GENERAL STUDIES-1

INDIAN CULTURE

PRASAD SCHEME

Why in news?

The parliamentary standing committee on transport, tourism and culture has referred to the tourism ministry's flagship Pilgrimage Rejuvenation and Spiritual Augmentation Drive (Prasad) scheme as one whose conceptualisation is "radically wrong" and which needs a "complete relook".

What's the issue?

The standing committee noted that the scheme was not running properly even three years after its launch. States have their own tourism policy and it seems there is no coordination with the central government. The standing committee was also dissatisfied with the government's response blaming state government agencies for the delay.

About PRASAD scheme:

PRASAD scheme aims to create spiritual centres for tourism development within the nation. To implement the PRASAD scheme a Mission Directorate has been set up in the Ministry of Tourism.

Twelve cities namely Amaravati (Andhra Pradesh), Gaya(Bihar), Dwaraka(Gujarat), Amritsar(Punjab), Ajmer(Rajasthan), Kanchipuram(Tamil Nadu), Vellankani(Tamil Nadu), Puri(Odisha), Varanasi(Uttar Prasesh), Mathura(Uttar Pradesh), Kedarnath (Uttarakhand) and Kamakhya (Assam) have been identified for development under Pilgrimage Rejuvenation and Spirituality Augmentation Drive (PRASAD) by the Ministry of Tourism.

SOCIAL ISSUES AND INDIAN SOCIETY

COUNTERING GROWING INEQUALITY

Income inequality in India has reached historically high levels with the share of national income accruing to India's top 1 per cent earners touching 22 per cent in 2014, while the share of the top 10 per cent was around 56 per cent, according to the World Inequality Report 2018 released.

World Inequality Report 2018

Published by: World Inequality Lab at the Paris School of Economics

Trends in Global Income inequality

Global income growth dynamics are driven by strong forces of convergence between countries and divergence within countries. Global dynamics are shaped by a variety of national institutional and political contexts.

- Since 1980, income inequality has increased rapidly in North America and Asia, grown moderately in Europe, and stabilized at an extremely high level in the Middle East, sub-Saharan Africa, and Brazil.
- The poorest half of the global population has seen its income grow significantly thanks to high growth in Asia.
- Income growth has been sluggish or even nil for individuals between the global bottom 50% and top 1%. This includes North American and European lower- and middle-income groups.
- In China, India, and Russia inequality surged with opening and liberalization policies.

Income inequality in India

Since the beginning of deregulation policies in the 1980s, the top 0.1% earners have captured more growth than all of those in the bottom 50% combined. The structural changes to the economy along with changes in the regulation appear to have had significant impact on income inequality in India since the 1980s.

Comparison between India and China

In particular, the report enables a comparison of economic progress made in India and China. Comparison between China and India is meaningful as they had both been large agrarian economies at similar levels of per capita income when they had started out in the early 1950s. Moreover, the absence of democracy in a society does not by itself guarantee faster economic growth and greater income equality.

- Since 1980, while the Chinese economy has grown 800% and India's a far lower 200%, inequality in China today is considerably lower than in India.
- The share of the top 1% of the Chinese population is 14% as opposed to the 22% reported for India. It is emphasised that growing inequality need not necessarily accompany faster growth, observing that inequality actually declined in China from the early 21st century.
- Inequality rose to extreme level in India and moderate level in China as China invested more in education, health and infrastructure for its bottom 50 per cent population.
- The World Development Indicators data released by the World Bank show that per capita income in China was five times that of India in 2016 while the percentage of the population living on less than $1.90 a day was about 10 times less at the beginning of this decade.
- The spread of health and education in that country enabled the Chinese economy to grow faster than India by exporting manufactures to the rest of the world. The resulting growth lifted vast multitudes out of poverty.
- As the human capital endowment was relatively equal, most people could share in this growth, which accounts for the relative equality of outcomes in China when compared to India.
- An ingredient of this is also the greater participation of women in the workforce of China, an outcome that eludes India.

Democracy not a barrier to development

India has lower per capita income, persistent poverty and by all accounts rising inequality. Democracy per se cannot be held responsible for this. There are States in India with superior social indicators than China. This shows that not only is democracy not a barrier to development but also that similar political institutions across India have not resulted in same development outcomes across its regions.

Way forward

There is need to spread health and education far more widely amidst the population. The role of progressive taxation is significant in tackling rising inequality at the top. At the same time, to tackle inequality at the bottom there is a need for more equal access to education and good paying jobs.

POWER OF THE COLLECTIVE

Domestic violence, or intimate partner violence (IPV) as it is sometimes called, is a worldwide problem. Intimate partner violence is referred as a threatened physical, sexual, financial or emotional abuse of a woman by their intimate partner

Domestic violence in India includes any form of violence suffered by a person from a biological relative, but typically is the violence suffered by a woman by male members of her family or relatives.

The greed for dowry, desire for a male child and alcoholism of the spouse are major factors of domestic violence against women in rural areas.

IPV in India

Domestic violence or IPV is currently defined in India by the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act of 2005.

- In India, more than 55 percent of the women suffer from domestic violence,
- Physical injury is the most visible form of domestic/Intimate partner violence.
- Emotional abuse has been gaining more and more recognition in recent years as an incredibly common form of domestic violence within the private home throughout developing nations such as India.
- Most of the risk factors for intimate partner violence identified in slums appear to be similar to those identified in non-slum settings in India.
- In Indian families with patriarchal norms, women with higher income or status relative to their partners are more likely to be seen as gender deviant and to face violence

- Norms related to gender roles, community attitudes and the broader social context, including the media, play a significant role in the acceptance and promotion of intimate partner violence.
- Women with a lifetime history of IPV were more likely to have reported poorer physical and mental health compared to those without a lifetime history of IPV.

Role of Self-Help groups to address IPV

Strategies to address IPV have included legal reforms, awareness creation drives, and strengthening of women's civil rights. As criminal justice solutions have largely been inaccessible to socially precarious women, a more inclusive alternative is to have collective-based resolution mechanisms. The potential of large-scale groups of women, such as self-help groups (SHGs), becomes critical in the Indian context.

Many models of community dispute resolution mechanisms have been experimented in India like,

- The Nari Adalats (women courts) in various States,
- Women's Resource Centres (Rajasthan),
- Shalishi (West Bengal), and
- Mahila Panchayats (Delhi)

They have seen IPV as a public issue rather than a personal problem. Several NGOs have co-opted these models so that women can resolve cases of violence without getting entangled in tedious legal processes.

GENERAL STUDIES-2

POLITY

TRIPLE TALAQ BILL

The much talked-about Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Marriage) Bill, which seeks to criminalise the practice of instant triple talaq (or 'talaq-e-biddat'), is being discussed in LS.

Highlights

The Bill seeks to prohibit "any pronouncement (of divorce) by a person upon his wife by words, either spoken or written or in electronic form, or in any other manner".

