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Polity and Governance

1. 'Mediation' in Ayodhya title suit: Routine idea that has got new SC push (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Polity & Governance)

The Bench asked for the option of mediation to be explored after hour-long arguments in the court on Tuesday. It said it would pass orders on its suggestion for mediation on March 6.

On Tuesday, the five-judge Constitution Bench of the Supreme Court hearing the Ayodhya title dispute deferred hearings to March 5, giving the parties a week to explore the possibility of settling the matter through an in-camera, court-monitored process of mediation that could pave the way for a “healing”.

The Bench is hearing appeals against the Allahabad High Court verdict of September 30, 2010, which had ordered the disputed 2.77 acres of the Ram Janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid site to be split three ways among the Nirmohi Akhara sect, Sunni Central Wakf Board, Uttar Pradesh, and Ramlalla Virajman.

Reaction of disputing parties
The ‘Muslim’ parties told the Bench they were as such not opposed to the suggestion of a mediated settlement. Among the ‘Hindu’ parties, counsel for Ramlalla Virajman and Mahant Suresh Das opposed the proposal, saying mediation had been attempted in the past, and had not succeeded. The Nirmohi Akhara backed the suggestion.

Arguments by Supreme Court judges
The Bench asked for the option of mediation to be explored after hour-long arguments in the court. It said it would pass orders on its suggestion for mediation on March 6.

Under Section 89 of the Civil Procedure Code, judges must ensure that all avenues to resolve a dispute outside the Court have been exhausted. It reads: "Where it appears to the Court that there exist elements of a settlement which may be acceptable to the parties, the Court shall formulate the terms of settlement and give them to the parties for their observations and after receiving the observations of the parties, the Court may reformulate the terms of a possible settlement and refer the same for (a) arbitration; (b) conciliation; (c) judicial settlement including settlement through Lok Adalat; or (d) mediation.

Previous attempt at mediation
In the Ayodhya title suit, the three-judge Bench of the Lucknow bench of Allahabad High Court had, after all arguments had concluded on August 3, 2010, tried mediation. All lawyers were called into the chamber and asked whether they wanted to reconcile. The process collapsed — apparently after the ‘Hindu’ side said it was not acceptable.

After several parties appealed the High Court order, the Supreme Court in 2017 described the Ayodhya dispute as a matter of “sentiments and religion”, and suggested that it would be best if the contentious issue was settled amicably.
Before the demolition of the Babri Masjid in December 1992, there were serious attempts at talks and working back channels between the VHP and the All India Muslim Personal Law Board, overseen by at least three Prime Ministers, but mostly Chandra Shekhar and PV Narasinha Rao. The demolition put paid to all that. The difference between these earlier attempts and the latest one, however, is that none of the earlier moves were court-mandated or referred.

(Adapted from The Indian Express)

2. New Delhi International Arbitration Centre Ordinance, 2019 (Relevant for GS Prelims and Mains Paper II; Polity & Governance)

The Union Cabinet, chaired by the Prime Minister Narendra Modi has approved promulgation of an Ordinance for establishing the New Delhi International Arbitration Centre (NDIAC) for the purpose of creating an independent and autonomous regime for institutionalised arbitration.

Benefits
The benefits of institutionalized arbitration will accrue to Government and its agency and to the parties to a dispute. This shall be to the advantage of the public and the public institutions in terms of quality of expertise and costs incurred and will facilitate India becoming a hub for Institutional Arbitration.

Objective
The NDAIC shall be established with an aim to:-

(a) to bring targeted reforms to develop itself as a flagship institution for conducting international and domestic arbitration

(b) provide facilities and administrative assistance for conciliation mediation and arbitral proceedings;

(c) maintain panels of accredited arbitrators, conciliators and mediators both at national and international level or specialists such as surveyors and investigators;

(d) facilitate conducting of international and domestic arbitrations and conciliation in the most professional manner;

(e) provide cost effective and timely services for the conduct of arbitrations and conciliations at Domestic and International level;

(f) promote studies in the field of alternative dispute resolution and related matters, and to promote reforms in the system of settlement of disputes; and

(g) co-operate with other societies, institutions and organisations, national or international for promoting alternative dispute resolution.
In order to facilitate the setting up of NDIAC, the Ordinance envisages the transfer and vesting of the undertakings of the ICADR in the Central Government. The Central Government will subsequently vest the undertakings in NDIAC.

**Salient Features:**
- New Delhi International Arbitration Centre (NDIAC) will be headed by a chairperson who has been a Judge of the Supreme Court or a Judge of a High Court or an eminent person, having special knowledge and experience in the conduct or administration of arbitration law or management, to be appointed by the Central Government in consultation with the Chief Justice of India.

- There will be two Full time or Part time Members from amongst eminent persons having substantial knowledge and experience in institutional arbitration, both domestic and international.

- Also, one representative of a recognised body of commerce and industry shall be chosen on rotational basis as Part time Member.

- Secretary, Department of Legal Affairs, Financial Adviser nominated by the Department of Expenditure and Chief Executive Officer, NDIAC shall be ex-officio Members.

**Background:**
The New Delhi International Arbitration Centre Bill, 2019, could not be taken up for consideration and passing by the Rajya Sabha in the recently concluded 248th Session. Further the Parliament has been adjourned sine die on 13th February, 2019. As per the provisions of Article 107(5) of the Constitution of India, a Bill, which has been passed by the Lok Sabha but is still pending in the Rajya Sabha, shall lapse on dissolution of the Lok Sabha, which is likely to take place in near future.

Therefore, the Government in view of the urgency to make India a hub of institutionalised arbitration and promote 'ease of doing business’ has decided to promulgate an Ordinance namely "The New Delhi International Arbitration Centre Ordinance, 2019".

*(Adapted from PIB)*

### 3. National Mineral Policy, 2019 (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Polity & Governance)

The Union Cabinet, chaired by the Prime Minister Narendra Modi has approved National Mineral Policy 2019.

**Benefits:**
The New National Mineral Policy will ensure more effective regulation. It will lead to sustainable mining sector development in future while addressing the issues of project affected persons especially those residing in tribal areas.
Objective:-
The aim of National Mineral Policy 2019 is to have a more effective, meaningful and implementable policy that brings in further transparency, better regulation and enforcement, balanced social and economic growth as well as sustainable mining practices.

Details:
The National Mineral Policy 2019 includes provisions which will give boost to mining sector such as
- introduction of Right of First Refusal for RP/PL holders,
- encouraging the private sector to take up exploration,
- auctioning in virgin areas for composite RP cum PL cum ML on revenue share basis,
- encouragement of merger and acquisition of mining entities and
- transfer of mining leases and creation of dedicated mineral corridors to boost private sector mining areas.
- The 2019 Policy proposes to grant status of industry to mining activity to boost financing of mining for private sector and for acquisitions of mineral assets in other countries by private sector
- It also mentions that Long term import export policy for mineral will help private sector in better planning and stability in business
- The Policy also mentions rationalize reserved areas given to PSUs which have not been used and to put these areas to auction, which will give more opportunity to private sector for participation
- The Policy also mentions to make efforts to harmonize taxes, levies & royalty with world benchmarks to help private sector

Among the changes introduced in the National Mineral Policy, 2019 include the focus on make in India initiative and Gender sensitivity in terms of the vision. In so far as the regulation in Minerals is concerned, E-Governance, IT enabled systems, awareness and Information campaigns have been incorporated. Regarding the role of state in mineral development online public portal with provision for generating triggers at higher level in the event of delay of clearances has been put in place. NMP 2019 aims to attract private investment through incentives while the efforts would be made to maintain a database of mineral resources and tenements under mining tenement systems. The new policy focusses on use coastal waterways and inland shipping for evacuation and transportation of minerals and encourages dedicated mineral corridors to facilitate the transportation of minerals. The utilization of the district mineral fund for equitable development of project affected persons and areas. NMP 2019 proposes a long term export import policy for the mineral sector to provide stability and as an incentive for investing in large scale commercial mining activity.

The 2019 Policy also introduces the concept of Inter-Generational Equity that deals with the well-being not only of the present generation but also of the generations to come and also proposes to constitute an inter-ministerial body to institutionalize the mechanism for ensuring sustainable development in mining.
Background:

In compliance of the directions of the apex Court, the Ministry of Mines constituted a committee on 14.08.2017 under the chairmanship of Dr. K Rajeswara Rao, Additional Secretary, Ministry of Mines to review NMP 2008. The Committee had members from Central Ministries/ Departments, State Governments, Industry Associations and Subordinate offices of Ministry of Mines. The Committee also invited concerned NGOs and Institutional Bodies to take part in the deliberation of the Committee meetings. The Comments/suggestions from the stakeholders were also sought. Based on the deliberations held at Committee meetings and stakeholders’ comments/ suggestions, Committee Report was prepared and submitted to the Ministry of Mines.

The Ministry of Mines accepted the committee Report and invited the comments/ suggestions of the stakeholders as part of the PLCP process. Based on the received comments/ suggestions received in PLCP process and the comments/ suggestions from the Central Ministries/ Departments the Ministry of Mines finalized the National Mineral Policy 2019.

(Adapted from PIB)


The Union Cabinet, chaired by the Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi has approved the National Policy on Software Products - 2019 to develop India as a Software Product Nation.

Major impact
The Software product ecosystem is characterized by innovations, Intellectual Property (IP) creation and large value addition increase in productivity, which has the potential to significantly boost revenues and exports in the sector, create substantive employment and entrepreneurial opportunities in emerging technologies and leverage opportunities available under the Digital India Programme, thus, leading to a boost in inclusive and sustainable growth.

Expenditure involved
Initially, an outlay of Rs.1500 Crore is involved to implement the programmes/ schemes envisaged under this policy over the period of 7 years. Rs1500 Crore is divided into Software Product Development Fund (SPDF) and Research & Innovation fund.

