine will be decidedly against Beijing's economic interests.
 - Rakhine is an important link in its Belt and Road Initiative and China is building a \$7.3 billion deep-water port in the province.
 - It has also invested \$2.45 billion to build an oil and gas pipeline connecting coastal Rakhine to Yunnan province in Southern China.
 - It is an attempt to show itself in a new, more positive light in the region.
 - The "three-stage plan" was described by China on Rohingya diplomacy
1. **A ceasefire on the ground** - This is seen as an efficient plan, as people will no longer flee to neighboring countries.
 2. **Talks between Myanmar and Bangladesh** - This is to work out the modalities of return of the Rohingya from their camps in Bangladesh to their homes in Rakhine.
 3. **Poverty alleviation** - As a long-term solution.
- Myanmar responded with the plan that it was in line with Myanmar's own views, and thanked China for its "assistance as a friend in between the eternal neighbours.

Implications for India

- Despite its old ties with Myanmar, India struggles to find the right tone in relations with that country.
- India missed a right moment to take leadership in a regional crisis due to limited views on the Rohingya.
- India has a misguided notion that even a bare mention of the humanitarian problem then unfolding in the Rakhine would anger Myanmar and send it rushing to China.
- Now it is clear that India has a long way to go, and a lot to learn from China.

Challenges

- While the signing of a repatriation deal suggests some positives, the details of the agreement are very preliminary.
- The agreement had mandated an immediate ceasefire in Rakhine to halt further displacement which hasn't been declared yet.
- Also, the number of Rohingya who will be sent back or the timeline for repatriation hasn't been revealed.
- It is also not clear whether the refugees themselves want to go back to a place they had fled in such perilous circumstances.
- There is also no indication thus far, that a resettlement plan is taking shape.

Way Forward

- China sees the Rohingya crisis as an economic problem, given that it has been proposing a development centric solution.
- While economic assistance is essential, the real problem is arguably deeply political, and thereby needing a political solution.
- Unless Myanmar takes efforts to recognize Rohingya as full-fledged citizens, any deal is doomed to fail.

Nepal's Long Transition to Democracy

In News:

- Under new constitution first parliamentary polls held in Nepal which will complete its democratic transition.
- India must play an enabling role in this tumultuous transition from a 240-year-old monarchy to a multi-party polity.

Evolution of Democracy in Nepal

- **Abolishing Monarchy** - A Maoist insurgency erupted in the mid-1990s which claimed nearly 15,000 casualties.
- In 2005, after a peace accord, the Maoist joined the political mainstream and subsequently contested elections.
- Monarchy was overthrown in 2006 and a 601-member Constituent Assembly (CA) was elected in 2008 with a two-year mandate to draft a new constitution.
- **Constitution** - CA failed in its mandate after multiple extensions and finally lapsed in 2012 after the Supreme Court's intervention.
- Despite the lack of consensus for a constitution, this period, notably, saw the rehabilitation of former maoist militants.
- A new CA was finally elected in November 2013, with eventually concluded the long delayed constitutional draft.
- **Terai Dissent** - New Constitution enjoyed considerable support, but wasn't liked by 'Madhesi & Janjatis' of plains bordering India.
- While India sought to address the Madhesi cause, the Katmandu establishment saw this as interventionist.
- Nepal even started talk of enhancing co-operation with China through Tibetan plateau to off-set India.
- **Local Body Elections** - Eventually, there was a regime change and a new coalition under Mr. Prachandra came to power.
- Notably, the elections to the 753 local bodies in Nepal were held earlier this year after a 20-year gap under the Prachandra regime.
- **Future** - Nepal will elect seven provincial assemblies along with its parliament as per the 2015 constitution.
- Parliament and the provincial assemblies will in turn elect a new president and vice president.

Significance of this Election

- Nepal voted on 26th November in the first phase of parliamentary elections under its new Constitution of 2015.
- The turnout in the first phase was estimated to be 65%.
- The first round was mostly concentrated in the upper hill regions, with the rest of the country scheduled to vote on December 7.
- Uniquely for Nepal's highly fragmented party politics, these elections witness a direct battle between two fronts.

Political Contestant

- **Democratic alliance** - It is led by the Nepali Congress and includes the former Panchayat parties and Madhesi groups.
- **Left alliance** - It brings together, in a surprise agreement hammered out between, the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist) and the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Centre).
- This is an electoral battle between the forces belonging to the centre-right and the centre-left, but to reduce it to an ideological battle would be misleading.

Issues on the Stake

- Populism dominates the ideological positions of the major parties and the politics of patronage has governed their engagement with the people.
- The consequence of this has been lack of movement on key issues facing the underdeveloped nation-state.

- One such issue that dominated the political discourse in the last half-decade has been the need for decentralization and representation of the marginalized communities.
- Madhesi and Janajatis (tribals) have continued to claim that their demands for adequate state restructuring and federalism were not met in the new Constitution.
- The new electoral alliances have subsumed such differences with the Maoists, who were willing to grant such demands for amendments to the new Constitution.
- They are joining hands with the UML, which is strongly opposed to any concessions.
- The political instability has meant that vital issues of economic development have remained largely unaddressed.
- Contradicting hopes that Nepal's transition from a monarchy to a republic would focus the people's concerns

Future of Indo-Nepal Ties

- One of the important challenges for the new government will be to address Madhesi grievances through constitutional amendments.
- India seems to have recognized that its overt support to the Madhesi cause had hurt diplomatic relations with Nepal.
- It has hence currently been urging the Madhesi leadership to work from within the system rather than through agitation or boycott.
- An increased Chinese presence through infrastructure projects under the 'Belt & Road Initiative' is a real risk.
- Hence, an early move by Delhi, to build positive equations with whatever regime takes shape in Katmandu is necessary.

ASEAN's Lesion for SAARC

Context

- Both SAARC and ASEAN took birth with almost similar aspirations.
- While ASEAN celebrates its 50th year, being largely successful, the SAARC has remained stagnated.

Why has SAARC stagnated?

