

Weekly Current Affairs

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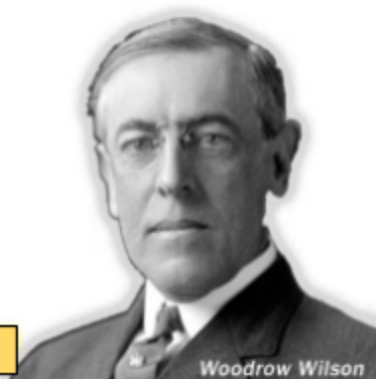
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NATIONAL



#1 Green Credit Scheme

- The Forest Advisory Committee, an apex body tasked with adjudicating requests by the industry to raze forest land for commercial ends, has approved a scheme that could allow “forests” to be traded as a commodity.
- If implemented, it allows the Forest Department to outsource one of its responsibilities of reforesting to non-government agencies.
- In the current system, industry needs to make good the loss of forest by finding appropriate non-forest land – equal to that which would be razed. Green Credit Scheme
- It also must pay the State Forest Department the current economic equivalent – called Net Present Value – of the forest land.

- It's then the Forest Department's responsibility to grow appropriate vegetation that, over time, would grow into forests.

Green Credit Scheme:

- The proposed 'Green Credit Scheme', as it is called, allows agencies – they could be private companies, village forest communities – to identify land and begin growing plantations.
- After three years, they would be eligible to be considered as compensatory forest land if they met the Forest Department's criteria.
- An industry needing forest land could then approach the agency and pay it for parcels of such forested land, and this would then be transferred to the Forest Department and be recorded as forest land.
- The participating agency will be free to trade its assets, that is plantation, in



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parcels, with project proponents who need forest land.

- This is not the first time that such a scheme has been mooted.
- In 2015, a 'Green Credit Scheme' for degraded forest land with public-private participation was recommended, but it was not approved by the Union Environment Minister, the final authority.

Individuals outside:

- The Forest Advisory Committee believes that such a scheme will encourage plantation by individuals outside the traditional forest area and will help in meeting international commitments such as sustainable development goals and nationally determined contributions.
- One of India's prongs to combat climate change is the Green India Mission that aims to sequester 2.523 billion tonnes of carbon by 2020-30, and this involves adding 30 million hectares in addition to existing forest.
- It does not solve the core problems of compensatory afforestation," Kanchi Kohli, who is with the Centre for Policy Research and investigates forest rights.

#2 Private property is a human right: Supreme Court

- The Supreme Court held in a judgment that a citizen's right to own private property is a fundamental right. The State cannot take possession of it without following due procedure and authority of law.

Key highlights of the ruling:

- The State cannot trespass into the private property of a citizen and then claim ownership of the land in the name of 'adverse possession.' Grabbing private land and then claiming it as its own makes the State an encroacher.
- In a welfare state, the right to property is a human right.

#3 Social media posting is a fundamental right

- The Tripura High Court has ordered that social media posting is a fundamental right.

Key highlights:

- In a landmark order, the Tripura High Court has ordered the police to refrain from prosecuting a man who was earlier arrested over a social media post. Chief Justice Akil Kureshi also barred the police from making any further arrests in connection with the case.
- The Chief Justice in his order remarked that posting on social media was tantamount to a "fundamental right" applicable to all citizens, including government employees.
- The Chief Justice passed the order after lawyers moved the court against the arrest of Youth Congress activist Arindam Bhattacharjee over his post on a social media platform. In compliance with the court's order, the police have now erased Sections 120(B) and 153(A) of the Indian

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Penal Code from the First Information Report.

#4 Coal sector reforms

- The government announced promulgation of the ordinance for amendment in the Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) (MMDR) Act, 1957 and the Coal Mines (Special Provisions) Act, 2015 in order to ease auction of coal mines, allow FDI and enhance ease of doing business.

Key highlights:

- The Union Cabinet had recently approved the amendments which intend to open up new areas of growth in the coal and mining sector.
- The amendments in the laws would offer unexplored and partially explored coal blocks for mining through prospecting license-cum-mining lease (PL-cum-ML).
- It will also lead to democratisation of the coal mining sector by opening it up to anyone willing to invest.
- The amendments will allow Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in the coal mining sector by removing the restriction and eligibility criteria for participation.
- Allowing successful bidder/allottee to utilise mined coal in any of the plant of its subsidiary or holding company Attracting large investment in coal mining sector as restrictions of end use has been dropped.

#5 Presumption of constitutionality

- The Supreme Court declined urgent hearing on a plea seeking to declare the Citizenship Amendment Act as constitutional and said that there was already a “presumption of constitutionality” to a law passed by Parliament.

About:

- The term ‘presumption of constitutionality’ is a legal principle that is used by courts during statutory interpretation – the process by which courts interpret and apply a law passed by the legislature, such as Parliament.
- It is the legal principle that the judiciary should presume statutes enacted by the legislature to be constitutional unless the law is clearly unconstitutional or a fundamental right is implicated.
- The presumption is not absolute, however, and does not stand when there is a gross violation of the Constitution. There are limitations to the doctrine.

#6 Explained: The laws being used to suspend Internet

- The Supreme Court declared that the fundamental right to freedom of speech and expression and the right to carry on trade or business using the Internet are constitutionally protected. This came in the backdrop of the five-month-long Internet shutdown in Kashmir.

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Background:

- The Information Technology Act, 2000, Section 144 of Criminal Procedure Code (CrPC), 1973 and the Telegraph Act, 1885 are the three laws that deal with the suspension of Internet services.
- In 2017, the central government notified the Temporary Suspension of Telecom Services (Public Emergency or Public Service) Rules under the Telegraph Act to govern suspension of the Internet. These Rules derive their powers from Section 5(2) of the Indian Telegraph Act.

Recent verdict:

- Although the court stopped short of ruling that access to the Internet is a fundamental right, it said that the Internet as a medium is used to exercise other fundamental rights.
- The court recognized that the 2017 Rules are the only procedure to be followed to suspend Internet services in the occurrence of a “public emergency” or for it to be “in the interest of public safety”.
- The verdict reiterated that the competent authority to issue an order under the Suspension Rules, in ordinary circumstances, would be the Secretary to the Ministry of Home Affairs.
- The Rules also say that in case the confirmation does not come from a competent authority, the orders shall cease to exist within a period of 24 hours.

#7 Senior Citizens Amendment Bill

- The Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens (Amendment) Bill, 2019 has been referred to the Standing Committee on Social Justice and Empowerment by the Lok Sabha Speaker. The bill was introduced in Lok Sabha in December 2019.

Key features of the bill:

- The definition of “children” and ‘parents’ has been expanded.
- The definition of ‘maintenance’ and ‘welfare’ has been expanded.
- The mode of submission of application for maintenance has been enlarged.
- The ceiling of Rs.10,000/- as maintenance amount has been removed.
- Preference to dispose of applications of senior citizens, above eighty years of age, early has been included.
- Registration of Senior Citizens Care Homes/Homecare Service Agencies etc. have been included.
- Minimum standards for senior citizen care homes have been included in the Bill.
- Appointment of Nodal Police Officers for Senior Citizens in every Police Station and District level Special Police Unit for Senior Citizens has been included.
- Maintenance of Helpline for senior citizens has been included.



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INTERNATIONAL



INTERNATIONAL Current Affairs

#1 Ethnic unity law

- The People's Congress of Tibet Saturday passed a law that makes ethnic unity in the region mandatory, reflecting the significant role that the autonomous Himalayan region plays in its economic and social development.
- These regulations will come into effect from May 1 and are meant to "strengthen ethnic unity".
- The law makes it clear that Tibet has been an inalienable part of China since ancient times and that it is the common responsibility of the people of all ethnic groups to safeguard national reunification and take a clear stand against separatism.