Implementation strategy and targets
The Policy will lead to the formulation of several schemes, initiatives, projects and measures for the development of Software products sector in the country as per the roadmap envisaged therein.

To achieve the vision of NPSP-2019, the Policy has the following five Missions:
I. To promote the creation of a sustainable Indian software product industry, driven by intellectual property (IP), leading to a ten-fold increase in India share of the Global Software product market by 2025.

II. To nurture 10,000 technology startups in software product industry, including 1000 such technology startups in Tier-II and Tier-III towns & cities and generating direct and indirect employment for 3.5 million people by 2025.

III. To create a talent pool for software product industry through (i) up-skilling of 1,000,000 IT professionals, (ii) motivating 100,000 school and college students and (iii) generating 10,000 specialized professionals that can provide leadership.

IV. To build a cluster-based innovation driven ecosystem by developing 20 sectoral and strategically located software product development clusters having integrated ICT infrastructure, marketing, incubation, R&D/testbeds and mentoring support.

V. In order to evolve and monitor scheme & programmes for the implementation of this policy, National Software Products Mission will be set up with participation from Government, Academia and Industry.

Background:
The Indian IT Industry has predominantly been a service Industry. However, a need has been felt to move up the value chain through technology oriented products and services. To create a robust software product ecosystem the Government has approved the National Policy on Software Products - 2019, which aims to develop India as the global software product hub, driven by innovation, improved commercialisation, sustainable Intellectual Property (IP), promoting technology start-ups and specialized skill sets. Further, the Policy aims to align with other Government initiatives such as Start-up India, Make in India and Digital India, Skill India etc so as to create Indian Software products Industry of USD ~70-80 billion with direct & indirect employment of ~3.5 million by 2025.

(Adapted from PIB)

5. Understanding Articles 370, 35A (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Polity & Governance)

A recent central ordinance, which extends reservation to SCs and STs in J&K, throws the spotlight on Article 35A, as well as Article 370 from which it derives. While regional political leaders have warned against dilution of Article 35A, petitions challenging it are due to come up in SC. What are these two provisions?
What is Article 370?
Included in the Constitution on October 17, 1949, Article 370 exempts J&K from the Indian Constitution (except Article 1 and Article 370 itself) and permits the state to draft its own Constitution.

It restricts Parliament’s legislative powers in respect of J&K. For extending a central law on subjects included in the Instrument of Accession (IoA), mere “consultation” with the state government is needed. But for extending it to other matters, “concurrence” of the state government is mandatory.

What were the terms included in the IoA for Kashmir?
The Schedule appended to the Instrument of Accession gave Parliament the power to legislate in respect of J&K only on Defence, External Affairs and Communications.

In Kashmir’s Instrument of Accession in Clause 5, Raja Hari Singh, ruler of J&K, explicitly mentioned that the terms of “my Instrument of Accession cannot be varied by any amendment of the Act or of Indian Independence Act unless such amendment is accepted by me by an Instrument supplementary to this Instrument”.

Clause 7 said “nothing in this Instrument shall be deemed to commit me in any way to acceptance of any future constitution of India or to fetter my discretion to enter into arrangements with the Government of India under any such future constitution”.

How did the accession come about?
Raja Hari Singh had initially decided to remain independent and sign standstill agreements with India and Pakistan, and Pakistan in fact signed it. But following an invasion from tribesmen and Army men in plainclothes from Pakistan, he sought the help of India, which in turn sought the accession of Kashmir to India. Hari Singh signed the Instrument of Accession on October 26, 1947 and Governor General Lord Mountbatten accepted it on October 27, 1947.

India’s stand on accession
It was India’s stated policy that wherever there was a dispute on accession, it should be settled in accordance with the wishes of people rather than a unilateral decision of the ruler of the princely state. In India’s acceptance of the IoA, Lord Mountbatten stated that “it is my Government’s wish that as soon as law and order have been restored in Kashmir and her soil is cleared of the invader, the question of the State’s accession be settled by a reference to the people”. India regarded accession as purely temporary and provisional, as stated in the Government of India’s White Paper on J&K in 1948. In a letter to J&K Prime Minister Sheikh Abdullah dated May 17, 1949, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru with the concurrence of Vallabhbhai Patel and N Gopalaswami Ayyangar wrote: “It has been settled policy of Government of India, which on many occasions has been stated both by Sardar Patel and me, that the Constitution of Jammu and Kashmir is a matter for determination by the people of the state represented in a Constituent Assembly convened for the purpose.”

How was Article 370 enacted?
The original draft was given by the Government of J&K. Following modification and negotiations, Article 306A (now 370) was passed in the Constituent Assembly on May 27, 1949. Moving the motion, Ayyangar said that though accession was complete, India had offered to have a plebiscite taken when the conditions were created, and if accession was not ratified then “we shall not stand in the way of Kashmir separating herself away from India”. On October 17, 1949, when Article 370 was finally included in the Constitution by India’s Constituent Assembly, Ayyangar reiterated India’s commitment to plebiscite and drafting of a separate constitution by J&K’s Constituent Assembly.

**Was Article 370 a temporary provision?**

It is the first article of Part XXI of the Constitution. The heading of this part is ‘Temporary, Transitional and Special Provisions’. Article 370 could be interpreted as temporary in the sense that the J&K Constituent Assembly had a right to modify/delete/retain it; it decided to retain it. Another interpretation was that accession was temporary until a plebiscite. The Union government, in a written reply in Parliament last year, said there is no proposal to remove Article 370. Delhi High Court in Kumari Vijayalaksmi (2017) too rejected a petition that said Article 370 is temporary and its continuation is a fraud on the Constitution. The Supreme Court in April 2018 said that despite the headnote using the word “temporary”, Article 370 is not temporary. In Sampat Prakash (1969) the SC refused to accept Article 370 as temporary. A five-judge Bench said "Article 370 has never ceased to be operative". Thus, it is a permanent provision.

**Can Article 370 be deleted?**

Yes, Article 370(3) permits deletion by a Presidential Order. Such an order, however, is to be preceded by the concurrence of J&K’s Constituent Assembly. Since such an Assembly was dissolved on January 26, 1957, one view is it cannot be deleted anymore. But the other view is that it can be done, but only with the concurrence of the State Assembly.

**What is Article 370’s significance for the Indian Union?**

Article 370 itself mentions Article 1, which includes J&K in the list of states. Article 370 has been described as a tunnel through which the Constitution is applied to J&K. Nehru, however, said in Lok Sabha on November 27, 1963 that “Article 370 has eroded”. India has used Article 370 at least 45 times to extend provisions of the Indian Constitution to J&K. This is the only way through which, by mere Presidential Orders, India has almost nullified the effect of J&K’s special status. By the 1954 order, almost the entire Constitution was extended to J&K including most Constitutional amendments. Ninety-four of 97 entries in the Union List are applicable to J&K; 26 out of 47 items of the Concurrent List have been extended.; 260 of 395 Articles have been extended to the state, besides 7 of 12 Schedules.

The Centre has used Article 370 even to amend a number of provisions of J&K’s Constitution, though that power was not given to the President under Article 370. Article 356 was extended though a similar provision that was already in Article 92 of the J&K Constitution, which required that President’s Rule could be ordered only with the concurrence of the President. To change provisions for the Governor being elected by the Assembly, Article 370 was used to convert it into a nominee of the President. To extend President’s rule beyond one year in Punjab, the government needed the 59th, 64th, 67th and 68th Constitutional Amendments, but achieved the same result in J&K just by invoking
Article 370. Again, Article 249 (power of Parliament to make laws on State List entries) was extended to J&K without a resolution by the Assembly and just by a recommendation of the Governor. In certain ways, Article 370 reduces J&K’s powers in comparison to other states. It is more useful for India today than J&K.

Is there any ground in the view that Article 370 is essential for J&K being a part of India? Article 3 of the J&K Constitution declares J&K to be an integral part of India. In the Preamble to the Constitution, not only is there no claim to sovereignty, but there is categorical acknowledgement about the object of the J&K Constitution being “to further define the existing relationship of the state with the Union of India as its integral part thereof. Moreover people of state are referred as ‘permanent residents’ not ‘citizens’.” Article 370 is not an issue of integration but of autonomy. Those who advocate its deletion are more concerned with uniformity rather than integration.

What is Article 35A?
Article 35A stems from Article 370, having been introduced through a Presidential Order in 1954. Article 35A is unique in the sense that it does not appear in the main body of the Constitution — Article 35 is immediately followed by Article 36 — but comes up in Appendix I. Article 35A empowers the J&K legislature to define the state’s permanent residents and their special rights and privileges.

Why is it being challenged?
The Supreme Court will examine whether it is unconstitutional or violates the basic structure of the Constitution. But unless it is upheld, many Presidential Orders may become questionable. Article 35A was not passed as per the amending process given in Article 368, but was inserted on the recommendation of J&K’s Constituent Assembly through a Presidential Order.

Article 370 is not only part of the Constitution but also part of federalism, which is basic structure. Accordingly, the court has upheld successive Presidential Orders under Article 370.

Since Article 35A predates basic structure theory of 1973, as per Waman Rao (1981), it cannot be tested on the touchstone of basic structure. Certain types of restrictions on purchase of land are also in place in several other states, including some in the Northeast and Himachal Pradesh. Domicile-based reservation in admissions and even jobs is followed in a number of states, including under Article 371D for undivided Andhra Pradesh. The Centre’s recent decision extending to J&K reservation benefits for SCs, STs, OBCs and those living along international borders, announced last week. throws the spotlight back on Article 35A.

Parent provision and its offshoot

Article 370
Part of the Constitution ever since it came into effect, it lays down that only two Articles would apply to J&K: Article 1, which defines India, and Article 370 itself. Article 370 says
other provisions of the Constitution can apply to J&K “subject to such exceptions and modifications as the President may by order specify”, with the concurrence of the state government and the endorsement of the J&K Constituent Assembly.