- **Cooperation** - The political animosity and military conflict between India and Pakistan have disturbed the regional cooperation.
- This witnessed a new low when India boycotted the 19th SAARC summit in Pakistan, as a result of the Uri terrorist attack.
- Subsequently the summit was cancelled with Bangladesh, Afghanistan and Bhutan following India's stance.
- **Trade** - Trade amongst the SAARC members stands only at 3.5% of their total volume of trade.
- Initiatives under the South Asian Free Trade Association have failed to make much headway.
- Sub-regional initiatives like the BBIN Motor Vehicle Agreement also have stalled.
- Bhutan recently announced that it is unable to proceed with the **Motor Vehicles Agreement** with Bangladesh, India and Nepal.
- After Bhutan's decision, India, Nepal and Bangladesh will have to decide whether to wait for Bhutan to reconsider or to press ahead with a truncated 'BIN' arrangement.
- **Connectivity** - The SAARC Visa Exemption Scheme allows only certain categories of dignitaries to be exempt from visas.
- Ordinary citizens are excluded from accessing unimpeded travel in the region.
- Free movement of people between India and Pakistan is not that easy.
- It is even difficult to get a visa for citizens of other SAARC countries who have visited either India or Pakistan before and now wish to travel to the other.
- Poor infrastructure in SAARC countries also plagues connectivity.

ASEAN's Lesion for SAARC

- **Mandates** - ASEAN, in its first two decades, focussed on a limited range of issues.
- Only after securing them, it expanded its mandate over time.
- Resultantly, it now deliberates on varied issues such as climate change, disaster management, counterterrorism, drugs and human trafficking, etc.
- **Cooperation** - ASEAN was able to ensure its sustainability by amicably resolving the disputes and adopting peaceful mechanisms to mitigate opposing claims.
- **Trade** - Trade in ASEAN has grown rapidly.
- It has focused on promoting rapid economic growth and modernization.
- It has created the ASEAN Comprehensive Investment Agreement (ACIA) for facilitating trade.

- This ensures liberalization and protection of cross-border investments operations, together with best practices for the treatment of foreign investors and investments.
- **Connectivity** - ASEAN nations are planning to waive entry requirements amongst the member states.
- A feasibility study has been conducted on the development of a rail link from Singapore to Kunming in southern China.
- This boosts intraregional trade and people-to-people connectivity.
- Projects aimed at promoting the entire region as a tourist destination have also been undertaken.

Future of SAARC

- SAARC countries should avoid building sub-regional ties at the cost of jeopardising the regional vision for unity.
- E.g. attempting to isolate Pakistan by forming sub-regional initiatives like the BIMSTEC.
- Bilateral power struggle and animosity should not come in the way of keeping open the channels of engagement.

SAARC

- The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was established with the signing of the SAARC Charter in Dhaka on 8 December 1985.
- SAARC comprises of eight Member States who are Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

ASEAN

- The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was established in 1967 in Bangkok, Thailand.
- It came in with the signing of the ASEAN Declaration (Bangkok Declaration) by the founding members namely Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand.
- Brunei Darussalam, Viet Nam, Lao PDR, Myanmar, and Cambodia joined in the course of time.

ASEAN Comprehensive Investment Agreement

- ACIA was adopted in 2009 in the context of an integrated economic community.
- It was envisioned as ASEAN's instrument to create a free and open investment environment to increase global competition and enhance the attractiveness of ASEAN as a single investment destination.

BBIN

- It is the regional sub-grouping India had planned for ease of access among the four countries.
- It was an alternative proposed by the government after Pakistan rejected the Motor Vehicle Agreement (MVA) at the SAARC summit in Kathmandu in 2014.
- It seeks to allow trucks and other commercial vehicles to ply on one another's highways to facilitate trade.
- Of the other SAARC members, Sri Lanka and the Maldives are not connected by land, and Afghanistan could only be connected if Pakistan was on board.

Peace Process in Syria

In News: The 7 year-old Syrian conflict is moving toward a possible end with the defeat of IS and weak ceasefire agreements with the many rebel groups.

Peace Negotiations

- Astana Peace Process, (sponsored by Russia, Iran & Turkey) and the U.N.-sponsored Geneva Talks have been inconclusive thus far.
- Russia has pressed the military advantage gained to find a lasting political solution by hosting Syrian President Assad recently.
- Notably, the Russian side had also had multiple consultations with other stakeholders - U.S., Saudi, Egyptian and Israel.
- Also, in tandem with the Russian initiatives, Saudi sponsored a two-day meeting of around 140 rival groups in Riyadh.
- In this, an agreement was reached to field a unified rebel delegation at the Geneva talks in future meetings.
- They also reportedly dropped their long-standing demand for the removal of President Assad, which could ease tensions.

Challenges

- The intense foreign involvements that pursue divergent objectives have created a big mess in Syria - which needs to be overcome.
- **Divergence** - Notably, there is no unanimous opinion in support of the Assad regime and the legitimacy of major rebel groups.

- The Kurdish quest for self-determination is also highly controversial as this spreads across borders.
- Similarly, **apprehension about Iranian gains in the Syria** has also been a major concern for countries like Saudi & Israel.
- Also, the future polity envisioned for Syria range from the continuation of “ShiaiteBa’atAllawite domination” under Assad to the establishment of a “Sunni Republic”.
- **Enacting Peace** – A sustainable and speedy agreement on peace is crucial as prolonged negotiations will lead to further crisis.
- Any peace process involves funds for reconstruction and stakeholders should ensure sufficient funds for development.
- The best one can realistically hope for is a congruence of major players and progressive withdrawal of foreign military presence.

India’s Stakes

- By keeping a low profile during the conflict, India has earned wider acceptability across the Syrian social spectrum.
- Before the war, bilateral trade between the two countries was over half a billion dollars annually, with India enjoying a trade surplus.
- In a post-conflict situation, India has a potential role in institution building and reconstruction.
- India could also capitalize on its repo with Iran to further its economic prospects Syria.

OPEC Meeting

In News: OPEC meeting has been scheduled for November last week in Austria.

OPEC

- Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries is a cartel of oil exporting nations, which accounts for more than 40 per cent of the world’s oil supply.
- As of now OPEC has 14 members, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq and Kuwait, Venezuela are the founding members of the group.
- OPEC aims to coordinate and unify the petroleum policies of its member countries to stabilise oil markets.
- Member countries together increase or decrease oil production to try to achieve desired supply levels and prices, based on a unanimous vote.
- As a ‘swing producer’, OPEC could turn on and turn off the stoppers to control global oil production and prices.

OPEC’s Challenges from Non-Members

- Technological advancements horizontal drilling and fracturing enabled shale oil exploration and production on an industrial scale in the US.
- US output since last year has increased by nearly a million barrels a day to a daily nine million barrels.
- That already puts American producers in the league with oil giants Saudi Arabia and Russia (non- member) and cuts further into OPEC’s past ability to play a role in setting prices and supplies.
- This upended the dynamics of the oil industry and precipitated the collapse of oil trade since mid-2014.
- Mega producers such as Russia that are also not part of OPEC, too now command significant influence in the oil market.