Ethnic Unity in China:

- This is not the first time that the phrase ethnic unity has been mentioned by China.

- In October 2019, the General Offices of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee published a guideline for enhancing ethnic unity, which stressed on efforts to improve the governance of ethnic affairs, guaranteeing the legal rights and interests of citizens of ethnic groups and cracking down on "criminal acts" that sabotage ethnic unity or cause ethnic separation, Xinhua Net reported at the time.
- Before this, in 2016, China began a campaign in the autonomous territory of Xinjiang to promote ethnic unity and called for people to respect the cultures of the minorities who call the region home.

Why is ethnic unity important?

- According to a paper published by The Jamestown Foundation, in China different ethnic groups and nationalities are considered to progress at different speeds



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towards the common goal of socialism and harmony.

- Chinese President Xi Jinping has urged people to strengthen the community spirit and has called on ethnic groups to unite.
- In September 2019 at an event to honour role models and groups on ethnic unity and progress, he emphasised that patriotic teaching should be a priority.
- In November 2019, the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee and the State Council published an outline for promoting patriotic education in the new era.
- Therefore, patriotic education is an important vehicle for the promotion of values that further "ethnic unity".
- This is in line with Xi's self-described "New Era", which marks a departure from previous attempts towards establishing a system of ethnic autonomy, as per the paper.

#2 World Future Energy Summit to begin today in Abu Dhabi

- The World Future Energy Summit will begin today in Abu Dhabi. 33,500 participants from 170 countries and 800 specialist exhibitors are expected to attend the four-day annual event.

Key highlights:

- The theme for this year's summit is "Rethinking Global Consumption, Production, and Investment." The World Future Energy Summit is the Middle East's

largest future energy and sustainability event.

- It is held annually at Abu Dhabi National Exhibition Centre.
- The 2020 edition includes exhibition and forum programmes across five main pillars: energy, solar, water, waste and smart cities, hosting an unrivalled gathering of top-level government and business leaders.
- The event is starting to set an example for best practice, supporting the circular economy through recycling, and acting to remove single-use plastics from the event.
- Also held alongside the World Future Energy Summit are the Climate Innovations Exchange, 'CLIX' for short and the Future Sustainability Summit.
- The event will showcase 42 of the world's most disruptive innovations, selected from 1,402 global submissions from 128 countries, related to the future of energy, food, agriculture and sustainability in space.

#3 Sultan Qaboos

- Oman's monarch, Sultan Qaboos bin Said died after having ruled the country for nearly five decades. He was succeeded by Sayyid Haitham bin Tariq al Said as Sultan of Oman.

About:

- Qaboos bin Said Al Said (1940 – 2020) was the Sultan of Oman from 1970 until his death.
- A fourteenth-generation descendant of the founder of the House of Al Said, he was the



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longest-serving leader in the Middle East and Arab world at the time of his death.

- As Sultan, Qaboos implemented a policy of modernization and brought an end to Oman's international isolation.
- His reign saw a rise in living standards and development in the country, the abolition of slavery, the end of the Dhofar Rebellion and the promulgation of Oman's constitution.
- In 2004, the Government of India honoured him with the Jawaharlal Nehru Award for International Understanding.

#4 American attack on Iran's cultural sites

- President Donald Trump tweeted that if Iran strikes any Americans, or American assets, in retaliation, the US would target 52 sites in Iran which are important to Iranian culture.
- Such a step, should he follow through on his threat, could be considered a war crime.

Key highlights:

- The nations of the world adopted at The Hague in 1954, The Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, the first international treaty focussed exclusively on the protection of cultural heritage during war and armed conflict.
- The Convention defined cultural property as "movable or immovable property of great importance to the cultural heritage of every person, such as monuments of architecture, art or history, whether religious or secular; archaeological sites....", etc.

- The Rome Statute of 1998, the founding treaty of the International Criminal Court, describes as a "war crime" any intentional attack against a historical monument, or a building dedicated to religion, education, art, or science.

#5 Nepal's Seke language

- The "near-extinct" Nepalese language Seke has just 700 speakers around the world. Of these, 100 are in New York, and roughly half of these 100 stay in one building in the city.
- Most of the Seke-speaking community in New York stays in the Ditmas Park area of Brooklyn, or in Queens.
- The last year, 2019, was the International Year of Indigenous Languages, mandated by the United Nations (UN).
- A press release issued by the UN in December 2019 quoted President of the UN General Assembly Tijjani Muhammad-Bande as saying that despite efforts throughout the year, one indigenous language disappears every fortnight.

Nepal's Seke language:

- According to the Endangered Language Alliance (ELA), Seke is one of the over 100 indigenous languages of Nepal and is mainly spoken in the five villages of Chuksang, Chaile, Gyakar, Tangbe and Tetang in the Upper Mustang district.
- The dialects from these villages differ substantially and are believed to have varying degrees of mutual intelligibility.

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- In recent years, Seke has been retreating in the face of Nepali, which is Nepal's official language and is considered to be crucial for getting educational and employment opportunities outside villages.
- According to ELA, difficult conditions at home and job prospects elsewhere have brought speakers of Seke to places such as Pokhara, Kathmandu and even New York.
- Therefore, the vulnerability of the language is linked to the migration of people to places where Seme is not spoken, which has reduced the intergenerational transmission of the language.
- The younger generation does not find much use in learning the language, giving preference to Nepali and English.

Languages in danger:

- UNESCO has six degrees of endangerment.
- These are: safe, which are the languages spoken by all generations and their intergenerational transmission is uninterrupted; vulnerable languages, which are spoken by most children but may be restricted to certain domains; definitely endangered languages, which are no longer being learned by children as their mother tongue.

#6 UK children's book award

- India-born author Jasbinder Bilan has bagged a coveted UK children's book award for her debut novel 'Asha and the Spirit Bird',.

About:

- The story is set in the Himalayan territory of her Indian roots and inspired by the special childhood bond with her grandmother.
- Bilan will receive 5,000 pounds as the winner of the award.
- Her winning debut work follows eleven-year-old Asha, who is empowered with spiritual connections to her grandmother as she journeys through the wild and dangerous Himalayas with her best friend Jeevan.
- Bilan's book was shortlisted from 144 entries alongside 'Crossfire' by Malorie Blackman, 'In the Shadow of Heroes' by Nicholas Bowling and 'Furious Thing' by Jenny Downham.

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BUSINESS AND ECONOMY



BUSINESS & ECONOMY Current Affairs

#1 Tightens debit, credit card usage norms

- RBI has issued directions under Section 10(2) of the Payment and Settlement Systems Act, 2007 (Act 51 of 2007) to increase the security of card transactions. These shall come into effect from March 16, 2020.

Key highlights of the direction:

- RBI has asked banks to allow only domestic card transactions at ATMs and point of sale (PoS) terminals in India at the time of issuance or reissuance of a card.
- The RBI has also asked banks to offer all cardholders the facility to switch on or off and set or modify transaction limits within the overall card limit.
- Issuers should provide cardholders the facility for enabling 'card not present'

(domestic and international) transactions, 'card present' (international) transactions and contactless transactions.

- 'Card not present' transactions involve furnishing of card number and CVV (card verification value) in transactions executed online.
- 'Card present' transactions need the card for use in PoS or ATM terminals.
- Contactless transactions are done using RFID technology or near-field communication (NFC).

#2 India's fiscal deficit

- India's fiscal deficit, which essentially maps how much money the Indian government has to borrow to make up the gap between its expenditure and its revenues, was just 3.4 per cent of the gross domestic product (GDP) for 2018-19. For the current year, the



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Union Budget presented in July expected the fiscal deficit to be 3.3 percent of the GDP.