- The proposed law seeks to make triple talaq a punishable offence and describes the practice as against "constitutional morality" and "gender equity". Anyone who pronounces instant divorce "shall be punished with imprisonment for a term which may extend to three years and a fine", the bill proposes.
- As per the provisions of the Bill, the husband could also be fined and the quantum of fine would be decided by the magistrate hearing the case.
- The proposed law will be applicable only to instant triple talaq and will empower the victim to approach a magistrate seeking "subsistence allowance" for herself and minor children.
- The woman can also seek the custody of her minor children from the magistrate who will take a final call on the issue.

Background:

The Supreme Court had termed the practice of instant triple talaq unconstitutional while considering a petition to that effect. The then CJI J S Khehar had directed the government to bring in a legislation in this regard.

Opposition: Several Muslim clerics and Muslim organisations have opposed the Bill, terming the government's stand as "uncalled for interference" in the personal laws of the community.

THE PREVENTION OF TORTURE BILL, 2017

Why in news?

The Prevention of Torture Bill, 2017 has been introduced in the Parliament as a private member's bill. Private members' bills can be

introduced by any member of Parliament who is not a minister but seldom get enacted.

Highlights of the Bill:

- The Bill proposes at least three years of imprisonment for a public servant who inflicts torture on anybody for a confession or even for information that may lead to the detection of an offence. The punishment could be extended to ten years.
- A public servant who intentionally does any act to cause grievous harm to somebody, even if in police custody, shall be punished.

Significance of this move:

India is one of only eight countries out of 170 signatories to the United Nations convention against torture and other inhuman treatment or punishment yet to ratify it.

The proposed legislation fulfils India's commitment, as confirmed to the United Nations, that "torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment" are prohibited and constitute serious violations of human rights. The report of the Law Commission on "Custodial Crimes" had also recommended changes to the law to make torture punishable.

THE REPRESENTATION OF THE PEOPLE (AMENDMENT) BILL OF 2017

Why in news?

The Representation of the People (Amendment) Bill of 2017 has been introduced by the government in the Parliament.

Highlights of the Bill:

The Bill proposes to allow non-resident Indians (NRIs) to emerge as a decisive force in the country's electoral politics on their own terms. The amendment paves the way to remove an "unreasonable restriction" posed by Section 20A of the Representation of the People Act, which requires

overseas electors to be physically present in their electoral constituencies to cast their votes.

Significance of this move:

If the Bill is passed, overseas voters can appoint a proxy to cast their votes on their behalf, subject to certain conditions to be laid down in the Conduct of Election Rules, 1961. This would considerably mitigate the difficulties presently faced by overseas electors in exercising their franchise.

GOVERNANCE ISSUES AND POLICIES

IMMOVABLE PROPERTY (AMENDMENT) BILL

The Requisitioning and Acquisition of Immovable Property Act empowers the central government to requisition any immovable property and also to acquire them under certain specified conditions.

Why in news?

Lok Sabha has passed the Immovable Property (Amendment) Bill. The Bill amends the regulations governing compensation payable for acquisition of immovable property by the Centre for defence and security purposes.

Highlights

- The Requisitioning and Acquisition of Immovable Property (Amendment) Bill 2017 amends the original 1952 Act to allow the Centre to reissue the acquisition notice in case the property's owner wants to be given a hearing.
- As per the amendment, the compensation rates that will be payable will be fixed at the date of publication of the first notice in addition to an interest.
- The amended bill is aimed at addressing cases where the property owner is able, after prolonged litigation, to get the acquisition notice quashed in the court so as to be given a hearing.

WELFARE SCHEMES AND DEVELOPMENTAL GROUPS

THE TRAFFICKING OF PERSONS (PREVENTION, PROTECTION AND REHABILITATION) BILL 2017

The Trafficking of Persons (Prevention, Protection and Rehabilitation) Bill 2017, initiated by the women & child development ministry, is currently with a group of ministers (GoM) that will take a final view on the matter. The Bill has proposed severe punishment for those engaging in the heinous crime.

Highlights of the Bill:

Forms of trafficking:

➢ The Bill identifies various forms of trafficking, including for the purposes of bonded labour, sexual exploitation, pornography, removal of organs and begging.
➢ Listing out the 'aggravated forms of trafficking', the bill also speaks of offences such as intimidation, inducement, promise of payment of money, deception or coercion.
➢ It mentions trafficking after administering any drug or alcohol or for the purpose of marriage or under the pretext of marriage.

Punishment:

➢ Whoever commits the offence of aggravated form of trafficking of a person shall be punished with rigorous imprisonment for a term which shall not be less than 10 years, but which may extend to life imprisonment and shall be liable to fine that shall not be less than Rs 1 lakh.
➢ For repeat offenders, it suggests imprisonment for life "which shall mean imprisonment for the remainder of that person's natural life", apart from a fine that will not be less than Rs 2 lakh.

Anti- trafficking bureau:

The bill proposes the establishment of a national anti-trafficking bureau, which shall be entrusted with the gamut of issues aimed at controlling and tackling the menace under various forms.

Functions of the Bureau:

➢ Coordination, monitoring and surveillance of illegal movement of persons and prevention.
➢ The bureau will also be entrusted with increasing cooperation with authorities in foreign countries for boosting operational and long-term intelligence for investigation of trafficking cases, and driving in mutual legal assistance.

State level measures:

The bill also aims at having state-level anti-trafficking officers who shall also provide relief and rehabilitation services through district units and other civil-society organisations.

Relief and rehabilitation:

The bill also spells out measures towards relief and rehabilitation for the victims of trafficking, and seeks the formation of a committee for this purpose.

The committee is proposed to be headed by the women & child development secretary and would have members from the several other ministries.

STRIVE PROJECT

Why in news?

A Financing Agreement for IDA Credit of USD 125 million (equivalent) for the "Skills Strengthening for Industrial Value Enhancement Operation (STRIVE) Project" was recently signed by the Government of India with the World Bank.

Objective: To improve access to quality and market-driven vocational training provided in it is and apprenticeships.

What is STRIVE?

STRIVE is an outcome focused scheme marking shift in government's implementation strategy in vocational education and training from inputs to results. STRIVE will focus to improve on the quality and the market relevance of vocational training provided in ITIs and strengthen the apprenticeship programme through industry-cluster approach.

The result areas for the project include Improved Performance of Industrial Training Institutes; Increased Capacities of State Governments to Support Industrial Training Institutes and Apprenticeship Training; Improved Teaching and Learning; and Improved and Broadened Apprenticeship Training.

NATIONAL SERVICE SCHEME

Why in news?

The President Shri Ram Nath Kovind recently presented National Service Scheme Awards 2016-17.

Objective: To recognize and reward outstanding contributions towards voluntary community service made by the Universities/ Senior Secondary (+2) Councils, NSS Units/ Programme Officers and NSS Volunteers, with a view to further promote NSS.

What is the scheme about?

NSS is a Centrally Sector Scheme. The primary objective is of developing the personality and character of the student youth through voluntary community service. The ideological orientation of the NSS is inspired by the ideals of Mahatma Gandhi. Very appropriately, the motto of NSS is "NOT ME, BUT YOU".

Programme Structure:

NSS is being implemented in Senior Secondary Schools, Colleges and Universities. The design of the NSS envisages that each educational institution covered under the Scheme has at least one NSS. Each NSS unit adopts a village or slum for taking up its activities.