Upcoming Meet

- During mid-2014 to contain oil trade collapse OPEC nations introduced price cuts in production, as a result crude oil prices dropped.
- The cuts helped halt oil’s collapse and aided its 40 per share resulting \$64 a barrel now.
- At the same time US shale producers assumed on and it eventually teamed with major non-OPEC producers such as Russia to cut about 2 per cent of global production.
- This strategy seems to have helped; the price collapse halted giving way to the meeting this year.
- This OPEC meeting is expected to approve extension the production cost cuts until December 2018 with Russia (non- member) also on board to boost production.
- The meeting is crucial as OPEC will decide whether to continue with output cuts or not.

Implications for India

- India imports more than 80 per cent of its oil requirement.
- If OPEC gets aggressive on its output cut programme, it could mean trouble for India.
- As oil prices halving since 2014 has been a fiscal boon for the government and oil companies.
- Higher oil prices will invariably mean costlier petrol and diesel and higher inflation in India.

- Even if price rises India has no big burned as US shale oil would come back to the market resulting in a cap on prices.

ENVIRONMENTAL AFFAIRS

Rising Light pollution

In News: Earth's artificially lit outdoor surface at night grew by about 2%, resulting in increasing light pollution.

Light Pollution

- Light pollution, also known as photo pollution, is the presence of anthropogenic light in the night environment.
- It is exacerbated by excessive, misdirected or obtrusive uses of light, but even carefully used light fundamentally alters natural conditions.
- As a major side-effect of urbanization, it is blamed for compromising health, disrupting ecosystems and spoiling aesthetic environments.

Consequences

- Light pollution has ecological consequences, with natural light cycles disrupted by artificial light introduced into the night time environment.
- Increased sky glow can affect human sleep
- In addition to threatening 30 percent of vertebrates that are nocturnal and over 60 percent of invertebrates that are nocturnal, artificial light also affects plants and microorganisms.
- It threatens biodiversity through changed night habits, such as reproduction or migration patterns, of many different species: insects, amphibians, fish, birds, bats and other animals."

Recent Data

- Every year earth is getting brighter than earlier years, it underscores the concerns about the ecological effects of light pollution on people and animals.
- The rate of growth observed in developing countries was much faster than in already brightly lit rich countries.
- With few exceptions, growth in night time light was observed throughout South America, Africa and Asia.
- Light remained stable in only a few countries, although the researchers said the satellite sensor's blindness to some LED light may mask an actual increase.
- Eg. Australia's lit area decreased due to wildfires. Night time light declined in War-hit Syrian and Yemen.

Cause of Increase

- US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration weather satellite data may understate the situation because its sensor cannot detect some of the LED lighting that is becoming more widespread, specifically blue light.
- Experts had hoped the growing use of highly efficient LED lighting might lessen energy usage worldwide.
- The new findings indicate use of artificial lighting instead is growing, increasing energy demand.
- City transitions of its street lighting from sodium lamps to LED, indicates that savings in energy are being offset by either new or brighter lights in other places.

Dust Storm and Delhi pollution

In News: SAFAR report shows that multiday dust storm from west Asia is the reason for Delhi smog.

Findings of the Report

- System of Air Quality and Weather Forecasting and Research (SAFAR) under the Ministry of Earth Sciences published a 'Scientific Assessment of Delhi Winter Air Quality Crisis'.
- It listed events behind the smog that had smothered Delhi and its neighborhood.
- The report blamed a multiday dust storm from west Asia much more than the burning of stubble for Delhi's air quality crisis during November 6-16
- The pollution contribution of Gulf dust storm on peak day was around 40% and from stubble burning was 25%".

Effect of Dust Storm

- It began as a giant swirl over Iraq, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia in the last week of October, then propelled eastward by a set of peculiar atmospheric conditions, covering all towns and cities in its path by a choking, blinding haze.
- In the Middle East the storm triggered over 4,000 cases of suffocation across Iraq's governorates, forced Iraq's civil aviation authority to shut down flights.

- A high-pressure center developed above the Gulf of Oman and the strong anticyclone flow at 5,500 metres transported atmospheric dust into the direction of Delhi.
- A high-pressure zone over Delhi and its neighborhood and the absence of strong winds kept pollutants trapped close to the surface.

Cause of Recent Storm

- Occurrences of dust and dust storms (sand storms) had enormously increased as compared with those occurring during the last century in Iraq.
- It cited climate change as the main reason which led to drastic changes in annual rainfall and temperature besides other reasons such as drought, mismanagement of water, and abandonment of agricultural lands.
- The other reason for the dust in Iran is apparently massive dam-building exercises that Tehran has undertaken, along with the diversion of water resources for agriculture.

Recent Concern

- The Delhi-NCR faces with difficult situation each winter when air pollution levels goes up out of control.
- Last year, the day after Diwali, air pollution levels were recorded at eight times the safe limit, in Delhi.
- In response, the Supreme Court-appointed EPCA, a body empowered to enforce the Graded Response Action Plan (GRAP).
- The GRAP aims to roll out progressively tougher actions as pollution levels rise, without waiting for an emergency to impose strict measures.
- The main objective of EPCA and GRAP is to institutionalize measures to tackle air pollution emergencies.
- Besides these, there was recently a ban against firecrackers in the National Capital Region.
- Despite these measures, pollution levels did surge after the festivities, though lower compared to the past two years.
- Notably post-Diwali smog never receded and very recently the city registered “severe” on the Air Quality Index (AQI).
- This comes along with a warning for serious health effects.

Indian Forest (Amendment) Ordinance, 2017

- Bamboo is taxonomically a grass.
- Yet it was legally defined as a tree under the Indian Forest Act, 1927.
- This was a major impediment for bamboo cultivation on non-forest land as the act mandates requirement of felling/transit permit for its economic use.
- Though India has 19% share of world’s area under bamboo cultivation, its market share in the sector is only 6%.
- So the Union Government has recently promulgated the Indian Forest (Amendment) Ordinance, 2017.
- It exempts bamboo grown in non-forest areas from the definition of tree.
- So there is no more a requirement of felling/transit permit.
- Hence this will promote cultivation of bamboo in non-forest areas to achieve twin objectives of increasing the farmer incomes and also increasing the green cover.
- It will greatly aid the success of recently constituted National Bamboo Mission.
- Bamboo grown in the forest areas will continue to be governed by the provisions of IFA, 1927.