- Now, former Economic Affairs Secretary S C Garg has stated, in his blog dated January 14, that the true fiscal deficit for 2018-19 is 4.7% – more than a full percentage point than the number claimed by Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharam's Budget in July.

Key highlights:

- According to Garg, for the current financial year, too, the actual fiscal deficit is likely to range between 4.5 per cent to 5 percent of GDP.
- According to SC Garg, the official figures hide the true fiscal deficit. That's because some of the government's expenditure was funded by the so-called "off-budget" items.
- All government expenditure, revenues and debts are required to be carried out through the Consolidated Fund of India (CFI). If it is done so, the fiscal deficit of the Government should equal to the additional debt incurred during the year, all recorded in the CFI.
- Unfortunately, all these transactions are not recorded through the CFI all the time. Some debt/liabilities are not assumed outside the CFI – either in the Public Account or totally outside the formal accounting system of the Government i.e. outside CFI and Public Account.
- Such transactions are described popularly as Below the Line, Off Budget etc.

What is fiscal deficit?

- The Union Budget's "Budget at a Glance" document explains what fiscal deficit is. It states: "Fiscal Deficit is the difference between the Revenue Receipts plus Non-debt Capital Receipts (NDCR) and the total expenditure".
- In other words, the fiscal deficit is "reflective of the total borrowing requirements of the Government".

What is the significance of fiscal deficit?

- In the economy, there is a limited pool of investible savings. These savings are used by financial institutions like banks to lend to private businesses (both big and small) and the governments (Centre and state).
- The significance of fiscal deficit is that if this ratio is too high, it implies that there is a lesser amount of money left in the market for private entrepreneurs and businesses to borrow. Lesser amount of this money, in turn, leads to higher rates of interest charged on such lending.
- So, simply put, a higher fiscal deficit means higher borrowing by the government, which, in turn, means higher interest rates in the economy.
- This concern becomes even more significant when, like today, Indian businesses are facing high interest rates.
- A high fiscal deficit and higher interest rates at a time like this would also mean that the efforts of the Reserve Bank of India to reduce interest rates are undone.

What is the acceptable level of fiscal deficit?



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- There is no set universal level of fiscal deficit that is considered good. Typically, for a developing economy, where private enterprises may be weak and governments may be in a better state to invest, fiscal deficit could be higher than in a developed economy.
- In developing economies, governments also have to invest in both social and physical infrastructure upfront without having adequate avenues for raising revenues.
- In India, the Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management Act requires the central government to reduce its fiscal deficit to 3 percent of GDP. India has been struggling to achieve this mark.

#3 Saksham

- Saksham', an annual one-month long fuel conservation mega campaign of Petroleum Conservation Research Association (PCRA) under the aegis of Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas, was launched.

Key highlights:

- Saksham is an acronym for Sanrakshan Kshamta Mahotsav.
- It is an annual flagship event of Petroleum Conservation Research Association (PCRA) under the aegis of Ministry of Petroleum & Natural Gas, Govt. of India.
- To make citizens aware about the conservation and effective utilization of petroleum products.

#4 Z Morh tunnel

- A Concession Agreement for completing the 6.5-kilometre long Z-Morh tunnel in Jammu and Kashmir was signed in New Delhi.

Key highlights:

- Under the agreement, the two-lane bi-directional tunnel with parallel escape tunnel will be completed in 3.5 years at a cost of 2379 Crore rupees.
- The project includes construction, operation and maintenance of the tunnel with approaches on NH-1 at Srinagar-Sonamarg-Gumri Road from 61 kilometres to 89.30 kilometres on Design, Build, Finance, Operate and Transfer Annuity basis.
- Z-Morh Tunnel will provide all-weather road connectivity to Sonmarg tourist spot in Jammu and Kashmir.
- It mostly remains closed during the winters due to heavy snowfall in Gaganger area.

#5 'Must run' status

- Indian Electricity Grid Code (IEGC) has asserted that renewable energy power plants shall be treated as "must run" and electricity from these plants shall not be curtailed for any commercial reasons.

Key highlights:

- Part of the latest draft IEGC prepared by the group, the provision comes at a time when a number of states have repeatedly resorted

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to not scheduling power from renewable sources, citing high costs.

- A 'must run' status means that the concerned power plant has to supply electricity to the grid under all conditions.
- The group has added new codes in the latest IEGC draft – the Protection and Commissioning code, which entails a centralised database containing details of relay setting for grid elements, and the Cyber Security code, which provides for identification of critical information infrastructure.
- The IEGC lays down regulations for various persons and participants in the country's power ecosystem to plan, develop, maintain and operate power systems in the country "in a secure, economic, reliable, resilient and efficient manner", states the draft.

#6 'Option in goods' in commodities

- Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi) said that stocks exchanges can launch 'option in goods' in their commodity derivatives segment. This is in addition to 'options on commodity futures'.

Key highlights:

- The provision shall pave the way for launching options contracts in commodities based on underlying spot market price and settlement through compulsory delivery.
- For the first time, Indian commodity derivatives market will witness both European as well as American options,

where as in securities market options are restricted to European style only.

- The options can reduce the risk for the hedgers. Options in agriculture commodities can prove to be an important tool to replace the minimum support price intervention scheme of the govt.
- A contract for the purchase or sale of a right to buy or sell or a right to buy and sell in the future, such underlying goods, is called 'option in goods'.
- It will play a major role in stimulating agricultural marketing and enable farmer-friendly options products.
- The product design and risk management framework would be in conformity with the guidelines of the circular, and exchanges willing to start trading in options contracts with goods as underlying should take prior approval of Sebi for launching such contracts.
- The exchanges should also make necessary disclosures such as open interest of top 10 largest participants/group of participants in "option in goods" (both long and short) and the details of their combined open interest in underlying constituents.

#7 TCPDF

- The Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) on Thursday said telecom service providers will need to deposit all unclaimed money of consumers, including excess charges and security deposit, in the Telecommunication Consumers Education and Protection Fund (TCEPF).

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- The authority observed that there is a need to bring clarity among service providers in depositing money which they are unable to refund to the consumers.

Key highlights:

- TRAI said, adding that while some service providers were depositing money only on account of excess billing revealed in the audit, others were depositing unclaimed money such as security deposits and plan charges of failed activations.
- It is prudent to deposit any such unclaimed / non refundable amount belonging to consumers in the TCEP fund as it will be utilised for the welfare measures of the consumers.
- Accordingly, it was felt that an amendment in the TCEP regulation may be carried out to remove any kind of ambiguity and facilitate deposit of any unclaimed money of the consumer such as excess charges, security deposit, plan charges of failed activations, etc.
- The TCPA Regulations, 2007, which have now been amended, provide the basic framework for depositing unclaimed money of consumers by service providers, maintenance of the SELF and other related aspects.

Provisions of the amendment:

- With this amendment, service providers will deposit any unclaimed consumer money of any form such as excess charges, security deposit, plan charges of failed activations, or any amount belonging to a consumer, which service providers are unable to refund to consumers, to the fund after providing time of 12 months or period of limitation specified under law whichever is later.
- In a separate release, the regulator said that the total wireless subscribers in the country declined from 1,183.40 million at the end of October 2019 to 1,154.39 million at the end of November 2019, a monthly decline of 2.43% or 28.82 million subscribers.
- As per the data, while wireless subscription in urban areas declined from 662.92 million in October to 647.33 million in November, wireless subscription in rural areas fell from 520.48 million to 507.26 million in the months under review.
- Additionally, Reliance Jio was the market leader with 32.04% market share, followed by Vodafone Idea (29.12%), Bharti Airtel (28.35%), BSNL (10.19%) and MTNL (0.29%).

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SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY



SCIENCE & TECH Current Affairs

#1 Over hundred global scientists converge in NIOT Chennai

- Over a hundred global scientists in the field of ocean studies are converged in the National Institute of Ocean Technology (NIOT) in Chennai.

