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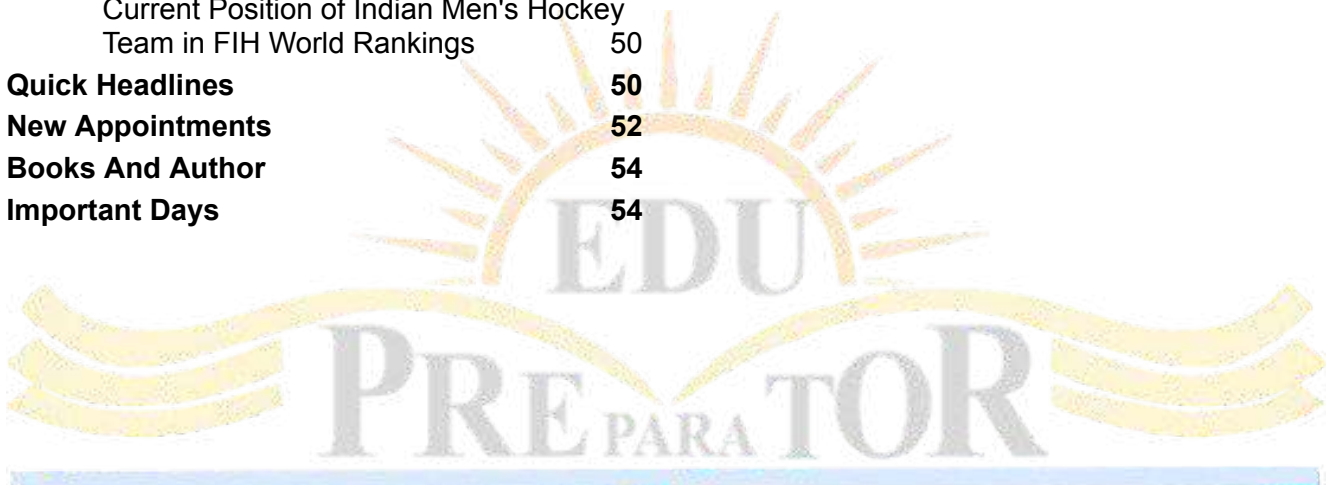
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Economics

'India's Strategy for Deregulation and Economic Growth'

'Introduction and Relevance'

- The Chief Economic Advisor (CEA), Dr. V. Anantha Nageswaran, recently declared that deregulation would be a central concept in India's Economic Survey for 2024-25.
- This reflects the government's decision to lessen inhibitory rules across various sectors in order to stimulate economic growth and increase small and medium enterprises' (SMEs) productivity.
- Deregulation, essentially the reduction or removal of governmental regulation over industries, is aimed at promoting competition and enhancing market efficiency by inviting the entry of new players.

'Historical Context'

- Deregulation has been a critical element of economic reforms (LPG Reforms), initiated post-1991 steering India from a heavily regulated economy to a more liberal and globally integrated one.
- For instance, in 1978, the Airline Deregulation Act was passed in India, transferring more control to airline companies and significantly revamping the industry landscape.

'Areas of Focus for Economic Growth'

- The Economic Survey for 2024-25 identifies deregulation, particularly at state and local levels, as a vital catalyst for growth.
- The need for an adjustment in corporate wage structures to align earnings with living costs, ultimately stimulating demand and economic growth, has been highlighted.
- It also underlines the necessity for India to create approximately 8 million jobs annually to accommodate the growing workforce.

'Impacts of Deregulation on the Indian Economy'

- Deregulation makes way for blooming industries like telecommunications, aviation, and IT by giving businesses more autonomy, hastening decision-making processes, and alleviating bureaucratic delays.
- Additionally, the deregulated market increases competition and offers better quality products at competitive prices, which benefits consumers and boosts industrial growth.

'LPG Reforms'

- The Liberalization, Privatization, and Globalization (LPG) reforms were devised as a keystone of India's economic strategy to surmount the crisis and stimulate sustainable growth.
- New Trade Policy was introduced to augment exports by revamping licensing procedures and linking non-essential imports to exports.
- The Exim Scrips ruling ended the state-owned firms' monopoly over imports, empowering the private sector to independently import goods.

'Importance of Deregulation for Indian Economy'

- Deregulation targets a sustainable recovery and growth by lessening bureaucratic hurdles and empowering market forces, while also fostering entrepreneurship, investments, and innovation.
- It also seeks to revitalise Agriculture and Allied Sectors, bridge Infrastructure Deficit, and enhance Export Competitiveness under aggravated geopolitical tensions.

'MSME Sector'

- Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) are businesses involved in the production, processing, and preservation of goods and services, and they form a pivotal part of India's economy, fuelling employment, innovation, exports, and inclusive growth.

'Key Initiatives to Accelerate Indian Economic Growth'

- Numerous initiatives have been undertaken to stimulate economic growth, including the New Economic Policy (NEP), 2020, Production-Linked Incentive (PLI) Scheme, and sectors like Start-up India and Make in India 2.0.

'Effective Strategies for Impactful Deregulation'

- To render deregulation successful and influential, partnerships between the government and the private sector are critical, alongside fair competition.
- Digital platforms can be utilised to amplify governance transparency, reduce compliance burdens and simplify approval procedures.
- It is also crucial to promote financial inclusion and support SMEs, adapt best practices from global examples, and address unique challenges with sector-specific reforms.

DRI Report on Smuggling in India

Introduction and About DRI

- The Directorate of Revenue Intelligence (DRI) released a report on the rising cases of smuggling within India.
- DRI, the top anti-smuggling agency in India, was founded on 4th December 1957 and replaced the Central Revenue Intelligence Board, which was formed in 1953.
- DRI is part of the Central Board of Indirect Taxes & Customs under the Ministry of Finance. Its main function is to enforce Customs and indirect tax laws.
- In the fiscal year 2023-24, DRI seized goods worth approx Rs 3,573 crore.
- Its annual regional Customs enforcement meeting on Foundation Day has enhanced international cooperation from 2013.

Findings of the DRI Report

- The DRI report indicates a significant increase in drug seizures, contraband cigarettes, and illicit currency.
- Drug seizures, especially of cocaine and methamphetamine, have spiked in FY24 and are particularly rising within northeastern states like Assam and Mizoram.
- There is a 19% rise in contraband cigarette seizures during the first half of FY25. Most are smuggled through free trade warehousing zones in Dubai.
- Rs 13.8 crore in foreign currency was confiscated in the first half of FY25, which has surpassed all of FY24's total of Rs 12.4 crore. 55% of these took place on land routes from Myanmar, Bangladesh, and Nepal.
- Wildlife trafficking remains rampant as indicated by seizures of 53.5 kg of elephant tusks and other wildlife items.

Challenges in Controlling Smuggling

- Smuggling operations frequently exploit corruption, collusion, and free trade agreements, threatening domestic industries and the economy. On top of that, comprehensive data on all smuggling activities is lacking, diminishing the effectiveness of strategic response planning.
- The rise of cyber-enabled drug trafficking through the dark web and cryptocurrencies also impede traditional methods of multiple smuggling detection.
- India's vast borders and varied terrains across different states complicate comprehensive smuggling surveillance and control.
- Smuggling syndicates are now employing more advanced methods such as engaging "mules" and using international departure gates for gold smuggling.

Strategies to Address Smuggling Challenges

- Collaboration between national and international law enforcement can boost anti-smuggling operations. For instance, the Ministry of Home Affairs has initiated capacity-building programmes for law enforcement agencies.

- Implementing stricter regulations on free trade zones and enhancing monitoring systems can help reduce illicit activities. Alongside this, there needs to be regular audits and inspections to ensure trade law compliance.
- Investment in advanced technology such as data analytics, drones, and surveillance systems can improve detection capabilities at important transit points.
- Running public awareness campaigns about the detrimental effects of drug abuse and the impact of smuggling on society encourages citizens to report illicit activities. For instance, the UK's "Crimestoppers" campaign actively encourages citizens to report suspicious activities.

DRI Report on Smuggling in India

Introduction and Background about DRI

- The Directorate of Revenue Intelligence (DRI) is India's apex anti-smuggling agency.
- Established on 4th December 1957, the DRI evolved from the Central Revenue Intelligence Board which was formed in 1953.
- Under the Central Board of Indirect Taxes & Customs, Ministry of Finance, it is tasked with investigating and enforcing Customs and indirect tax laws.
- Over the years, the DRI has spawned other specialised agencies including the Directorate General of GST Intelligence and the Narcotics Control Bureau.

Highlights from the DRI Smuggling Report

- The DRI reported a major surge in drug seizures in FY24, with cocaine smuggling seeing a 9% increase and seizures doubling compared to the previous year.
- There has been a rise in methamphetamine seizures, especially in northeastern states like Assam and Mizoram.
- The first half of FY25 witnessed a 19% increase in contraband cigarettes seizures,

largely smuggled through free trade warehousing zones in Dubai.

- There was a rise in illicit currency seizures, with Rs 13.8 crore seized in the first half of FY25 alone.
- Conversely, gold seizures declined by 9% in FY24, with 55% of the gold seizures being from land routes from Myanmar, Bangladesh, and Nepal.
- There continues to be a problem with wildlife smuggling, as demonstrated by the seizure of 53.5 kg of elephant tusks and other wildlife items.

Challenges in Controlling Smuggling

- The operation of smuggling syndicates is frequently facilitated by corruption and collusion, which weakens law-enforcement mechanisms and legal frameworks.
- Amendments in the Wildlife Protection Act have not been successful in fully curbing wildlife trafficking.
- Free trade agreements are being exploited by smugglers who misdeclare goods, causing an influx of illegal products into the market and posing a threat to the domestic economy.
- A lack of comprehensive data on smuggling activities limits the effectiveness of preventive measures.
- Increased use of technology by smugglers, such as the dark web and cryptocurrencies, pose new challenges to traditional detection methods.
- India's long and diverse borders with multiple countries complicate the monitoring and control of smuggling.

Strategies to Address Smuggling

- Strengthening law enforcement and enhancing collaboration between national and international agencies can improve anti-smuggling measures.
- Regulatory frameworks have to be more stringent on free trade zones, which are often exploited for smuggling activities. Regular audits and inspections can ensure compliance.

- Advanced technology utilisation such as data analytics, surveillance systems and drones can enhance detection capabilities.
- Public awareness campaigns about the dangers of drug abuse and the societal impact of smuggling can foster community involvement in preventing smuggling.

WIPO World Intellectual Property Indicators 2024 Report and India's Intellectual Property Growth

Introduction to Intellectual Property (IP) and WIPO

- The World Intellectual Property Organisation (WIPO) is a specialized United Nations agency established in 1967.
- WIPO's objective is to encourage creative activity and guard intellectual property internationally.
- Headquartered in Geneva, Switzerland, WIPO administers 26 international treaties and has 193 member states.
- Among the member states, India joined WIPO in 1975 and holds memberships in numerous critical WIPO-managed International Treaties and Conventions pertaining to Intellectual Property Rights (IPRs).

Understanding WIPO's 2024 Report on World Intellectual Property Indicators

- WIPO's World Intellectual Property Indicators (WIPI) 2024 report signifies India's noteworthy achievements in the global intellectual property arena.
- India features among the top 10 nations for patents, trademarks and industrial designs according to the report.

- The report outlines a rise in worldwide IP filings, signalling resilience in innovation despite economic hindrances.
- Primarily, residents from China, the US, Japan, South Korea, and India largely drove this increase.

India's Performance in World Intellectual Property Indicators 2024

- India experienced the fastest growth in patent applications in 2023 among the top 20 sources, marking the fifth consecutive year of significant growth.
- Between 2018 and 2023, patent and industrial design applications more than doubled, with major contributions from sectors like Textiles and Accessories, Tools and Machines, and Health and Cosmetics.
- India's patent-to-GDP ratio, an indicator of the economic impact of patent activity, also saw substantial growth, showcasing the scale of IP activity along with economic expansion.
- For trademark filings, India ranked fourth worldwide with a vast majority of these filings made by indigenous entities.

Understanding IP, Patents, Trademarks, GIs and Industrial Designs

- Intellectual Property (IP) includes intangible creations of the human intellect, such as copyrights, patents, and trademarks.
- Patents are exclusive rights granted for an invention that provide legal protection to the inventors.
- A trademark or a mark is a sign capable of distinguishing the goods or services produced or provided by one company from those of others.
- Industrial designs encompass the ornamental or aesthetic aspects of a product, and a Geographical Indication (GI) is a sign identifying a good as originating from a specific geographical area.

India's Initiatives to Encourage Innovation

- India has established a robust legislative framework to protect IP, including The Copyright Act, 1957, The Patents Act, 1970, and The Geographical Indications of Goods (Registration and Protection) Act, 1999.
- India introduced the National Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) Policy in 2016 to further enhance its focus on intellectual property.
- Government initiatives also include 'Make in India' programme, the National (IP) Awareness Mission, and Kalam Program for Intellectual Property Literacy and Awareness Campaign.

Socio-Economic Implications of India's IP Growth

- Increase in IP filings leads to economic empowerment by boosting local businesses and leading to enhanced competitiveness.
- Growth of IP sector has potential to create new job opportunities in research, development and legal services related to intellectual property.
- As India continues to strengthen its IP framework, it enhances its reputation as a global innovation hub, attracting foreign investment and partnerships.

One Rank One Pension Scheme (OROP)

Introduction and Background

- The One Rank One Pension scheme, commonly known as OROP, aims to provide uniform pension benefits to armed forces personnel based on their rank and length of service.
- The scheme was officially implemented on 7th November 2015, with benefits effective from 1st July 2014.
- OROP ensures that all armed forces personnel retiring at the same rank receive the same pension, irrespective of their retirement date.
- Concept of OROP arose from the K.P. Singh Dev Committee (1984) which suggested such

pension equality based on the established pension principles for higher court judges.

- Many administrative challenges discouraged early implementation of OROP, as suggested by the 4th and 5th Central Pay Commissions as well as by the Cabinet Secretary Committee (2009).
- Eventually, the Rajya Sabha Petition Committee's recommendation led to the implementation of OROP for all Defence Forces personnel.

Key Features and Supreme Court's Ruling

- OROP's key features are pension determination by rank and length of service, a revision of the pension every five years, and inclusion of special provisions for family pensioners, war widows, and disabled pensioners.
- Uttar Pradesh and Punjab have the most beneficiaries.
- Financial implications of OROP revisions cost around Rs 8,450 crore annually. Over 25.13 lakh armed forces pensioners and their families benefit from this scheme.
- The Supreme Court, in Indian Ex-Servicemen Movement v Union of India Case, affirmed the constitutional validity of the OROP scheme. It stated that varying pensions for personnel of the same rank based on their retirement dates are not arbitrary.