Neelakurinji Reserve

- Neelakurinji (*Strobilanthes kunthiana*) is a shrub that is found in the shola forests of the Western Ghats in South India.
- The reserve is located in Munnar in Idukki district of Kerala.
- The government has decided to redraw the boundaries of the Neelakurinji reserve.
- The government had issued a preliminary notification in 2006 reserving a 3,200-hectare area for Neelakurinji bloom.
- It blooms once in 12 years and it is expected to bloom in July, 2018.
- The notification had triggered an outcry from the local community citing the presence of habitations, institutions, and places of worship within the notified area.
- It belongs to the genus *Strobilanthes* which has around 250 species.
- Blooming periods of different species of Kurinji differ from each other.
- It grows at an altitude of 1300 to 2400 metres.
- Besides the Western Ghats, Neelakurinji is also seen in the Shevroys in the Eastern Ghats.

Mahendragiri Gecko

- A new species of gecko (lizards) belonging to the genus Hemidactylus was recently discovered from Mahendragiri hills in Andhra-Odisha border.
- It is the second gecko to be found endemic to the Eastern Ghats area.
- The first one “House Lizard” was discovered from KangerGhati National Park in Chattisgarh.
- Scientists discovered that Mahendragiri geckos were not a population of geckos found in Western Ghats in Maharashtra and it is the latest addition to the species list of the Eastern Ghats.
- The lizard is the 32nd species of Hemidactylus gecko found in India.
- The discovery highlights the biodiversity importance of the region.
- For the last 70 years, it did not get its rightful place in the classification scheme.

Chinkara

- The chinkara (*Gazellabennettii*), also known as the Indian gazelle, is a gazelle (*Antelope*) species native to Iran, Pakistan and India.
- They live in arid plains and hills, deserts, dry scrub and light forests.
- They are being poached allegedly by the Bawaria community, a Scheduled Caste whose traditional occupation is hunting.
- The Narayan Sarovar Sanctuary, located in Kachchh district of Gujarat is especially important for chinkara.
- It got the highest protection under Schedule 1 of the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972.
- The Bishnoi sect guards chinkaras in the Marwar region where it lives in majority.

Implementation Period of Environmental Protocols

- Paris Agreement, 2015 under UNFCCC is intended for **2020-2030** period.
- First phase of the Kyoto Protocol - **2005-2012**
- Doha amendment, 2012 – concerning the second phase of the Kyoto Protocol
- As only 75 countries have so far ratified the Doha amendments it could not be enforced which requires ratification of 144 countries.
- Second phase of the Kyoto Protocol - **2013-2020**
- India ratified the second phase of the Kyoto Protocol.

BIO/ HEALTH ISSUES

Reducing Salt Intake

Context: USA and 74 other countries have been advocating the lowering of salt intake

Problem with Salt

- Salt added to our foods by processors and restaurants is the main source of sodium in our diets.
- While some studies have concluded that only people with hypertension need to reduce salt intake.
- But most experts have called for comprehensive reductions by all.
- Excess sodium is responsible for most cases of hypertension in Western societies.
- Hypertension is a leading risk factor for heart attacks, strokes and kidney failure.

Scientific Reasons

- Both sodium & chloride which make up salt are essential nutrients for the body.
- Our kidneys are fine-tuned machines for keeping blood levels of sodium within a physiologically healthy range.
- When there's too much sodium on board, the kidneys dump it into urine for excretion, and when more is needed, they reabsorb it.
- Unfortunately, with a chronic excess of sodium to deal with, the kidneys can get worn out.
- Sodium levels in the blood then rise along with water needed to dilute it, resulting in increased pressure on blood vessels (BP).

USA's Standards

- The recommended daily intake for healthy American adults is 2,300 milligrams of sodium a day.
- Currently, an average American consumes more than 3,400 milligrams a day.
- Notably, even a lunch of soup and a sandwich from a restaurant can easily add up to a day's worth of sodium.
- It is estimated that an average reduction of just 400 milligrams of sodium a day could save 28,000 lives and \$7 billion in health-care costs annually.
- Notably, wherever there has been an intake reduction, a decline in the rates of hypertension and cardiovascular disease is observed.

Voices of Dissent

- There is resistance from the food and restaurant industries, which fear that consumers will reject a change in recipes.
- Also, consumers are sometimes wary of low-sodium products, thinking that they will lack flavor.

Addressing Malnutrition

In News:

- Global estimates prove that India is seriously facing the problem of malnutrition.
- Various initiatives have been taken up by government to address the malnutrition.

Nutrition Accessibility Status

- In 2017, India ranked 100 out of 119 countries on the Global Hunger Index.
- Malnutrition is often a symptom of underlying problems such as poor maternal health which may lead to low weight at birth, stunting and susceptibility to diseases in childhood.
- Among adults, malnutrition directly impacts adult productivity and hampers the cognitive development of children.
- Based on the fourth National Family Health Survey (NFHS) (2015- 16), 38% children below 5 years are stunted and 58.4% are anemic.
- 54% women between 15 and 49 years to be anemic while 22.9% have a low maternal body mass index.

Government's Measures

- **Rice fortification** -Rice is fortified with iron has been introduced in the mid-day meal scheme in Odisha, to reduce anemia among primary school students.
- **Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS)** -Programme which provides food, pre-school education, and primary health care to mothers and children.
- **Public Distribution System (PDS)**- It's to make available diverse, nutritious and micro-nutrient fortified foods to the populations.
- **Mission Shakti** - In Odisha under this scheme women are empowered with the help of SHGs.
- **Pustikar Divas** -Establishing nutrition rehabilitation centres, identifying children suffering from severely-acute malnutrition, and fixing a day for monitoring such children are the objectives of this mission.
- **SaansadAdarsh Gram Yojana**- It aims to equip people with quality access to basic amenities and opportunities to help them shape their own destiny under MP's fund.
- **Other options**- In some areas government is also working on cash transfers supplemented with counseling to ensure behavioral change among people and to generate demand for diverse dietary choices.

Malnutrition Problem

- The recent National Family Health Survey data has indicated that a third of our child population is being stunted.
- And more than half the women in the reproductive age-group are being anaemic.
- Besides, a recent World Bank Report has highlighted that India is paying about 9-10 per cent income penalty.
- This is because of the fact that roughly three-fourth of the present workforce suffered from stunting in childhood.
- The adverse effect on lifelong learning capacities and lower adult productivity is the result of early onset of stunting hampering mental and physical growth.