INDIA AND ITS INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

INDIA-SWISS DEAL ON DATA SHARING

Why in news?

In a move aimed at combating black money stashed abroad, India has signed an agreement with Switzerland that would allow automatic sharing of tax- related information. So far, India had to ask Switzerland for specific bits of information by proving that a valid inquiry was on against the account holder. The Swiss could delay or deny the information altogether.

Significance

Confidentiality and data protection requirements are to be strictly followed under the automatic information exchange framework. This process ensures the signatory always maintains control over its exchange partners and the treatment of the data exchanged, as per OECD. The automatic exchange of information will also discourage Indians from stashing black money in Swiss banks. Indian deposits in Swiss banks have been falling already.

What necessitated this move?

Switzerland, which has always been at the centre of the debate on black money allegedly stashed by Indians abroad, used to be known for very strong secrecy walls till a few years ago around its banking practices. A huge global pressure has resulted in Switzerland relenting on the tough secrecy clauses its local laws gave to the banks.

Possible outcome : Though the deal will do little by way of bringing back black money from Swiss accounts, it will have a deterrent effect. The black money hoarders will be under pressure with one big safe haven gone off their list.

RESTORING NORMALCY IN RAKHINE

Why in news?

India will provide Myanmar with $25 million for development projects including prefabricated houses in troubled Rakhine state to enable the return of Rohingya Muslims who have fled the area. A memorandum of understanding to support development of Rakhine and help create jobs was recently signed.

Significance

This support is intended to help the Government of Myanmar achieve its objective of restoration of normalcy in Rakhine State and enable the return of displaced persons. Besides housing, the proposals include building schools, healthcare facilities and building bridges and roads.

India has been trying to promote economic cooperation with Myanmar to try to push back against China's expansive involvement in infrastructure development across south Asia. Beijing has also stepped into the Rohingya crisis and proposed a three-phase plan including a ceasefire, bilateral talks and then tackling poverty long-term.

Backgrounder:

More than 600,000 Rohingya have escaped to Bangladesh after attacks by insurgents on Myanmar security forces in August triggered a military crackdown that the United Nations has called ethnic cleansing. The international community demands the Rohingya be allowed to go home in safety, and Bangladesh and Myanmar have begun talks on repatriation, but huge doubts remain about the Rohingya ever being able to return in peace to rebuild homes and till fields.

India, which is concerned about the influx of the refugees into its territory, has stressed economic development of the Rakhine region as a way to help lower tensions.

REGIONAL COMPREHENSIVE ECONOMIC PARTNERSHIP (RCEP)

In a sign that India's Free Trade Agreement (FTA) negotiations could slow further, the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) has taken a strong stand that the country should restrain itself from concluding any such pact from which it would not gain in the medium term. A lot of India's free trade agreements have not served as well as they could have.

The statement is significant coming ahead of the ASEAN-India commemorative summit where the issue of the long-delayed Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) will likely take centre stage.

What you need to know about RCEP?

RCEP is proposed between the ten member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) (Brunei, Burma (Myanmar), Cambodia,

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Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam) and the six states with which ASEAN has existing FTAs (Australia, China, India, Japan, South Korea and New Zealand).

RCEP is viewed as an alternative to the TPP trade agreement, which includes the United States but excludes China.

Concerns associated with RCEP:

Emphasis of RCEP is on trade in goods and the same enthusiasm is not shared for trade in services, which is a big challenge for India. While there is immense pressure on India in the RCEP negotiations to commit to opening up (90%) of its traded goods, what is troubling the government is the fact that other RCEP countries have so far been lukewarm to India's demands for greater market access in services, particularly on easing norms on the movement of professionals and skilled workers across borders for short-term work.

India, which is defensive regarding opening up its goods sector, is currently virtually isolated in the RCEP talks. Also, existing huge goods trade deficit has led to questions on whether the pact is only helping ASEAN nations and not benefiting India.

What needs to be done?

India's FTA strategy has to be guided by the 'Make In India' initiative that aims to boost domestic manufacturing and job creation within India. In return for greater market access in goods, India, with its large pool of skilled workers and professionals, should try to use the RCEP to gain on the services side, by securing commitments from the other nations to mutually ease norms on movement of such people across borders for short-term work.

Though larger FTAs are important for getting preferential access to the markets, it is important to be cautious about the manner in which such arrangements work out in respect of India's imports as well as on the country's efforts to increase the share of manufacturing sector in the economy.

INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

GAMING DISORDER AS MENTAL HEALTH CONDITION IN 2018

In the draft of its forthcoming 11th International Classification of Diseases, the World Health Organization includes "gaming disorder" in its list of mental health conditions. The new ICD-11 entry on gaming disorder "includes only a clinical description and not prevention and treatment options."

What is gaming disorder?

The WHO defines the disorder as a "persistent or recurrent" behavior pattern of "sufficient severity to result in significant impairment in personal, family, social, educational, occupational or other important areas of functioning." The disorder is characterized by "impaired control" with increasing priority given to gaming and "escalation," despite "negative consequences."

About International Classification of Diseases:

ICD is the "basis for identification of health trends and statistics globally and the international standard for reporting diseases and health conditions. It is used by medical practitioners around the world to diagnose conditions and by researchers to categorize conditions." The WHO's ICD lists both mental and physical disorders.

UN IMPOSES NEW SANCTIONS ON NORTH KOREA

The UN Security Council has unanimously voted to impose tough new sanctions on North Korea in response to Pyongyang's latest missile test. The restrictions, proposed by the US, are designed to prevent Pyongyang from furthering its nuclear programme. The move was a "significant ramping up" of sanctions against North Korea.

The sanctions:

The sanctions include a ban on nearly 90% of refined petroleum exports to North Korea. The resolution also orders North Koreans who work abroad to return to the country within 24 months.

The resolution also contains a commitment to the resumption of "six-party talks", leaving the door open for possible diplomatic negotiations to find a peaceful solution to security concerns in the Korean Peninsula. They involve North Korea, South Korea and the US, along with regional powers China, Japan and Russia. The last six-party talks were held in 2009.

Intentions behind this move:

The idea is to squeeze North Korea as tightly as possible to reduce its income, reduce its revenues, and in that way hopefully drive it to the negotiating table and also for it to stop its missile development process.

What necessitated this move?

North Korean leader Kim Jong-un's government has conducted several missile tests this year, which have drawn condemnation from the international community. Recently, in November 2017, it had successfully conducted a new intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) capable of reaching the US mainland. The missile is said to be the "most powerful ICBM" yet to be tested by the country. It was the third test of an ICBM by North Korea this year.

North Korea's reaction:

It described the latest UN sanctions "as a violent breach of our republic's sovereignty and an act of war that destroys the peace and stability of the Korean peninsula and a wide region.

THE STATE OF THE WORLD'S CHILDREN REPORT, 2017

Published by: UNICEF

Theme: "Children in a digital world"

Highlights

With less than one-third of India's internet users being females, the country's girls and women risk becoming further marginalised in society and at home if they remain digitally illiterate in the backdrop of the

country making a public push towards a more digital economy. However, globally, 12% more men than women used the internet in 2017.