About NIOT:

- It was established in 1993. It was situated at Chennai in Tamil Nadu.
- An autonomous society under the Ministry of Earth Sciences, Government of India.
- NIOT is managed by a Governing Council and the Director is the head of the Institute.

Key highlights:

- They are participating in the Central Indian Ocean Leadership Workshop at the Union

Government-run research institution, with the support of the United Nations.

- The scientists represent fifteen Indian Ocean Rim countries.
- They are studying on evolving a regional framework on how to study coastal vulnerabilities like the Tsunami's, the increasing frequency and intensity of cyclones, sea-level rise due to climate change and sea erosion.
- To develop reliable indigenous technologies to solve the various engineering problems associated with harvesting of non-living and living resources in the Indian Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), which is about two-thirds of the land area of India.

#2 Scientific Social Responsibility

- During the 107th Indian Science Congress, head of the Climate Change Programme



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under Department of Science and Technology, spoke about the Centre's policy on implementing scientific social responsibility (SSR).

Key highlights:

- Under the Scientific Social Responsibility (SSR) programme, researchers who are working on a science project funded by any of the Ministries under the Central government will have to undertake activities to popularise science and make it more accessible to the public.
- The Department of Science and Technology (DST) would draw up a list of activities which could be taken up under the SSR programme. This could range from going to colleges delivering lectures, writing an article in a magazine or doing something beyond the curriculum.
- The science outreach would be mandatory and researchers had to include this as part of their outcome report.
- It will be implemented this year after a consultation meeting with all stakeholders.

#3 Saras Mk2

- Science and Technology that the government needs to be the "launch customer" to make Saras Mk2 commercially viable.

About:

- Saras Mk2 is the first indigenous light transport aircraft in India.

- It has been developed by the National Aerospace Laboratory (NAL).
- The 19-seater aircraft, developed with a target cost of ₹50 crores, is at least 20-25% lower in cost than other aircraft in a similar category.

Key highlights:

- The aircraft has been in the making for a long time. The first prototype flew in 2004.
- But without the initial push from the government, the manufacturing capacity required for commercial production could not be set up.
- Presently, the NAL has only one order from the Indian Air Force for 15 aircraft.
- The NAL has been pitching Saras Mk-2 for the government's UDAN (Ude Desh Ka Aam Nagrik), since it has the capacity to operate in "ill-equipped", "semi-prepared" and "unpaved airstrips". The scheme, launched in October 2016, is aimed at linking areas that have no air connectivity.

#4 Indian Data Relay Satellite System

- India plans to ring in its own era of space-to-space tracking and communication of its space assets this year by putting up a new satellite series called the Indian Data Relay Satellite System.
- The IDRSS is planned to track and be constantly in touch with Indian satellites, in particular those in low-earth orbits which have limited coverage of earth.
- In the coming years, it will be vital to Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO), whose

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roadmap is dotted with advanced LEO missions such as space docking, space station, as well as distant expeditions to moon, Mars and Venus.

- It will also be useful in monitoring launches, according to K. Sivan, ISRO Chairman and Secretary, Department of Space.
- The first beneficiary would be the prospective crew members of the Gaganyaan mission of 2022 who can be fully and continuously in touch with mission control throughout their travel.

Work initiated:

- Work on the two IDRSS satellites planned initially has begun. The first of them will be sent towards the end of 2020. It will precede the pre-Gaganyaan experimental unmanned space flight which will have a humanoid dummy.
- A second one will follow in 2021.
- The two will offer near total tracking, sending and receiving of information from the crew 24/7.
- Older space majors such as the U.S. and Russia started their relay satellite systems in the late 1970s-80s and a few already have around 10 satellites each.
- They have used them to monitor their respective space stations Mir and the International Space Station, and trips that dock with them, as well as the Hubble Space Telescope.
- Dr. Sivan said IDRSS satellites of the 2,000 kg class would be launched on the GSLV launch to geostationary orbits around 36,000 km away. In such apparently fixed

orbits, they would be covering the same area on earth.

- A satellite in GEO covers a third of the earth below and three of them can provide total coverage.

IDRSS is imperative:

- During the launch of the human mission and also when the crew craft orbits earth from a distance of 400 km, at least one ground station must see and track it. But with available ground stations, that would not be the case.
- Without data relay satellites, ISRO would have to create a large number ground stations everywhere or hire them globally and yet the crewed spacecraft would not be visible all the time.
- While the U.S. is putting up its third-generation advanced fleet of TDRS (Tracking & Data Relay Satellites), Russia has its Satellite Data Relay Network and Europe is building its own European Data Relay System. China is into its second generation Tianlian II series.

#5 Challakere to be ISRO's astronaut training hub

- India's world-class facility for training astronauts will be established at Challakere, on the Bengaluru-Pune NH4 in Chitradurga district of Karnataka.

About:

- Challakere is a village in Chitradurga district in the state of Karnataka, India.

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- Challakere is also known as the 'oil city' or "second Mumbai" of India because it is the second-largest producer/supplier of edible oil after Mumbai. There are as many as 60+ oil industries in Challakere.
- Challakere is known for the kambali (woven blankets) made by the local Kuruba people.

#6 Extraocular Vision

- The researchers have shown that a species of brittle stars, which are relatives of starfish, can see even though it does not have eyes.

Key highlights:

- The red brittle star (*Ophiocoma wendtii*), which lives in the coral reefs of the Caribbean Sea, becomes only the second creature, after a sea urchin species, known to have this ability (barring freak cases in other species).
- The ability to see without eyes is known as extraocular vision.
- Previous researchers have defined it as the ability to resolve scenes without discrete eyes.

- In sea urchins and brittle stars, researchers suspect that extraocular vision is facilitated by the photoreceptor cells found on their bodies.
- The brittle stars moved toward walls that were white with a black bar, suggestive of a daytime hiding place. When grey walls were included, they still moved towards the black stripe, which was centred on a white stripe.
- The researchers suggest that a brittle star sees with the help of light-sensing cells that cover its entire body.
- These light-sensing cells give the brittle star visual stimuli, allowing it to recognise coarse structures such as rocks, the research suggests.
- Another peculiar feature of the red brittle star is its signature colour change.
- While the creature is deep red during the day, it changes its colour to beige at night.
- The researchers think that there may be a link between their extraocular vision and colour changing abilities since the responses they saw in the creatures tested during the day, disappeared in those that were tested at night.

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ENVIRONMENT



#1 Mopa airport project

- The Supreme Court cleared the path for construction of an international airport at Mopa in Goa by lifting the suspension on Environmental Clearance (EC) granted to the project.

Key highlights:

- The top court had in March last year suspended the EC granted for the greenfield airport and had directed the Expert Appraisal Committee (EAC) to revisit the decision in light of its impact on the ecology there.
- While lifting the suspension on EC, a bench of Justices D Y Chandrachud and Hemant Gupta noted the assurance tendered on behalf of concessionaire GMR Goa International Airport Limited that it would adopt a zero-carbon programme both in the

construction and operational phases of the airport.

- The top court-appointed the National Environmental Engineering Research Institute (NEERI) to oversee compliance with the directions issued by it in the matter.

#2 Blue Flag tag

- The Centre issued an Extraordinary Gazette Notification declaring a list of activities and facilities that would be permissible in the Coastal Regulation Zone (CRZ) areas of certain beaches, which have been identified for obtaining the 'Blue Flag' certification.

Background:

- In July 2019, the Ministry of Environment had identified 13 beaches across the country for the Blue Flag certification.
- According to the latest notification, the following activities and facilities would be



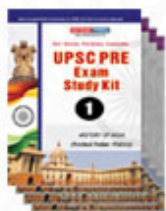
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permitted in the CRZ of these beaches, including Islands, subject to maintaining a minimum distance of 10 meters from the High Tide Line (HTL): Grey water treatment plant; Solar power plant; Landscaping lighting; CCTV surveillance; First aid station; Parking facilities etc.