Article 35A
Introduced by a Presidential Order of 1954, it empowers the J&K legislature to define a “permanent resident” of the state, and to provide special rights and privileges to those permanent residents.

(Adapted from Indian Express)

6. How a change in law has made election candidates more accountable: Form 26 (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Polity & Governance)

Last week, the Law Ministry made it mandatory for election candidates to reveal their income-tax returns of the last five years, as well as the details of their offshore assets. This was done by amending Form 26, after the Election Commission of India wrote to the Ministry.

What is Form 26?
A candidate in an election is required to file an affidavit called Form 26 that furnishes information on her assets, liabilities, educational qualifications, criminal antecedents (convictions and all pending cases) and public dues, if any. The affidavit has to be filed along with the nomination papers and should be sworn before an Oath Commissioner or Magistrate of the First Class or before a Notary Public.

What has changed?
Earlier, a candidate had to only declare the last I-T return (for self, spouse and dependents). Details of foreign assets were not sought. Offshore assets, as per the February 26 notification, means “details of all deposits or investments in foreign banks and any other body or institution abroad and details of all assets and liabilities in foreign countries”. It is now mandatory for candidates to reveal their own income-tax returns of the last five years rather than only one, and the details of offshore assets, as well as the same details for their spouse, members of the Hindu Undivided Family (if the candidate is a karta or coparcener), and dependents.

Why must candidates file these details?
The objective behind introducing Form 26 was that it would help voters make an informed decision. The affidavit would make them aware of the criminal activities of a candidate, which could help prevent people with questionable backgrounds from being elected to an Assembly or Parliament. With the recent amendment, voters will know the extent to which a serving MP’s income grew during his five years in power.

When and how was it introduced?
Like most recent electoral reforms in India, Form 26 was introduced on September 3, 2002, following a court order. The genesis of the affidavit can be traced to the 170th Report of the
Law Commission, submitted in May 1999, which suggested steps for preventing criminals from entering electoral politics. One of the suggestions was to disclose the criminal antecedents as well as the assets of a candidate before accepting her nomination.

The then government did not act on the recommendation, leading to public interest litigation in Delhi High Court in December 1999. On November 2, 2000, the HC directed the EC to secure information on whether a candidate is accused of any offence(s) punishable by imprisonment, her assets as well as those of her spouse and dependents and any other information the EC considers necessary.

The Union government appealed in the Supreme Court, which not only agreed with the Delhi HC, but went a step ahead and directed the EC, in its order dated May 2, 2002, to ask candidates whether they have been convicted/acquitted/discharged of any criminal offence in the past, or accused in any pending cases six months before the filing of nomination, seek details of assets and liabilities of a candidate, her spouse and dependents, and the educational qualifications of the candidate.

On June 28, 2002, the EC issued an order to implement the verdict. However, in less than two months, the Union government promulgated an Ordinance diluting the EC’s order. As per the Representation of the People (Amendment) Ordinance, 2002 (subsequently replaced by an Act on December 28, 2002), a candidate was only expected to disclose whether she was accused of any offence punishable with imprisonment for two years or more in a pending case in which charges had been framed by a court, and whether she had been convicted of an offence and sentenced to a year’s imprisonment or more. The government subsequently also amended the Election Conduct Rules of 1961 on September 3, 2002, to ask candidates to disclose details of assets and liabilities of a candidate, her spouse and dependents, and the educational qualifications of the candidate.

What happens if a candidate lies in an affidavit?
A candidate is expected to file a complete affidavit. Leaving a few columns blank can render the affidavit “nugatory”. It is the responsibility of the Returning Officer (RO) to check whether Form 26 has been completed; the nomination paper can be rejected if the candidate fails to fill it in full.

If it is alleged that a candidate has suppressed information or lied in her affidavit, the complainant can seek an inquiry through an election petition. If the court finds the affidavit false, the candidate’s election can be declared void.

The current penalty for lying in an affidavit is imprisonment up to six months, or fine, or both. In May 2018, the EC had asked the government to make the filing of a false affidavit a “corrupt practice” under the election law, which would make the candidate liable for disqualification for up to six years. But nothing has been done by the government on this front.

Has anyone been punished for suppressing information in Form 26?
In 2016, Patna High Court annulled the Lok Sabha membership of Chhedi Paswan, the BJP member from Sasaram in Bihar, for not declaring a criminal case pending against him. Paswan had defeated former Lok Sabha Speaker Meira Kumar in 2014. The SC stayed the HC order, but suspended his voting right until a final verdict was delivered. This prevented Paswan from participating in the 2017 presidential election.

(Adapted From Indian Express)

7. Model code of conduct: Analysis (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Polity & Governance)

What is the model code of conduct?
The model code refers to a set of norms laid down by the Election Commission of India, with the consensus of political parties. It is not statutory. It spells out the dos and don’ts for elections. Political parties, candidates and polling agents are expected to observe the norms, on matters ranging from the content of election manifestos, speeches and processions, to general conduct, so that free and fair elections take place.

When was it introduced?
The EC traces its introduction to the 1960 Assembly elections in Kerala. During simultaneous polls to the Lok Sabha and Assemblies in several States in 1962, the EC circulated the code to all recognised parties, which followed it “by and large”. In October 1979, the EC came up with a comprehensive code that saw further changes after consultations with parties.

When is the code enforced?
The code comes into force on the announcement of the poll schedule and remains operational till the process is concluded, as provided in the notification. It is also applicable to a “caretaker” government on premature dissolution of a State Assembly.

How is it enforced?
The EC ensures that ruling parties at the Centre and in States adhere to the code, as part of its mandate to conduct free and fair elections under Article 324 of the Constitution. In case of electoral offences, malpractices and corrupt practices like inducements to voters, bribery, intimidation or any undue influence, the EC takes action against violators. Anyone can report the violations to the EC or approach the court. The EC has devised several mechanisms to take note of the offences, which include joint task forces of enforcement agencies and flying squads. The latest is the introduction of the cVIGIL mobile app through which audio-visual evidence of malpractices can be reported.

What are the key malpractices?
Any activity aggravating existing differences or creating mutual hatred or causing tension between different castes and communities, religious or linguistic, is a corrupt practice under the Representation of the People Act. Making an appeal to caste or communal feelings to secure votes and using places of worship for campaigning are offences under the Act. Bribery to voters is both a corrupt practice and an electoral offence under the Act and
Section 171B of the Indian Penal Code. Intimidation of voters is also an electoral offence, while impersonating them is punishable under the IPC. Serving or distributing liquor on election day and during the 48 hours preceding it is an electoral offence. Holding public meetings during the 48-hour period ending with the hour fixed for the closing of the poll is also an offence.

What restrictions does the code impose?
According to the EC, the code states that the party in power — whether at the Centre or in the States — should ensure that it does not use its official position for campaigning. Ministers and other government authorities cannot announce financial grants in any form. No project or scheme which may have the effect of influencing the voter in favour of the party in power can be announced, and Ministers cannot use official machinery for campaign purposes.

(Adapted from The Hindu)

8. On the belated acquittal of death row convicts (Relevant for GS Mains Paper II; Polity & Governance)

Who are now acquitted?
Six members of a nomadic tribe spent 16 years in prison in Maharashtra; three of them were on death row for 13 of these years, while the other three faced the gallows for nearly a decade. One of them was a juvenile at the time of the offence. And all this for a crime they did not commit. The only silver lining for the six convicts is that even though 10 years had elapsed since the Supreme Court imposed the death penalty on them, the sentence was not carried out. Hearing on their review petitions became an occasion for another Bench of the Supreme Court to revisit the 2009 verdict.

A three-judge Bench has now found that unreliable testimony had been used to convict the six men. One of the two eyewitnesses had identified four others from police files as members of the gang that had raided their hut in 2003, but these four were not apprehended. The gang had stolen ₹3,000 and some ornaments, killed five members of the family, including a 15-year-old girl, who was also raped. It is possible that the heinous nature of the crime had influenced the outcome of the case. The belief that condign punishment is necessary for rendering complete justice could be behind courts brushing aside discrepancies or improvements in the evidence provided by witnesses.

On a fresh hearing of the appeals, the court has concluded that the accused, who were roped in as accused in this case after being found to be involved in an unrelated crime elsewhere, were innocent.

Case proves that death penalty should be abolished
The case, in itself, holds a strong argument against the retention of the death penalty on the statute book. Had the sentence against these six been carried out, the truth would have been buried with them. In recent years, the Supreme Court has been limiting the scope for resorting to the death penalty by a series of judgments that recognise the rights of death
row convicts. A few years ago it ruled that review petitions in cases of death sentence should be heard in open court. In a country notorious for “the law’s delay”, it is inevitable that the long wait on death row, either for a review hearing or for the disposal of a mercy petition, could ultimately redound to the benefit of the convicts and their death sentences altered to life terms. In a system that many say favours the affluent and the influential, the likelihood of institutional bias against the socially and economically weak is quite high. Also, there is a perception that the way the “rarest of rare cases” norm is applied by various courts is arbitrary and inconsistent. The clamour for justice often becomes a call for the maximum sentence. In that sense, every death sentence throws up a moral dilemma on whether the truth has been sufficiently established. The only way out of this is the abolition of the death penalty altogether.

(Adapted from The Hindu)

9. Official Secrets Act: what it covers; when it has been used, questioned (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Polity & Governance)

In the Supreme Court, the government threatened to invoke the Official Secrets Act against two publications that had run reports on the Rafale deal, on the basis of documents which, the government claimed, had been stolen from the Defence Ministry.