Socio-Economic Implications of OROP

- Positively, implementing OROP improves the financial security of veterans and their families, increases their disposable income, and provides them a greater social recognition.
- It creates an equitable pension system guarding the financial well-being of military veterans.
- However, the implementation of OROP also led to high economic costs and administrative challenges.
- Initial estimates predicted the cost to be Rs. 500 crore, which has shot up to between Rs. 8000-10000 crore, burdening the exchequer.

- Administrative challenges include difficulties in retrieving and verifying past records of eligible personnel, complicating the seamless delivery of pension benefits to all eligible individuals.

Analysis of the International Debt Report 2024

Introduction and Key Findings

- The recently released "International Debt Report 2024" by the World Bank indicates a worsening debt crisis for developing nations. The year 2023 witnessed the highest debt servicing levels in two decades, due to escalating interest rates and economic challenges.
- A UNCTAD report "A World of Debt 2024: A Growing Burden to Global Prosperity", also published in June 2024, echoes the above crisis.

Rising Debt Levels and Costs

- Total external debt of Low- and Middle-Income countries (LMICs) has soared to a striking USD 8.8 trillion by 2023 end, an 8% jump since 2020.
- External debt for the International Development Association (IDA) eligible countries has ascended by approximately 18%, reaching USD 1.1 trillion.
- The LMICs have encountered a record of USD 1.4 trillion in debt servicing costs in 2023, crucially affecting national budgets.

Impact on Borrowing Costs and Role of Creditors

- Due to harsh global credit conditions, private creditors have reduced lending to IDA nations, resulting in increased debt servicing.
- Conversely, multilateral lenders like the World Bank have amped up their support by providing USD 51 billion more than they gathered in debt payments.

State of the Global Debt Crisis

- The UNCTAD "World of Debt Report, 2024" predicts global debt to ramp up to USD 315 trillion in 2024, triple the global GDP.
- Public debt is spiralling upward, driven by the Covid-19 crisis, rising food and energy costs, climate change, and a sluggish global economy.
- Debt servicing has been placed under more strain with half the developing countries now dedicating at least 8% of their government revenues to it.

Effective Measures Taken to Tackle Debt Crisis

- The Debt Management and Financial Analysis System Programme (DMFAS) by UNCTAD aids developing countries in improving their debt management.
- The Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative and the Multilateral Debt Relief Initiative (MDRI) by the IMF and World Bank provide debt relief and low-interest loans to countries grappling with unwieldy debt.
- The Global Sovereign Debt Roundtable (GSDR) assembles debtor countries and creditors to find solutions to debt sustainability and restructuring issues.

The Way Forward

- Low-income countries' increased representation in decision-making processes, financial transparency, and accountability can help avert debt predicaments.
- The proposed contingency financing measures, such as augmented access to Special Drawing Rights (SDRs) by the IMF, can aid in fortifying the reserves of developing countries during predicaments.

Geography And Environment

National Wildlife Health Policy in India

Introduction and About the Policy

- Recently, the Indian government proposed the National Wildlife Health Policy. This policy is aimed at addressing a host of health threats faced by wildlife.
- The Central Zoo Authority, operating under the Ministry of Environment, Forest, and Climate Change (MoEF&CC), was responsible for organising the consultative workshop wherein this proposal was raised and discussed.
- The workshop included a range of stakeholders such as government departments, NGOs, academic institutions, zoological parks, and veterinary universities.
- Institutions such as the GISE Hub at IIT Bombay and the Principal Scientific Adviser's office to the Government of India have pledged support to the policy's development.

Aim and Reach of the Policy

- The proposed National Wildlife Health Policy will serve to complement India's National Wildlife Action Plan (2017-31) and the One Health policy.
- The One Health policy focuses on optimizing the health of people, animals, and the environment by recognising their interdependence.
- The National Wildlife Action Plan (2017-31) encompasses 103 conservation actions and 250 projects including creating a standard protocol for disease surveillance in tiger reserves, protected areas, and forests.
- The new policy also features proposals for developing legally binding protocols for the humane euthanasia of wild animals, managing wildlife pathogen risk, disease outbreak preparedness and response, and improving biosecurity.

Contributions and Implications

- The policy will spearhead R&D initiatives centered on wildlife disease management and health strategy.
- It is also expected to enhance the skills and knowledge bases of all stakeholders involved in wildlife conservation and management.

Addressing Current Wildlife Health Challenges

- Indian wildlife is plagued by a host of health issues including infectious diseases like Canine Distemper Virus, habitat loss, impacts from climate change, and illegal activities.
- Given that India is home to over 91,000 species of wildlife and more than 1,000 protected areas like national parks, wildlife sanctuaries, and biosphere reserves, a policy like this becomes increasingly important.

Central Zoo Authority

- The Central Zoo Authority (CZA) is a statutory body that operates under the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change. It was established in 1992 under the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972.
- Headed by the Environment Minister, the CZA includes 10 members and a member-secretary.
- Its primary objective is to complement and reinforce the national effort in the conservation of rich biodiversity.

Key Highlights of the 16th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (COP16 UNCCD)

Introduction and About

- The 16th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Convention to Combat

Desertification (COP16 UNCCD) was recently concluded in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

- Almost 200 countries participated and pledged to prioritise land restoration and drought resilience.
- This was the first UNCCD COP to be held in the Middle East and North Africa region.

The Key Outcomes of COP16 UNCCD

- Significant efforts towards a global drought framework were made, aiming for completion in 2026.
- Financial commitments totaling over USD 12 billion were pledged to address desertification, land degradation, and drought.
- The launch of Riyadh Global Drought Resilience Partnership will support 80 vulnerable countries, including \$10 billion from the Arab Coordination Group.
- The Great Green Wall initiative received substantial financial support, endorsing Sahel landscape restoration and coordination across 22 African countries.
- The launch of Vision for Adapted Crops and Soils (VACS) initiative with nearly USD 70 million.
- Recognizing the necessity of including indigenous peoples and local communities in global land and drought governance.
- Highlighting the role of private sector advocacy, ESG strategies, and sustainable finance in tackling desertification, land degradation, and drought through the Business4Land initiative.
- Agreement to continue UNCCD's Science-Policy Interface established in 2013.

About United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification

- The UNCCD was established in 1994 aiming to protect and restore land for a sustainable future.
- It operates on the principles of participation, partnership, and decentralization.

Desertification and its Current Status

- Desertification is a type of land degradation where an already dry land area becomes increasingly arid.

- Areas like Europe, Brazil, the Western United States, Asia, and Central Africa are witnessing significant drying trends.

Implications of Land Degradation and Desertification

- Unsustainable land use has negatively impacted seven of the nine global boundaries, according to the UNCCD.
- Droughts affect 1.8 billion people globally and are hitting economic sectors including agriculture, energy, and water availability severely.

Current Desertification Scenario in India

- From 2015-2019, 30.51 million hectares of India's total reported land was degraded which is a 4.42% increase from 2015.
- This degradation exposes 854.4 million people to drought from 2015-2018.

About The International Drought Resilience Observatory

- The International Drought Resilience Observatory is an AI-driven platform aiding countries in assessing and enhancing their capacity to cope with droughts.
- It is an initiative of the International Drought Resilience Alliance and was launched by COP27 to the UNFCCC at Sharm El-Sheikh by Spain and Senegal.

Nine Years of the Paris Agreement: An Analysis

The Paris Agreement: A Basic Introduction

- The Paris Agreement is a legally binding international treaty under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), adopted on 12th December 2015.
- It aims to significantly curb global warming, with a target of keeping the temperature increase below 2°C compared to pre-industrial levels, attempting even to limit warming to 1.5°C.

- The Paris Agreement replaced the earlier Kyoto Protocol, expanding the focus from developed countries to a more globally-inclusive approach.
- An essential component of the Paris Agreement is the requirement for countries to submit and update their Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) every five years, outlining their plans for reducing greenhouse gas emissions and adapting to climate change impacts.

Significant Achievements of the Paris Agreement

- The Paris Agreement marked the first universal framework in which nearly all nations, regardless of their level of development, committed to confronting climate change through nationally determined contributions (NDCs).
- Developed countries pledged to mobilise an annual USD 100 billion by 2020 to support developing nations in their mitigation and adaptation efforts.
- The Agreement incorporated the UNFCCC principle of 'Common But Differentiated Responsibilities' (CBDR), ensuring a balanced commitment based on national circumstances.

Criticisms and Shortcomings After Nine Years

- A report by the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) called out the Paris Agreement's ineffectiveness in achieving its goals, despite nine years of operation.
- The eight years following the signing of the Agreement consecutively remained the warmest on record for global temperatures.
- The current pace and commitments of climate action, as shown in the Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), are insufficient to limit global warming to the targeted 1.5°C, with expectations of a 2.5-2.9°C increase.
- The WMO advocates for a supplementary fossil fuel treaty, citing shortcomings in the Paris Agreement, demonstrated by a projected gap in global emission targets and actual mitigation.

Variability in National Efforts and Implementation Challenges

- While many countries have solid climate action and disaster risk reduction plans through their established NDCs, the effectiveness and adequacy of these plans vary significantly.
- For instance, the European Union's NDCs show strong targets and implementation reflected in policies such as the European Green Deal. In contrast, South Africa struggles with efficient execution due to its reliance on coal and resource constraints.

Addressing the Implementation Gaps of the Paris Agreement

- Strengthening and Enforcement of Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs)
- Make NDCs legally binding by periodic reviews for alignment with temperature goals.
- Developed countries should take on higher mitigation targets reflecting their historical emissions and financial capability.

Phasing Out the Use of Fossil Fuels

- Establish a binding international protocol for phasing out fossil fuels.
- Provide financial and technical aid to developing countries for a clean energy transition.
- Eliminate subsidies on fossil fuels to prioritize investment in renewable energy.

Enhancement of Climate Finance

- Developed countries should exceed the annually set goal of USD 300 billion for climate finance by 2035.
- Focus on funding for adaptation and recovery from losses and damages, especially for vulnerable nations.
- Implement innovative mechanisms like carbon and aviation taxes.

Promotion of Technology Transfer

- Facilitate affordable technology transfer, and build technological capacity through training and research.
- Foster public-private partnerships for sustainable innovation and deployment.

Emphasis on Adaptation and Risk Reduction

- Develop strategies for disaster risk reduction.
- Invest in creating resilient infrastructures.
- Establish early warning systems to mitigate the impact of climate-induced extreme weather events.

Equitable Implementation and Accountability

- Uphold equity by reinstating the principle of Common But Differentiated Responsibilities (CBDR).
- Establish transparent accountability for Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) and finance.
- Implement incentives for compliance and penalties for non-compliance.

Increasing Global Cooperation

- Strengthen multilateral institutions to facilitate unified global action following the recent developments at COP29 in Baku.
- Set up robust legal frameworks that ensure accountability for non-compliance.

UNCCD's World Drought Atlas: An Overview and Recommendations

Understanding UNCCD and the World Drought Atlas

- The UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), established in 1994, is the sole legally binding international treaty that links environmental and developmental goals with sustainable land management.
- The UNCCD, in collaboration with the European Commission's Joint Research Centre,

unveiled the World Drought Atlas at the COP16 in Riyadh.

- The Atlas is a comprehensive global document on drought-related risks and solutions.

Key Findings of the UNCCD's Drought Atlas

- The Atlas highlights drought as a systemic risk, predicting that 75% of the world's population could be affected by drought conditions by 2050 if current trends persist.
- Economic effects of droughts are substantial and often underestimated, causing substantial damage to agriculture, energy production and trade.
- India, with its diverse climate and dependence on monsoon rains, is particularly vulnerable to droughts.
- Around 60% of India's agricultural land is rain-fed, implying susceptibility to rainfall fluctuations.
- Rapid urbanisation and improper water management have exacerbated the drought conditions.

Understanding Droughts

- Droughts are extended instances of significantly reduced water availability, caused by climate factors and human activities.
- In India, about two-thirds of the country is at risk of drought, severely impacting agricultural productivity and livelihoods.

Measures for Drought Management

- Various initiatives like the Integrated Drought Management Programme, UNCCD's Drought Initiative, and the Drought Resilience, Adaptation and Management Policy Framework play an instrumental role in drought management.
- A global awareness effort, World Day to Combat Desertification and Drought, is observed annually on 17th June.

Key Recommendations of the World Drought Atlas

- Governance: The Atlas calls for countries to develop comprehensive national drought plans,

promoting international collaboration and financial mechanisms for drought management.

- Land Use Management: Sustainable agriculture practices and land restorations are encouraged.

- Water Supply and Management: The Atlas recommends increased investment in infrastructure for water supply management such as wastewater reuse and groundwater recharge systems.

Military Defence And Exercises

India-Cambodia Joint Exercise CINBAX

Introduction

- The Indian Army and the Cambodian Army have embarked on their initial Joint Table Top Exercise, named CINBAX, at the Foreign Training Node in Pune.

- This historic event is scheduled from the 1st to the 8th of December 2024, with the primary aim of nurturing strategic cooperation, trust, and interoperability between the two nations.

- It involves 20 personnel from each army, focusing on counter-terrorism operations under Chapter VII of the United Nations Charter.

Key Highlights and General Overview

- Participants: The Indian Army has deployed 20 personnel from an Infantry Brigade, and the Cambodian Army also has 20 personnel taking part in the exercise.

- Location: The exercise is taking place at the Foreign Training Node in Pune, India.

- Duration: The exercise lasts for a week from the 1st to the 8th of December 2024.

- Focus: The primary focus is counter-terrorism operations under the guidance of the UN Charter Chapter VII.

Objectives of Exercise CINBAX

- To enhance trust, camaraderie, and interoperability among the troops of India and Cambodia.

- To strengthen joint operational efficiency in peacekeeping missions.

- To promote indigenous defence production by showcasing weapons and equipment of Indian origin.

Significance and Geo-Political Importance

- The joint exercise asserts a growing strategic relationship between India and Cambodia.

- The event demonstrates an increased focus on fostering military cooperation and enhancing regional security to combat terrorism and maintain peace.

- The showcasing of Indian-origin weapons and equipment underscores India's commitment and capability to contribute to indigenous defence production and global peacekeeping missions.

- The joint exercise also signifies a significant step towards achieving robust global partnerships to maintain world peace and security, in accordance with the UN charter's objectives.

Trilateral Air Combat Exercise - Desert Knight

Introduction and Overview

- Desert Knight is a trilateral air combat exercise initiated by India, France, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

- The exercise has been conducted over the Arabian Sea which holds strategic importance.

- The motive behind this exercise is to strengthen the defence cooperation and interoperability among the air forces of these nations.

- It is also designed to prepare the air forces to tackle complex combat scenarios.

- This trilateral exercise illustrates the growing ties among India, France, and the UAE against

the backdrop of evolving global security challenges and geopolitical tensions.

Objectives and Purpose of the Exercise

- The primary goal of the Desert Knight exercise is to enhance trilateral defence cooperation and build synergy among India, France, and the UAE.
- It's also meant to improve the interoperability of the air forces of these nations during complex combat scenarios.
- The operation focuses on fostering collaborative skills through realistic and challenging operations.