- These activities and facilities would be exempt from prior clearance under the provisions of CRZ Notification, Island Protection Zone Notification and Island Coastal Regulation Zone Notifications respectively.

What is 'Blue Flag' certification?

- The 'Blue Flag' is a certification that can be obtained by a beach, marina, or sustainable boating tourism operator, and serves as an eco-label. The certification is known as an indication of high environmental and quality standards.
- The certification is awarded by the Denmark-based non-profit Foundation for Environmental Education (FEE) with 33 stringent criteria under four major heads for the beaches: (i) Environmental Education and Information (ii) Bathing Water Quality (iii) Environment Management and Conservation and (iv) Safety and Services.
- The Blue Flag Programme started in France in 1985 and in areas outside Europe since 2001.
- 47 countries currently participate in the program, and 4,573 beaches, marinas, and boats have this certification.

#3 World Meteorological Organization report

- According to World Meteorological Organization (WMO), The past decade (2010-2019) was the hottest on record and 2019 was the second warmest year ever, just shy of 2016, since records began.

About:

- The data from the Geneva-based WMO crunches several datasets including from NASA and the UK Met Office. It showed that the average global temperature in 2019 was 1.1 degree Celsius (34°F) above pre-industrial levels.
- Australia had its hottest, driest year on record in 2019, setting the scene for the massive bushfires.
- The hottest year on record was in 2016 due to the warming impact of a strong El Nino event.
- Since the 1960s, each decade has been warmer than the previous one, by significant amounts. While the 2010s continued this trend, the second half of the decade was especially warm – the five hottest years ever have occurred during that span.

#4 Galapagos tortoise

- Recently, Diego (*Chelonoidis hoodensis*, or the giant tortoise species) has retired from the captive breeding programme in the Galapagos National Park, Ecuador.
- He will be returned to Española Island, from where he was taken around 80 years ago.



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Key Points:

- Diego is 100 years old and joined the breeding programme in 1976. The tortoise population has since gone up from 15 to 2,000. He is responsible for about 40% of the offspring produced.
- Another male tortoise 'E5' has generated about 60% offspring.
- Diego has a long leathery neck, dull-yellow face and beady eyes. Fully stretched out, he extends to about five feet and weighs about 176 pounds.
- The long neck is critical for his species' survival, helping the tortoises crane their necks to feed on cacti.

Threats:

- Tortoises on the Galápagos Islands served as an excellent source of food for seafarers in the 1800s so a large number were picked up from the islands.
- Feral goats on the islands posed another danger, competing for food, destroying the tortoises' habitat.
- It is Critically Endangered under IUCN Red List Status.

#5 Kaziranga National Park

- Kaziranga National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage Site in Assam, has recorded 96 species of wetland birds, as per the second wetland bird count conducted by officials of the park.

Key findings:

- The second wetland bird count revealed a total of 19,225 birds belonging to 96 species of 80 families. The first wetland bird count, conducted in 2018, revealed a total of 10,412 birds covering 80 species under 21 families.
- With 6,181 individuals, the bar-headed goose led the species count, followed by the common teal at 1,557 and northern pintail at 1,359. All three belong to the family Anatidae.
- More than half the birds (9,924) and 85 of 96 species were recorded in Agoratoli Range of the park because Sohola, the largest of Kaziranga's 92 perennial wetlands, falls in this range.

#6 Coastal Regulation Zone

- The four illegal apartment complexes in Maradu, Kerala, was razed by controlled implosion on the orders of the Supreme Court for breaching Coastal Regulation Zone (CRZ) norms. The court had called the illegal constructions a "colossal loss" to the environment.

Key highlights:

- In India, the Coastal Regulation Zone (CRZ) Rules govern human and industrial activity close to the coastline, in order to protect the fragile ecosystems near the sea.
- They restrict certain kinds of activities – like large constructions, setting up of new industries – within a certain distance from the coastline.



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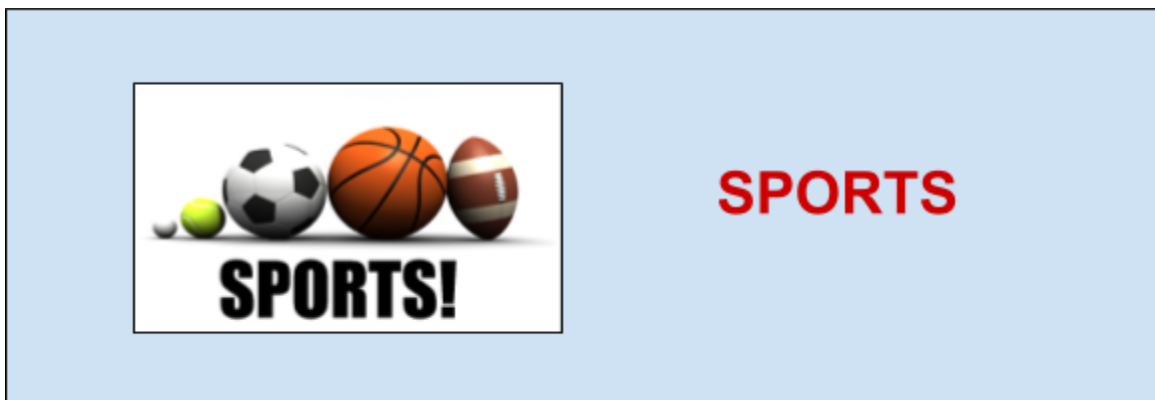
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- Under the rules, the regulation zone has been defined as the area up to 500 m from the high-tide line. The restrictions depend on criteria such as the population of the area, the ecological sensitivity, the distance from the shore, and whether the area had been designated as a natural park or wildlife zone.
- The Rules have a no-development zone of 20 m for all islands close to the mainland coast, and for all backwater islands in the mainland.
- For the so-called CRZ-III (Rural) areas, two separate categories have been stipulated.
- In the densely populated rural areas (CRZ-IIIA) with a population density of 2,161 per sq km as per the 2011 Census, the no-development zone is 50 m from the high-tide level, as against the 200 m stipulated earlier.
- CRZ-IIIB category (rural areas with population density below 2,161 per sq km) areas continue to have a no-development zone extending up to 200 m from the high-tide line.
- While the CRZ Rules are made by the Union environment ministry, implementation is to be ensured by state governments through their Coastal Zone Management Authorities. In the current case, the Kerala Coastal Zone Management Authority (KCZMA) identified the CRZ violations.

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SPORTS



#1 First edition of Khelo India University Games to be held in Odisha

- The first edition of Khelo India University Games has been scheduled to be held at the Kalinga Institute of Industrial Technology (KIIT) University in Bhubaneswar.

Aim:

- The University Games provides a platform for young students to showcase their sports talent. The games are aimed to further nourish the talents of the youth.

Khelo India University Games:

- Khelo India University Games is an initiative of the Government of India to empower the sports sector. It aims to mould the future of budding sports stars in India.

- The games will be held from 22 February to 1 March 2020. Union Minister of Sports Kiren Rijiju and Chief Minister of Odisha Naveen Patnaik unveiled the logo and jersey of Khelo India University Games at the launching ceremony of the event that was held at Bhubaneswar on 7 January 2020.

#2 Saurabh Chaudhary won gold at the 63rd National Shooting Championship

- The 17-year-old ace shooter from Uttar Pradesh Saurabh Chaudhary has won the men's 10 metres air pistol gold at the 63rd National Shooting Championship in Bhopal on 4 January 2020. Chaudhary shot a 246.4 to finish on top.
- Sarabjot Singh of Haryana secured second and scored 243.9 and Abhishek Verma won bronze in a high-quality final.