Limitations

- Government initiatives like the National Health Mission (NHM), Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) and the Swachch Bharat Mission (SBM) have come in this regard.
- However the pace of reduction of malnutrition has been suboptimal.
- This is partially explained by our narrow approach to food.
- As, measures have largely relied on in-kind transfers such as in the foodgrains through Public Distribution System (PDS), meals or Take Home Rations (THR) through AnganwadiCentres (AWC).
- Besides, in many states these initiatives are marred by pilferage and leakages.
- Also, there is only around 50 per cent enrolment because of lack of awareness of the programmes, seasonal migration and discrimination by field workers.
- The successful results of in-kind transfers and meal programmes in southern States are largely due to the underlying social capital in these States making it context-specific.

Global Hunger Index

- The GHI score is a multidimensional index composed of four indicators:
 1. Proportion of **undernourished** in the population.
 2. **Mortality** rate of children under the age of five (deaths per 1000 live births).
 3. Proportion of children under five suffering from **wasting** (low weight for height).

4. Proportion of children under five suffering from **stunting** (lower height than typical for age).
 - India's 100th rank is worse than the likes of North Korea, Bangladesh, and Iraq.
 - And is only better than Pakistan and Afghanistan among Asian countries.
 - Notably, India is at the high end of the "serious" category.

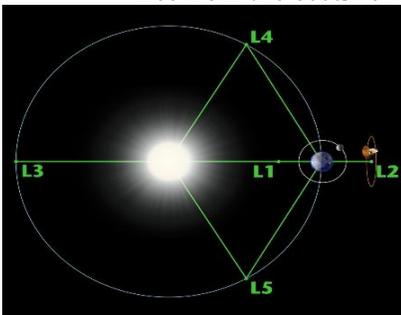
TECHNOLOGICAL AFFAIRS

Aditya-L1 Mission

- It is the first Indian mission to study the Sun.
- It is expected to be launched in 2019 by the launch vehicle PSLV-XL with six payloads from Sriharikota.
- The main aim of the solar mission is to do coronal and near UV studies.
- It will be launched into the halo orbit around the Lagrangian point 1 (L1) of the Sun-Earth system.
- This orbit has the advantage of allowing continuous monitoring of the sun.

Lagrange Points

- A Lagrange point is a location in space where the combined gravitational forces of two large bodies, such as Earth and the sun or Earth and the moon, equal the centrifugal force felt by a much smaller third body.
- The interaction of the forces creates a point of equilibrium where a spacecraft may be "parked" to make observations.
- The first point, L1, lies between Earth and the sun and gets an uninterrupted view of the sun and free from the occurrence of eclipses.



- L2 with the Earth, moon and sun behind it, a spacecraft can get a clear view of deep space and it has a protection for radiation field from sun.
- The James Webb Space Telescope will move into L2 point in 2018.
- The third Lagrange point, L3, lies behind the sun, opposite Earth's orbit. For now, science has not found a use for this spot.
- Points L4 and L5 are stable and lie along Earth's orbit at 60 degrees ahead of and behind Earth and dust and asteroids tend to accumulate in these regions due to its stability.
- Asteroids that surround the L4 and L5 points are called Trojans and Earth's only known Trojan asteroid, 2010 TK7 is found in the region.

Global Conference on Cyber Space 2017

- India is hosting the 5th Global Conference on Cyber Space (GCCS), 2017.
- The GCCS is taking place outside OECD nations for the first time.
- It aims at encouraging dialogue among stakeholders of cyberspace.
- The theme for 2017 is 'Cyber4All: An Inclusive, Sustainable, Developmental, Safe and Secure Cyberspace'.
- It will deliberate on issues relating to promotion of cooperation in cyberspace, norms for responsible behavior in cyberspace and to enhance cyber capacity building.

Peace-a-thon

- As part of the GCCS, a **global Cyber Challenge event** called as "Peace-a-thon" was held.

- It is launched with the objective of enablement and empowerment of cyber security.
- Cyber Peace Foundation (CPF) and Policy Perspectives Foundation (PPF) in collaboration with Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeiTY) organized the event.
- National Critical Information Infrastructure Protection Center (NCIIPC) has also collaborated with MeiTY.

ASTROSAT

- It is India's first dedicated multi wavelength space observatory.
- Most other scientific satellites are capable of observing only a narrow range of wavelength band. But ASTROSAT enables the simultaneous multi-wavelength observations of various astronomical objects with a single satellite i.e it observes universe in the optical, Ultraviolet, low and high energy X-ray regions of the electromagnetic spectrum.
- Multi-wavelength observations of ASTROSAT can be further extended with co-ordinated observations using other spacecraft and ground based observations.
- The Cadmium-Zinc-Telluride Imager (CZTI) is an instrument to observe and image hard X-rays in AstroSat.
- It has consistently been making important.
- The latest discovery of it is a polarization analysis of the Crab nebula pulsar.

Meisenheimer complex

- It is a chemical compound which has been found to be highly effective in removing fluoride and metal ions from drinking water.
- The metal ions include lead, mercury, cadmium, copper, and iron.
- It is formed through the single step synthesis through mixing of two chemicals at room temperature.
- It repels water by nature. Thus a polystyrene sponge becomes a water repelling material when coated with this compound.
- It enables the sponge to absorb a wide variety of oils and organic solvents from water.
- It has negative and positive charged parts and this helps it absorb metal ion pollutants and fluoride from water.

MISCELLANEOUS

A Reflection on the Indian Society - Padmavati Controversy

In news: Protests have broken out across the country for alleged erroneous depiction of Rajput queen Rani Padmavati in the upcoming movie 'Padmavati'.

PADMAVATI

- **Poetry** - The earliest source to mention her is "Padmavat", an epic fictionalized poem written in 1540 CE.
- It was written by Malik Muhammad Jayasi, a Sufi poet and a resident of Jayas in Awadh, a very long way from Chittor, Rajasthan.
- The story with elements of fantasy portrays her as an exceptionally beautiful princess of the Singhal kingdom (Sri Lanka).
- RatanSen, the Rajput ruler of Chittor, who heard about her beauty went on an adventurous quest, won her hand in marriage and brought her to Chittor.
- Following this, AlauddinKhalji, the Sultan of Delhi who heard about her beauty laid siege to Chittor to obtain her.
- Many events occurred during the period of the siege including the killing of RatanSen, till the Fort was finally captured by Khalji.
- But before the capture, Padmavati and her companions committed Jauhar (self-immolation) to protect their honour.
- After her sacrifice, the Rajput men died fighting on the battlefield.
- **History** - According to the poem, Padmavati was born in 1540 which is 224 years after Khalji's death as per historical records.
- Khalji defeated the Rana of Chittor in 1303 and died in 1316, but no one by the name Padmini or Padmavati existed then.