Participants and Their Contribution

- India: Participated with aircraft like Sukhoi-30MKI, Jaguars, IL-78 mid-air refuellers, and AEW&C systems. Indian air force operated from Jamnagar on India's west coast.
- France: Contributed by deploying Rafale jets from the Al Dhafra airbase in the UAE.
- The UAE: Took part in the exercise with their F-16 fighter jets, operating from the Al Dhafra airbase.

Details of the Exercise

- The trilateral exercise is termed as a "large force engagement" featuring extensive combat manoeuvres.
- The operation was carried out approximately 350-400 km southwest of Karachi over the strategic Arabian Sea.

Geographic and Strategic Importance

- The Arabian Sea is a strategically vital region for these nations, providing an ideal backdrop for the exercise.
- Conducting such a trilateral exercise in an influential region underscores the growing trilateral ties between these nations.
- This can potentially influence the geopolitical dynamics in the region and beyond.

Harimau Shakti 2024 - India-Malaysia Joint Military Exercise

Introduction

- Harimau Shakti 2024 is the 4th edition of the joint military exercise between India and Malaysia.
- Commenced on December 2, 2024, the exercise was held at Bentong Camp in Pahang district, Malaysia.
- This annual event is aimed at boosting the military cooperation between the two nations.

Reasons for the Exercise

- The exercise is designed to improve the ability of both forces to conduct joint counterinsurgency operations in jungle terrain.
- It is aligned with the United Nations Chapter VII Mandate, signifying the exercise's emphasis on international peace and security.

Participants and Duration

- The Indian contingent comprised of 78 personnel from the MAHAR Regiment Battalion.
- The Malaysian contingent involved 123 personnel from The Royal Malaysian Regiment.
- The exercise ran for two weeks, from December 2 to December 15, 2024.

Objectives of the Exercise

- The primary goal of this exercise was to enhance joint military capabilities in counterinsurgency operations in jungle terrain.
- It aimed to boost defence cooperation between India and Malaysia, thereby fostering enhanced bilateral relations.

Phases of the Exercise

- Phase 1: This phase focused on cross-training between both armies, including lectures, demonstrations, and jungle drills.
- Phase 2: This phase involved active participation of both armies in a simulated exercise, executing various drills such as

Anti-MT Ambush, Occupation of Harbour, Recce Patrol, Ambush, and attack on areas controlled by terrorists.

Importance and Impact

- Such joint military exercises reinforce the mutual cooperation and understanding between the armies of the two countries.
- It supports in the sharing of best practices and experiences, enhancing operational readiness and interoperability.
- Through these exercises, both India and Malaysia are able to show commitment towards peace, security, and stability in the region, strengthening their status in accordance with the United Nations Chapter VII Mandate.

INS Tushil - Advanced Defence Cooperation Milestone for India and Russia

INS Tushil Introduction and Details

- INS Tushil (F70) is a sophisticated, multi-role stealth-guided missile frigate incorporated into the Indian Navy in Russia.
- This development marks a crucial milestone in the defence cooperation between India and Russia, and also demonstrates India's maritime prowess.
- The vessel is an upgraded version of the Krivak III-class frigate and belongs to Project 1135.6 (Talwar Class).
- INS Tushil is the first among two upgraded frigates under a contract signed in 2016 between the Indian Government and the Russian JSC Rosoboronexport.
- As a versatile warship, it serves multiple functions such as escorting, patrolling, and combat operations, a critical asset to modern naval fleets.

INS Tushil's Significance, Weapons, and Versatility

- The meaning of 'Tushil' is 'protector shield,' underlining the Indian Navy's commitment to defending maritime borders.
- INS Tushil boasts of advanced weaponry, including BrahMos supersonic cruise missiles, Shtil Surface-to-Air Missiles, anti-submarine torpedoes, and electronic warfare systems.
- It has been designed for operational versatility in air, surface, underwater, and electromagnetic dimensions.
- The design aligns with India's SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) vision, contributing to stability in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR).

Indo-Russian Defence Cooperation

- Cooperation in defence between India and Russia range widely and include projects and strategic dialogues.
- Key elements are the Agreement on Military Technical Cooperation (2021-2031) and the India-Russia 2+2 Dialogue that strengthen bi-lateral defense relations.
- Bilateral projects under this cooperation include T-90 tanks, Su-30-MKI aircraft, and MiG-29-K aircraft.
- Military exercises such as INDRA(Tri-Services), Avia Indra(Air Force), and Ex Vostok (Army) make up an integral part of the cooperation.

Commissioning of INS Nirdeshak

Introduction and About

- INS Nirdeshak is a state-of-the-art survey vessel commissioned at the Visakhapatnam Naval Dockyard by the Indian Navy.
- This vessel is the second ship of the Survey Vessels (Large) (SVL) Project.

- With modern technology such as Multi-Beam Echo Sounders and Autonomous Underwater Vehicles (AUVs), it will serve the core functions of comprehensive hydrographic surveys, enhanced navigation, and heightened maritime safety.

The SVL Project

- The SVL Project's primary function is to modernise the Indian Navy's hydrographic survey fleet.
- This modernisation project is targeting a replacement of the ageing Sandhayak class ships.
- Apart from INS Nirdeshak, the project consists of three other ships, namely, Sandhayak, Ikshak, and Sanshodhak.

Indigenous Manufacturing

- With over 80% indigenous content utilised, INS Nirdeshak's construction supports the Indian government's Make in India and Atma Nirbhar Bharat initiatives.
- This promotes self-reliance and boosts the local manufacturing sector through the production of modern military-grade vessels.

Maritime Diplomacy and Security

- INS Nirdeshak is not only built for hydrographic and safety purposes but also serves as an efficient tool for maritime diplomacy.
- In line with India's SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) initiative, INS Nirdeshak will assist friendly nations in their oceanic surveys.
- By boosting maritime security, the possession of this advanced vessel also strengthens India's leadership within the Indian Ocean Region.

SLINEX 2024 - A Bilateral Naval Exercise

Introduction and Overview

- SLINEX 2024, standing for Sri Lanka - India Exercise 2024, took place recently in Visakhapatnam, India.
- This event represents a bilateral naval exercise between India and Sri Lanka aimed at strengthening ties and enhancing their maritime security.

What's New?

- The Sea Phase of the SLINEX 2024 comprised a variety of joint exercises, facilitating collaboration between Special Forces of both nations.
- Distinct drills, including gun firings, communication training, seamanship, navigation evolutions, and helicopter operations, were included in the session.
- The Indian Navy participated via INS Sumitra, emphasizing the importance of this deployment in solidifying the exercise's relevance.

Historical Background

- The series of the SLINEX exercise between India and Sri Lanka began in 2005, highlighting the long-term coordination between the two nations in terms of naval operations.
- The historical ties between India and Sri Lanka are extensive, with cultural and economic relations spanning over two and a half millennia.

Economic Importance

- In the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), India stands as Sri Lanka's largest trade partner, achieving a significant platform for bilateral trade.
- The fiscal year 2023-24 experienced a bilateral trade surge, reaching an impressive USD 5.5 billion.
- The essential goods exported from India aid Sri Lanka's economy significantly, which has been

further improved by the India-Sri Lanka Free Trade Agreement.

Other Bilateral Exercises

- Besides the SLINEX, India and Sri Lanka also conduct the Mitra Shakti exercise, focusing primarily on their respective armies. This continued engagement in varied military exercises accentuates the comprehensive cooperation between the two nations.

Polity

Overview of the Railways (Amendment) Bill, 2024

Introduction and Background

- The Railways (Amendment) Bill, 2024 has recently been passed in the Lok Sabha in India.
- India's railway network's development began prior to independence, originally as a branch of the Public Works Department.
- The scale of the network expanded, resulting in the implementation of the Indian Railways Act, 1890 to regulate various railway units.
- The railway organisation separated from the Public Works Department leading to the formation of the Indian Railway Board Act, 1905, which provided powers or functions to the Railway Board under the Indian Railways Act, 1890.
- Despite the repeal of the 1890 Act following the enactment of the Railway Act in 1989, the Railway Board Act, 1905 continued to exist, and the appointments to the Board were made under this Act.

The Purpose and Provisions of the Railway (Amendment) Bill

- The Bill intends to repeal the Indian Railway Board Act, 1905 and to simplify laws by integrating its provisions into the Railway Act, 1989.

- The Bill amends Section 2 of the Railway Act, 1989, proposing a new Chapter 1A related to the Railway Board, giving them certain powers as determined by the Central Government.
- The amended Bill allows the Central Government to decide the Railway Board's composition, including the number of members, their service conditions, qualifications, and experience.
- The Central Government may delegate its powers and functions related to all or any of the Railways to the Board under this Amendment.
- The Chairman and Members appointed under the 1905 Act carry over their appointments under this Act. This Amendment does not propose the formation of a new board or body.

Benefits of the Amendment

- The Amendment includes provisions for improving operational efficiency and the decentralisation of powers, thus granting more autonomy to Railway Zones.
- The functioning of the Railway Board stands to improve, driving efficient development of the railway network.

Criticisms of the Bill

- Critics argue that the Bill fails to address significant Railway issues such as safety, vacancies, power decentralisation at regional and divisional levels.
- Some MPs express concern over the potential impact on the Railway Board's independent functioning due to the centralisation of various powers related to the Board in the Centre.
- There are also concerns about the challenges faced by the Indian Railways, including operational delays, accidents, safety initiatives, bureaucratic inefficiency, slow technological progress and the complexity of the PPA model and investment, and the devolution of powers to zones.

Recommendations

- Suggestions call for the Railway Board to become an independent body, empowered to make decisions and be free from government control.
- Representation for Scheduled Castes, Tribes, Other Backward Classes, and Women on the Railway Board should be ensured.

Lok Sabha Approval of the Banking Laws (Amendment) Bill, 2024

Introduction and Explanation about the Bill

- The Banking Laws (Amendment) Bill, 2024, was passed by the Lok Sabha.
- Introduced by Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman, this bill seeks to amend several existing banking laws.
- The laws set to be amended include the Reserve Bank of India Act, 1934, the Banking Regulation Act, 1949, the State Bank of India Act, 1955, and the Banking Companies (Acquisition and Transfer of Undertakings) Acts of 1970 and 1980.
- The overarching aim of the amendment is to ensure the stability, safety, and health of banks in India.
- It is intended to make banking easier for customers, promote reforms, and protect investors.

Enhanced Features and Provisions

- The new bill introduces significant features intending to simplify procedural matters and improve the distribution of wealth.
- For instance, account holders can now nominate up to four people for their bank account or Fixed Deposit (FD), over the previous limit of one nominee.
- The bill lays out two ways for nomination - one is assigning a fixed share to all nominees simultaneously, the other allows a sequential distribution from one nominee to the other.

- The account holder is given the freedom to decide the nomination method.
- Another provision relates to adjusting the definition of 'substantial interest' for directorial posts, consequently raising the current limit from Rs 5 lakh to Rs 2 crore.

Changes for Government Banks

- The Banking Laws (Amendment) Bill proposes extended tenures for directors in cooperative banks, increasing from 8 to 10 years, except for the chairman and full-time director.
- This change aligns with the Constitution (97th Amendment) Act, 2011, which offers special rights and protection to cooperative societies.
- Once enacted, the amended law would allow directors of central cooperative banks to be appointed on the board of directors of state cooperative banks.
- Additionally, banks receive more freedom to decide the remuneration of statutory auditors.
- The dates for reporting financial data for regulatory compliance are shifted to the 15th and the last date of every month, diverging from the current requirement to report on the second and fourth Fridays of each month.

Customer-related Provisions and Changes

- With this bill, depositors will have the choice of either sequential or simultaneous nomination.
- For customers using the locker facility, they will only have the option of sequential nomination.

One Nation, One Election 'The Constitution 129th Amendment Bill 2024'

Introduction and Significance

- The Indian government has initiated steps towards "One Nation, One Election" by introducing two Constitution Amendment Bills in Lok Sabha: The Constitution 129th Amendment Bill 2024 and The Union Territories Laws Amendment Bill 2024.

- The "One Nation, One Election" concept seeks to induce simultaneous elections, which were prevalent in India from 1951 to 1967, where both Lok Sabha and state assembly polls were held together.

Key Features of the Bills

- The Constitution 129th Amendment Bill 2024 is set to include Article 82A(1-6) that aligns the terms of Lok Sabha and State Assemblies, following ex-President Ram Nath Kovind's committee recommendations.

- Amendments have been proposed to Articles 83, 172 and the addition of "conduct of simultaneous elections" to Article 372, thereby expanding Parliament's power over state legislative elections.

- The Union Territories Laws Amendment Bill 2024 seeks to facilitate simultaneous elections with the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies by amending various sections of pre-existing acts.

Constitutional Provisions Related to Elections in India

- The Constitution of India provides a robust framework for elections in India, detailed under Part XV (Articles 324-329).

- The relevant Articles outline the powers and functions of the ECI, set requirements for electoral rolls, suggest suffrage bases, mandate the delimitation of constituencies, and determine the tenure of legislative assemblies.

High-Level Committee Report on Simultaneous Elections

- The Kovind-led High-Level Committee was formed to evaluate the feasibility of these simultaneous elections.

- The report outlined the rationale for simultaneous elections, gave logistical considerations, and suggested strategies to aid the transition, including a harmonized electoral roll system.

Challenges Associated with Implementing Simultaneous Elections

- Implementation of this scheme comes with significant challenges like robust technological infrastructure requirement, potential legal challenges, regional disparity concerns, and significant logistical challenges.

- Recommended solutions include legal clarity, strengthening electoral infrastructure, public awareness campaigns, and capacity building.

Potential Facilitation Strategies

- The transition towards simultaneous elections requires clear legal provisions, a unified electoral roll system, and the use of modern technology in recording votes and tabulating results.

- Public awareness campaigns and training sessions for election officials are suggestively beneficial strategies for the smooth implementation of this system.

Opposition's Move to File a No-Confidence Motion Against the Vice-President

Introduction and Current News

- The Opposition parties have recently planned to submit a notice for a motion of no-confidence against the Vice-President of India, who concurrently serves as the Chairman of the Rajya Sabha (Upper House of the Parliament).

- This motion is set to be submitted under Article 67(b) of the Indian Constitution.

No-Confidence Motion

- A No-Confidence Motion is typically introduced in the Lok Sabha (Lower House of Parliament) to gauge the current government's level of support.

- To be considered, the motion requires endorsement from at least 50 members.

- If the motion is passed, it mandates the government to resign.

- These motions usually surface when the government appears to lose majority backing.

Constitutional Provisions for the Vice-President

- Article 63 of the Indian Constitution establishes the office of Vice-President. The Vice-President also serves as the ex-officio Chairperson of the Rajya Sabha.
- Resignation from the office needs submission of a resignation letter to the President, becoming effective upon acceptance.
- The qualifications, election process, oath, term, removal, and roles of the Vice-President are detailed in various Articles of the Constitution.