What is the Official Secrets Act?
OSA in short, it has its roots in the British colonial era. The original version was The Indian Official Secrets Act (Act XIV), 1889. This was brought in with the main objective of curbing the voice of a large number of newspapers that had come up in several languages and were opposing the Raj's policies. It was amended and made more stringent in the form of The Indian Official Secrets Act, 1904, during Lord Curzon's tenure as Viceroy of India. In 1923, a newer version was notified. The Indian Official Secrets Act (Act No XIX of 1923) was extended to all matters of secrecy and confidentiality in governance in the country.

What comes under its purview?
It broadly deals with two aspects — spying or espionage, covered under Section 3, and disclosure of other secret information of the government, under Section 5. Secret information can be any official code, password, sketch, plan, model, article, note, document or information. Under Section 5, both the person communicating the information, and the person receiving the information, can be punished.

For classifying a document, a government Ministry or Department follows the Manual of Departmental Security Instructions, 1994, not under OSA. Also, OSA itself does not say what a “secret” document is. It is the government’s discretion to decide what falls under the ambit of a “secret” document to be charged under OSA. It has often been argued that the law is in direct conflict with the Right to Information Act, 2005.

Between the RTI Act and OSA, which has primacy?
Section 22 of the RTI Act provides for its primacy vis-a-vis provisions of other laws, including OSA. This gives the RTI Act an overriding effect, notwithstanding anything
inconsistent with the provisions of OSA. So if there is any inconsistency in OSA with regard to furnishing of information, it will be superseded by the RTI Act. However, under Sections 8 and 9 of the RTI Act, the government can refuse information. Effectively, if government classifies a document as “secret” under OSA Clause 6, that document can be kept outside the ambit of the RTI Act, and the government can invoke Sections 8 or 9. Legal experts see this as a loophole.

**Has there been any effort to change provisions of OSA?**

In 1971, the Law Commission became the first official body to make an observation regarding OSA. In its report on ‘Offences Against National Security’, it observed that “it agrees with the contention” that “merely because a circular is marked secret or confidential, it should not attract the provisions of the Act, if the publication thereof is in the interest of the public and no question of national emergency and interest of the State as such arises”. The Law Commission, however, did not recommend any changes to the Act.

In 2006, the Second Administrative Reforms Commission (ARC) recommended that OSA be repealed, and replaced with a chapter in the National Security Act containing provisions relating to official secrets. Observing that OSA was “incongruous with the regime of transparency in a democratic society”, the ARC referred to the 1971 Law Commission report that had called for an “umbrella Act” to be passed to bring together all laws relating to national security.

In 2015, the present government set up a committee to look into provisions of the OSA in light of the RTI Act. It submitted its report to the Cabinet Secretariat on June 16, 2017, recommending that OSA be made more transparent and in line with the RTI Act.

**What are the major instances when OSA has been invoked?**

One of the oldest and longest criminal trials involving OSA is the 1985 Coomar Narain spy case. Twelve former staff members in the Prime Minister’s Office and Rashtrapati Bhavan Secretariat were sentenced to 10 years’ imprisonment in 2002. They were found guilty of entering into a criminal conspiracy with officials of the French, Polish and German embassies, communicating secret official codes, classified documents and information pertaining to defence, shipping, transport, finance, planning, and R&AW and Intelligent Bureau reports.

The other high-profile case was the ISRO spy case targeting scientist S Nambi Narayan. Before his recent acquittal, he had faced a criminal trial under OSA, and was accused of passing on rocket and cryogenic technology to Pakistan for illegal gratification.

The most recent conviction under OSA came in 2018, when a Delhi court sentenced former diplomat Madhuri Gupta, who had served at the Indian High Commission in Islamabad, to three years in jail for passing on sensitive information to the ISI.

In another high-profile case, then Kashmir Times journalist Iftikhar Gilani was arrested in 2002 and charged under OSA.

*(Adapted from Indian Express)*
10. Forest rights of traditional dwellers and SC order (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Polity & Governance)

Eviction order put on hold
On February 28, the Supreme Court put on hold its February 13 order directing states to evict tribals and other forest-dwellers whose claims over encroached forest land had been rejected under the law that recognises these rights and provides a framework for recording them.

Reason for holding order
Following protests, the Union Tribal Affairs Ministry and the Gujarat government had sought a modification of the court’s February 13 direction. These protests are ongoing — large demonstrations took place across the country for demands that included promulgation of an ordinance to overturn the Supreme Court’s order.

What was February 13 order?
The February 13 order came on a challenge to The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 — commonly known as The Forest Rights Act (FRA) — filed by three wildlife NGOs. The court directed 17 states that had filed affidavits on claims rejected under the Act (adding up to a total of 11,91,327 claims) to ensure that in all cases “where rejection orders have been passed, eviction will be carried out on or before the next date of hearing”.

How did the claims process work?
The process of filing claims began in 2008. The FRA recognises both individual forest rights (IFRs) and community forest rights (CFRs), which are claimed by gram sabhas. Scrutiny takes place at four levels — gram sabha, sub-divisional level committee (SDLC), district-level committee (DLC), and state-level monitoring committee (SLMC). While the SLMC monitors the process, appeals under the law lie up to the DLC, whose decisions on the record of forest rights “shall be final and binding”.

Scheduled Tribe (ST) claimants had to furnish two pieces of evidence that they were in possession of the land in question before the cut-off date of December 13, 2005; Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (OTFDs) had to show that they had been residing in the village for 75 years prior to the cut-off date, and were dependent on it for their livelihood.

The disputes are mostly over IFRs. As per a statement issued by the Tribal Affairs Ministry on August 30, 2018, the total number of rejected claims are in the order of 19.34 lakh (of which 18.88 lakh are individual claims) — much more than the cumulative number in the affidavits filed by states in the Supreme Court. Some 18 lakh claims have been accepted.
What is the argument about the order?
It is essentially about whether some claimants are being evicted unfairly. Both groups of activists — those who back the evictions and those who oppose it — have pointed to satellite pictures from before and after the December 13, 2005 cut-off date in support of their arguments. While tribal activists have claimed that pictures from Gujarat establish that most rejected claims were rejected unfairly, forest and wildlife activists have said satellite images prove that a large number of claims in Maharashtra and Gujarat were bogus.

What do forest and wildlife activists say?
According to the three petitioners, Praveen Bhargava of Wildlife First, Kishore Rithe of Nature Conservation Society, and Poonam and Harshavardhan Dhanwatey of Tiger Research and Conservation Trust (TRACT), “Of the over 19 lakh rejected claims, over 14 lakh were rejected at the gram sabha level itself. Tribal activists have always insisted that the gram sabha’s word would be final. So, why are they objecting to the rejections?”

Satellite images of “several bogus claims”, the petitioners say, “have proved that they were encroachments after the cut-off date”. Claims that the February 13 order would uproot tribals from their homes were tendentious, they argue: “Almost all those whose claims have been rejected already own legally-held lands. It is just that they have to give up the additional lands that they have encroached upon after the cut-off date.”

The forest and wildlife activists argue that over 60% of forest-dwellers are landless, “which means only 40% are trying to control the entire land in contention”. This illegally occupied land, they say, can be given to the village community under CFRs instead of IFRs. “It will provide the landless with additional income opportunities from the forest produce that they have traditionally gathered.”

What is the argument of tribal activists?
Ambarish Mehta and Trupti Parekh of the tribal NGO ARCH-Vahini cite opposite findings from Dediapada tehsil in Gujarat’s Narmada district. “Our study of 4,600 cases — 2,000 of them approved and 2,600 unapproved — shows that only 2% of cases were of encroachments after the cut-off date. Our findings were corroborated both by the Gujarat government’s forest research institute GEER Foundation and by the High Court, which ordered the grant of approval to the rejected cases. But officials haven’t moved on it yet.”

According to Mehta, in many states, Forest Department beat guards steered the process at the gram sabha level. “Our satellite imagery study has also proved that not only were claims wrongly rejected, the area too, was wrongly reduced by an average of about an acre each.”

What study are the activists relying on?
The study, which the Supreme Court also considered, was conducted by the Maharashtra government’s Tribal Research and Training Institute (TRTI). It considered 40,428 finally approved IFR cases until 2007-08, 35,044 of which, covering an area of 51,600 hectares, were found to be properly measured. 570 ha were changed from forest cover to agriculture, and 641 ha from barren to agriculture after the cut-off date, the study found. A large number of cases were observed in Jalgaon (539) and Dhule (102).

Another round of analysis of satellite imagery in 2011-12 showed that in six districts (Jalgaon, Nandurbar, Dhule, Nashik, Thane, Gadchiroli), the recognised area under cultivation had grown by 4% over the area under cultivation in 2007-08. Over the same period, forest and barren lands had come down from 910 ha to 433 ha and 5,476 ha to 4,605 ha respectively.

“This means the people have cleared forest cover and started cultivation there as well as in erstwhile barren land after the IFRs have been recognised on these lands,” the TRTI report said. “Further 406 cases in which forest/tree cover and 321 cases in which non-agriculture land is observed on images of 2011-12, same land had been allotted to more than one person and overlaps with more than 40% with adjacent land,” it said.

A study of satellite imagery carried out for the Maharashtra government by The Energy and Resources Institute (TERI) highlighted several instances in which cases of post-2005 encroachment had been granted rights. The TERI report, submitted in 2012, revealed that thousands of claims were of encroachments made after the cut-off date. An analysis of 66,300 cases covering 1,07,897 ha showed that 14,668 ha were encroached upon after the cut-off date. It also revealed that 1,466 cases were of claims made over lands measuring more than the permissible 4 ha.

So how reliable is the claims process?
In 2010, the N C Saxena Committee appointed by the Ministries of Tribal Affairs and Environment had pointed to several problems with the implementation of the FRA. A large number of cases had been disposed of without measuring the land, and there was an unnecessary rush to clear cases due to the elections in 2009, the Committee reported. Implementation was slow in Goa, Uttarakhand, Jharkhand, Himachal Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and the Northeast. There was inadequate representation of some sections in the Forest
Rights Committees (FRCs) of gram sabhas in violation of rules. Claims had been rejected without adequate grounds, certain claimants had been helped with evidence, and some claimants had been summarily evicted without proper verification. There were also cases of forest-cutting after the cut-off date.