- There are just only two historical facts relevant to the story - I) Khalji's attacks on Chittor, ii) RatanSen's defeat.
- **Oral tradition** - Besides the verifiable historical facts, there are other facts, culturally constructed through the oral tradition of telling and retelling stories.
- For the common people who are untrained to distinguish historical facts from cultural and popular memory, this acquires the status of history.
- Evidently, this popular memory is subject to quick metamorphoses just as the Padmavati story.
- The story has travelled place and time from North India and Rajasthan to Bengal from the 16th to the 20th century and has undergone several mutations.

About Controversy

- There are arguments that there were differentiation between historical facts and the popular versions of the story as depicted in the film Padmavati.
- **Khalji** - Sultan AlauddinKhalji had earned a reputation among contemporary and modern historians for several achievements.
- These include-
 - successful thwarting of Mongol invasions of India
 - conquest of large territories
 - strictly enforcing low prices of commodities in the markets for the common people's daily purchases
 - declared defiance of the Shariat in matters of governance, etc
- But Khalji was certainly not known for his lustful pursuit of women.
- The movie revolving around Khalji's conquest of Chittor for Padmavati undermines the respect for the ruler.
- **Padmavati** - For the Rajput women, she is a heroic queen who had committed Jauhar to save her honour against a lusty Muslim invader.
- She is thus a revered queen and seen as the epitome of sacrifice.
- But rather than highlighting her sacrifice, the film is criticized of highlighting the romantic angle instead.
- The visuals of the heroine singing and dancing evidently go against the patriarchal telling of Padmavati's story, circumscribed by notions of purity and honor.
- **Caste honour** - KarniSena is a self-styled Rajput organization which is very particular of caste honor.
- This is now raising anxiety about the film's scheduled release as it alleges that the film wrongly depicts the traditions in relation with the Rajput clan.

Larger Implications

- **Law and order** - The UP government has written to the Union I&B Ministry requesting that the CBFC be alerted of the "public sentiment" about distortion of "facts" in the film.
- The characterization and depiction of Muslim invaders and Hindu clans in the film could possibly lead to a communal clash.
- Thus, there is an apprehension that the release of the film would lead to law and order disruption.
- **Freedom of expression** - However, as per Supreme Court's earlier verdicts, a mere threat to public order cannot be a ground to suppress freedom of expression.
- The insistence on demanding accuracy in period dramas is an infringement on creativity.
- Notably, this is a film based on a work of fiction.
- However, the controversy now is centred on the question of "historical facts" in connection with the film.
- Reacting to this in legal terms is like endorsing the notions of Rajput honour and Hindu-Muslim enmity fuelled by random groups.

Chittor Fort

- The Chittor Fort or Chittorgarh in Rajasthan is one of the largest forts in India.
- It is designated as a World Heritage Site by the UNESCO.
- The fort was the capital of Mewar and is today situated in the Chittorgarh town.
- It sprawls over a hill above the plains of the valley drained by the Berach River, a tributary of the Banas River.

Reflection of Social Perceptions

- A social understanding of the whole uproar over a movie, Padmavati, raises some crucial questions on some perceptions in society and the status of women in India.
- "All disputes about history and myth are indeed the reflection of concerns at present"

- **Sacrifice** - Celebrating the myth of a woman who embraced death to protect medieval honors is nothing but embracing the idea of Sati which was abolished as a practice nearly two centuries ago.
- Evidently, some upper-caste establishments and political leaders have hailed Padmavati as “rashtramataPadmavati”, the mother of the nation.
- **Community** - The controversy highlights the reality that the clan and the community are increasingly becoming more powerful than the individual.
- The marital and sexual choices of an individual are largely being controlled and conditioned by the caste and communal identities.
- E.g. there is a rising trend of discouraging all inter-faith love relationships as “love jihad”.
- The marriage of a 25-year-old Hindu girl, Akhila (now Hadiya) who chose to marry a Muslim was annulled by the court.
- In Kerala, there are “reconversion centre” that coerces Hindu women who have relationships with men of other religions to “return” to the fold.
- Evidently, in many of these cases, it is usually the woman who faces the double burden of caste and gender identities.
- **Masculinity** - The Kshatriyas are offended because the film Padmavati has allegedly shown Khilji, a Muslim ruler fantasizing about Padmavati.
- More than the concern for a woman, this is more a violent reaction for the challenge posed for Hindu masculinity.
- **Patriarchy** - The agenda of ardent proponents of patriarchy has often been to control and subjugate woman in her individual choices.
- But the very nature of **patriarchal deception** is that it does it with the **tag of 'protecting women'**.
- **Media** - Indian cinema, especially Bollywood, has for long been a playground of desire, especially for men.
- It has shown blindness to the culture of stalking being a social evil and has often only romanticized it.
- But when it is portrayed to be done by someone with a well-known caste or religious identity and tag, it is opposed with all fervor.

IN-SHORT

Blue Whales

- Researchers have analyzed the movement of blue whales when catching its prey.
- Blue whales usually favor their right side similar to right handedness in people.
- But in shallow water between 10 and 100 feet, they most prefer to use their left side to keep a good eye on its prey.
- This is because, the tiny crustaceans known as krill, its most favoured prey usually found less plentiful in the shallow depth.
- In deep water, there are a lot of krill, so visual contact is not important.
- Its situation specific choice is to get as much food in their mouth.
- Researchers say that lefties are unusual in the animal kingdom.

Cool Subdwarfs

- Scientists have discovered some of the oldest stars in our Milky Way Galaxy.
- It is determined based on its location and velocities.
- They are known as Cool subdwarfs, since they are much older and cooler in temperature than the Sun.

European Bank for Reconstruction & Development

- The Union Cabinet has approved India's membership for European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD).
- EBRD is an international financial institution founded in 1991 and headquartered in London.
- It is owned by 65 countries and two EU institutions, and US is the biggest shareholder.
- Besides Europe, member countries of the EBRD are also from other continents - North America (Canada and US), Africa (Morocco), Asia (Japan, China, South Korea) and Australia.
- EBRD's core operations pertain to **private sector development** in their countries of operation.
- The minimum initial investment towards the membership of EBRD will be approximately one million Euros.