The Change in Election Procedure for the Vice-President

- Initially, the Constitution dictated that the Vice-President would be elected by a joint session of both Houses of Parliament.
- However, this cumbersome process was eliminated by the 11th Constitutional Amendment Act of 1961, thus simplifying the election process for this post.

Powers and Functions of the Vice-President

- The Vice-President, as Chairman of the Rajya Sabha, has the authority to adjourn the House or suspend its proceedings in the event of no quorum.
- They have the power to judge on the disqualification of a Rajya Sabha member due to defection.
- Other significant responsibilities include approving the raising of a breach of privilege question in the House, guiding the operation of Parliamentary Committees, appointing members to various committees, and interpreting the Constitution and rules related to the House.

Impeachment Process and Judicial Accountability in India

Impetus for Current Discussions

- Recent calls for the impeachment of a Judge from the Allahabad High Court due to controversial remarks at a religious event.

- These remarks have raised questions about the judge's impartiality and general judicial propriety.

Impeachment Process

- Impeachment refers to the legal procedure for removing a Judge from the position, a procedure not explicitly stated in the Constitution.
- Constitutionally the impeachment of judges is to uphold judicial accountability while preserving judiciary independence.
- The articles guiding the process are Article 124(4) for Supreme Court judges and also applies to High Court judges per Article 218. Grounds for impeachment are limited to "proved misbehaviour" and "incapacity".

Steps in Impeachment

- Initiation of an Impeachment Process: Requires a motion supported by either 100 members of the Lok Sabha or 50 members of the Rajya Sabha; the Speaker or Chairman then makes a decision on the motion.
- Formation of an Inquiry Committee: Composed of The Chief Justice of India or a Supreme Court judge; The Chief Justice of a High Court; and a distinguished jurist, this committee conducts thorough research of the allegations.
- Committee Report and Parliamentary Debate: The completion of the investigation leads to a report being handed to the presiding officer of the House; this report is then debated, and any motion to proceed requires approval by both Houses of Parliament with a special majority.
- Removal of Office: If the motion passes through both Houses, it is then passed on to the President.

Guidelines Regulating Judges' Public Commentary

- Judges, like all citizens, have the freedom of speech and expression under Article 19(1)(a) of the Constitution; however, this is subject to limitations to maintain public order and morality, as well as the integrity of their office.
- Public statements by judges must avoid hints of bias and uphold the dignity of their judicial office.

- Bangalore Principles of Judicial Conduct (2002) and Restatement of Values of Judicial Life (1997) provide some of the key regulatory principles.
- The Judiciary also has internal protocols for when the public statements of Judges may appear controversial.

Maintaining Judiciary Impartiality in a Diverse Society

- Upholding Constitutional values, including equality, justice, and secularism, forms part of the judiciary's guiding principles.
- Advancing diversity and awareness within judiciary bodies through inclusive recruitment, training, and education will ensure greater impartiality and sensitivity towards social issues.
- Judicial decisions must be based solely on facts, evidence, and applicable laws, demonstrating judges' neutrality and adherence to the rule of law.
- Civil society and the media play a key role in providing checks and balances, ensuring judicial impartiality through constructive criticism and scrutiny.

Understanding the Places of Worship Act, 1991 and the Shahi Jama Masjid Dispute

Introduction to the Places of Worship Act, 1991

- This Act was established in 1991, with a primary aim to protect and preserve the religious status of places of worship, preventing conversions between different religious groups.
- The Act intends to maintain communal harmony by freezing the religious character of places.
- The Act specifies the religious status of places of worship, as they existed on 15 August 1947, and prohibits any changes.

Background of Shahi Jama Masjid Dispute

- The Act is currently under scrutiny due to a dispute involving the Shahi Jama Masjid in Sambhal, Uttar Pradesh.
- The petitioners claim the 16th-century mosque was built on an ancient Hindu temple site.
- The mosque is a protected monument under the Ancient Monuments Preservation Act, 1904, and holds the status of a Monument of National Importance.
- Petitioners have sought a survey to understand the historical and religious character of the site, leading to debates over the Act's validity.

Relevant Sections of the Places of Worship Act, 1991

- Section 3 prohibits the conversion from one religious denomination to another.
- Section 4 maintains that the religious identity of a place of worship has to remain as it was on 15 August 1947.
- Section 5 makes exemptions, including the controversial Babri Masjid-Ram Janmabhoomi dispute in Ayodhya.
- Section 6 imposes penalties for attempts to change the religious character of a place of worship.

Concerns Regarding the Places of Worship Act, 1991

- The Act is criticised for limiting judicial review and potential infringement on the rights of certain religious communities.
- The exemption of certain disputes, such as the Ram Janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid case, has raised concerns about selective legal treatment.
- Critics express that the Act might exacerbate communal tensions, especially over sensitive places like mosques, temples, and churches.
- Critics also believe the Act may undermine India's secular character instead of protecting it.

Way Forward

- There is a necessity for a clear interpretation of the Act's provisions by the Supreme Court.
- The jurisdictional limits of lower courts need to be better defined, to prevent overreach.

- Legal challenges should be free from political influence to maintain the judiciary's credibility.
- Emphasising the shared cultural and historical heritage across religions could help to strengthen unity over division.

SC Guidelines on Death Penalty and Mercy Petitions

Introduction

- The Supreme Court of India has recently issued comprehensive guidelines to streamline the execution of death sentences and the processing of mercy petitions.
- The court upheld a decision by the Bombay High Court to commute the death penalty of two convicts to a 35-year life term due to excessive execution delays.

SC Guidelines

- All states and union territories are directed to establish dedicated cells for handling mercy petitions efficiently and within a set time frame.
- Prison authorities must promptly forward mercy petitions with all relevant details to the cell.
- An official from the Law or Justice Department will ensure legal compliance.
- The communications should be carried electronically unless confidentiality is required.
- Execution warrant protocol entails a mandatory 15-day gap between its issuance and execution.

Death Penalty and Mercy Petition: The Basics

- The death penalty, also known as capital punishment, is the most severe form of punishment in the Indian judicial system.
- It is governed by various provisions in the Bharatiya Nyay Sanhita and Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita.
- A mercy petition is a formal request made by a convict to the President or the Governor seeking mercy.

Constitutional Framework

- The Constitution of India does not explicitly denote capital punishment as unconstitutional.
- A convict can present a mercy petition to the President of India under Article 72 of the Constitution of India.
- The power to grant pardon is given to the Governors of States under Article 161 of the Constitution of India.

Implications of SC Guidelines

- The guidelines aim to reduce execution delays and enhance accountability within the judicial system.
- They ensure the convicts are informed of their rights and provided legal aid, aligning with jurisprudence focusing on "rarest of rare" cases.
- Session courts are required to maintain records and ensure timely listing of death sentence cases.

SC Rulings on the Death Penalty

- Over the years, the Supreme Court of India has passed several significant judgments regarding the death penalty, including *Bachan Singh v. State of Punjab*, 1980, which established the "rarest of rare" cases concept.
- In *Jagmohan Singh v. State of UP* 1973, the court upheld the death sentence as constitutionally permissible according to Article 21.
- The court also laid out criteria for determining if a case falls under the "rarest of rare" cases in the *Machhi Singh v. State of Punjab* 1983 judgment.

Rank Reports and Awards

Overview of the Railways (Amendment) Bill, 2024

Introduction and Background

- The Railways (Amendment) Bill, 2024 has recently been passed in the Lok Sabha in India.
- India's railway network's development began prior to independence, originally as a branch of the Public Works Department.
- The scale of the network expanded, resulting in the implementation of the Indian Railways Act, 1890 to regulate various railway units.
- The railway organisation separated from the Public Works Department leading to the formation of the Indian Railway Board Act, 1905, which provided powers or functions to the Railway Board under the Indian Railways Act, 1890.
- Despite the repeal of the 1890 Act following the enactment of the Railway Act in 1989, the Railway Board Act, 1905 continued to exist, and the appointments to the Board were made under this Act.

The Purpose and Provisions of the Railway (Amendment) Bill

- The Bill intends to repeal the Indian Railway Board Act, 1905 and to simplify laws by integrating its provisions into the Railway Act, 1989.
- The Bill amends Section 2 of the Railway Act, 1989, proposing a new Chapter 1A related to the Railway Board, giving them certain powers as determined by the Central Government.
- The amended Bill allows the Central Government to decide the Railway Board's composition, including the number of members, their service conditions, qualifications, and experience.

- The Central Government may delegate its powers and functions related to all or any of the Railways to the Board under this Amendment.
- The Chairman and Members appointed under the 1905 Act carry over their appointments under this Act. This Amendment does not propose the formation of a new board or body.

Benefits of the Amendment

- The Amendment includes provisions for improving operational efficiency and the decentralisation of powers, thus granting more autonomy to Railway Zones.
- The functioning of the Railway Board stands to improve, driving efficient development of the railway network.

Criticisms of the Bill

- Critics argue that the Bill fails to address significant Railway issues such as safety, vacancies, power decentralisation at regional and divisional levels.
- Some MPs express concern over the potential impact on the Railway Board's independent functioning due to the centralisation of various powers related to the Board in the Centre.
- There are also concerns about the challenges faced by the Indian Railways, including operational delays, accidents, safety initiatives, bureaucratic inefficiency, slow technological progress and the complexity of the PPA model and investment, and the devolution of powers to zones.

Recommendations

- Suggestions call for the Railway Board to become an independent body, empowered to make decisions and be free from government control.
- Representation for Scheduled Castes, Tribes, Other Backward Classes, and Women on the Railway Board should be ensured.

Lok Sabha Approval of the Banking Laws (Amendment) Bill, 2024

Introduction and Explanation about the Bill

- The Banking Laws (Amendment) Bill, 2024, was passed by the Lok Sabha.
- Introduced by Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman, this bill seeks to amend several existing banking laws.
- The laws set to be amended include the Reserve Bank of India Act, 1934, the Banking Regulation Act, 1949, the State Bank of India Act, 1955, and the Banking Companies (Acquisition and Transfer of Undertakings) Acts of 1970 and 1980.
- The overarching aim of the amendment is to ensure the stability, safety, and health of banks in India.
- It is intended to make banking easier for customers, promote reforms, and protect investors.

Enhanced Features and Provisions

- The new bill introduces significant features intending to simplify procedural matters and improve the distribution of wealth.
- For instance, account holders can now nominate up to four people for their bank account or Fixed Deposit (FD), over the previous limit of one nominee.
- The bill lays out two ways for nomination - one is assigning a fixed share to all nominees simultaneously, the other allows a sequential distribution from one nominee to the other.
- The account holder is given the freedom to decide the nomination method.
- Another provision relates to adjusting the definition of 'substantial interest' for directorial posts, consequently raising the current limit from Rs 5 lakh to Rs 2 crore.

Changes for Government Banks

- The Banking Laws (Amendment) Bill proposes extended tenures for directors in cooperative

banks, increasing from 8 to 10 years, except for the chairman and full-time director.

- This change aligns with the Constitution (97th Amendment) Act, 2011, which offers special rights and protection to cooperative societies.
- Once enacted, the amended law would allow directors of central cooperative banks to be appointed on the board of directors of state cooperative banks.
- Additionally, banks receive more freedom to decide the remuneration of statutory auditors.
- The dates for reporting financial data for regulatory compliance are shifted to the 15th and the last date of every month, diverging from the current requirement to report on the second and fourth Fridays of each month.

Customer-related Provisions and Changes

- With this bill, depositors will have the choice of either sequential or simultaneous nomination.
- For customers using the locker facility, they will only have the option of sequential nomination.

One Nation, One Election 'The Constitution 129th Amendment Bill 2024'

Introduction and Significance

- The Indian government has initiated steps towards "One Nation, One Election" by introducing two Constitution Amendment Bills in Lok Sabha: The Constitution 129th Amendment Bill 2024 and The Union Territories Laws Amendment Bill 2024.
- The "One Nation, One Election" concept seeks to induce simultaneous elections, which were prevalent in India from 1951 to 1967, where both Lok Sabha and state assembly polls were held together.

Key Features of the Bills

- The Constitution 129th Amendment Bill 2024 is set to include Article 82A(1-6) that aligns the terms of Lok Sabha and State Assemblies,

following ex-President Ram Nath Kovind's committee recommendations.

- Amendments have been proposed to Articles 83, 172 and the addition of "conduct of simultaneous elections" to Article 372, thereby expanding Parliament's power over state legislative elections.
- The Union Territories Laws Amendment Bill 2024 seeks to facilitate simultaneous elections with the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies by amending various sections of pre-existing acts.

Constitutional Provisions Related to Elections in India

- The Constitution of India provides a robust framework for elections in India, detailed under Part XV (Articles 324-329).
- The relevant Articles outline the powers and functions of the ECI, set requirements for electoral rolls, suggest suffrage bases, mandate the delimitation of constituencies, and determine the tenure of legislative assemblies.

High-Level Committee Report on Simultaneous Elections

- The Kovind-led High-Level Committee was formed to evaluate the feasibility of these simultaneous elections.
- The report outlined the rationale for simultaneous elections, gave logistical considerations, and suggested strategies to aid the transition, including a harmonized electoral roll system.

Challenges Associated with Implementing Simultaneous Elections

- Implementation of this scheme comes with significant challenges like robust technological infrastructure requirement, potential legal challenges, regional disparity concerns, and significant logistical challenges.
- Recommended solutions include legal clarity, strengthening electoral infrastructure, public awareness campaigns, and capacity building.

Potential Facilitation Strategies

- The transition towards simultaneous elections requires clear legal provisions, a unified electoral roll system, and the use of modern technology in recording votes and tabulating results.
- Public awareness campaigns and training sessions for election officials are suggestively beneficial strategies for the smooth implementation of this system.

Opposition's Move to File a No-Confidence Motion Against the Vice-President

Introduction and Current News

- The Opposition parties have recently planned to submit a notice for a motion of no-confidence against the Vice-President of India, who concurrently serves as the Chairman of the Rajya Sabha (Upper House of the Parliament).
- This motion is set to be submitted under Article 67(b) of the Indian Constitution.

No-Confidence Motion

- A No-Confidence Motion is typically introduced in the Lok Sabha (Lower House of Parliament) to gauge the current government's level of support.
- To be considered, the motion requires endorsement from at least 50 members.
- If the motion is passed, it mandates the government to resign.
- These motions usually surface when the government appears to lose majority backing.

Constitutional Provisions for the Vice-President

- Article 63 of the Indian Constitution establishes the office of Vice-President. The Vice-President also serves as the ex-officio Chairperson of the Rajya Sabha.
- Resignation from the office needs submission of a resignation letter to the President, becoming effective upon acceptance.

- The qualifications, election process, oath, term, removal, and roles of the Vice-President are detailed in various Articles of the Constitution.