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MCQ



Q1. The “Global Risk Perception Index ” under the global risk report was released recently by which of the following organisations ?

- a) World Bank
- b) World Economic Forum
- c) International Monetary Fund
- d) World Trade Organisation

Answer: B

Q2 Consider the following statements :

1. India allows e-commerce companies to work on the marketplace model where buyers and sellers are free to buy and sell and follow the rules of the marketplace and laws of the country which clearly say that

FDI in multi-brand retail will only be allowed up to 49%.

2. India has been at the receiving end of unfair trade practices for a very long time and therefore believes in the creation of a far more reformed rules based trading system with the WTO.
3. Right classification of the so called ‘other imports’ under HSN code will only lead to greater transparency and establish fair trading practices and make India a fair place to do business and trade and also provide equal opportunity to all.

Which of the above statements are true ?

- a) 1 & 2 only
- b) 2 & 3 only
- c) 1 & 3 only



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d) all of the above

Answer: D

Q3. 'IndARC' is the first underwater observatory of India in the Arctic Region. The observatory aims to study Arctic climate and how it influences the monsoon. It is located between the North Pole and which of the following countries ?

- a) Russia
- b) Norway
- c) Greenland
- d) Belgium

Answer: B

Q4. Consider the following pairs of Indian tribes and their inhabiting states :

- 1. Toto : west Bengal
- 2. Nyishi : Arunachal Pradesh
- 3. Barda : Gujarat
- 4. Chenchu : Assam
- 5. Siddis : Kerala

Which of the above pairs are correctly matched ?

- a) 1,2 & 3 only
- b) 3,4 & 5 only
- c) 2,3 & 5 only
- d) all of the above

Answer: A

Q5. The threat of "Taal" volcano (recently in news) unleashing a potentially catastrophic eruption remains high in the country. The authorities have warned today that it was showing dangerous signs. The above said volcano is in which of the following countries ?

- a) Indonesia
- b) Philippines
- c) Mexico
- d) Argentina

Answer: B

Q6. "World Gold Outlook 2020" was recently released by which of the following global organisations ?

- a) World Trade Organisation
- b) World Gold Council
- c) World Bank
- d) International Monetary Fund

Answer: B

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Q7. The Kyaukphyu Special Economic Zone (SEZ) deep seaport project will link the land locked Yunnan province of China directly to the Indian Ocean allowing China to bypass the strait of Malacca through which it imports a sizable amount of oil and gas. China signed an agreement with which of the following countries to take forward the project ?

- a) Bangladesh
- b) India
- c) Myanmar
- d) Pakistan

Answer: C

Q8. Which of the following countries recently launched a “Seismic Hazard Microzonation” technique to minimise earthquake disasters ?

- a) India
- b) Japan
- c) Indonesia
- d) Bali

Answer: A

Q9. The “Global Social Mobility Index “was recently released by which of the following global organisations recently?

- a) World Bank
- b) WTO
- c) World Economic Forum
- d) Asian Development Bank

Answer: C

Q10. India is associated with which of the following countries recently to build the “Aurobindo Ashram school” at Thankot ?

- a) Bangladesh
- b) Myanmar
- c) Afghanistan
- d) Nepal

Answer : D

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Important Article from various newspapers



#1 Higher Education Quality Mandate (The Hindu)

Mains Paper 2: Governance

Prelims level: UGC

Mains level: Steps taken towards higher education development process

Context:

- Aiming to improve the quality in Higher Education Institutions the University Grants Commission has adopted the Higher Education Quality Improvement Programme Mandate.
- 5 verticals of Quality Mandate developed by UGC cover evaluation reforms, eco friendly and sustainable university campuses, human values and professional ethics,

faculty induction and academic research integrity.

Background:

- Innovation and human capital, the two pillars of labour productivity and GDP growth, largely depends on the quality of higher education. According to the India Skills Report-2019, only 47% of Indian graduates are employable, which is exacerbated by startlingly low Faculty Figures.
- Of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted in 2015, SDG4 is dedicated to education.
- Higher education is mentioned in target 4.3 of SDG4 – “By 2030, ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and



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quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university.”

What are the structural flaws?

Faculty storage:

- Faculty vacancies at government institutions are at 50% on average. The problem lies in increased demand, and stagnant supply.
- The number of institutions has surged in India since the 2000s, while the number of students doing PhD has remained constant.
- Meanwhile, there are over 1,00,000 India born PhDs in universities around the world, kept away by paltry salaries and poor funding.
- Indian R&D expenditure at 0.62% of GDP is one of the lowest in emerging economies.

Publications of Research:

- Faculty are under pressure to produce a certain number of papers to Gain Promotion.
- This often makes them publish papers in journals that may not be of high quality.
- This also means that there is more emphasis on publishing papers than on teaching.

Lack of quality faculty:

- Teaching and research in any university depends on the quality of faculty as well as the quality of students.
- The quality of teaching depends on the quality of teachers.
- For teachers to impart knowledge to students they must have a broad knowledge

of their subject matter as well as enthusiasm and a desire for learning throughout the course of their career.

Raising Expenses:

- Quality education is expensive in India.
- India has severely under-invested in education over the last 40 years, not much have been invested in R&D, and today even the top institutions are having very poor laboratory facilities.

Large scale expansion:

- We expanded education very rapidly –India has a larger number of institutions than China, both in terms of colleges and universities.
- In the process of standardisation of such institutions, India has erred by creating one single framework, where examinations became the only way to judge merit.
- This led to the mushrooming of coaching classes and anybody who could get ranks by studying in such coaching institutes were celebrated.

Lack of leadership:

- The heads of universities are often appointed with Political Motivations.
- Vice-Chancellors are selected merely because they have the right political connections in the Ministry of Human Resource Development in the case of central universities, or appropriate political or caste affiliations in the concerned state.

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- Also, in many cases, they pay huge amounts of money for the posts that are the most visible symbols of the university system.

What are the UGC mandates?

- The University Grants Commission (UGC) of India is a statutory body set up in 1956, and is charged with coordination, determination and maintenance of standards of higher education.

The UGC's Mandate Includes:

- Determining and maintaining standards of teaching, examination and research in universities.
- Framing regulations on minimum standards of education.
- Overseeing distribution of grants to universities and colleges in India.
- Providing scholarships/fellowships to Beneficiaries.
- Monitoring conformity to its regulations by universities and colleges.
- Serving as a vital link between the Union and state governments and institutions of higher learning.

Why is UGC a failure?

- Though the number of universities and student enrolment has been increasing, the the quality of education is still lagging behind, which is attributed to UGC.
- UGC's policies suffer from two diametrically opposite issues—underregulation and over-regulation. While it lets smaller substandard institutions slip by as deemed

universities, it also instigates witch-hunts against reputed deemed universities.

- Hence, it is argued that UGC has not only failed to fulfil its mandate but also has not been able to deal with emerging diverse complexities.

What is the quality mandate in 2019?

- The quality mandate aims at evolving the higher education system to equip the country's next generation with vital skills, knowledge and ethics for leading a rewarding life.
- UGC released five documents concerning the 5 verticals of Quality Mandate, which covers-
 1. Evaluation Reforms,
 2. Eco-Friendly and Sustainable University Campuses,
 3. Human Values & Professional Ethics,
 4. Faculty Induction,
 5. Academic Research Integrity
- **SATAT**– Framework for Eco-Friendly and Sustainable Campus development in Higher Educational Institutions.
- **Mulya Pravah** – Guidelines for Inculcation of Human values and Professional Ethics in Higher Educational Institutions.
- **Guru-Dakshta** – A guide to Faculty Induction Programme (FIP) to improve student centricity.
- Consortium for Academic and Research Ethics (UGC-CARE) to continuously monitor and identify quality journals across disciplines.
- **'Paramarsh'** – To mentor aspirant institutions for promoting quality assurance



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in higher education and facilitate National Accreditation and Assessment Council (NAAC) Accreditation.