- The EBRD is not to be confused with the European Investment Bank (EIB) which is owned by EU member states and used to support EU policy.

PradhanMantriMahila Shakti Kendra

- The objective of this new scheme is to empower rural women through community participation.
- Improving the child sex ratio, survival of new born girl child, girl education and empower them through several initiatives are the main motives.
- It aims to create an environment in which women realize their full potential.
- The scheme is envisaged to work at national, state and block level.
- Under the scheme, community engagement through student volunteers is envisioned in the backward districts at block level.
- Student volunteers will help in awareness generation regarding various important government programmes as well as social issues.
- It will be implemented by the Ministry of Women and Child Development under umbrella mission for “Protection and Empowerment for Women” for the duration of 2017-18 to 2019-20.

Brahmos Missile

- It is the supersonic cruise missile that can be launched from land, sea, sub-sea and air based platforms.
- It is developed by a joint venture between DRDO of India and NPOM of Russia.
- It is a two-stage missile with a solid propellant booster engine in its first stage and the liquid ramjet engine in the second stage.
- The missile has flight range of up to 290 km with supersonic speed all through the flight, making it the first supersonic cruise missile.
- It uses Transport Launch Canister (TLC) for transportation, storage and launch.
- It is also the world's fastest anti-ship cruise missile in operation.
- Brahmos ER missile is capable of hitting the enemy targets at much higher range than the current range of 290 km with the supersonic speed of 2.8 Mach.
- This technology upgrade comes after India's full membership to the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR), which removed caps on range of Brahmos cruise missile.
- IAF has successfully test fired the air-launched version of the brahmos for the first time from Sukhoi-30MKI fighter jet.
- With this launch, India has completed the cruise missile triad for land, sea and air variants.
- The air launched BrahMos missile is a 2.5 ton supersonic air to surface cruise missile with ranges of more than 400 kms.
- It marks a history as IAF is the first air force in the world to have successfully fired an air launched 2.8 Mach surface attack missile.
- The original range was 290 km which was further extended to 450 km after joining MTCR and expected to be extended even up to 600 km.

BetiBachaoBetiPadhao

- The Union Cabinet has recently given its approval for expansion of BetiBachaoBetiPadhao for a Pan India reach covering all the 640 districts of the country as per census 2011.
- The scheme was launched in 2015 to address the issue of decline in Child Sex Ratio (CSR) in gender critical districts.
- The objectives of the Scheme are
 1. Prevent gender biased sex selective elimination
 2. Ensure survival & protection of the girl child
 3. Ensure education of the girl child
- The initiative has two major components such as mass communication campaign and multi-sectoral action covering all States and UTs.
- It is currently implemented in 161 districts which has adverse CSR.
- It is being implemented in a coordinated effort by Ministry of WCD, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare and Ministry of HRD.
- **CSR** - Number of girls per 1000 boys in the age group of 0-6 years. It declined sharply from 976 in 1961 to 918 in Census 2011.

Pay Revision for Judges

- The Union Cabinet has recently approved the revision in the salaries, gratuity, allowances, pension of the Judges of the SC and HC and retired Judges of SC and HC following the recommendation of Pay Commission.
- Salaries, gratuity, pension, allowances of Judges of Supreme Court are governed by the Supreme Court Judges (Salaries and Conditions of Service) Act, 1958.

- For Judges of High Courts, it is governed by High Court Judges (Salaries and Conditions of Service) Act, 1954.
- An amendment in the acts is required whenever there is any proposal for revision of salaries/pension gratuity, allowances.
- Therefore, the government intends to move bills to amend the two acts in the ensuing winter session of parliament.

Free float

- It refers to the portion of the total outstanding shares of a company that is in the hands of the public.
- Hence, it is available to be freely traded on the market.
- The shares of the companies with sufficient free float exhibit lesser price volatility than companies whose shares are mostly held by a close group of promoters.
- This is mainly due to availability of buyers for free floated shares held by public.
- Whereas promoters held the shares for the long run and do not engage in daily buying and selling activity.

Bishnois of Rajasthan

- The Bishnois are a sect of people mainly found in Bikaner Region in Rajasthan.
- They will not tolerate killing of wild animals and felling of a green tree.
- They are called as “The Protectors of Black Buck”.
- Jammeshwarji Maharaj launched this sect in 1542 A.D who preached 29 principles to the followers.
- It covers various aspects of brotherhood, penance, fighting social evils, reserving rights for women, wildlife preservation and kindness towards animals.
- Bishnois treat these principles a religion and follow them with devotion.
- They staged a protest recently against the poaching of Chinkara.

India's Biggest Oil Refinery

- India's biggest oil refinery proposed on the western coastline near Rajapur tehsil of the Ratnagiri district in Maharashtra.
- The government has recently begun the joint measurement of land.
- The land has been notified as an industrial area under Maharashtra Industrial Development Corporation (MIDC) Act, instead of Land Acquisition Act, 2013.
- MIDC law is draconian and gives no voice to the people.
- So farmers from in Maharashtra have been protesting against it.
- The villagers are also concerned at the pollution caused by the refinery once it is operational.
- The refinery will stand next to world's biggest nuclear power project, the proposed 9900 MW Jaitapur Nuclear Power Project (JNPP), which is another cause for concern among locals.
- A desiltation project and a 1,500 MW thermal power project are also proposed in the vicinity.

North East Rural Livelihood Project

- It is a unique scheme proposed by the Ministry of Development of North-Eastern Region (DoNER) and is being supported by the World Bank.
- It will primarily benefit the tribals and the lower socioeconomic groups, especially women, in the North-Eastern Region (NER).
- Four states, - Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura, will be taken up for helping the tribal and even the non-tribal lower groups living in remote areas.
- It is also aimed at assisting over 10,000 Self Help Groups (SHGs) and benefit about three lakh poor households.
- The more vulnerable tribal groups like Reang in Tripura and Lepsha and Bhutias in Sikkim will also benefit from it.

How bacteria survive?

- Aerobic bacteria cannot undergo metabolic processes without oxygen.
- Each cell must extract electrons from food that are then transported along the cell's membrane until they reach an oxygen molecule.
- The energy released during this metabolic process is used to sustain life.
- But Bacteria rarely live by themselves as single-celled organisms.
- Most grow in communities to form a biofilm with tissue-like properties that serves to fortify the community.
- As communities grow they can become overcrowded, creating an environment where each cell has to compete for limited nutrients and oxygen to survive.