The Change in Election Procedure for the Vice-President

- Initially, the Constitution dictated that the Vice-President would be elected by a joint session of both Houses of Parliament.

- However, this cumbersome process was eliminated by the 11th Constitutional Amendment Act of 1961, thus simplifying the election process for this post.

Powers and Functions of the Vice-President

- The Vice-President, as Chairman of the Rajya Sabha, has the authority to adjourn the House or suspend its proceedings in the event of no quorum.

- They have the power to judge on the disqualification of a Rajya Sabha member due to defection.

- Other significant responsibilities include approving the raising of a breach of privilege question in the House, guiding the operation of Parliamentary Committees, appointing members to various committees, and interpreting the Constitution and rules related to the House.

Impeachment Process and Judicial Accountability in India

Impetus for Current Discussions

- Recent calls for the impeachment of a Judge from the Allahabad High Court due to controversial remarks at a religious event.

- These remarks have raised questions about the judge's impartiality and general judicial propriety.

Impeachment Process

- Impeachment refers to the legal procedure for removing a Judge from the position, a procedure not explicitly stated in the Constitution.

- Constitutionally the impeachment of judges is to uphold judicial accountability while preserving judiciary independence.

- The articles guiding the process are Article 124(4) for Supreme Court judges and also applies to High Court judges per Article 218. Grounds for impeachment are limited to "proved misbehaviour" and "incapacity".

Steps in Impeachment

- Initiation of an Impeachment Process: Requires a motion supported by either 100 members of the Lok Sabha or 50 members of the Rajya Sabha; the Speaker or Chairman then makes a decision on the motion.

- Formation of an Inquiry Committee: Comprised of The Chief Justice of India or a Supreme Court judge; The Chief Justice of a High Court; and a distinguished jurist, this committee conducts thorough research of the allegations.

- Committee Report and Parliamentary Debate: The completion of the investigation leads to a report being handed to the presiding officer of the House; this report is then debated, and any motion to proceed requires approval by both Houses of Parliament with a special majority.

- Removal of Office: If the motion passes through both Houses, it is then passed on to the President.

Guidelines Regulating Judges' Public Commentary

- Judges, like all citizens, have the freedom of speech and expression under Article 19(1)(a) of the Constitution; however, this is subject to limitations to maintain public order and morality, as well as the integrity of their office.

- Public statements by judges must avoid hints of bias and uphold the dignity of their judicial office.

- Bangalore Principles of Judicial Conduct (2002) and Restatement of Values of Judicial Life (1997) provide some of the key regulatory principles.

- The Judiciary also has internal protocols for when the public statements of Judges may appear controversial.

Maintaining Judiciary Impartiality in a Diverse Society

- Upholding Constitutional values, including equality, justice, and secularism, forms part of the judiciary's guiding principles.
- Advancing diversity and awareness within judiciary bodies through inclusive recruitment, training, and education will ensure greater impartiality and sensitivity towards social issues.
- Judicial decisions must be based solely on facts, evidence, and applicable laws, demonstrating judges' neutrality and adherence to the rule of law.
- Civil society and the media play a key role in providing checks and balances, ensuring judicial impartiality through constructive criticism and scrutiny.

Understanding the Places of Worship Act, 1991 and the Shahi Jama Masjid Dispute

Introduction to the Places of Worship Act, 1991

- This Act was established in 1991, with a primary aim to protect and preserve the religious status of places of worship, preventing conversions between different religious groups.
- The Act intends to maintain communal harmony by freezing the religious character of places.
- The Act specifies the religious status of places of worship, as they existed on 15 August 1947, and prohibits any changes.

Background of Shahi Jama Masjid Dispute

- The Act is currently under scrutiny due to a dispute involving the Shahi Jama Masjid in Sambhal, Uttar Pradesh.
- The petitioners claim the 16th-century mosque was built on an ancient Hindu temple site.
- The mosque is a protected monument under the Ancient Monuments Preservation Act, 1904,

and holds the status of a Monument of National Importance.

- Petitioners have sought a survey to understand the historical and religious character of the site, leading to debates over the Act's validity.

Relevant Sections of the Places of Worship Act, 1991

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Schemes And Initiative

Kisan Kavach: India's First Anti-Pesticide Bodysuit

Introduction and About

- The Kisan Kavach is India's first-ever anti-pesticide bodysuit, recently unveiled by the Ministry of Science & Technology.

- It is a protective gear aimed at shielding farmers from the detrimental effects of pesticide exposure such as respiratory issues, vision impairment, and even fatality.
- The suit is fashioned from 'oxime fabric', a material capable of chemically degrading usual pesticides that might come into contact with the fabric or the body during spraying operations.

Production and Development

- This pioneering product is a result of a collaborative effort between BRIC-inStem, a firm based in Bangalore, and Sepio Health Pvt. Ltd.
- The manufacturing of the Kisan Kavach involves a process known as nucleophilic-mediated hydrolysis on cotton fabric which is responsible for the deactivation of pesticides.

Pesticide Use in India

- As reported by the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO), India utilised more than 61,000 tonnes of pesticide in 2020.
- Interestingly, the country is known to produce approximately four times more pesticide than it consumes.

Impact of Pesticide Poisoning

- Pesticide poisoning is a grave global concern, with an estimated 385 million instances of acute pesticide poisoning being recorded every year.
- This constitutes a staggering 11,000 deaths, with South Asia bearing the brunt of the effects.

Significance of Kisan Kavach

- The introduction of Kisan Kavach is a significant step towards safeguarding not only the physical health of the farming community but also the larger ecosystem.
- The anti-pesticide bodysuit also places equal emphasis on the environmental sustainability aspect, working to reduce the damage caused by excessive pesticide use.

- It also represents the effective use and locomotive power of science and technology in areas that directly impact human health and lifestyle.

The PENCiL Portal

Introduction and About

- The PENCiL (Platform for Effective Enforcement for No Child Labour) portal is an initiative launched in 2017 by the Ministry of Labour and Employment in India.
- This portal was introduced to ensure effective enforcement of the provisions of the Child and Adolescent Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986.
- The primary aim of the portal is to eradicate child labour from the country.

Key Components of the Portal

- The PENCiL portal comprises five main components. These include the Central Government, State Government, and District Project Societies.
- Apart from these administrative bodies, Child Tracking System and Complaint Corner are vital elements for tracking and reporting issues related to child labour.

Legislative Provisions and Initiatives to Curb Child Labour

- Several constitutional and legal provisions are in place to combat child labour in India.
- Article 24 strictly prohibits the employment of children under 14 years in any hazardous work, and Article 39 protects children from abuse of their health and strength.
- Right to Education Act (2009), Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act (1986), and The Factories Act (1948) are significant legislative measures for child protection.
- The National Policy on Child Labour (1987) was instituted specifically to address and remedy child labour issues.

India's Participation in International Anti-Child Labour Conventions

- India has ratified several international conventions designed to protect children against labour exploitation.
- These include the Minimum Age Convention (1973), UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) of 1989, and The Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999.
- Ratifying these conventions means that India has committed to adhering to the standards and norms set out in these international documents.

Current Importance and Impact

- The continued commitment to eliminate child labour and protect children's rights is reflected in the creation and operation of the PENCIL portal.
- This initiative, alongside national and international legal provisions, plays a crucial role in tackling child labour issues in the present day.
- The portal facilitates reporting, tracking, and prompt action against child labour, enhancing the effectiveness of child labour eradication measures.

India Adopts Global CubeSat Standard

Introduction and About CubeSat

- The CubeSat standard defines a modular satellite framework that is compatible with standard deployers.
- Measurements of Cubesat are predicated on the "one unit" measurement or "1U" which measures 10x10x10 centimetres and can be expanded to larger sizes such as 1.5U, 2U, 3U, 6U and even 12U.
- The framework of CubeSat requires uniformed dimensions, low-outgassing materials, kill switches and rigorous testing.
- This CubeSat standard is adopted by the Bureau of Indian Standards, an arm of the Department of Consumer Affairs, in India.
- Through the adoption of this standard, educational and research organisations in India

are assisted in developing CubeSats with commercial components as a cost-effective satellite alternative.

In Action: Recent Developments with CubeSats in India

- Indian universities, with the support of the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO), have already initiated the deployment of several student-built satellites.
- Notable examples of these are JUGNU, built by IIT Kanpur, and KalamSAT, by Space Kidz India.

India's Space Sector and Recent Changes

- India's ambition to increase its footprint in the global space economy is significantly reflected through the recent adoption of the CubeSat standard.
- Currently valued at USD 8 billion, India's space economy aims to reach USD 100 billion by 2040.
- The Indian government is broadening the space sector to private companies and has allotted a Rs 1,000 crore venture capital fund to foster growth and innovation in this sector.
- As per the recently amended Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) policy, an even investment of 100% FDI is now permitted in the space sector.

PRAGATI: India's Revolutionary Infrastructure Development Platform

Introduction & Overview

- PRAGATI, which stands for Pro-Active Governance and Timely Implementation, is an innovative platform launched by India in 2015.
- It's a part of the Digital India programme, with a focus on bringing in e-transparency and e-accountability through real-time interactions between key stakeholders.
- The Oxford University study commended the platform for successfully speeding up 340 delayed projects valued at USD 205 billion.

Operational Features

- PRAGATI operates using a digital dashboard and conducts reviews through video-conferences chaired by the Prime Minister.
- This system not only streamlines decision-making, but also cuts through bureaucratic red tape and thereby reduces project timelines.
- The platform aims to address grievances of the common man, while monitoring and reviewing crucial programs and projects of the Government of India.

Environment-friendly Practices

- PRAGATI distinctively emphasises the use of green technologies and sustainable practices, citizens welfare at its heart and infrastructure for betterment accordingly.
- The combination of effective governance with sustainable practices is a significant aspect of this platform.

Significant Projects Accelerated by PRAGATI

- Several infrastructure development projects have been accelerated by PRAGATI, including the Chenab Bridge in Jammu & Kashmir and the Bogibeel Bridge in Assam.
- The Jal Jeevan Mission, another initiative accelerated by PRAGATI, demonstrated tremendous progress: rural tap water connections were increased from 17% in 2019 to 79% by 2024, resulting in enhanced water access nationwide.

Wider Relevance to Governance

- PRAGATI's praise from Oxford University highlights the potential for ICT platforms to transform governance, specifically in large-scale infrastructure projects.
- This system serves as a benchmark for similar global efforts, endorsing the integration of technology with governance for efficient and transparent operations.

SHe-Box Portal

Introduction and Purpose

- The SHe-Box portal is a recent development by the Ministry of Women and Child Development.
- Its core purpose is to boost the effectiveness of the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition, and Redressal) Act, 2013.
- The platform acts as a one-stop-shop for all women, irrespective of her work status, to lodge complaints of sexual harassment at workplaces.

Features of SHe-Box Portal

- The portal ensures a high level of confidentiality; only the Chairperson of the Internal Committee (IC) or Local Committee (LC) can view the complainant's details.
- Complaints can be registered either by the woman directly or by a representative acting on her behalf.
- The process mandates some basic information such as work status, name, contact number and email.
- The portal features a built-in check to see if the aggrieved individual's workplace is registered. In case it is, complaints are automatically sent to the respective IC or LC for immediate action.
- The portal also houses a monitoring dashboard which allows nodal officers at different administrative levels to track the number of complaints lodged, resolved, and pending.

Timeline for Complaint Resolution

- The SHe-Box portal follows a strict timeline as prescribed under the Act for complaint resolution.
- All queries are expected to be resolved within a span of 90 days, which helps to make the procedure swift and transparent.

Significance and Impact

- The introduction of the SHe-Box portal is a significant step towards creating safer workplaces for women and ensuring implementation of the law for preventing sexual harassment.
- By making it easy for women to lodge complaints and mandating strict timelines for resolution, the portal is an impactful tool in making workplaces more accountable to their employees.
- The confidentiality provided by the platform aids in reducing the fear of backlash or discrimination that many women face when reporting such incidents.
- By ensuring better implementation and monitoring of the guidelines prescribed by the Act, the portal seeks to reduce the occurrences of workplace harassment and foster a more inclusive and respectful workplace environment.

ICMR's "First in the World Challenge" for Health Innovation

Introduction and Overview

- The Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) has initiated a unique competition, the "First in the World Challenge".
- It aims to stimulate innovative solutions concerning pressing health issues.
- The initiative encourages the generation of novel ideas and helps advance the discovery and development of healthcare breakthroughs.

Nature of the Challenge

- Contenders for this ambitious challenge can be individuals or teams from single or multiple institutes.
- The challenge solicits bold, impactful global health research ideas.
- It does not focus on 'incremental innovations' or 'process innovation'.

- Regardless of the potential for failure, the challenge is set to spur revolutionary biomedical breakthroughs.

Selection Process

- A committee comprised of experts is assigned for evaluation and selection of the proposals.

The Role of ICMR

- Recently, ICMR furthered its efforts by formalising agreements under the network for Phase 1 Clinical Trials.
- It involves collaborations for the development of treatments for various diseases, including multiple myeloma and the Zika virus.
- This step is in line with ICMR's goal to position India as a leader in the clinical development of pharmaceutical agents and innovative health solutions.

About ICMR

- ICMR is India's apex body for the formulation, coordination, and promotion of biomedical research.
- It operates under the Department of Health Research, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoH&FW).

The Gk Part

- Historical importance: ICMR is instrumental in addressing public health issues, formulating health regulations, and undertaking biomedical research.
- Geographical relevance: It is a national body that might shape India's stature in global health research and innovation through initiatives such as the "First in the World Challenge".
- Broad importance: Beyond fostering an environment for groundbreaking health solutions, the challenge also serves as a platform for revolutionising health sciences, policy-making, and international collaboration in health research.

Anna Chakra and SCAN for Reforming India's Public Distribution System (PDS)

Introduction and Launch of Anna Chakra and SCAN for PDS Reform

- The Union Minister of Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution and New & Renewable Energy recently launched "Anna Chakra" and the SCAN (Subsidy Claim Application for NFSA) portal.
- These tools are aimed at modernising India's PDS to improve the efficiency of the PDS supply chain and streamline the subsidy claim process.
- The new initiative could provide significant benefits for millions of Indian citizens relying on food security programmes.

The Anna Chakra System

- Developed by the World Food Programme and the Foundation for Innovation and Technology Transfer at IIT-Delhi, Anna Chakra is a tool designed to optimise the supply chain of the PDS.
- It uses advanced algorithms to identify optimal transport routes for food grains, ensuring efficient distribution.
- Anna Chakra integrates with the Railways' Freight Operations Information System and the PM Gati Shakti platform.

The SCAN System

- Aligned with the National Food Security Act (NFSA) 2013, the SCAN portal has been developed to modernise the subsidy claim process.
- It ensures better fund utilisation and increases food security for the population, while also reducing leakages.

Basics and Evolution of the Public Distribution System (PDS)

- The PDS is a food security system operating under the NFSA, which provides food grains at affordable prices.