The report said that no state other than Maharashtra had used methods like GPS, GIS, and satellite imagery to decide on claims. Maharashtra, ironically, saw two massive morchas by farmers, one of whose demands pertained to the non-granting of IFRs despite a better record — over 2 lakh out of over 3 lakh claims — than other states.

What is the area of forests at stake?
Bhargava of Wildlife First gave this estimate: The Tribal Affairs Ministry’s September 2018 report says that 18.88 lakh individual claims stand rejected after completion of due process. The total area for which individual titles have been granted is 18.87 lakh ha, or 1.03 ha per claim on average. If this average area per individual claim is applied to the 18.88 lakh rejected claims, the total area of forest land in possession of the claimants would work out to around 19.59 lakh ha.

“We have to also understand the difference between individual and community rights,” Bhargava said. “The latter doesn’t take away any forests. But by granting ineligible individual rights, we are not undoing the ‘historic injustice’ (as the FRA set out to do) done to tribals and OTFDs, but in fact doing historic injustice to precious forests that are already under grave threat from fast-accelerating climate change,” he said.

The TERI study worked with Cartosat-1 images of areas covered under 40,000 recognised forest rights cases in Jalgaon, Dhule, Nashik, Nandurbar, Gadchiroli, and Thane districts. “At least 8,104 ha, which is 20 per cent of the 40,000 ha average allotment in these cases, of ineligible forest land has been recognised,” the study said.

Said Rithe of Nature Conservation Society: “This study is up to 2012. If you consider cases in other parts of the state, and cases after 2012 as well, you can imagine the extent of ineligible allotments and claims.”

What is the way forward hereon?
The process in the Supreme Court is ongoing. Mohan Hirabai Hiralal, whose work on forests rights at Gadchiroli’s Mendha-Lekha village is reckoned as the harbinger of the CFR movement, said, “It’s true that large areas of forests were cleared after 2005, but studies like the one by ARCH-Vahini have proved that a huge number of claims have been wrongly rejected as well. Justice demands that claims are not rejected just because poor people are not able to produce sufficient evidence. Now that we have the technology to check the veracity of claims, why not use it?”

Mehta of ARCH-Vahini said he was open to the idea of revisiting not just the rejected cases but also the approved ones by using satellite imagery. “This will also weed out fraudulently approved cases,” he said.
Rithe, however, argued: “In Gujarat, the Bhaskaracharya Institute for Space Applications and Geo-Informatics had proved in 2012 that 80% of claims were bogus.”

Say Rithe, Bhargava, and the Dhanwateys: “Three Benches since 2017 have sought to know what action has been initiated against unauthorised possession. They have also sought to know details like areas and numbers of claimants in both the ST and OTFD categories. These orders have come after repeated reminders to the states to file factual affidavits. The latest SC order was based on these affidavits. Also, while everybody seems to be worried about IFR claims, nobody is serious about notifying Critical Wildlife Areas as mandated by the FRA. The logical step ahead is to free illegally occupied forest land from the possession of unauthorised claimants.”

(Adapted from Indian Express)

11. The lowdown on the Official Secrets Act (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Polity & Governance)

What does it mean?
An ‘Official Secrets Act’ is a generic term that is used to refer to a law — originally invented by the British, and then exported across the Commonwealth — that is designed to keep certain kinds of information confidential, including, but not always limited to, information involving the affairs of state, diplomacy, national security, espionage and other state secrets. Across multiple countries, the Official Secrets Acts follow a similar pattern: classifying certain categories of information as “official secrets,” and then providing stiff penalties for any sharing, dissemination or publication of such information.

What are its traits?
India’s Official Secrets Act (OSA) dates back to 1923, unsurprisingly a creation of the colonial regime. The 1923 Act includes penalties for spying (which, in turn, includes even “approaching” or being “in the vicinity of” a prohibited place, publishing any “sketch” or “plan” that might be useful to the enemy, with a prejudicial purpose.) Additionally, however, it punishes the communication of any information obtained in contravention of the Act, which could prejudice the security of the state, or friendly relations with foreign states. Furthermore, it punished people who knowingly receive such information — a provision clearly designed to capture investigative journalism.

What is the criticism?
The primary critique of the Act is that it flips the constitutive logic of a democratic republic, where the state is supposed to be transparent to its citizens. While it is nobody’s case that all information ought to be made public – for example, troop movements in wartime or confidential trade negotiation positions, to take two examples, obviously need to be secret – there should be a heavy presumption against secrecy. Under the OSA, however, the state is given wide powers to place information off-limits to citizens, simply by stipulating that certain documents are secret — and then draconian powers to punish them in case it is made public, regardless of the public interest involved. This makes whistle-blowing and
investigative journalism a perilous enterprise, no matter how critically important it might be to have the information public.

**But what about the RTI?**
The scope of the OSA has been somewhat diluted, thanks to the Right to Information Act. Section 22 of the RTI Act expressly says it overrides the OSA. In other words, it is not open to the government to deny access to a document demanded through an RTI question, on the basis that it has been marked secret under the OSA. Rather, the government will have to justify its decision to withhold information under the arguably narrower exception clauses of the RTI Act itself.

**How often is it used?**
The OSA is not used very often, but it is used enough times to keep it in the news, and to exercise a chilling effect (especially on investigative journalism). Recent, high-profile cases involving the OSA include that of the journalist Iftikhar Gilani (the case was withdrawn), the diplomat Madhuri Gupta (who was convicted of espionage charges), and the scientist Nambi Narayanan (who was charged, tried, and acquitted of espionage charges — and later directed to be paid compensation by the Supreme Court).

**What is its future?**
As recently as 2006, the Home Ministry recommended substantial changes to the OSA, in line with the privacy regime established by the RTI. From time to time, there are calls to repeal the OSA and replace it with a National Security Act that is more consistent with the aspirations of an open, democratic republic. However, the OSA has proved resilient, and it would be reasonable to assume that we are stuck with it for at least the medium-term future.

(Adapted from The Hindu)

12. 17th Lok Sabha Lok Sabha polls (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Polity & Governance)

**Important facts**
1. Elections to the 17th Lok Sabha will be conducted in seven phases across the country from April 11 to May 19. The counting of votes will be on May 23.

2. The Model Code of Conduct came into effect immediately on the announcement of the schedule.

3. The Commission reiterated that strict action would be taken for the use of photographs of defence personnel in the election propaganda. In a letter to all the recognised parties on Saturday, the electoral body asked the parties, their candidates and cadres to desist from displaying photographs of Defence personnel or functions involving them in advertisements, or otherwise.
4. Assembly elections in Andhra Pradesh, Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim and Odisha will be conducted simultaneously with the Lok Sabha elections in these respective States. However, the EC is yet to take a call on Assembly polls in Jammu and Kashmir owing to the security scenario.

5. Polls in 22 States and Union Territories will be conducted in a single phase. Two-phase elections are in Karnataka, Rajasthan, Manipur and Tripura, while Assam and Chhattisgarh will have three phases. Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Odisha will be covered in four phases, Jammu and Kashmir in five, and Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal in seven phases. In Anantnag, election will he held in three rounds.

6. As on January 1, about 900 million people were eligible to vote, as per the electoral rolls, compared to 814.5 million in 2014. Among them are a sizable number of those born at the turn of the millennium. Over 15 million fall in the 18-19 years age group. While 71,735 overseas electors have been enrolled, more than 16.77 lakh are service electors.

7. There are more than 10.35 lakh polling stations, 10% higher than in 2014.

8. The Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT) machines, a total of 17.4 lakh units, will be used for the first time at all the stations.

9. The CEC said the standard operating procedure for the security of EVMs and VVPATs had been revised to ensure that their end-to-end movement was monitored through GPS-fitted transport vehicles.

10. There are clear guidelines for use of social media by political parties and candidates. Various social media platforms shall also remain under the close and stringent vigil of the Commission for any content aimed at vitiating the electoral process or designed to disturb peace, tranquillity, social harmony and public order.

The Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI) is to workout the details accordingly. With the input of Facebook, Twitter, Google, WhatsApp and Share Chat, the IAMAI has already responded and confirmed its eagerness to cooperate with the EC.

As decided, the intermediaries have already started awareness campaigns for users highlighting the EC activities. The exercise will cover awareness campaigns regarding unlawful conduct during election.

The platforms have appointed grievance officers and will deploy fact checkers to identify fake news and other malpractices.

**The platforms are already taking actions against fake accounts and spam.**

Also, as directed, they will accept only pre-certified political advertisements during elections and will share the expenditure incurred on this account with the election authorities.
(Adapted from The Hindu)

13. Supreme Court recalled its own 2009 order sentencing six convicts to death: Analysis (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Polity & Governance)

The Supreme Court recalled its own 2009 order sentencing six convicts to death, and acquitted them because of glitches in the prosecution case, which involved the murder of five persons. It brought the spotlight on the varying ways in which courts have awarded and commuted the death sentence over the years.

Death penalty in Indian laws
India has the death penalty in 46 provisions under various laws. It is marked by the possibility of judicial error. As British legal philosopher H L A Hart said, “It would be a terrible thing if a man has been hanged for a crime which he has not committed; in such a case, law itself would be a murderer.”

Indian Constituent Assembly member Shibban Lal Saksena, who himself had been on death row for 26 months, argued in 1949 that of 37 people hanged during that period, 7 were innocent. B R Ambedkar argued for abolition of the death penalty but the Constituent Assembly left the issue to the Supreme Court and Parliament. Eventually, Parliament and the judiciary could not abolish the death penalty; the 35th report of the Law Commission (1967) recommended retention of the provision.