Way forward:

- India is one of the youngest nations in the world, where the college-age group is growing at large. Whereas in the QS World University Rankings-2015, only two Indian universities were featured in the top 200, while just 10 made it into the top 700.
- Therefore, the quality of education should be oriented more towards employability than rote learning.
- **Information and Communication Technology (ICT)**– should be utilized to improve the quality of higher education.
- India shall consider moving towards Learning Outcome based curriculum framework.
- Continuous internal evaluation– can help in identifying Behavioural outcomes of individuals.
- **In terms of faculty selection and promotion** – it should be based on proper selection committee.
- **Brain Drain from the country** – shall be reduced by appropriate schemes.

Conclusion:

- **China solved this problem by attracting Chinese** – origin PhDs back home with dollar salaries and monetary incentives for published research.
- With the advent of Artificial Intelligence (AI), almost 40-50% of existing jobs would be heavily automated. This is the right time for

the Indian Higher Education institutions to improve their quality to match international standards and enhance the employability of the students.

Mains Questions:

Q1. What are the structural flaws in Indian education system?

#2 Preventing mob lynching

Mains Paper 2:- Social Justice

Prelims level:- Mob lynching laws

Mains level:- Welfare scheme for vulnerable sections of the society

Context:

- The spate of incidents of lynching over the past few years has led to a heightened sense of insecurity among the marginalised communities. Though no data has been compiled by the NCRB of the number of cases of lynching in the country since 2015 for reasons unknown, the figures reported by various sections of the media are troubling.

The Supreme Court Judgement in 2018:

- In 2018, the Supreme Court described lynching as a “horrendous act of mobocracy”.
- The Court exhorted the Centre and State governments to frame laws specifically to deal with the crime of lynching.
- The Court Laid down certain guidelines to be incorporated in these laws including fast-track trials, compensation to victims,



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and disciplinary action against lax law-enforcers.

guidelines of the Supreme Court have been adopted by the State.

State laws:

- The Manipur government came up first with its Bill against lynching in 2018, incorporating some logical and relevant clauses.
- The Bill specified that there would be nodal officers in each district to control such crimes.
- Police officers who fail to prevent the crime of lynching in their jurisdiction are liable to be imprisoned for a term that may extend from one to three years with a fine limit of ₹50,000.
- No concurrence of the State government is required to prosecute them for dereliction of duty.
- The Rajasthan government passed a bill against lynching in August 2019.
- However, not only has the government accepted only a few guidelines issued by the apex court, but is also silent on any action to be initiated against police officers who may be accused of dereliction of duty.
- West Bengal came up with a more stringent Bill against lynching. Punishment for lynching to death is punishable with the death penalty or life imprisonment and a fine of up to ₹5 lakh.
- West Bengal Governor Jagdeep Dhankhar has invited the Chief Minister and leaders of all legislature parties for a meeting this month to discuss the Bill. Most other

What can the Centre do?

- The Centre would do well to incorporate sections in the law for penal action against doctors who stand accused of dereliction of duty, for delay in attending to victims of lynching, or submitting false reports without carrying out a proper and thorough medical examination of the victims, either under coercion by the police or due to their own prejudice against the community or religion of the victims.
- Under the compensation scheme for the victims, the amount to be paid to the victims should be recovered from the perpetrators of the crime or collective fines be imposed on the villagers where the lynching takes place.
- Punitive action to be taken against police officers accused of dereliction of duty.
- The Central law too as it would deter police officials acting in a partisan manner in favour of the lynch mob.

Way ahead:

- To framing the laws, the Centre could even provide for punitive action against political leaders found guilty of inciting mobs.
- Until a zero-tolerance attitude is adopted in dealing with mob lynching, this crime will continue to show a rising trend.

Mains Questions:

Q1. Supreme Court described lynching as a 'horrendous act of mobocracy'. The Supreme



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Court has laid down guidelines for prevention of Mob violence and Lynching against any caste or community in this regard. What are the initiatives taken based on these guidelines at the level of Centre and the States? Discuss with examples.

#3 On regulations for foreign investors (Mint)

Mains Paper 3: Economy

Prelims level: Not much

Mains level: Key implications from SEBI's move on FPI

Context:

- Foreign investors who have been fleeing the country since the Union budget presented early last month have something to cheer about finally.
- The Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI), based on the recommendations of the H.R. Khan committee, eased several regulatory restrictions that are likely to make life easier for foreign portfolio investors (FPIs).
- Among a slew of measures, the financial markets regulator has simplified the registration process for FPIs by doing away with the broad-based eligibility criteria, which required a minimum of at least 20 investors in a foreign fund, and certain documentary requirements.

Engage off market sale:

- FPIs can now also engage in the off-market sale of their shares with fewer restrictions. Further, SEBI has allowed entities registered

at an international financial services centre to be automatically classified as FPIs. This might help foreign investors bypass some of the restrictions.

- Mutual funds with offshore funds too can invest in India as FPIs to avail certain tax benefits now. Central banks that are not members of the Bank of International Settlements are also allowed to register as FPIs and invest in the country under the new norms.
- Smart cities, along with other urban development agencies, will now be allowed to issue municipal bonds to raise funds for development.
- These measures to cut red tape will help lower the regulatory burden on investors, globalise India's financial markets, and aid the growth of the broader economy by increasing access to growth capital.

Key implications from SEBI's move:

- It is not immediately clear whether SEBI's move was motivated by the recent flow of funds out of India's capital markets.
- Capital in excess of ₹20,000 crore has left Indian shores in the last few weeks after Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman's budget decision to increase taxes on FPIs.
- Policymakers were clearly under pressure to do something to allay the fears of foreign investors, so the timing of SEBI's move is no surprise.
- But given the broader trend of capital flowing out of emerging markets across the world, it remains to be seen whether SEBI's present move will yield immediate benefits.

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Even if it fails to do so, the move will still help Indian markets become more attractive to foreign investors in the long-run.

Conclusion:

- While the steps taken by policymakers to make amends for their previous policy errors are obviously welcome, they should not deflect attention from the larger and persistent issue of overreach by the government against investors.
- In a world of globalised capital markets, where many nimble emerging markets compete to attract capital from the developed world, India cannot afford to be seen as flip-flopping on its commitments.

Mains Questions:

Q1. SEBI's liberalised norms for FPIs will make Indian markets attractive to foreign investors. Comment.

#4 Behind slow-moving consumer goods (Mint)

Mains Paper 3: Economy

Prelims level: FMCG

Mains level: Slowdown in the FMCG companies

Context:

- A lot has been written about why automobile sales in the Indian economy have been skidding lately.
- While it is easy to understand why consumers may hold back on big-ticket car or SUV purchases when faced with slowing credit or income.

- Studying long-term growth trends in listed FMCG companies and their investor interactions after the June-quarter results yields some insights.

It's a slowdown, not recession:

- The sales of the 30 listed FMCG companies, after expanding at 11-13 per cent between the June and December quarters of 2018, lost speed to a 9 per cent growth in the March quarter of 2019 and further to 7.3 per cent in the latest June quarter.
- Market researcher Nielsen has said that after growing at 12 per cent in the first half of 2019, India's FMCG market growth will likely slow to about 8 per cent in the second half.
- FMCG firms often keep their sales growth ticking through price increases, so volume growth trends better represent consumer demand.
- On this score, sector bellwether Hindustan Unilever (HUL) has reported a 5 per cent volume growth in the June quarter of FY20, after managing 10 per cent growth in FY19.