> Digital divides can mirror broader societal divides — between rich and poor, cities and rural areas, between those with or without an education — and between women and men. India is one place in which the digital divide highlights society's deep chasms.

Causes for digital gender divide:

Digital gender divide is caused by a number of factors — social norms, education levels, lack of technical literacy and lack of confidence among them — but is often rooted in parents' concern for the safety of their daughters. Many fear that allowing girls to use the internet will lead to liaisons with men, bringing shame on the family.

In a society that is still largely patriarchal, for girls, traits like deference and obedience are often valued over intelligence and curiosity. In some households, technology is not seen as necessary or beneficial for girls and women.

Why bridging of digital gender gap is necessary?

If girls and women remain digitally illiterate, they risk becoming further marginalised in society and at home. Therefore, bridging gender gap is necessary. Besides, digital connection and literacy offer advantages in a knowledge-based society, improving children's lives and their future earning potential.

GENERAL STUDIES-3

INDIAN ECONOMY

FSDC

Why in news?

Finance Minister will chair pre-Budget consultation meeting with financial sector regulators and take stock of the economic situation. Apart from offering proposals for the Union Budget 2018 -19, the FSDC would also review the measures taken by the government and the RBI for dealing with the stressed assets and initiation of insolvency action against defaulting promoters.

About FSDC:

The Financial Stability and Development Council (FSDC) was constituted in 2010.

- ➢ The Council is chaired by the Union Finance Minister
- ➢ Its members are Governor, Reserve Bank of India; Finance Secretary and/or Secretary, Department of Economic Affairs; Secretary, Department of Financial Services; Chief Economic Adviser, Ministry of Finance; Chairman, Securities and Exchange Board of India; Chairman, Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority and Chairman, Pension Fund Regulatory and Development Authority.

Functions

The Council deals, inter-alia, with issues relating to financial stability, financial sector development, inter–regulatory coordination, financial literacy, financial inclusion and macro prudential supervision of the economy including the functioning of large financial conglomerates.

- ➢ No funds are separately allocated to the Council for undertaking its activities.

PUBLIC FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT SYSTEM (PFMS)

The home ministry has directed all NGOs, business entities and individuals who receive funds from abroad to open accounts in any of the 32 designated banks, including one foreign, within a month for higher level of transparency. It also asked them to ensure that such funds are not utilised for activities detrimental to the national interest.

The directive to the NGOs, companies and individuals to open foreign contribution accounts in banks, which are integrated with the central government's Public Financial Management System (PFMS), came for providing a higher level of transparency and hassle-free reporting compliance.

Background:

The Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act 2010 provides for the regulation of acceptance of the foreign funds or foreign hospitality by certain individuals, associations, organisations and companies "to ensure that such contributions or hospitality is not being utilised for the activities detrimental to the national interest".

About PFMS:

The PFMS, which functions under the Controller General of Accounts in the Ministry of Finance, provides a financial management platform for all plan schemes, a database of all recipient agencies, integration with core banking solution of banks handling plan funds, integration with state treasuries and efficient and effective tracking of fund flow to the lowest level of implementation for plan scheme of the government.

Significance of PFMS:

Introduction of the PFMS resulted in effectiveness and economy in public finance management through better cash management for government transparency in public expenditure and real-time information on resource availability and utilisation across schemes. It also resulted in improved programme administration and management, reduction of float in the system, direct payment to beneficiaries and greater transparency and accountability in the use of public funds.

SPECIAL ECONOMIC ZONE (SEZ)

Why in news?

A commerce ministry-appointed panel has suggested few changes in the existing SEZ rules. In order to align the SEZ rules 2006 with the GST (Goods and Services Tax) laws as well as for removal of various difficulties

faced, the committee was constituted by the ministry to make necessary recommendations.

Proposed changes:

- The Board of Approval (BoA), the highest decision making body for SEZs, should be given additional powers to exempt units and developers from certain rules to promote these zones.
- The other suggestions include submission of GST registration certificate instead of sales tax registration. It also provides for obtaining national security clearance as per guidelines issued by the home affairs ministry.
- The committee has also sought the establishment of a SEZ Rules Interpretation Committee to help in ease of operations, as well as suggestions to reduce paper work for developing SEZ units.

What is a SEZ?

A Special Economic Zone (SEZ) is a geographical region that has economic laws more liberal than a country's typical economic laws. They are established with an aim to purport development , promote rapid economic growth by providing tax and business incentives for attracting foreign technology along with investment. These are not merely SEZ's but may be called as "favorite Investment destinations" for foreign establishments. Such units would be future sources of employment, hubs of latest technologies and equipped with the best infrastructure.

ALL ABOUT FRDI BILL, 2017

Status of the bill

The Financial Resolution and Deposit Insurance Bill, 2017 (FRDI Bill), introduced in the Lok Sabha in August, 2017, is under consideration of the Joint Committee of the Parliament.

Concerns

Certain misgivings have been expressed in the media regarding "bail-in" provisions of the FRDI Bill. The Government has said, FRDI Bill is far more depositor friendly than many other jurisdictions, which provide for statutory bail-in, where consent of creditors or depositors is not required for bail-in.

The finance ministry has clarified that the FRDI Bill does not take away from the government's implicit guarantee to depositors. They provide additional protections to the depositors in a more transparent manner.

The Financial Resolution and Deposit Insurance Bill, 2017

1. Resolution Corporation:

- It would replace the currently existing Deposit Insurance and Credit Guarantee Corporation (DICGC) which is now an arm of the RBI.
- It would monitor financial firms, anticipate risk of failure, take corrective action, and resolve them in case of such failure.
- The Corporation will also provide deposit insurance up to a certain limit, in case of bank failure.

2. Classification financial firms

- The Resolution Corporation or the appropriate financial sector regulator may classify financial firms under five categories, based on their risk of failure.
- These categories in the order of increasing risk are: (i) low, (ii) moderate, (iii) material, (iv) imminent, (v) critical.

3. Taking over the management

- The Resolution Corporation will take over the management of a financial firm once it is classified as 'critical'. It will resolve the firm within one year.

4. Resolution methods

- Resolution may be undertaken using methods including: (i) merger or acquisition, (ii) transferring the assets, liabilities and management to a temporary firm, or (iii) liquidation.
- If resolution is not completed within a maximum period of two years, the firm will be liquidated.

- The Bill also specifies the order of distributing liquidation proceeds.

How does it work?

In case of a bank failure, the proposed corporation will provide deposit insurance up to a certain limit, which has not been specified. Currently, bank deposits of up to Rs 1 lakh are insured but there are few banks that have failed in India in recent years as the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has stepped in to work out a resolution plan without creating any risk for depositors.

1. The bill has suggested that the use of the 'bail-in' provision may result in cancellation of a liability, which could extend to bank deposits or could lead to modification of the terms or changing the form of the asset class. This provision would be last in the line for payments in case of liquidation.
2. The deposit insurance scheme currently covers all banks, commercial, regional rural and co-operative banks. The RBI which has been in charge of bank liquidations or resolutions will also no longer be in charge.
3. Once a financial services company, including a bank, slips into critical category, the resolution corporation will take over the firm and prepare a resolution plan during a year, which can be extended by another 12 months.