- The PDS, managed by the Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution, evolved from a wartime rationing measure during World War II.
- Over the years, it expanded to address food shortages and improved its focus on poor households through the Revamped Public Distribution System (RPDS) and the Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS).

National Food Security Act (NFSA), 2013

- Enacted on 12th September 2013, the NFSA aims to provide access to adequate quantities of quality food at affordable prices to ensure food and nutritional security.
- It covers significant portions of the rural and urban population, providing them with food grains at subsidised rates.

Key Reforms in the PDS System

- Recent PDS reforms include the launch of One Nation One Ration Card (ONORC), which allows beneficiaries to access subsidised food from any FPS nationwide.
- Also, the development and implementation of technology-related reforms like SMART-PDS Scheme, Aadhaar and Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT), and GPS and SMS Monitoring have been significant.

Challenges Related to PDS and the Way Forward

- Significant inclusion and exclusion errors in identifying beneficiaries, corruption and leakages, lack of adequate storage facilities, and poor-quality food grains are some of the challenges with the PDS.
- Adopting advanced technologies like blockchain and IoT for tracking the supply chain and implementing real-time stock updates could help in mitigating these challenges.

The Bima Sakhi Yojana

Introduction and About

- The 'Bima Sakhi Yojana' was recently launched by the Prime Minister of India as a new initiative from Life Insurance Corporation (LIC).
- This programme is designed with a focus on women empowerment and financial inclusion, and plans to provide job opportunities for 2 lakh Indian women.
- Bima Sakhi Yojana is formulated as a stipend-based programme which is exclusively for women, and includes specialized training along with financial support for a duration of three years.
- Each participant known as a Bima Sakhi will earn a progressively decreasing monthly stipend over this period, starting from Rs 7,000 in the first year, followed by Rs 6,000 in the second year, reducing to Rs 5,000 in the third year.

Eligibility and Advantages

- The eligibility criteria for enrolment in this programme includes being a woman aged between 18 to 70 years and having completed at least 10th-grade education.
- Apart from the stipend, Bima Sakhis have the opportunity to earn commissions based on the insurance policies that they are able to secure.
- The programme also offers opportunities for career growth as the graduate Bima Sakhis will be considered for the position of Development Officer roles within LIC, subject to meeting required qualifications.

Why in News and Importance

- Bima Sakhi Yojana is recently launched by the Prime Minister with an aim to boost women employment and financial independence among Indian women.
- This scheme supports the vision of women's empowerment by providing them opportunities to be financially independent.
- It will also play an important role in securing wider coverage of insurance policies, as more

agents would be involved in disseminating and securing insurance.

- The Bima Sakhi Yojana initiative is also gaining significance as a potential means of narrowing the gender gap in the insurance industry, by recruiting and training women, who are underrepresented in this sector.

Ken Betwa River Link Project

Introduction and About

- The Ken-Betwa Link Project is an initiative designed to interlink the Ken and Betwa rivers.
- The motive of this project is to transfer surplus water from the Ken River in Madhya Pradesh to the Betwa River in Uttar Pradesh.
- The underlying objective for this water transfer is to irrigate the drought-prone Bundelkhand region which spans across various districts in Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh, such as Jhansi, Banda, Lalitpur, Mahoba, Tikamgarh, Panna, and Chhatarpur.
- Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi is set to lay the foundation stone for this project on December 25, 2025.

Project's Composition

- This project involves constructing a 2-kilometer wide and 77-meter tall Dhaudhan Dam located within the Panna Tiger Reserve's boundaries.
- Apart from the dam, a 230-kilometer canal will be constructed for the purpose of water transfer.
- These are a few infrastructural components of the Ken-Betwa project which also happens to be one of the 30 river interlinking projects planned across India.

Significance

- The Ken-Betwa River Link Project comes with multifaceted benefits.

- It is aimed at bolstering water conservation thereby imparting sustainability to water use.
- It also has a potential to generate 103 MW of hydropower, contributing to the green energy segment - an area of great emphasis currently.
- Another important benefit of this project is its capacity to provide drinking water to over 62 lakh people.

Geographical Relevance - The Ken and Betwa Rivers

- Both the Ken and Betwa rivers are originated in Madhya Pradesh and are tributaries of the Yamuna River.
- The Ken River flows into the Yamuna in the Banda district of Uttar Pradesh and merges with the Betwa in Hamirpur district, also in Uttar Pradesh.
- Several major dams, including Rajghat, Paricha, and Matatila, are built on the Betwa River.
- Notably, the Ken River happens to flow through the Panna Tiger Reserve which imparts an ecological concern to the river interlinking project.

Paryatan Mitra and Paryatan Didi Initiative

Introduction and About

- The Paryatan Mitra and Paryatan Didi initiative is an innovative programme launched by the Indian Ministry of Tourism.
- The primary goal of the programme is to boost the tourism industry by enhancing tourist experiences and fostering a culture of responsible tourism.
- It focuses on training locals such as taxi drivers, hotel personnel, vendors, and students on key aspects like tourism awareness, cleanliness, safety, sustainability, and providing a hospitable atmosphere to tourists.

Why in News or Current Updates

- The initiative has drawn attention for its role in revolutionizing the tourism industry.
- The pilot project was initially launched in several locations across India including Orchha in Madhya Pradesh (MP), Gandikota in Andhra Pradesh (AP), Bodh Gaya in Bihar, Aizawl in Mizoram, Jodhpur in Rajasthan, and Sri Vijaya Puram in Andaman & Nicobar.
- In acknowledgment of its successful impact, the programme was extended to cover 50 tourist destinations by World Tourism Day, 2024.
- Until now, the programme has successfully trained more than 3,500 individuals since its pilot launch on August 15, 2024.

General Knowledge Part: History, Geography, Importance and Other

- This initiative is a crucial part of the Government's wider strategy to revitalize the tourism sector.
- It was introduced with the belief that locals play a dominant role in establishing a tourist-friendly environment.
- The pilot project sites for the Paryatan Mitra and Paryatan Didi initiative were strategically selected, covering diverse geographic features from the north-eastern state of Mizoram to the island archipelago of Andaman & Nicobar.
- The programme plays an essential role in supporting the livelihood of local communities and contributing to sustainable economic development.
- The reach of the initiative, extending to 50 other tourist destinations by World Tourism Day 2024, signifies its critical role in promoting responsible tourism and enhancing the tourism sector's sustainability in India.

Science And Tech

ISRO's SpaDeX Mission: Mastering the Art of Space Docking

Introduction to SpaDeX

- SpaDeX (Space Docking Experiment) is a technology demonstration mission developed by the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO).
- The mission, scheduled for donning on 30th December 2024, will show India's potential in mastering space docking technology.
- The specific goal of SpaDeX is to scout the potential of satellite docking between two small spacecraft, SDX01 (Chaser) and SDX02 (Target), in low Earth orbit.
- These satellites are expected to dock autonomously using advanced sensors and propulsion systems.
- Secondary objectives focus on testing the electric power transfer and practicing spacecraft control.

Mission Design and Challenges

- SpaDeX will place the two satellites into a specific 470 km orbit using the Polar Satellite Launch Vehicle (PSLV) rocket.
- These spacecraft are equipped with the Bharatiya Docking System (BDS) featuring low-impact, androgynous docking mechanisms, boosting mission flexibility and precision.
- The PSLV's fourth stage, POEM-4, will be harnessed to carry 24 payloads from academic institutions and startups.
- The biggest challenge lies in navigating the two fast-moving satellites to reduce their relative velocity before docking.

What is Space Docking?

- Space docking is an intricate operation that involves maneuvering two fast-paced spacecraft into the same orbit and fusing them into a single unit.
- It plays a critical role in assembling large space infrastructures or transferring equipments, crew, or supplies in space.
- The International Space Station (ISS) was constructed using this technique, where separate modules were launched and docked in space.
- Regular docking missions ensure the ISS remains operational by bringing in supplies, new crew members, and modules, while allowing the old crew to return to Earth.

The Importance of Space Docking for India

- Docking technology is a prerequisite for constructing multi-modular space stations, as it allows the assembly of parts in space thus reducing size and weight constraints.
- It is essential for orbital refueling, payload exchange, and offering mission flexibility for moon bases and Martian exploration.
- Crucial in aiding future missions like Chandrayaan-4, space stations, and the planned Bharatiya Antariksh Station (BAS).
- Space Docking is of vital importance for crew transfers and emergency evacuations in long-haul missions like Gaganyaan.
- Successful accomplishment of SpaDeX could position India as the fourth nation, after Russia, the US, and China, to master space docking, strengthening India's presence in satellite servicing and allowing for advanced global collaborations.
- Satellite servicing can be improved through docking technology as it allows for repairing, refueling, and upgrading satellites.

Innovative Methods in Malaria Prevention

Introduction and About

- Malaria is a serious and potentially fatal disease caused by parasites of the Plasmodium species.
- This disease is transmitted by the bite of infected female Anopheles mosquitoes.
- The two most dangerous species among the five infecting humans are P. falciparum and P. vivax.
- Upon biting an infected individual, a mosquito transmits the parasites to the next person it bites.
- The parasites travel to the individual's liver, mature, and then invade their red blood cells.

Why Genetically Modified Parasites in the News

- Recent advancements in malaria prevention are now focusing on genetically modified malaria-causing parasites rather than genetically modified mosquitoes.
- This innovative approach aims to boost immune system priming during the liver stage of the parasite's life cycle, potentially leading to more effective malaria vaccines.
- Genetically modified parasites are designed to stimulate the immune system in the liver, preventing the disease before it can enter the bloodstream.
- Notably, genetically modified mosquitoes can spread resistance to malaria through interbreeding with wild mosquitoes.

Understanding Immune Priming and Trial Efficacy

- Immune priming refers to a host improving its immune defences following an initial exposure to a pathogen.
- This leads to better protection against infection upon subsequent exposure to the same, or different pathogens.

- The trial conducted saw an efficacy of 89% in participants exposed to late-arresting genetically modified parasites (p falciparum, in this case).

Comparison to Traditional Methods

- Traditional methods like radiation-sterilised mosquitoes and radiation-attenuated sporozoites require significantly larger exposures for comparable levels of protection.

Malaria in India

- Malaria remains a substantial public health issue in India, with around 1 million cases reported annually.
- Approximately 95% of the population reside in malaria-endemic regions, with most cases (80%) emerging from tribal, hilly areas that comprise only 20% of the population.
- In 2022, India accounted for 66% of malaria cases in the WHO South-East Asia Region, with P. vivax being responsible for around 46% of these cases.

Current Treatment and Global Initiatives

- The current treatment includes WHO recommended malaria vaccines like RTS,S/AS01 and R21/Matrix-M.
- World Malaria Day is observed every year on 25th April.
- WHO launched the Global Malaria Programme (GMP) in 2015 as part of the global initiative against Malaria.

Government Initiated Programs Related to Malaria

- The Indian government has initiated several programmes to control and eradicate malaria. They include:
 - National Malaria Control Programme (NMCP) – 1953
 - National Vector-Borne Disease Control Programme – 2003
 - Malaria Elimination Research Alliance-India (MERA-India) – Launched on the eve of 'World Malaria Day' in 2019.
 - National Strategic Plan: Malaria Elimination 2023-27

Global Cooperation in Space Debris Management

Understanding Lower Earth Orbit (LEO)

- LEO is a region of space that orbits Earth at altitudes ranging from 180 km to 2,000km.
- The region is frequently used for satellites and the International Space Station due to its proximity to Earth.
- The orbital mechanics of LEO require a satellite to travel at a speed of approximately 7.8km/s for it to remain in orbit indefinitely, thereby experiencing minimum atmospheric drag and orbital decay.

Importance of LEO

- LEO is preferred for Earth observation and communication satellites due to it offering high-resolution images and data because of its proximity to the Earth's surface.
- LEO is crucial for Global Positioning Systems and other scientific missions.
- The International Space Station orbits in LEO, making it accessible for regular resupply missions, crew transport, human space exploration, and scientific research.
- In comparison to higher orbits like Geostationary Orbit, launching satellites in LEO is more cost-effective due to reduced energy requirements for reaching orbit.

Challenges Associated with LEO

- The increasing number of satellites in LEO has led to concerns over space debris, such as decommissioned satellites, broken parts, and spent rocket stages that pose a risk of collision to active satellites and spacecraft.
- The rapid growth in satellite constellations and private companies' guarding proprietary satellite data are major management challenges.
- Geopolitical tensions and weaponisation of LEO significantly increase space debris and pose risks to LEO operations.

Space Debris and Its Threats

- Space debris or fragmented non-functional objects in Earth's orbit pose a significant risk to operational satellites and limit the availability of orbital slots for future space missions.
- The rising volume of space debris complicates the efforts of maintaining situational awareness in space.
- The possibility of the Kessler Syndrome counters the Big Sky Theory suggesting that the growing number of debris can lead to higher likelihood of collisions and further debris generation.

Initiatives to Address Space Debris

Challenges

- Initiatives by India include ISRO's System for Safe and Sustainable Operations Management, Collision Avoidance Maneuvers, Centre for Space Debris Research, and Project NETRA.
- Global initiatives include Inter-Agency Space Debris Coordination Committee, United Nations Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space's guidelines for space debris mitigation, and European Space Agency's Clean Space Initiative.
- The United Nations has also established five treaties on Space Activities to govern states' actions in the exploration and usage of outer space.

Axiom-4 Mission: An Overview and Its Significance for India

Introduction and About

- Axiom-4, also known as Ax-4, is a private spaceflight mission intending to launch in 2024.
- Axiom Space, a US-based company which focuses on developing space infrastructure operates the mission.
- This mission makes use of SpaceX's reusable Crew Dragon Spacecraft to transport astronauts to and from the International Space Station (ISS).

- It is the fourth such mission facilitated by Axiom Space in collaboration with NASA (National Aeronautics and Space Administration).

Mission Objectives

- The primary objective of Axiom-4 is to enable commercial activities such as space tourism in Low Earth Orbit (LEO).
- The mission aims to demonstrate that commercial space stations can be efficient platforms for business operations and scientific research.
- Axiom-4 is driven by international collaboration, aiming to promote global cooperation in space exploration and to strengthen international partnerships.
- The mission also supports scientific research and technological advancements in microgravity, furthering developments in areas such as materials science, biology, and Earth observation.

Key Features

- The mission deploys a SpaceX Dragon spacecraft propelled by a Falcon 9 rocket.
- The spacecraft carries professional astronauts, researchers, and private individuals.
- With a projected duration of 14 days, the crew on board will conduct various scientific experiments, technological demonstrations, and educational outreach.
- One of the critical steps in Axiom Space's grander vision of creating the first commercial space station, Axiom-4 aims at transitioning from ISS activities to establishing an independent orbital platform.

Significance for India

- Axiom-4 is a significant milestone for India as it demonstrates a landmark collaboration between the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) and NASA. It highlights India's advancing presence in space exploration.
- It facilitates Indian astronauts' participation in ISS activities, enhancing India's capabilities in human spaceflight and promoting its contribution to international space science.