New Code of Criminal Procedure
The new Code of Criminal Procedure (1973) required “special reasons” to be given if death was preferred over a life sentence. Under the old CrPC (1898), reasons were to be given if the death penalty was not imposed. This requirement was removed in 1955. The 187th report of the Law Commission (2003) recommended use of a lethal injection in addition of hanging.

What are the observation of Supreme Court?
The court itself observed in Santosh Kumar Bariyar (2009) that the death penalty is imposed “arbitrarily or freakishly” and added: “There is no uniformity of precedents”. Again in Sangeet (2013), the court acknowledged that “principled sentencing” has become “judge-centric”. In Swami Shraddhanand (2008), the court said award of the death sentence depends on the “personal predilection of judges”. In Mohd Farooq (2010), it held that “the precedent of death penalty… is itself crumbling under the weight of disparate interpretations.”

Rulings on constitutionality
In Bachan Singh (1980), the matter was referred to a Constitution Bench that upheld the constitutionality by a 4-1 majority. It said special reasons should relate to exceptional circumstances of a case in terms of both “crime” and “criminal”. The court did not agree that wide discretion given to judges is arbitrary, but did say that death should be given only in “rarest of rare” cases when alternative option is unquestionably foreclosed. Justice P
Bhagwati, in a minority opinion, observed that death penalty being arbitrary and discriminatory is unconstitutional.

**Rarest of rare**

In a number of cases such as Lok Pal Singh (1985) and Darshan Singh (1988), the death penalty was awarded without any reference to rarest of rare. In Mukund (1997) and Farooq (2002) it was referred but not applied.

*(Adapted from Indian Express)*

**13. The 13-point, 200-point quota roster conundrum (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Polity & Governance)*

The ordinance that overturned the Supreme Court-backed formula for implementing reservations in university jobs has been challenged. How is making the department the unit for quotas different from making the institution the unit?

**Why is there a controversy over job appointments in higher education?**

Most appointments to central government jobs are recommended by bodies like the Staff Selection Commission or Union Public Service Commission. These organisations generally deal with posts with uniform eligibility criteria — thus, everyone who takes the Civil Services Examination is eligible for IAS, IPS, IFS, or other central services. This makes it easier to distribute posts among qualified candidates in the reserved and unreserved categories.

Earmarking reserved posts in teaching jobs in universities is more complex. This is because fewer vacancies are advertised, and vacancies in different departments are not comparable. For instance, the eligibility for the post of assistant professor in political science is different from the eligibility for the same post in another subject.

**So how are reserved posts earmarked?**

A position in the roster for any reserved group is reached by dividing 100 by the percentage of the quota that the group is entitled to. For example, the OBC quota is 27% — therefore, they get $100/27 = 3.7$, that is, every 4th post for which a vacancy arises. SCs, likewise, get every $100/15 = 6.66$, that is, every 7th post, and STs get $100/7.5 = 13.33$, that is, every 14th vacancy. Thus, the lower the percentage of reservation provided to a category, the longer it will take for a candidate from that category to be appointed to a reserved post.

**What is the ‘13/200-point’ roster? Why are reserved categories objecting to the 13-point roster?**

As per the formula for determining reserved posts, it is only after 13.33 positions (14 in round figure) are filled that every reserved category gets at least one post. The expression “13-point roster” reflects the fact that 13.33 (or 14) vacancies are required to complete one cycle of reservations.
Based on this, every 4th, 7th, 8th, 12th, and 14th vacancies are reserved for OBCs, SCs, OBCs, OBCs, STs respectively in the 13-point roster. Which means (i) there is no reservation for the first three positions and, (ii) even in the full cycle of 14 positions, only five posts — or 35.7% — go to the reserved categories, which is well short of the constitutionally mandated ceiling of 49.5% (27% + 15% + 7.5%).

The new 10% quota for the economically weaker sections (EWS) has widened this gap further. This is because every 10th post (100/10 = 10) is now reserved for EWS — which means six reserved seats in every cycle of 14, or 42.8% reservation when the ceiling is 59.5% (49.5% + 10%).

There is another problem, which indeed, lies at the heart of the current controversy. In smaller departments, say, those with fewer than four teachers, the 13-point roster — in which reservation kicks in only with the fourth vacancy — allows a situation in which representation to reserved categories can be denied all together. And they can appoint five teachers from the ‘general category’ against only one from a reserved category (OBC).

So, in order to provide the constitutionally mandated 49.5% reservation, the University Grants Commission (UGC) started to treat the university/college as a ‘unit’ (rather than individual departments), and adopted what is called the ‘200-point roster’, which was already being used by the Department of Personal and Training for appointments in all central government services.

It is called ‘200-point’ since all reserved categories can get their constitutionally mandated quantum of reservation once 200 seats are filled. And since no single department in an institution can have 200 seats, it made sense to treat the whole institution/university (rather than the department) as the ‘unit’ to calculate the quota.

**Is the 200-point roster the ideal system?**

It is better than the 13-point roster. While the 13-point roster falls far short of the mandated percentage of reservation, the 200-point roster allows for it, provided exactly 200 appointments are made. The reservation falls short even here, if the number of appointments is either less or more than 200.

What makes the 200-point roster more effective in ensuring the broad goal of 49.5% reservations is the fact that the quota deficit in one department can be made up by another.

**How did the present controversy arise?**

The 200-point system of implementing reservations was adopted by all central universities by 2014. In April 2017, Allahabad High Court struck down the 200-point roster, saying “If the University is taken as a ‘Unit’ for every level of teaching and applying the roster, it could result in some departments/subjects having all reserved candidates and some having only unreserved candidates.”
The Supreme Court upheld this decision in June, and on March 5, 2018, the UGC notified changes to its guidelines, directing universities to treat the department, rather than the university or college, as the ‘unit’, thus bringing back the 13-point system. Following a furore, the Centre moved a Special Leave Petition in the Supreme Court in April. The court rejected the petition in January 2019. Last Thursday, the Cabinet cleared an ordinance to bring back the 200-point roster. But the ordinance was challenged in court the very next day.

**What are the main arguments of SC/ST/OBC groups against the 13-point roster?**
The proportion of reservation in the 13-point roster, irrespective of the number of posts filled, falls far short of the constitutionally mandated quota, in effect violating the Constitution itself.

The HC order created two standards in the implementation of reservations in faculty recruitment: department as the unit (13-point roster) for SC/ST/OBC appointments, and institution as the unit (200-point roster) for appointment of Physically Handicapped. If the 200-point roster is seen to create a disparity between the SC/ST/OBC and unreserved categories, isn’t the same problem created if the 13-point roster is followed for SC/ST/OBC and the 200-point roster for Physically Handicapped?

The problem of “some departments/subjects having all reserved candidates and some having only unreserved candidates” exists in the 13-point roster as well. On June 1, 2018, BHU advertised 80 posts, out of which 12 were reserved (under the 13-point roster). All these reserved posts were in the Department of Cardiothoracic Surgery and Otorhinolaryngology, while all posts in the Department of General Medicine were unreserved.

**What is the evidence from the actual working of the 13-point roster?**
The UGC report of 2016–17 shows the combined representation of SCs, STs, and OBCs among assistant professors, associate professors, and professors in all central universities (excluding colleges) were 32%, 7.8% and 5.4% respectively — less than the 49.5% reservation ceiling.

A glimpse of the future effect of the 13-point roster is visible in the advertisements for faculty positions after the UGC’s March 5, 2018 notification. Central University of Haryana advertised 80 seats, but none for SCs, STs, and OBCs. IGNTU (Amarkantak) advertised one reserved post out of 52, and Central University of Tamil Nadu advertised 2 reserved posts out of 65.

**What is the way out of this situation?**
Perhaps the best solution, without affecting the interests of unreserved categories, would be to make the roster (either 13-point or 200-point) for reserved positions by taking all reserved categories together (49.5%).
In this way, every second post \((100/49.5 \approx 2)\) will be reserved, which can then be distributed among all reserved categories as per their respective quotas (OBC 27\%, SC 15\%, ST 7.5\%).

(Adapted from Indian Express)

14. Assembly election campaigns could have a bearing on the parliamentary polls (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Polity & Governance)

Parliamentary elections in India have increasingly been influenced by State-level political variables beyond the performance of the ruling parties and the Opposition at the Centre.

State assembly elections on Lok Sabha elections
And this factor is likely to be even more salient in the four States facing simultaneous elections to the Assemblies and the Lok Sabha: Andhra Pradesh, Odisha, Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh.

Situation in Andhra Pradesh
In Andhra Pradesh, the two main rivals are regional forces, the Chandrababu Naidu-led Telugu Desam Party and the Y.S. Jaganmohan Reddy-led YSR Congress Party. In 2014, the TDP had successfully fought elections in alliance with the BJP, and the Congress faced a backlash because of the bifurcation of the State during its tenure. This time, however, with the TDP having broken its alliance with the BJP, the regional parties are in a direct contest, and the national parties relegated to being minor players.

Andhra Pradesh has faced acute fiscal concerns after bifurcation, and the TDP government would be keen to reassure voters over concerns about the State’s economy. It fared the best in the country on economic growth parameters, with a significant increase in per capita income during the last five years and successful delivery of irrigation schemes. On the flip side, delays in the construction of the new capital city and the ballooning public debt suggest that Andhra still has structural issues to overcome.

The TDP and the YSRCP have tried a game of one-upmanship on relations with the Centre and the denial of “special category status” for the State, which it is argued is crucial to overcome fiscal issues. Both parties have significant support bases among OBCs and other landowning communities, and the lack of any substantive differentiation between them could make this a closely contested election. The two parties are also likely to be important players in a post-election scenario at the national level.