The plan has generated a lot of heat with bank unions as well as political parties criticising the move that has the potential to use deposits, beyond the insured amount, for reviving the bank.

Benefits

The government believes that the bill seeks to protect customers of financial service providers in times of financial distress and also help encourage discipline among the financial service providers by putting a limit on the use of public money to bail out distressed entities. It also seeks to decrease the time and costs involved in resolving distressed financial entities.

PROMPT CORRECTIVE ACTION (PCA)

Why in news?

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has once again clarified that prompt correction action (PCA) is imposed to encourage banks to improve their financial health. The reiteration comes in the wake of rumours on social media that some of the banks that are under PCA could be closed down.

What is PCA?

PCA norms allow the regulator to place certain restrictions such as halting branch expansion and stopping dividend payment. It can even cap a bank's lending limit to one entity or sector. Other corrective action that can be imposed on banks include special audit, restructuring operations and activation of recovery plan. Banks' promoters can be asked to bring in new management, too. The RBI can also supersede the bank's board, under PCA.

When is PCA invoked?

The PCA is invoked when certain risk thresholds are breached. There are three risk thresholds which are based on certain levels of asset quality, profitability, capital and the like. The third such threshold, which is maximum tolerance limit, sets net NPA at over 12% and negative return on assets for four consecutive years.

What are the types of sanctions?

There are two type of restrictions, mandatory and discretionary. Restrictions on dividend, branch expansion, directors compensation, are mandatory while discretionary restrictions could include curbs on lending and deposit. In the cases of two banks where PCA was invoked after the revised guidelines were issued — IDBI Bank and UCO Bank — only mandatory restrictions were imposed.

What will a bank do if PCA is triggered?

Banks are not allowed to renew or access costly deposits or take steps to increase their fee-based income. Banks will also have to launch a special drive to reduce the stock of NPAs and contain generation of fresh NPAs. They will also not be allowed to enter into new lines of business. RBI will also impose restrictions on the bank on borrowings from interbank market.

DARPAN PROJECT

DARPAN – "Digital Advancement of Rural Post Office for A New India" Project has been launched to improve the quality of service, add value to services and achieve "financial inclusion" of un-banked rural population.

Goal: To provide a low power technology solution to each Branch Postmaster (BPM) which will enable Branch Post Offices (BOs) to improve the level of services being offered to rural customers across all the states.

Significance of the project:

The Project shall increase the rural reach of the Department of Posts and enable BOs to increase traffic of all financial remittances, savings accounts, Rural Postal Life Insurance, and Cash Certificates; improve mail operations processes by allowing for automated booking and delivery of accountable article; increase revenue using retail post business; provide third party applications; and make disbursements for social security schemes such as MGNREGS.

SAMEEP

Launched by: External Affairs Ministry

SAMEEP – 'Students and MEA Engagement Programme'

Objective: To take Indian foreign policy and its global engagements to students across the country.

Under this programme, all the ministry officers – under-secretary and above – will be asked to go to their hometowns, particularly their alma maters. They will be expected to interact with the students about the way the MEA works, basic elements of its policies, how diplomacy is conducted, and generally give students an idea of what a career in the MEA would look like.

- The agenda of the programme is not only to make students interested and aware of India's place in the world and its global

ambitions, but also to drive interest in diplomacy as a career option.

NATIONAL COMPANY LAW TRIBUNAL (NCLT)

Why in news? Since the National Company Law Tribunal (NCLT) was set up in 2016, over 4,300 cases have been filed at its various benches for resolution process, according to the Reserve Bank data.

What is it?

National Company Law Tribunal (NCLT) is a quasi-judicial body that will govern the companies in India. It was established under the Companies Act, 2013 and is a successor body of the Company Law Board.

Powers:

NCLT will have the same powers as assigned to the erstwhile Company Law Board (which are mostly related to dealing with oppression and mismanagement), Board for Industrial and Financial Reconstruction (BIFR)(revival of sick companies) and powers related to winding up of companies (which was available only with the High Courts).

INDUSTRY, INFRASTRUCTURE AND INVESTMENT

THE INDIAN INSTITUTE OF PETROLEUM AND ENERGY BILL, 2017

The Parliament has passed the Indian Institute of Petroleum and Energy Bill, 2017.

Highlights of the Bill:

- ✓ The Bill establishes the Indian Institute of Petroleum and Energy, Vishakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh.
- ✓ It declares the Institute as an institution of national importance.
- ✓ The Institute aims to provide high quality education and research focussing on the themes of petroleum, hydrocarbons and energy.

✓ The key authorities of the Institute are as follows: (i) the General Council; (ii) the Board of Governors; (iii) the Senate; and (iv) any other authorities declared by the statutes.
✓ The President of the Board of governors to be appointed by the central government
✓ Powers of the Board of Governors include instituting courses of study and laying down standards of proficiency and other academic distinctions, fixing fees and other charges.
✓ The Council will comprise up to 20 members including the Secretary, Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas (Chairman)
✓ The powers of the Council include reviewing the broad policies and programmes of the Institute and advising the Board and suggesting improvements in fiscal management of the Institute.

**Funding:** The Institute will be required to maintain a fund which will be credited with the funds that it receives from the central government, fees and money received from any other sources (grants and gifts). The accounts of the Institute shall be audited by the Comptroller and Auditor-General of India.

BHARATIYA NIRDESHAK DRAVYA (BND-4201)

It is India's first home-grown high purity gold reference standard. It is the reference material for gold of '9999' fineness (gold that is 99.99% pure). It will be beneficial to the consumers and public at large to ensure purity of gold.

**Benefits of the new standard:**

Once the BND's of other purity gold are made available in the market, jewellers will move towards more instrumental methods rather than the conventional fire assay methods for testing, which are not only time consuming but also not environment friendly as poisonous gases are released.

Gold reference standard is indispensable in gold and jewellery hall marking. This will also be useful for Collection and Purity Testing Centres to certify the purity of gold deposits under the gold monetisation scheme.

KIMBERLEY PROCESS

Why in news?

The KP Plenary Session is being held at Brisbane, Australia. In one of the landmark decisions favoring India's leading position in Diamonds globally, India was appointed as the Kimberly Process (KP) Vice Chair for 2018 & Chair for 2019 in the last plenary held in Dubai in November, 2016. The EU will be KP Chair for 2018.

What is the Kimberley Process?

The Kimberley Process is an international certification scheme that regulates trade in rough diamonds. It aims to prevent the flow of conflict diamonds, while helping to protect legitimate trade in rough diamonds.

- ✓ The Kimberley Process Certification Scheme (KPCS) outlines the rules that govern the trade in rough diamonds. The KPCS has developed a set of minimum requirements that each participant must meet.
- ✓ The KP is not, strictly speaking, an international organisation: it has no permanent offices or permanent staff.
- ✓ It relies on the contributions – under the principle of 'burden-sharing' – of participants, supported by industry and civil society observers.
- ✓ Neither can the KP be considered as an international agreement from a legal perspective, as it is implemented through the national legislations of its participants.