The International Space Station (ISS)

- The ISS, located approximately 400 kilometres above the Earth's surface, is a large, permanently inhabited laboratory.
- The ISS is a combined initiative involving 15 countries and 5 space agencies, including NASA, Roscosmos (Russian Space Agency), the European Space Agency, JAXA (Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency), and the Canadian Space Agency.
- It serves as a workspace for an international crew of seven astronauts and cosmonauts, completing an orbit around the Earth every 90 minutes at a speed of 7.66 km/sec, thereby completing 16 orbits in a day.

Dark Matter and Dark Energy: Unseen Forces of the Universe

Introduction

- Dark Matter and Dark Energy are two elusive but fundamental aspects of our universe.
- They do not interact with electromagnetic forces, which makes them largely undetectable.
- Dark Matter makes up about 27% of the universe, while Dark Energy accounts for around 68%.

Dark Matter - Origins and Composition

- Dark matter is believed to have formed during the Big Bang and concentrated into black holes.
- It is thought to consist of non-baryonic WIMPs (weakly interacting massive particles), many times the mass of a proton.
- Hypothetical particles, Neutralinos, and Sterile Neutrinos, are proposed candidates for the components of dark matter.

Evidence of Dark Matter

- Galaxy Rotation Curves indicate irregular movement of stars at the edge of galaxies, suggesting unseen mass – attributed to dark matter.

- Gravitational Lensing reveals more mass than seen, indicating the presence of dark matter.
- The distribution and motion of galaxies over time also point towards the existence of dark matter.

Dark Matter Exploration Projects

- Several projects have been designed to study dark matter, including the Alpha Magnetic Spectrometer, XENON1T, IceCube Neutrino Observatory, and the Large Hadron Collider.
- The upcoming launch of James Webb Space Telescope is expected to provide insight into the role of dark matter in galaxy formation.

Dark Energy - A Mysterious Force

- Dark energy is thought to be universally distributed and responsible for the accelerated expansion of the universe.
- Unlike dark matter, dark energy does not have any local gravitational effects but rather affects the universe globally, leading to a repulsive force accelerating the expansion.
- Hubble's Law, which states that galaxies move faster away from Earth as they are farther, indicates the expanding universe and hints at the existence of dark energy.

Noteworthy References

- Dutch astronomer Jacobus Kapteyn was amongst the first to infer the existence of "dark matter" in 1922.
- Antimatter, consisting of particles with opposite charges to visible matter particles, should not be confused with dark matter.

Recent Updates

- Physicists recently revised the minimum mass of dark matter, pushing it up to 2.3×10^{-30} proton masses, compared to the previous estimate of about 10^{-31} times the mass of a proton.

Miscellaneous

The Life and Legacy of Dr. Manmohan Singh

Introduction and Early Life

- Born on 26th September 1932 in Gah, Punjab (now in Pakistan), Dr. Manmohan Singh's early life was shaped by the aftershocks of the 1947 Partition of India and Pakistan.
- He pursued higher education in economics, distinguishing himself at prestigious institutions including Panjab University, Cambridge and Oxford.
- His academic career included influential teaching positions at Panjab University and the Delhi School of Economics.

Economic Administration and Contributions

- Dr. Singh excelled in various high-level government roles, including Chief Economic Advisor, Secretary of Economic Affairs, Governor of the Reserve Bank of India, and Chairman of the University Grants Commission.
- As RBI Governor from 1982-1985, his efforts catered to enhancing financial stability and bolstering policy discipline.
- His significant thesis work on India's export performance between 1951-1960 laid the groundwork for his future strategic impact on the Indian economy.

1991 Economic Reforms

- Singh, along with then Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao, played a vital role in the 1991 economic reforms during India's balance of payments crisis.
- The LPG reforms (Liberalisation, Privatisation, and Globalisation), initiated under their leadership, transformed India's economic landscape.
- As part of these reforms, notable measures he implemented include the devaluation of the rupee to boost exports, dismantlement of the License Raj to reduce industrial bottlenecks, and

liberalisation of foreign investment policies, thereby steering India towards economic stability and growth.

Tenure as Prime Minister (2004–2014)

- Dr. Manmohan Singh, as India's 14th Prime Minister, is heralded for his pivotal role in India's economic growth, distinguished by a robust annual growth rate of 8-9% during his first term.
- Key legislations such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) and the Right to Information Act (RTI) were introduced during his tenure.
- His second term was marked by key legislations focusing on equity and social justice, such as The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act and the National Food Security Act.
- Even in the face of global financial crises, under his guidance, India emerged as the world's second-fastest-growing major economy in 2007.

Foreign Policy and Recognition

- As a statesman, Singh played a significant role in India's foreign policy and global relations, as evidenced by the India–United States Civil Nuclear Agreement in 2008.
- He represented India in various international forums and received multiple recognitions, including the Padma Vibhushan and the Jawaharlal Nehru Birth Centenary Award.
- His academic excellence was acknowledged early-on with accolades like the Adam Smith Prize and the Wright's Prize from the University of Cambridge.

Leadership Lessons from Dr. Manmohan Singh

- The amalgamation of academic rigour and policy pragmatism was a cornerstone of his leadership, ensuring the effectiveness and sustainability of his policies.
- His leadership emphasised the balance between gradual, socially acceptable reforms and a strong commitment to maintaining equity and justice.

- Known for his strong ethical foundations, Singh's integrity in leadership earned him respect across political and social spectrums.
- Notably, his belief in strengthening institutions and systemic changes in policy ensured that his influence on India's policy framework outlived his time in office.
- His dignified and calm resilience in handling political setbacks, exemplified during the United Progressive Alliance defeat in 2014, attests to his legacy as a respected leader.

Zakir Hussain: The Legend of Tabla and IPF

About Zakir Hussain

- Born on 9th March 1951, Zakir Hussain was amongst legends in the field of Indian classical music.
- The late master of tabla inherited his passion from his father, Ustad Alla Rakha, starting his training at just seven years old.
- His collaborations with Western musicians, most notably his 1973 project with global artists such as John McLaughlin (English guitarist), L. Shankar (violinist), and T.H. 'Vikku' Vinayakram (percussionist), catapulted Indian classical music into international acclaim.
- Over his illustrious career, Zakir Hussain won several prestigious awards – four Grammy Awards (including three at the 66th Grammy Awards in 2024), the Padma Shri (1988), Padma Bhushan (2002), and Padma Vibhushan (2023).

Cause of his Death: Idiopathic Pulmonary Fibrosis (IPF)

- IPF is a chronic lung disease causing the air sacs (alveoli) in the lungs to become fibrous and scarred, impeding efficient oxygen exchange.
- This condition thickens and stiffens the tissues surrounding the alveoli, the small air sacs tasked with the exchange of oxygen and carbon dioxide between the lungs and bloodstream.

- The exact cause of IPF is uncertain, as emphasised by the term "idiopathic", meaning unexplained.
- It is more common in males and individuals with a history of smoking, especially adults over 50.
- Other risk factors include genetic predisposition, environmental exposures such as cigarette smoking, and viral infections.

Introduction to Tabla

- The tabla is a pair of vertical drums predominant in Hindustani classical music, containing two main components: the tabla (right) and the bayan or dagga (left).
- Classified as an awanad/avanaddha vadya (percussion instrument), it is credited to Amir Khusrau.
- The main body of the tabla is wooden, covered with a layer of animal skin. In the center of the tabla's skin is 'syahi' paste, crucial in tuning the drum.
- The bayan has a body of clay or metal, also covered with animal skin and syahi paste.
- The tabla primarily accompanies vocal and instrumental Hindustani music as well as various dance forms prevalent in northern India.
- Besides Zakir Hussain, other notable tabla players include Ustad Alla Rakha Khan, Shafat Ahmed, and Samta Prasad.

Campaign Against Tuberculosis in India

Introduction

- The Ministry of Health and Family Welfare in India has recently launched a 100-day nationwide campaign to combat Tuberculosis (TB).
- The campaign aims to find and treat missing TB cases while significantly reducing TB-related deaths.

- The programme will be executed across 347 districts in the country, with a particular focus on high-risk groups.

About the Campaign

- The 100-Day Campaign substantiates India's ambition to eradicate TB under the National TB Elimination Programme (NTEP).
- It synchronises with the broader vision of India to eradicate Tuberculosis well before the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals deadline.
- During this time, national guidelines for the implementation of the new drug-resistant TB regimen – BPaLM have been launched.
- The term 'BPaLM regimen' refers to a novel treatment for Multidrug-Resistant TB under the NTEP, which includes the four-drug combination of Bedaquiline, Pretomanid, Linezolid, and Moxifloxacin.
- 'Ni-kshay Vahaan' – mobile detection and treatment vans have also been launched as part of the campaign.

What is Tuberculosis (TB)?

- Tuberculosis, or TB, is an infectious disease caused by Mycobacterium tuberculosis primarily affecting the lungs.
- The disease spreads through the air from one person to another when people with TB cough, sneeze, or spit.

TB Statistics in India

- According to the India TB Report 2024, Tuberculosis (TB) mortality rates in India have dropped from 28 per lakh population in 2015 to 23 per lakh population in 2022.

India's Initiatives against TB

- India has implemented several initiatives to combat TB, including the National Strategic Plan (NSP) for Tuberculosis Elimination (2017-2025).
- Another strategy includes the 'TB Harega Desh Jeetega Campaign'.

- Additionally, programmes such as the Ni-kshay Poshan Yojana and Pradhan Mantri TB Mukh Bharat Abhiyan have also been implemented.

Akal Takht Imposes Punishment

About Akal Takht and Its Historical Significance

- The Akal Takht, spiritual and temporal authority of the Sikh community, is supervised by the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC).
- The Akal Takht was established in 1606 by Guru Hargobind, the 6th Sikh Guru, in response to the execution of his father, Guru Arjan Dev (5th Sikh guru), by the Mughals.
- Located in the Golden Temple complex, the Akal Takht became a symbol of Sikh sovereignty and resistance.
- The Akal Takht is one of the five Takhts (seats of power) in Sikhism but is of the highest position due to its dual authority (spiritual guidance along with temporal governance).

Sukhbir Singh Badal's Punishment and the Resultant Discussion

- Recently, a religious punishment was imposed on Sukhbir Singh Badal, President of the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD), by the Akal Takht for alleged misgovernance.
- This sparked a discussion regarding the Akal Takht's authority and its relationship with the SAD and the SGPC.

Role of Akal Takht Jathedar and Other Sikh Takhts

- The Jathedar, or head, of the Akal Takht can summon Sikhs for moral and spiritual accountability and prescribe punishments; this authority only applies to those who identify as a Sikh.
- Apart from Akal Takht, there are four other Sikh takhts situated in various locations: Takht Sri Keshgarh Sahib, Takht Sri Harimandir Ji Patna

Sahib, Takht Sachkhand Shri Hazur Abchalnagar Sahib, and Takht Sri Damdama Sahib.

Relationship Between Akal Takht, SGPC, and SAD

- The SGPC, formed in 1920, is responsible for managing Sikh gurdwaras and upholding religious principles.
- The SAD, established alongside the SGPC, initially functioned as its political wing.
- Controlling the SGPC allows SAD to influence appointments and decisions at the Akal Takht, leading to concerns about the Akal Takht's independence.

The Akali Movement and Formation of the SGPC

- The Gurdwara Reform Movement, also known as the Akali Movement, started in 1920 in Punjab in protest of British control over Gurudwaras.
- The movement led to the creation of the SGPC in 1920 and the Sikh Gurdwara Act of 1925, granting the Sikh community legal control over Gurudwaras.

Challenges for the Akal Takht and the SGPC

- Both the Akal Takht and the SGPC face issues related to allegations of political interference, delayed elections, disputes within factions, and pressure for reform.
- The Akal Takht also has the challenge of asserting its authority within a globalized Sikh community, addressing social issues like drug addiction and economic disparities, while upholding its core principles.

Way Forward

- Recommended steps forward include independent appointments of Jathedars involving global Sikh representation, democratic SGPC elections, and establishing clear boundaries between the SGPC's administrative functions and the Akal Takht's authority.

Sports News

Recent Developments in the World of Cricket

Asian U-19 Championship

- Bangladesh U-19 team successfully defended their Asia Cup title by defeating India in the finals with a 59-run lead.
- Setting a target of 199 runs, India was all out for 139 in just 35.2 overs.
- Significant performances by Mohammad Shihab James, Rizan Hossan and Azizul Hakim brought the Bangladesh team to a strong lead.

ICC Players of the Month

- Pakistani player Haris Rauf and England's Danni Wyatt-Hodge were honoured as ICC Players of the Month for November 2024.
- Rauf's bowling enabled Pakistan's first ODI series win in Australia since 2002.
- Wyatt-Hodge's batting was pivotal in England's T20I series victory over South Africa.

Groundbreaking career milestones

- Shaheen Shah Afridi made history as the youngest bowler to take 100 wickets in every format of cricket, becoming the first Pakistani bowler to achieve this.
- Pakistani all-rounder Imad Wasim announced his retirement from international cricket, after nine years.
- Jasprit Bumrah surpassed Kapil Dev's record of 51 wickets, becoming India's highest wicket-taker in Test cricket on Australian soil.
- Indian spinner Ravichandran Ashwin announced his retirement from international cricket following a 14-year career during which he became India's second-highest Test wicket-taker.

Women's Cricket Achievements

- England's Nat Sciver-Brunt set the new record for fastest Test century by a woman, reaching 100 runs off just 96 balls.
- India's Richa Ghosh made history by equalling the record for fastest fifty in women's T20Is.
- India won the first-ever U10 Women's Asia cup T-20 title, defeating Bangladesh by 41 runs.

Domestic Cricket Updates

- Mumbai won the Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy (SMAT) 2024, marking their second SMAT title.
- Punjab's top order batter, Anmolpreet Singh, set history by scoring the third fastest List A century in just 35 balls during the Vijay Hazare Trophy match against Arunachal Pradesh.

Notable Instances and Recognition

- On December 26, 2024, Indian cricketer Virat Kohli was fined 20% of his match fee for a shoulder barge against Australian player Sam Konstas.
- Indian cricket legend Sachin Tendulkar was appointed as an Honorary Cricket Member of the Melbourne Cricket Club (MCC) in recognition of his remarkable contributions to the sport.

Recent Updates on Badminton and Tennis

Syed Modi International Super 300 Badminton Tournament 2024

- The Syed Modi International Super 300, took place in December 2024, hosted at the Babu Banarasi Das Academy in Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh.
- In the women's singles event, PV Sindhu emerged victorious, clinching her third title. She triumphed over Luo Yu Wu from China, taking the match in two straight sets (21-14, 21-16).
- The men's singles saw Lakshya Sen capture his maiden Syed Modi title. He outplayed Jia Heng Jason Teh from Singapore, dominating the game with a score of 21-6 and 21-7.