- Biologists have recently revealed a mechanism by which bacterial cells access oxygen for energy production.
- They say that the communities can change the overall structure of the biofilm so that its surface area-to-volume ratio is higher and a larger proportion of the cells inside are able to access the oxygen on the outside.
- Some can also make molecules called phenazines, which help to shuttle electrons from the inside to the outside of the cell.
- Some make alternative versions of terminal oxidases i.e enzymes that transfer electrons to oxygen, which use oxygen more efficiently or are better at scavenging oxygen when the concentration is low.

Salvator Mundi (Saviour of the World)

- It is an ethereal portrait of Jesus Christ by Leonardo da Vinci, which dates to about 1500.
- It is one of around 16 verified da Vinci originals in existence.
- It is the last privately owned Leonardo da Vinci painting and was put on sale recently.
- Experts have had doubts about the authenticity as also the condition of the painting as the work has been marred by repeated repaintings.

Dindigul Locks

- The Dindigul region in Tamilnadu is known for well-crafted locks.
- There has been decline in the lock-making tradition in recent times.
- The reasons are—
 1. the refusal of artisans to adopt modern technology
 2. the absence of documentation,
 3. research and development
 4. an unorganised workforce paid poor wages
 5. disinterest among younger workers to learn the craft
 6. the invasion of cheaper and lightweight locks, especially from China and
 7. the higher cost of handcrafted locks.
- The imposition of 18% Goods and Services Tax (GST) has also hiked the price of Dindigul locks.
- Geographical Indication tag has been sought for Dindigul locks since 2013.

Pre-Monsoon Dust

- The aerosol burden over north India is 3 times more than the global mean value.
- It has been increasing at about 3% per year for the past few decades.
- But the amount of dust aerosol during the pre-monsoon period has decreased by 10-20% during the period.
- Past studies have shown that whenever pre-monsoon dust aerosol is more over north Indian region, the early part of monsoon rainfall is higher.

Water Bodies & Methane

- Shallow lakes, ponds, rivers and wetlands are relevant in the context of climate change.
- They are responsible for much of global greenhouse gas emissions.
- An important part of these emissions is caused by bubbles filled with methane gas that develop in the sediment at the bottom of these water bodies.
- When the bubbles reach the surface, the gas enters the atmosphere.
- Nutrient-rich sediments produce more methane than nutrient-poor sediments.
- One possibility for reducing methane production is therefore to make sure that sediments have fewer nutrients, which means using less fertiliser

Mamallapuram Stone Sculptures

- The hand-crafted stone sculptures of Mamallapuram have been recently granted the Geographical Indications (GI) tag.
- The exquisite rock-sculpting techniques exhibited in Mamallapuram date back to early 7th century CE.
- The Pallava dynasty, which ruled the area between 6 and 9th centuries A.D., is responsible for the development of port town as a centre of art and architecture.
- Mahendravarman (AD 580-630), his son Narasimhavarman I Mamalla (AD 630-668), Paramesvaravarman (A.D. 672-700) and Narasimhavarman II Rajasimha (A.D. 700-728) had contributed the most of sculptures.
- Mamallapuram was named after the king Narasimhavarman Pallava, who was also known as Mamallan (great wrestler).
- Sculptors use blue metal for stone sculptors instead of granite which has high density and very costly.

GI tags

- Tamil Nadu is first among the states in India with regard to the number of GI tags for its products, while Uttar Pradesh comes second.
- Darjeeling Tea was the first Indian product to get a Geographic Indication in the early 2000s.
- Tamil Nadu has submitted 50 products of which 24 have been approved by the registry.
- The most famous among these is the Kanchipuram silk.
- Coimbatore wet grinder, artisans of Vadasery in Nagercoil who make dazzling jewellery of a unique kind for temples, Tanjavur Dancing Doll are some of the products that have obtained the GI certificate.

UMANG App

- UMANG (Unified Mobile Application for New-age Governance) mobile app allow citizens to access government services on a single platform.
- The services live on the app include Aadhaar, DigiLocker, Bharat Bill Payment System (BBPS) among others.
- It is expected to provide access to over 1,200 services of various government organisations in states and at the Centre as well as utility payments.
- Using the app, citizens will be able to access Employees Provident Fund Organisation (EPFO) services, apply for a new PAN, and can register under the PradhanMantriKaushalVikasYojana.

INSPIRE 2017

- International Symposium to Promote Innovation & Research in Energy Efficiency (INSPIRE 2017) is an International conference that brings various stakeholders to showcase best practices in Energy Efficiency sector.
- The first edition of INSPIRE 2017 was recently held in Jaipur.
- It is being organized by Energy Efficiency Services Limited (EESL) in partnership with The World Bank, and Alliance for an Energy Efficient Economy (AEEE).

Bilateral Transfer Pricing Agreements

- Mutual agreement procedures (MAPs) and advance pricing agreements (APAs) are the bilateral transfer pricing agreements to solve the income tax dispute between IT department and foreign corporate.
- APAs are meant to settle potential disputes in advance, while MAPs to settle a dispute once it has happened.
- Both these agreements are applicable to a country only when the DTAA with a particular country contains a 'corresponding adjustment' clause.
- The clause would allow the tax disputes through bilateral arbitration instead of domestic litigation
- Now, IT department has issued a notification which allows MAP and APA with all countries irrespective of 'corresponding adjustment' clause in the treaty.
- It helps important trade partners such as France, Germany, Italy, Singapore and South Korea which did not get the benefit of MAP and APA in the previously held stance.

Mount Agung Volcano

- The volcano is located in Bali, Indonesia.
- Indonesian government has issued a warning of the "imminent" risk of a larger eruption and top level four alert.
- Residents were warned to immediately evacuate a danger zone that circles Agung in a radius of 8-10 km.
- It was erupted last time in 1963.

Shifting of Tigers

- The Rajasthan government has asked for permission to bring tigers from other States for their rehabilitation and cross-mating in order to develop strong breeds of the big cat.
- Previously, National Tiger Conservation Authority has given nod for shifting tigers from Ranthambhore National Park to Mukundara Hills tiger reserve.
- The Mukundara Hills tiger reserve is located in the south-eastern Rajasthan covering the existing darrah, Chambal and jawaharsagar wildlife sanctuary.
- It is the third notified tiger habitat in the State, after Ranthambhore and Sariska.
- It was established in 2013 to cater to the spillover tiger population from Ranthambhore.



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