What are Conflict diamonds?

"Conflict Diamonds" means rough diamonds used by rebel movements or their allies to finance conflict aimed at undermining legitimate governments. It is also described in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions.

Who is involved?

The Kimberley Process (KP) is open to all countries that are willing and able to implement its requirements. The KP has 54 participants, with the European Union and its Member States counting as a single participant. KP

members account for approximately 99.8% of the global production of rough diamonds.

NATIONAL HIGHWAYS INVESTMENT PROMOTION CELL (NHIPC)

Why in news?

The National Highways Authority of India has created a National Highways Investment Promotion Cell (NHIPC) for attracting domestic and foreign investment for highways projects.

NHIPC:

The cell will focus on engaging with global institution investors, construction companies, developers and fund managers for building investor participation in road infrastructure projects.

- ➢ The NHIPC will be working in close co-ordination with various connected Ministries and Departments of Government of India, State Governments, Apex Business Chambers like CII, FICCI, ASSOCHAM, and InvestIndia etc.
- ➢ NHIPC will also work in close co-ordination with Foreign Embassies and Missions in India and Indian Embassies and Missions situated in foreign countries.

Backgrounder:

The Government has set an ambitious target of construction of 35,000 km. of National Highways in the next five years under 'Bharatmala Pariyojana'. Given the scale of investment required, both foreign and domestic investment from public and private sector is pivotal.

PARE HYDROELECTRIC PLANT

Why in news?

A Loan agreement and a Guarantee agreement for providing additional funding has been signed for the project 'Pare Hydroelectric Plant' under Indo-German Bilateral Development Cooperation.

What is it?

The Pare Hydro Electric Project is planned as a run-of-the-river scheme on the Dikrong River in the Papumpare District of Arunachal Pradesh.

The broad objective of the project is generation of hydroelectric power for socio-economic development of the North Eastern Region.

The purpose of the project is efficient and ecological friendly generation of electric power. This will contribute to the economic efficient generation of power, growth in the North East region and protection of global climate.

Dikrong

The Dikrong is one of the major north bank tributaries of the river Brahmaputra, which originates from the lesser Himalayan ranges in Arunachal Pradesh.

INDIA'S FIRST NATIONAL RAIL AND TRANSPORTATION UNIVERSITY

Why in news?

The Union Cabinet has approved the Ministry of Railways' transformative initiative to set up the first ever National Rail and Transport University (NRTU) in Vadodara to skill its human resources and build capability. This innovative idea will be a catalyst for transformation of rail and transport sector towards New India.

Details

- The University will be set up as a Deemed to Be University under de novo category as per the UGC [Institutions Deemed to be Universities] Regulations, 2016.

- A not-for-profit Company under the Companies Act, 2013 will be created by the Ministry of Railways which shall be the Managing Company of the proposed university.
- The company will provide financial and infrastructural support to the university, and appoint Chancellor and Pro-Chancellor of the university.
- The funding of the new University/Institute is to entirely come from Ministry of Railways.

Significance

The university plans to use latest pedagogy and technology applications (satellite based tracking, Radio Frequency Identification and Artificial Intelligence) to improve on-the-job performance and productivity. Close collaboration with the Indian Railways will ensure that the stakeholders have access to Railways' facilities, which will work as 'live labs' and they will be able to work on solving real life problems. It will have 'Centres of Excellence' showcasing high-end, niche technology like High Speed Train.

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

INDIA'S FIRST POD TAXI

Why in news?

The much-awaited India's first pod taxi project- also known as Personal Rapid Transit (PRT)- has moved a step closer to reality after a high-level panel recommended inviting fresh bids for the same conforming to the strictest safety standards on the lines of those prescribed by an American body.

About the project:

This pilot project will cover a stretch of 13 kilometres from the Gurugram-Delhi border. The feasibility report for the same has been submitted by the National Highway Authority of India (NHAI). Every pod of Metrino taxi can accommodate up to five passengers.

What is Personal rapid transit (PRT) network?

Sized for individual or small group travel, personal rapid transit (PRT) is a transport mode combining small automated vehicles, known as pods, operating on a network of specially built guideways. The network consists of a number of stations or stops for passengers to get on and get off. The average speed of the pods is 60 kilometres per hour.

LIDAR DEVICES TO MONITOR AIR POLLUTION

The Central Pollution Control Board is planning to use advanced LiDAR (Light Detection and Ranging) devices to vertically monitor the air quality of Delhi-NCR. The agency is currently focusing on strengthening its surface-level monitoring network, however, in 'later stages', vertical monitoring will also be taken up.

What is LIDAR?

LIDAR is a remote sensing method that uses light in the form of a pulsed laser to measure ranges (variable distances) to the Earth. These light pulses—combined with other data recorded by the airborne system—generate precise, three-dimensional information about the shape of the Earth and its surface characteristics.

Types: Two types of LIDAR are topographic and bathymetric. Topographic LIDAR typically uses a near-infrared laser to map the land, while bathymetric lidar uses water-penetrating green light to also measure seafloor and riverbed elevations.

Applications: LIDAR systems allow scientists and mapping professionals to examine both natural and manmade environments with accuracy, precision, and flexibility. Scientists are using LIDAR also to produce more accurate shoreline maps, make digital elevation models for use in geographic information systems, to assist in emergency response operations, and in many other applications.

INDIA TO HAVE ITS OWN GRAVITATIONAL WAVE DETECTOR IN 2025

A new LIGO gravitational wave detector to measure ripples in the fabric of space and time is set to be built in India by 2025, in collaboration with universities from across the globe. The new Laser Interferometer

Gravitational-Wave Observatory (LIGO) detector will add to the two already operational in the US.

Significance : A third LIGO detector will help pinpoint the origin of the gravitational waves that are detected in future.

The LIGO detectors discovered the first gravitational waves produced by two giant merging blackholes last year. The research won a Nobel Prize in Physics this year.

About LIGO:

The observatory, described as "the most precise measuring device ever built," is actually two facilities in Livingston, Louisiana, and Hanford, Washington. They were built and operated with funding from the National Science Foundation.

The project is led by scientists from the California Institute of Technology and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and is supported by an international consortium of scientists and institutions.

What are Gravitational Waves?

Gravitational waves are the ripples in the pond of spacetime. The gravity of large objects warps space and time, or "spacetime" as physicists call it, the way a bowling ball changes the shape of a trampoline as it rolls around on it. Smaller objects will move differently as a result – like marbles spiraling toward a bowling-ball-sized dent in a trampoline instead of sitting on a flat surface.

Why they are useful?

These waves will be particularly useful for studying black holes (the existence of which was first implied by Einstein's theory) and other dark objects, because they'll give scientists a bright beacon to search for even when objects don't emit actual light.

With this, mapping the abundance of black holes and frequency of their mergers could get a lot easier. Since they pass through matter without interacting with it, gravitational waves would come to Earth carrying undistorted information about their origin. They could also improve methods for estimating the distances to other galaxies.