Situation in Odisha
In Odisha, the Biju Janata Dal led by Naveen Patnaik has been in power for 19 years, having bucked anti-incumbency largely due to welfare-driven governance. Unlike in Andhra Pradesh, the Congress and particularly the BJP have a stronger presence. The BJP, buoyed by its performance in the 2017 local body elections, is expected to put up a stronger fight in the State’s Assembly and Lok Sabha polls. In fact, the BJP is keen to make up for expected losses in its strongholds in the north with gains in the east.
Situation in Sikkim
India's longest-serving Chief Minister, Pawan Kumar Chamling (in power since 1994), and his Sikkim Democratic Front are expected to face a more pronounced challenge from the Sikkim Krantikari Morcha and the new party launched by former footballer Bhaichung Bhutia, the Hamro Sikkim Party.

Situation in Arunachal Pradesh
In Arunachal Pradesh, the Permanent Resident Certificate issue will figure as a dominant narrative during the elections even as the ruling BJP seeks to link its campaign to the performance of the Central government.

(Adapted from The Hindu)

15. 2019 Lok Sabha polls: Decoding the Model Code of Conduct (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Polity & Governance)

What is the philosophy behind the Model Code of Conduct?
The Model Code of Conduct (MCC) is a consensus document. In other words, political parties have themselves agreed to keep their conduct during elections in check, and to work within the Code. The philosophy behind the MCC is that parties and candidates should show respect for their opponents, criticise their policies and programmes constructively, and not resort to mudslinging and personal attacks. The MCC is intended to help the poll campaign maintain high standards of public morality and provide a level playing field for all parties and candidates.

Adherence to the Code is most important for the government or party in power, because it is they who can skew the level playing field by taking decisions that can help them in the elections. At the time of the Lok Sabha elections, both the Union and state governments are covered under the MCC.

How has the MCC evolved over the years?
Kerala was the first state to adopt a code of conduct for elections. In 1960, ahead of the Assembly elections, the state administration prepared a draft code that covered important aspects of electioneering such as processions, political rallies, and speeches. The experiment was successful, and the Election Commission decided to emulate Kerala’s example and circulate the draft among all recognised parties and state governments for the Lok Sabha elections of 1962. However, it was only in 1974, just before the mid-term general elections, that the EC released a formal Model Code of Conduct. This Code was also circulated during parliamentary elections of 1977.

Until this time, the MCC was meant to guide the conduct of political parties and candidates only. However, on September 12, 1979, at a meeting of all political parties, the Commission was apprised of the misuse of official machinery by parties in power. The Commission was told that ruling parties monopolised public spaces, making it difficult for others to hold meetings. There were also examples of the party in power publishing advertisements at the
cost of the public exchequer to influence voters. At this meeting, political parties urged the Commission to change the Code. So the EC, just before the 1979 Lok Sabha elections, released a revised Model Code with seven parts, with one part devoted to the party in power and what it could and could not do once elections were announced.

The MCC has been revised on several occasions since then. The last time this happened was in 2014, when the Commission introduced Part VIII on manifestos, pursuant to the directions of the Supreme Court.

Part I deals with general precepts of good behaviour expected from candidates and political parties. Parts II and III focus on public meetings and processions. Parts IV and V describe how political parties and candidates should conduct themselves on the day of polling and at the polling booths.

Part VI is about the authority appointed by the EC to receive complaints on violations of the MCC. Part VII is on the party in power.

**So, what is permitted and what is not under the MCC for the party in power?**
The MCC forbids ministers (of state and central governments) from using official machinery for election work and from combining official visits with electioneering. Advertisements extolling the work of the incumbent government using public money are to be avoided. The government cannot announce any financial grants, promise construction of roads or other facilities, and make any ad hoc appointments in government or public undertaking during the time the Code is in force. Ministers cannot enter any polling station or counting centre except in their capacity as a voter or a candidate.

However, the Commission is conscious that the MCC must not lead to governance grinding to a complete halt. It has clarified that the Code does not stand in the way of ongoing schemes of development work or welfare, relief and rehabilitation measures meant for people suffering from drought, floods, and other natural calamities. However, the EC forbids the use of these works for election propaganda.

**Is social media covered under the MCC?**
The Election Commission has taken the view that the MCC will also apply to content posted by political parties and candidates on the Internet, including on social media sites. On October 25, 2013, the Commission laid down guidelines to regulate the use of social media by parties and candidates. Candidates have to provide their email address and details of accounts on Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, etc., and add the expenditure on advertisements posted on social media to their overall expenditure for the election.

Until Tuesday, when the EC ordered taking down of social media posts showing a poster of Wg Cdr Abhinandan, there were no major examples of the Commission having acted against violations of the MCC on social media. This is probably because the EC did not have a mechanism to coordinate with Internet companies to take down impermissible content. However, these firms have now assured that they would cooperate with the EC during the coming Lok Sabha elections.
Over what period does the MCC apply?
The date of enforcement of the MCC has evolved over years of tussle between the EC and the government. The Code now kicks in as soon as the election schedule is announced, and stays in force until the election process is completed. Thus, the Code came into effect on March 10, when the EC had its press conference to announce the Lok Sabha elections, and will remain in force until the Commission notifies the list of elected representatives. Counting of votes is scheduled for May 23.

The current arrangement is based on an agreement between the poll panel and the central government reached on April 16, 2001, after protracted negotiations. It was agreed that the MCC would be effective from the date of announcement of elections; however, the Commission can't make its announcement more than three weeks ahead of issuing the formal notification of elections. It was also agreed that the inauguration of any completed or new project would be done by civil servants, so that the MCC did not hurt the public interest. The agreement was put before the Supreme Court, after which the court disposed of a special leave petition filed by the Union government against a Punjab High Court judgment on the question of when the MCC should kick in.

Is the MCC legally enforceable?
Although the MCC has been around for almost four decades, its observance is left to parties and candidates. It is not a legally enforceable document, and the Commission usually uses moral sanction to get political parties and candidates to fall in line.

Governments have in the past attempted to amend The Representation of the People Act, 1951, to make some violations of the MCC illegal and punishable. Although the EC's stand in the mid-1980s was that Part VII of the MCC (dealing with the party in power) should have statutory backing, it changed its position after the conduct of Lok Sabha elections in the 1990s. The EC is now of the opinion that making the Code legally enforceable would be self-defeating because any violation must be responded to quickly — and this will not be possible if the matter goes to court.

But how does the EC enforce the MCC without statutory backing?
There are examples of the EC taking punitive action against violators. For instance, during Assembly elections in Madhya Pradesh in 2003, the then Chief Minister of Punjab Amarinder Singh used state government aircraft to travel from Chandigarh to Indore for an official purpose. From there he travelled to Bhopal to campaign. The EC forced him to pay the government the cost of the entire air journey from Chandigarh to Bhopal and back for having violated the provision of the MCC that forbids ministers from combining official work with electioneering.

Among the strictest of punitive actions under the MCC was taken by the EC during the Lok Sabha elections of 2014, when it banned BJP leader Amit Shah and Samajwadi Party leader Azam Khan from campaigning in Uttar Pradesh, and ordered criminal proceedings against both politicians for making "provocative" and "prejudicial" statements while canvassing. The ban on Shah was lifted after he apologised and promised to not violate the MCC again.
Khan showed no remorse, and he remained banned from campaigning for the rest of the election season.

*(Adapted from Indian Express)*

16. Possible overuse of contempt law: Shillong Times case (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Polity & Governance)

Meghalaya High Court order
The Meghalaya High Court’s order finding the Editor and Publisher of Shillong Times guilty of contempt, and asking them to “sit in a corner” till the rising of the court and imposing a fine of ₹2 lakh each, is a heavy-handed response to comments in the newspaper on the court’s earlier orders.

Why the order is criticies?
What makes the order even more unfortunate is the explicit threat to ban the newspaper and jail them if they fail to pay the fine.

While courts are indeed empowered to decide whether a publication scandalised or tended to scandalise the judiciary or interfered with the administration of justice, there is no legal provision for an outright ban on it.

The origin of these contempt proceedings appears to be the State government’s unilateral decision to withdraw certain facilities to retired judges without consulting the court administration. After the matter was not resolved on the administrative side for two months, the court initiated suo motu proceedings and issued some directions. It was because of a news item, accompanied by a commentary on the court’s directions, that the contemnors had incurred the court’s displeasure.

The offending comments appeared to imply that the directions regarding extending facilities, including protocol services and domestic help, and reimbursing communication bills up to ₹10,000 a month and a mobile phone worth ₹80,000, to retired judges amounted to “judges judging for themselves”. It is a moot question whether the court ought to have taken umbrage at this remark or ignored it. It would serve the cause of preserving the dignity of the higher judiciary if overzealous comments made by activists or journalists were ignored. In 1999, the Supreme Court had brushed aside some adverse remarks by activists by saying, “the court’s shoulders are broad enough to shrug off their comments.”

However, in the case of Patricia Mukhim, the Editor of Shillong Times, the court has made sweeping remarks that the newspaper had always attacked individuals and institutions, had published propaganda calling for bandhs and “was always working against judges and the judicial system”. The defence argued the court should frame specific charges before convicting them for contempt. However, the matter was tried summarily. While it is open to the court to try a case of contempt in a summary manner, the use of personalised views of the publication’s past record to hand down the verdict puts a question mark over the decision-making process. While there may be a need to curb tendentious criticism of the
judiciary and self-serving comments on ongoing proceedings in mainstream and social media, there is a compelling case to use the contempt law sparingly, and avoid the impression that it is being used to stifle free speech or dissent. Lenience, not anger, ought to be the primary response of a detached judiciary.

(Adapted From The Hindu)

17. RTI upheld over Official Secrets Act: SC (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Polity & Governance)

An all-out effort by the government to claim privilege and push the Rafale jets’ pricing details back into the dark zone was countered by Justice K.M. Joseph in the Supreme Court.

The government’s reasons to hush the Rafale prices ranged from national security to not upsetting a “solemn undertaking” given to France to keep the price of the jets a secret.