- Indian women's doubles pair, Treesa Jolly and Gayatri Gopichand, made history by becoming the first Indian women's doubles pair to clinch the title.

Suspension of Russian Tennis Player Daniil Savelev

- Russian tennis player, Daniil Savelev, was handed down a suspension of two years for testing positive for the prohibited substance meldonium in July 2024.
- The International Tennis Integrity Agency (ITIA) confirmed that Savelev's doping was unintentional as it was caused by confusion with a family medication.
- Savelev accepted the suspension which will last until August 2026. This will temporarily halt his professional career, barring him from participating in any professional tennis matches.

Significance and General Knowledge Insights

- Badminton and Tennis are both racquet sports that require agility, precision and strategic planning. Tournaments such as Syed Modi International Super 300 provide an international platform for players to showcase their talent and gain global recognition.
- PV Sindhu, Lakshya Sen, Gayatri Gopichand, and Treesa Jolly are all key figures in Indian badminton who have contributed significantly to the sport in the country.
- Doping scandals, such as that of Daniil Savelev, highlight the rigorous regulation of professional sports and the severe consequences faced by athletes who violate anti-doping rules. Despite his unintentional breach, Savelev's career has been put on hold, demonstrating the strict nature of anti-doping regulations in professional sports.
- The infamous doping substance, meldonium, improves athletes' capacity for exercise, and has been on the World Anti-Doping Agency's list of banned substances since January 2016.

ISSF Junior World Cup 2025 to be Hosted by India

Introduction & About

- The International Shooting Sport Federation (ISSF) has confirmed that India will be hosting the ISSF Junior World Cup 2025.
- This prestigious event adds to India's robust portfolio of global shooting championships.
- It marks the ninth time that India has been granted the opportunity to organise a top-level shooting championship, showcasing India's growing prominence in the international shooting arena.

Current Affairs

- The announcement of India as the host nation of the ISSF Junior World Cup 2025 was confirmed on December 20, 2024 by the ISSF.
- This is set to enhance India's standing not just as a participant, but also as a host for major global sporting events.
- The recognition also reflects on the dedicated efforts of the National Rifle Association of India (NRAI) in promoting the sport.

Importance and Impact

- The hosting of this esteemed sporting event will undoubtedly offer opportunities to showcase the country's capabilities, not just in shooting, but in the larger perspective of organising international sporting events.
- It is expected to provide a boost to India's shooting sport infrastructure, which is continuously developing.
- This opportunity will allow for the growth of interest in shooting sports in India, which could even lead to a snowball effect of increased participation and success in such events going forward.

General Knowledge

- The ISSF is the global governing body of the Olympic Shooting events in Rifle, Pistol and

Shotgun disciplines, and of several non-Olympic Shooting sport events.

- Majority of its activities are to organise and promote the shooting sports on all levels, including the hosting of World Championships and World Cups.
- The NRAI, on the other hand, is the apex body of shooting sports in India and works towards promoting and popularising the sport in the country.

Recent Highlights in Athletics and Football Development

FIFA's Future Hosting Plans for the World Cup

- FIFA announced a joint venture where Spain, Portugal, and Morocco will co-host the 2030 Men's Football World Cup.
- Additional football matches will be organised in Argentina, Paraguay, and Uruguay, honouring the tournament's centenary.
- Saudi Arabia has been granted the hosting rights for the 2034 World Cup.
- The decisions were taken during an Extraordinary FIFA Congress meeting, which evoked varied responses in relation to the bidding process.

Accomplishments of India's Junior Hockey Teams

- India's men's junior hockey team registered their fifth Junior Asia Cup title with a 5-3 win over Pakistan on December 4, 2024, in Muscat, Oman.
- The triumphant win marked their third consecutive championship in 2015, 2023, and 2024.
- Arajjeet Singh Hundal emerged as the standout player with four goals facilitating the noteworthy victory.
- The Indian women's junior hockey team fortuitously defended their Women's Junior Asia

Cup title, overcoming China 3-2 in a penalty shoot-out after a 1-1 draw in the final match.

- The victorious outcome sanitises India's entry into the 2025 FIH Women's Junior Hockey World Cup, set to be held in Chile.

Current Position of Indian Men's Hockey Team in FIH World Rankings

- The Indian men's hockey team has ranked fifth in the latest world rankings recognised by the International Hockey Federation (FIH).
- This achievement comes in the light of their consecutive success at the 2024 Paris Olympics.
- The Netherlands remains at the top of the list, while India secured 2955 points, only trailing behind England and Belgium.
- The steady upward trajectory in the rankings is indicative of India's burgeoning success and progress in the sport of hockey.

Quick Headlines

- The Indian Ministry of Women and Child Development recently launched the Bal Vivah Mukht Bharat Abhiyan, a campaign focusing on exterminating child marriage in the country. This aligns with India's pursuit towards gender equality and the larger vision of a developed nation by 2047. Part of this campaign is the Child Marriage Free Bharat Portal; an online tool that allows users to report underage marriages, file complaints and access information on Child Marriage Prohibition Officers (CMPOs). The campaign targets seven states with above average child marriage rates - West Bengal, Bihar, Jharkhand, Rajasthan, Tripura, Assam, and Andhra Pradesh - and is designed to empower every daughter in the country.
- World AIDS Day is commemorated every 1st December, aiming to raise awareness about HIV/AIDS, its progress, and the ongoing efforts to eradicate it. The theme

for 2024 is "Take the rights path: My health, my right!". HIV, a life-threatening condition targeting the immune system, can be contained with antiretroviral therapy, albeit no cure is available. The Global AIDS Update 2023 reports a decrease in new infections, setting an ambitious goal to obliterate AIDS by 2030. Particularly in India, more than 2.5 million are living with HIV, yet new infections have been cut by 44% since 2010.

- India has risen 11 places to 49th in the Network Readiness Index (NRI) 2024, marking substantial progress in its digital infrastructure and capabilities. Published by the Portulans Institute, the NRI assesses 133 economies across four pillars: Technology, People, Governance, and Impact. India's NRI score improved from 49.93 in 2023 to 53.63 in 2024 thanks to improvements in digital metrics and innovations. The nation topped global rankings in AI scientific publications, AI talent concentration, and ICT services exports, while its telecom sector saw significant growth, boosted by the launch of 5G services in 2022.
- Researchers at the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Madras have created DHARINI, the world's largest high-resolution 3D atlas of a foetal brain. This atlas maps over 5,000 brain sections and 500 brain regions, focusing on the second trimester of pregnancy, a crucial time for brain development. It is seen as a potential tool for understanding cerebral palsy, autism, depression, bipolar disorder and other brain disorders. The research could also contribute towards advancements in artificial intelligence and machine learning.
- The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has approved Small Finance Banks (SFBs) to lend pre-sanctioned credit lines through the Unified Payments Interface (UPI) in an effort to enhance financial inclusion and formal credit access, particularly for new customers. Established on recommendations of the Nachiket Mor Committee, SFBs are special financial institutions with a mandate to allocate 75% of their Adjusted Net Bank Credit (ANBC) to priority sectors. With their primary aim being financial inclusion, SFBs cater to underserved areas and entities, requiring at least 25% of their branches to be in unbanked rural regions.
- SEBI has introduced the Specialised Investment Fund (SIF) asset class aimed at informed investors ready for riskier investments. SIFs bridge the gap between mutual funds and portfolio management services, with a minimum investment of Rs 10 lakh, and different thresholds for accredited investors. SIFs offer various strategies: open-ended, close-ended, and interval investment. Moreover, SEBI introduced Mutual Fund Lite regulations to facilitate passively managed funds such as exchange-traded funds and index funds by easing entry restrictions and reducing compliance burdens.
- The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has raised the collateral-free loan limit for farmers from Rs 1.6 lakh to Rs 2 lakh, benefitting over 86% of small and marginal farmers. The extended coverage includes loans for allied agricultural activities, enhancing income diversification. Additionally, the RBI has directed banks to ensure speedy implementation and increased awareness of this provision. This initiative aligns with the Modified Interest

Subvention Scheme, thereby improving farmers' access to Kisan Credit Card loans and helping them manage rising input costs.

- In the recent 55th Goods and Services Tax (GST) Council meeting chaired by the Finance Minister, several critical decisions were taken. The tax rate for used Electric Vehicle (EV) sales has been increased to 18% from 12% and GST will apply only to the margin value for business sales. No GST will be applied to penal charges by banks and non-banking financial companies (NBFCs) for loan violations or to payment aggregators handling payments less than Rs 2,000. However, the council did not agree to bringing Aviation Turbine Fuel (ATF) under GST, and supplies including black pepper, raisins and gene therapy were made exempt from GST.
- The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has reported that the Real Effective Exchange Rate (REER) of the rupee hit its highest level this year at 108.14 in November 2024, showing overvaluation since 2015-16. Despite this, the rupee experienced the lowest volatility amongst major global currencies. The overvaluation of the rupee makes Indian exports more expensive and undermines their competitiveness in global markets. Meanwhile, the strong US dollar, driven by higher bond yields and global demand for secure assets, has resulted in capital outflows from India.
- The Ministry of Law and Justice has recently amended Rule 93 of the Conduct of Election Rules, 1961, limiting public access to some election-related documents. This move follows a recommendation by the Election Commission of India (ECI) and comes after a directive from the Punjab and

Haryana High Court for the ECI to share all election documents. Critics, including RTI activists and opposition parties, argue this change compromises the transparency and accountability of elections. The Conduct of Election Rules, 1961 provides a thorough framework for conducting Indian elections, protecting voter secrecy, and defining the duties of election officers.

- The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has flagged concerns over the reliance on unsecured lending and private credit, despite a decrease in gross non-performing assets (GNPA) and continued profitability of banks. The share of unsecured loans in Scheduled Commercial Banks' total credit rose to 25.5% in March 2023 before slightly dropping to 25.3% in March 2024. The RBI suggested enhanced vigilance and compliance with credit appraisal processes due to the increased risk associated with unsecured loans. The report also highlighted prominent issues such as the rise of dark patterns and high employee attrition rates in the banking industry.

New Appointments

Jay Shah, Secretary of BCCI, has commenced his tenure as the youngest ever ICC Chairman at the age of 36. His leadership is significant during a crucial period for global cricket. Shah's role offers key opportunities and challenges in increasing the sport's reach and inclusivity.

Devajit Saikia is currently serving as the acting secretary of the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI), filling the role previously occupied by Jay Shah. Shah has since assumed the position of ICC chairman. Saikia will remain in this temporary role until a permanent secretary is

appointed. Shah had introduced major reforms during his tenure as BCCI secretary from October 2019.

Rama Mohan Rao Amara has been appointed as the Managing Director of the State Bank of India (SBI). His appointment, set for a tenure of three years, was approved by the ACC. Amara succeeds CS Setty, following a recommendation from the FSIB.

Dr. Shankar Prasad Sharma has been reappointed as the Resident Ambassador of India to Nepal. This appointment was endorsed by the President of Nepal, under Article 282 (1) of the Nepalese Constitution.

Justice Madan B Lokur is the Chairperson of the United Nations Internal Justice Council (IJC), effective from 19th December 2024 until 12th November 2028. His role is to ensure impartiality, professionalism, and independence within the UN's internal justice system.

V.Ramasubramanian is the chairperson of the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), appointed on 23 December 2024. Before this, he served as a Supreme Court Judge and the Chief Justice of the Himachal Pradesh High Court. He took over the position from Justice Arun Kumar Mishra.

Arunish Chawla, a senior IAS officer from the 1992 Bihar cadre, serves as the Revenue Secretary for India's Ministry of Finance. In addition to this role, he also assumes additional responsibility for the Ministry of Culture. Chawla took over these roles, replacing Sanjay Malhotra.

Amitava Chatterjee has been approved by the RBI as the Managing Director and CEO of Jammu and Kashmir Bank. His three-year term will commence on 30th December 2024, succeeding Baldev Prakash.

Dr. Sandip Shah serves as the Chairperson for the National Accreditation Board for Testing and Calibration Laboratories (NABL). He is a Gold Medalist in MD Pathology and commands over three decades of experience in the healthcare and diagnostics field. Dr. Shah ardently supports NABL's mission to uphold quality and reliability.

Ajay Singh and other board members of the Boxing Federation of India (BFI) played a significant role in Asia's involvement in World Boxing. Singh serves on the board alongside officials from commissions such as the Olympic, Finance, and Medical. Their collective contributions have made notable strides for Asian boxing on the world stage.

The Supreme Court Collegium has recommended Chief Justice G Narendar for the role of Chief Justice of the Uttarakhand High Court. Currently serving as Chief Justice, his expected promotion strengthens the judicial hierarchy in Uttarakhand. The recommendation signifies judicial confidence in Justice Narendar's capabilities.

Chief Justice Gurmeet Singh Sandhawalia has been appointed to the Himachal Pradesh High Court, succeeding Justice Rajiv Shakhder who retired in October 2024. His appointment followed a recommendation from the Supreme Court Collegium.

Books And Author

Book Title	Author/Editor
Dalai Lama's Secret to Happiness	Dr. Dinesh Shahra
BRING IT ON: The Incredible Story of My Life	Dr. Deepa Malik
The Unyielding Judge: The Life and Legacy of Justice A.N. Grover	Gauri Grover
New Bharat – Modi's Vision and Development 2019-2024	Ravi Prashar
Hindu Rashtra Hai Kya	Sitaram Yechury
The Fight for the Republic and Reflections on Culture, Media, and Science	Sitaram Yechury
Beyond The Higgs Boson: The W Boson and Dr. Ashutosh Kotwal's Quest for the Unknown	Dr. Ashutosh Kotwal
Tipu Sultan: The Saga of the Mysore Interregnum	Vikram Sampath
Loh Purush Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel Ka Jeevanvrit	Rakesh Kumar Sharma

Important Days

Date	Day
01 Dec	World AIDS Day
02 Dec	International Day for the Abolition of Slavery
03 Dec	International Day of Persons with Disabilities
04 Dec	International Day of Banks
05 Dec	International Volunteer Day for Economic and Social Development
05 Dec	World Soil Day
07 Dec	International Civil Aviation Day
09 Dec	International Day of Commemoration and Dignity of the Victims of the Crime of Genocide and of the Prevention of this Crime
09 Dec	International Anti-Corruption Day
10 Dec	Human Rights Day
11 Dec	International Mountain Day
11 Dec	UNICEF Foundation Day
12 Dec	International Day of Neutrality

12 Dec	International Universal Health Coverage Day
18 Dec	International Migrants Day
18 Dec	Minorities Rights Day
19 Dec	Good Governance Week
19 Dec	Goa Liberation Day
20 Dec	Sashastra Seema Bal (SSB) Raising Day
20 Dec	International Human Solidarity Day
21 Dec	World Meditation Day
21 Dec	World Basketball Day
22 Dec	National Mathematics Day
27 Dec	International Day of Epidemic Preparedness



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