Why it is difficult to detect these waves?

The reason that gravitational waves have been so difficult to detect is that their effects are tinier than tiny. In fact, the signals they produce are so small that scientists struggle to remove enough background noise to confirm them.
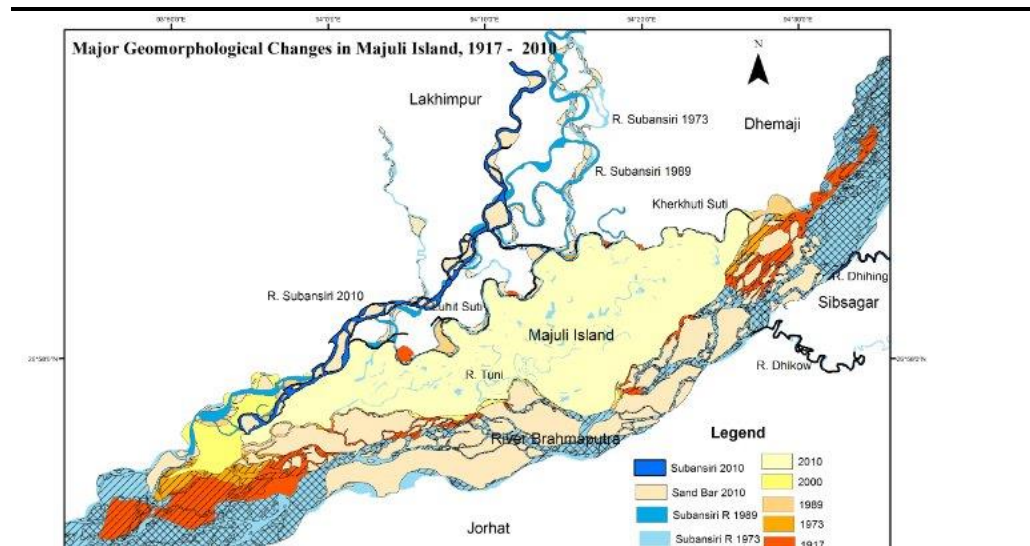
Einstein's prediction:

Albert Einstein predicted gravitational waves in his general theory of relativity a century ago. Under this theory, space and time are interwoven into something called "spacetime". Einstein predicted that mass warps space-time through its gravitational force.

When objects with mass accelerate, such as when two black holes spiral towards each other, they send waves along the curved space-time around them at the speed of light, like ripples on a pond. The more massive the object, the larger the wave and the easier for scientists to detect. Gravitational waves do not interact with matter and travel through the Universe completely unimpeded.

ENVIRONMENT

PROTECTION OF MAJULI ISLAND

A new scheme for protection of Majuli Island in Assam has been launched. The scheme protects the island from flood and erosion. The funding for the project would be from Ministry of DoNER.

Major Geomorphological Changes in Majuli Island, 1917 - 2010

Working of the scheme

The scheme has been framed by Brahmaputra Board based on the recommendations of the high level Expert Committee of the Government of India that visits the island at least twice a year to monitor and recommend anti-erosion measures.

Need for protection:

Geomorphologically, the entire Majuli island is a part of the alluvial flood plains of the Brahmaputra river. The Island is formed of soil consisting mainly of silt deposits. The soil is without cohesion and thus, susceptible to erosion. The problem of erosion has been severe after the disastrous earthquake of 1950. Although some measures were taken in the form of embankment and anti-erosion work by Government of Assam, the problem of erosion and flood remained mostly uncontained. The embankments built during the 60s were in poor condition.

About Majuli Island:

Majuli is the first island district of the country. The island is formed by the Brahmaputra river in the south and the Kherkutia Xuti, an anabranch of the Brahmaputra, joined by the Subansiri River in the north. Majuli is the nerve centre of neo-Vaishnavite.

Majuli Island was also declared the largest river island in the world, toppling Maraio in Brazil, by Guinness World Records in 2016.

REGIONAL PROJECT TO TACKLE STUBBLE BURNING

The problem of crop residue burning has been intensifying over the years, with Punjab, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh being the major burning hotspots. Increased mechanization, declining number of livestock, long period required for composting and no economically viable alternate use of residues are some of the reasons for residues being burnt in field. This not only has implications for global warming, but also has an adverse impact on air quality, soil health and human health.

About the project

In a significant step to combat climate change, the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change has approved a regional project on 'Climate Resilience Building among Farmers through Crop Residue Management' under the National Adaptation Fund for Climate Change (NAFCC).

Key facts:

- The first phase of the project has been approved for the States of Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan.
- The project not only aims to mitigate climate change impacts and enhance adaptive capacity, but will also counter the adverse environmental impacts that arise from burning.
- Initially, awareness generation and capacity building activities will be undertaken to encourage farmers to adopt alternate practices which would also help diversify livelihood options and enhance farmer's income.
- A slew of technological interventions will be undertaken for timely management of crop residue in addition to effective utilisation of existing machineries.

- Implementable and sustainable entrepreneurship models will be created in rural areas through upscaling successful initiatives and innovative ideas.

About the National Adaptation Fund for Climate Change (NAFCC):

The National Adaptation Fund for Climate Change (NAFCC) was established in 2015 to meet the cost of adaptation to climate change for the State and Union Territories of India that are particularly vulnerable to the adverse effects of climate change.

- The projects under NAFCC prioritizes the needs that builds climate resilience in the areas identified under the SAPCC (State Action Plan on Climate Change) and the relevant Missions under NAPCC (National Action Plan on Climate Change).
- NABARD has been designated as National Implementing Entity (NIE) for implementation of adaptation projects under NAFCC by Govt. of India.

Under this arrangement, NABARD would perform roles in facilitating identification of project ideas/concepts from State Action Plan for Climate Change (SAPCC), project formulation, appraisal, sanction, disbursement of fund, monitoring & evaluation and capacity building of stakeholders including State Governments.

100% ELECTRIC PUBLIC TRANSPORT THROUGH FAME II

The Centre is targeting a fully electric fleet for country's public transport, including buses, taxis and auto-rickshaws under the second phase of FAME India scheme. This move is mainly aimed at reducing pollution in the country.

Backgrounder:

The pilot phase or phase I of the Faster Adoption and Manufacturing of Hybrid and Electric vehicles in India (FAME India) was launched by the government in 2015, which expires on March 31, 2018. Thereafter, the phase II will be launched.

FAME India scheme:

With an aim to promote eco-friendly vehicles, the government had launched the Faster Adoption and Manufacturing of (Hybrid &) Electric Vehicles in India (FAME-India) scheme in 2015.

➢ It is being administered by the Heavy Industries Ministry.

- ➢ The FAME India Scheme is aimed at incentivising all vehicle segments, including two-wheelers, three wheeler auto, passenger four-wheeler vehicle, light commercial vehicles and buses.
- ➢ The scheme covers hybrid and electric technologies like a strong hybrid, plug-in hybrid and battery electric vehicles.
- ➢ FAME India is a part of the National Electric Mobility Mission Plan.