So what has driven this boom-bust behaviour?

- After growing at the sedate single digits until FY16, volume growth for FMCG players received a body-blow from the note ban, reporting shrinking volumes in the September and December quarters of 2016.
- By the time they staged a tentative revival to 3-4 per cent by June 2017, the GST implementation kicked in.
- With the GST sharply lowering indirect taxes on many large FMCG categories amid a

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benign input environment, players were able to drum up demand through price cuts and promotions.

- As a result, growth accelerated and stayed at double digits between September 2017 and 2018.
- But with the high base effect kicking in and input prices turning volatile in 2019, the old normal of single-digit volume growth seems to be reasserting itself.

What are the trends to driving it?

- The rural market, accounting for about 40 percent of FMCG sales, seems to be facing the brunt of the slowdown. Rural demand growth for FMCGs, which was racing ahead at 1.3-1.5 times urban growth in 2018, has since levelled off.
- This can probably be pinned on the drought-like situation across many States this past year on top of declining agricultural incomes. Northern and western markets for FMCGs have reported a sharper slowdown than the South or East.
- In highly penetrated categories such as soaps, laundry or toothpastes, mid- and low-priced brands appear to be hit by consumer downtrading on slowing income. But high-priced brands appear to be in good shape, thanks to the trend of affluent consumers 'premiumising'.
- Products with a 'natural' tag, despite their higher price tags, have continued to be a hit with consumers. According to Dabur, oral care products with a natural tag managed to grow volumes at 18 per cent, against 5-6 per cent in garden-variety toothpastes.

- In categories such as biscuits, packaged foods and edible oils, nippy local players have posed a stiff price competition to listed players, wooing away value-conscious consumers. In India, phases of benign input prices for FMCGs have always given birth to new local brands playing the discount game.
- Nielsen noted that small regional manufacturers of FMCGs had managed a 28 per cent sales growth in the year to September 2018, while national players grew at 12 per cent.

Shifting towards urban markets:

- In the urban markets, disruption in trade has also played a role in slowing sales for some players. The note ban prompted a distinct shift in urban shopping habits towards hypermarket and e-commerce stores, which now make up over 15 percent of FMCG sales.
- The traditional wholesale channel has seen shrinkage with GST woes and the liquidity crunch.
- With modern trade and e-commerce sites seeing products fly more quickly off the shelves, some players have used targeted discounts and promotions to gain share in this space, while those sticking with traditional channels have lost.

Conclusion:

- All this goes to show that FMCG players do not really have their backs to the wall.

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- Should the slowdown worsen, they have leeway to stimulate demand by trimming ad-spends and taking selective price cuts.
- All this, however, must be separated from the stock price performance of FMCG players, which may still need to be corrected from over-optimistic valuations.

Mains Questions:

Q1. What are the reasons behind slow-moving consumer goods?

#5 To creating jobs through garment exports (Mint)

Mains Paper 3: Economy

Prelims level: Employment

Mains level: Boosting employment through garment exports

Context:

- Rapid creation of productive and better paying jobs reduces poverty. It also mitigates inequality.
- One can actually have high GDP growth rates with modest employment generation.
- One can also have higher expenditure on anti-poverty and welfare measures, without having a major impact on jobs.

Job creation is the key goal:

- Job creation should, therefore, be the key development goal. States, instead of signing MoUs for thousands of crores of investment, should be seeking job creation commitments in their Investment Summits.

- Seeing the economy through the prism of job creation would bring into focus labour intensive sectors and generate discussion around policy instruments which could be used to get these sectors to grow more rapidly.
- This would require fresh thinking beyond the traditional macroeconomic parameters such as inflation, the fiscal and current account deficits, and interest rates on the one hand, and, on the other, infrastructure development; power, highways, ports and airports.
- India fought hard in the WTO negotiations for the phasing out of the quota system which used to govern textile exports and where (presumably for geopolitical reasons) the Chinese had a quota which was many times that of India's.
- It was felt that once quota restrictions ended, apparel exports from India would rise rapidly and catch up with Chinese exports.

Challenges for India:

- After the quota regime ended in 2005, textile and garment exports from India did not rise more rapidly.
- China's per capita income and wages are now about five times that of India's. Yet its textile exports are over \$270 billion whereas India's are around \$40 billion.
- India's growth rates remain modest whereas Vietnam and Bangladesh have been having sustained export growth of over 20 per cent per annum.

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- Fresh thinking on feasible measures to achieve a breakthrough is overdue.
- Garment exports, given India's low wages, should be covering the whole range of products for the global market rather than being restricted primarily to cotton apparel as is the case now.
- Given the nature of the global supply chain of readymade garments with rapidly changing designs and fashions, hassle-free zero duty imports of synthetic fabrics specified by designers of global brands is an essential prerequisite for becoming part of global supply chains.
- This is not the case now.
- The mechanism of advance licensing on input-output norms for exports works for standard industrial products, but not for garments.
- One radical option would be to do away with the duty protection available to the domestic synthetic fibre and fabric industry.

What does it need to?

- However, a viable approach which does not hurt the upstream domestic industry would be a dispensation where garment exporters exporting more than ₹100 crore per annum are given the freedom to import fabrics duty free, maintain records of usage for exports and be subject to annual audit to ensure that there is no misuse.
- Bangladesh runs such a scheme. India could easily do so.

- This would enable garment exporters across the country to attempt diversification using imported fabric and accessories.

Textile SEZs:

- A more ambitious approach would be for the government to develop large integrated textile and apparel Special Economic Zones, where there are no import duties, and invite investors from India as well as overseas to put up plants.
- There is one good precedent in the 1,000-acre Brandix textile SEZ, promoted by a Sri Lankan entrepreneur near Vijayawada.
- It has specialised in women's underwear and is a major supplier to the global luxury brand Victoria Secret.
- They claim that 60 percent of the bras sold by Victoria Secret in the US are made here.
- It has been growing and now employs over 18,000 women from nearby villages who come in chartered buses for two shifts in the day.
- The allotment of land at reasonable/nominal/subsidised rates for industrial parks for job creation has to be the guiding principle if labour intensive organised sector manufacturing jobs for global supply chains are to be created.
- Expensive land can undo the cost advantage of low wages.
- The SEZ regime could also be tweaked to treat sales to the domestic market on normal import duties as meeting the foreign exchange earning obligation of units in the SEZ.

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- Some production for the growing Indian market would shift to the SEZ creating jobs for Indians.

Incubation centres:

- Another bolder approach would be for the state to finance the creation of Incubation Centres of plug and play garment manufacturing units in Textile Parks.
- This would mean that work sheds with state-of-art stitching machines are provided at a token rent to a start-up, say, a fresh graduate from a fashion/ design institute with the agreement that as she succeeds, she would pay higher rents and even buy the garmenting unit paying the full cost.
- Those who fail, and some would fail, could leave and look for jobs without any liabilities. The cost of the failures could over time be borne by the successes so that the Incubation Centre could grow and nurture an increasing number of entrepreneurs.
- To have global scale, the Textile Parks need to be large. These may be promoted by the state directly, or, through innovative public-private partnerships.

- These could also break new ground by developing rental workers housing which has so far been missing in industrial area development.

Conclusion:

- However, staff housing is intrinsic to the IT SEZ development. Decent housing at a reasonable distance from the workplace makes a huge difference to worker productivity.
- These ideas are equally relevant for other labour intensive sectors ranging from toys to shipbuilding.
- The state needs to assume a larger responsibility than it has so far been prepared to do for India to begin creating manufacturing jobs for global supply chains on the scale needed.
- It also needs strategic thinking, patience and willingness to take risks.

Mains Questions:

Q1. To what extent the state must play a greater role in creating manufacturing jobs. Comment.

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