BLUE FLAG PROJECT

Launched by: Environment ministry

Objective: To enhance standards of cleanliness, upkeep and basic amenities at beaches. Under the project, each state or union territory has been asked to nominate a beach which will be funded through the ongoing Integrated Coastal Management Programme.

GANGA GRAM PROJECT

Launched by: Ministry of Drinking Water and Sanitation

About Ganga Gram project:

Launched under the Namami Gange Programme, Ganga Gram vision is an integrated approach for holistic development of villages situated on the banks of River Ganga with active participation of the villagers.

- ➢ These villages will set the bench mark of cleanliness and integrated effort of development. These will be converted into Ganga Grams by 31st December 2018.

> ➤ The objectives of Ganga Gram Project include solid and liquid waste management, renovation of ponds and water resources, water conservation projects, organic farming, horticulture, and promotion of medicinal plants.

NAMAMI GANGE PROGRAMME:

Namami Gange programme was launched as a mission to achieve the target of cleaning river Ganga in an effective manner with the unceasing involvement of all stakeholders, especially five major Ganga basin States – Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand, Bihar and West Bengal. The programme envisages: River Surface Cleaning, Sewerage Treatment Infrastructure, River Front Development, Bio-Diversity, Afforestation and Public Awareness

Implementation: National Mission for Clean Ganga (NMCG), and its state counterpart organizations i.e., State Program Management Groups (SPMGs).

Monitoring: A three-tier mechanism

   a) High level task force chaired by Cabinet Secretary assisted by NMCG at national level,
   b) State level committee chaired by Chief Secretary assisted by SPMG at state level and
   c) District level committee chaired by the District Magistrate.

The program emphasizes on improved coordination mechanisms between various Ministries/Agencies of Central and State governments.

ANTI-SMOG CANNON TO FIGHT AGAINST DELHI POLLUTION

Why in news?

With pollution levels in Delhi showing no signs of improvement and the city having smog as one of the main issues faced, the state government has introduced its latest weapon to combat the deadly smog.

What is Anti-smog gun?

Anti-smog gun, mounted on a vehicle, is a device that sprays atomised water into the atmosphere to reduce air pollution. The device could be

taken across the city to spray water to settle dust and other suspended particles.

The theory is that the sprayed water will cling on to the pollutants — particularly particulate matter PM2.5 and PM10 — and wash it down creating the effect of rain.

SECURITY CHALLENGES

SEEING THROUGH A GLASS DARKLY

Much has changed since November 26, 2008 terror attacks on multiple targets in Mumbai and terror has evolved into an even more dangerous phenomenon. Recent variants represent a paradigmatic change in the practice of violence. To deal with the terror threat, there must be far greater sharing of intelligence among agencies worldwide.

A different genre

It is difficult to recognise the new generation of terrorists as a mere extension of the earlier lot of radical Islamist terrorists. The new age terrorist seems to belong to an altogether different genre of terrorism.

Beginning with the attack on the Charlie Hebdo offices in Paris in 2015; the major incidents at Brussels and Istanbul Ataturk airports as well as the Bastille Day attack in France, all in 2016; to the string of attacks in London, Stockholm, Barcelona and New York, in 2017 are very different in structure and the morphology from attacks of an earlier period.

Islamic State, Standing out from the crowd

A large number of terror attacks in the past three years have been attributed to the handiwork of the Islamic State (IS).

- The IS's recruitment techniques, especially its ability to proselytise over the Internet, including "direct to home jihad" as also its more brutal brand of violence, set it apart from earlier variants of radical Islamist terror.

Even while the IS has gained a great deal of prominence due to its brand of violence, other terror networks such as al-Qaeda and its affiliates have continued to be no less active.

- The *Boko Haram (Nigeria)* in Africa has been responsible for more killings than most people would realise.
- The *Afghan Taliban and the Haqqani network* have carried out several spectacular attacks inside Afghanistan.
- The *Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)* and the *Lashkar-e-Jhangvi* have carried out several attacks inside Pakistan.
- Pakistan provides the wherewithal and the support to terror outfits such as the *Lashkar-e-Taiba* and the *Jaish-e-Mohammad* to launch well-planned attacks on Indian targets.
- *Al-Shabab(Somalia)* formalized ties with Al-Qaeda, became the international militant group's wing in the Horn of Africa.

Most of these outfits continue to adopt earlier methodologies. These have proved no less effective than those followed by the IS.

Incorrect perception on agencies of intelligence failure

It has become common practice to attack agencies of intelligence failure whenever a major terror attack takes place. This need not be the case in every instance. There are many other reasons for adequate intelligence not being available to prevent a terror attack.

Intelligence agencies are well-versed in the latest techniques of intelligence gathering:

- Agencies obtain vast amounts of information from both human and technical intelligence, not excluding signal intelligence and electronic intelligence, intelligence from satellites and photo reconnaissance, etc. This is apart from open source intelligence.
- Agencies employ data mining techniques and are familiar with pattern recognition software.
- Mapping and analysis of social networks is today a critical aspect of their work. This is especially useful when it comes to unearthing covert terror networks.

Many intelligence agencies today have an extensive database of several thousands of terrorists and potential terrorists.

What is the real problem?

Problems arise from inadequate sharing of intelligence across institutions and countries.

- The real problem is that when dealing with terrorism and terror networks, no two situations in the actual world are identical.
- The nature of threats is such that they continue to evolve all the time. Both the 2001 terror attack in New York and the November 2008 attack in Mumbai were one of a kind with few parallels at the time.

Anticipating an attack of this nature remains in the area of an "intelligence gap" rather than an "intelligence failure". An intelligence gap is one denoting an absence of intelligence output while an intelligence failure is one where, based on available evidence, no warning was issued.

Newer challenges faced by intelligence agencies

Anticipating newer threats is only partly facilitated by today's technical advances such as new computing and communication technologies. However, these alone are not often enough to meet today's intelligence needs.

As problems become more complicated, and as terror networks become even more sophisticated, there has to be recognition that the situation demands better understanding of factors that are at work.

SERIOUS FRAUD INVESTIGATION OFFICE (SFIO)

Why in news?

To detect financial frauds, the SFIO is in the process of developing an early warning system (EWS), and a consulting agency has been engaged to prepare the conceptual framework. In this regard, services of a consulting agency have been engaged to develop the conceptual framework.

About SFIO:

It is under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Corporate Affairs, Government of India. The SFIO is involved in major fraud probes and is the co-ordinating agency with the Income Tax and CBI.

- ➢ It is a multi-disciplinary organization having experts from financial sector, capital market, accountancy, forensic audit, taxation, law, information technology, company law, customs and investigation.
- ➢ These experts have been taken from various organizations like banks, Securities and Exchange Board of India, Comptroller and Auditor General and concerned organizations and departments of the Government.

Backgrounder:

The Government approved setting up of this organization on 9 January 2003 on the basis of the recommendations made by the Naresh Chandra Committee which was set up by the Government on 21 August 2002 on corporate governance.

NASEEM-AL-BAHR

It is a bilateral exercise between Indian Navy and Oman Navy.

- ➢ The exercise is also called as "Sea Breeze".
- ➢ The 11th edition of this exercise was held in Muscat.