RTI upheld over secrecy concerns
But Justice Joseph, one of the three judges on the Bench, asked the government to read out Sections of the Right to Information (RTI) Act, 2005. The judge said the information law has revolutionised governance and overpowered notions of secrecy protected under the Official Secrets Act, 1923.

Attorney-General K.K. Venugopal was first made to read out Section 22 of the RTI Act, which declared the RTI to have an “overriding effect” over OSA.

Then Section 24, which mandates even security and intelligence organisations to disclose information on corruption and human rights violations.

Finally, Section 8(2), which compels the government to disclose information “if public interest in disclosure outweighs the harm to protected interests”.

The government wants the court to refrain from examining the documents.

(Adapted From The Hindu)

18. 10% Quotas and a verdict (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Polity & Governance)

What is the basis for challenging the 10% quota for the economically backward sections?
The introduction of a 10% quota for the economically backward through the Constitution (103rd Amendment) Act has been challenged in the Supreme Court. The principal grounds cited in support of the challenge are mainly found in a 1992 judgment of a nine-judge Bench in Indra Sawhney vs Union of India. A look at the context in which Indra Sawhney, or the Mandal Commission case, was decided, its major findings and how they are being cited in the challenge to the 103rd Constitution Amendment.
What is the background of the case?
In December 1980, the Second Backward Classes Committee, headed by B.P. Mandal, better known as the Mandal Commission, gave its report. It recommended 27% reservation for Other Backward Classes (OBCs) and 22.5% for the Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes. A decade later, in August 1990, the government issued an office memorandum (OM), providing 27% vacancies for Socially and Educationally Backward Classes to be filled by direct recruitment. Violent protests greeted this memorandum, and a challenge was mounted in the Supreme Court. In 1991, a new government under the Congress issued a second OM notifying an additional reservation of 10% for other economically backward sections. A nine-judge Bench of the Supreme Court pronounced a 6:3 majority verdict in the Mandal Commission case, upholding the 27% quota in the first OM, but struck down the 10% quota based on economic criteria.

What were its main findings?
The majority judgment held that “a backward class cannot be determined only and exclusively with reference to economic criterion”. “It may be a consideration or basis along with, and in addition to, social backwardness, but it can never be the sole criterion,” Justice B.P. Jeevan Reddy wrote for the majority. It said backward classes could be identified on the basis of caste. The Bench also laid down that reservation not cross the 50% limit, unless a special case was made out for extraordinary situations and peculiar conditions to relax the rule. It wanted the ‘creamy layer,’ the advanced sections of the backward classes, excluded from reservation and asked the government to evolve suitable criteria to exclude the ‘creamy layer’.

Why cite the Indra Sawhney case?
After 27 years, the Constitution (103rd Amendment) Act, 2019, provides for 10% reservation in government jobs and educational institutions for the “economically backward” in the unreserved category. The Act amends Articles 15 and 16 of the Constitution by adding clauses empowering the government to provide reservation on the basis of economic backwardness. The 10% economic reservation is over and above the 50% cap. The Constitution does not define the term ‘backward classes,’ though it endorses the role of the state in ensuring and promoting social equality. Over the years, caste has been a constant factor in identifying social and educational backwardness. As the Mandal Commission case discusses the basis for identifying OBCs, its findings are being cited by those who have challenged the amendment. They say the amendment violates the bar on quotas solely based on economic criteria and breaches the 50% quota limit which, they argue, is part of the Basic Structure of the Constitution.

The petitions, including those by Youth for Equality and activist Tehseen Poonawala, argue that the amendment excludes the OBCs and the SCs/STs from the scope of economic reservation. They contend that the high creamy layer limit of ₹8 lakh a year ensures that the elite capture the reservation benefits. They argue that the amendment does not clearly define the term “economically weaker sections.”

What is the government’s response?
In its response by affidavit, the government says the amendment was “necessitated to benefit the economically weaker sections of the society who were not covered within the existing schemes of reservation, which, as per statistics, constituted a considerably large segment of the Indian population.” It quoted the 2010 report of the Commission for Economically Backward Classes, chaired by Major General S.R. Sinho (retired), which said 18.2% of the general category came under the below poverty line. It has said the economically weaker sections required as much attention as the backward classes. The government said the 50% ceiling applies to the SCs/STs and the OBCs. The new provisions separately deal with the economically weaker sections. It argued that a “mere amendment” to an Article would not violate the basic feature of the Constitution. The matter is likely to be referred to a Constitution Bench.

(Adapted From The Hindu)

19. Pinaki Chandra Ghose set to be India’s first Lokpal (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Polity & Governance)

Former Supreme Court judge and current member of the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), Pinaki Chandra Ghose, is likely to be India’s first anti-corruption ombudsman, or Lokpal.

Mr. Ghose was appointed as judge of the Calcutta High Court in 1997 and went on to become Chief Justice of Andhra Pradesh before his elevation to the Supreme Court in 2013.

Members of selection committee
His name was cleared and recommended by the high-level selection committee chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Other members of the committee are Chief Justice of India Ranjan Gogoi, Lok Sabha Speaker Sumitra Mahajan and eminent jurist Mukul Rohatgi.

Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha Mallikarjun Kharge, who is part of the committee, did not attend the meeting after he was invited as “special invitee.” Mr. Kharge had refused to attend earlier meetings too, protesting against his being invited as a “special invitee.”

Pressure from Supreme Court
The government was prompted to make the selection after the Supreme Court set the February-end deadline.

Lokpal Act
The Lokpal Act, which was passed in 2013 after a nationwide anti-corruption movement, provides for setting up of Lokpal at the centre and Lokayuktas in the States to probe corruption complaints against top functionaries and public servants, including the Prime Minister and the Chief Ministers.

(Adapted from the Hindu)
20. J&K’s SPOs: Under-trained, poorly paid militant targets (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains paper II; Polity & Governance)

Suspected militants killed a woman Special Police Official (SPO) in South Kashmir’s Shopian Saturday. How are the SPOs of J&K recruited, and what are they expected to do?

**SPO appointment**
The state’s 30,000 SPOs work alongside 90,000 regular police personnel, and are in many ways the unacknowledged backbone of the force. Under The Jammu and Kashmir Police Act, an SPO may be appointed “when it shall appear that any unlawful assembly or riot or disturbance of peace has taken place or may be reasonably apprehended and that the police force ordinarily employed is not sufficient for its preservation and protection of the inhabitants and the security of property”. SPOs were first appointed to deal with militancy in 1996 when Farooq Abdullah’s National Conference government was in power.

**Appointment conditions of SPO**
Initially, SPs appointed SPOs directly, based on need. There was no screening, and appointments were often made on “compassionate grounds”. The power to appoint SPOs later went to the Deputy Commissioners.

Men and women between the ages of 18 and 28 who have cleared Class 10 are eligible. Candidates must meet physical eligibility requirements, which includes the ability to run, for men, 1,600 m in 6 minutes and 15 seconds and, for women, 1,000 m in the same time.

**Emoluments given to SPO**
At the time SPOs were first appointed, their monthly salary was a paltry Rs 3,000, with the promise of absorption in the regular force after three years of “excellent performance” in counter-insurgency operations. After a revision in September 2018, SPOs with up to 5 years’ experience get Rs 6,000, those with 5-15 years’ experience get Rs 9,000, and veterans with over 15 years get Rs 12,000. By contrast, a regular policeman starts at more than Rs 25,000. SPO salaries are part of the Union Home Ministry’s Security Related Expenditure, and the state government has no say in what they get.

**Job profile of SPOs**
SPOs maintain law and order, gather intelligence, and fight against militants. Women SPOs are exempt from anti-militancy operations. Their only training is a week-long course at which they don’t learn much more than how to wear uniforms and salute officers. SPOs engaged in anti-militancy operations get a short course in handling weapons, but senior police officers say there is a gulf between this training and what regular police personnel get.

**Soft targets**
Since 1996, police records show, 504 SPOs have been killed in militant attacks. Militants believe police use SPOs to collect intelligence. Police officers claim to have intercepted militant communication from across the border last year asking for SPOs absorbed into the
force and promoted as constables to be targeted. The SPOs are often unpopular with the people — during anti-government protests.

(Adapted From Indian Express)

21. Lok Sabha polls 2019 | EC to meet social media firms: What’s on discussion table? (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Polity & Governance)

Three weeks ahead of India's most digitally-influenced Lok Sabha election so far, the Election Commission will meet with representatives of Internet companies to discuss unresolved issues related to social media content at a time when the Model Code of Conduct (MCC) is in force.

How did we get here?

In January this year, a 14-member EC committee chaired by Deputy Election Commissioner Umesh Sinha suggested changes to Section 126 of The Representation of the People (RP) Act, which prohibits campaigning in the last two days before voting. The panel studied the impact of social and new media during this “silence period” and recommended appropriate changes to the MCC. New media and social media are currently not covered under Section 126.

Two weeks ago, the Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI) — which is representing Facebook, Twitter, Google, WhatsApp and ShareChat in working with the poll panel to draw up a ‘Code of Ethics’ — agreed to “priority channels for the ECI within their grievance redressal mechanisms” and other election-related educational programs on these platforms.

On March 9, the EC said parties and candidates can’t use photos of defence personnel and defence functions for election purposes. Subsequently, Facebook was asked to remove political posters bearing Wg Cdr Abhinandan's pictures, shared by BJP leaders.

On Friday, the EC wrote to Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, Google, ShareChat, and TikTok calling them for a meeting on Tuesday to discuss channels of grievance redressal, evolve a mechanism to prevent abuse on social media and a “notification mechanism” for the EC to flag violations, and work out awareness programs particularly during the silence period and a “general Code of Ethics by Social Media intermediaries”.

What is likely to be discussed?

Based on the Sinha recommendations and IAMAI's response, the following unresolved issues are likely to be put on the table:

* Process of pre-certification for political advertisements online: The EC has said that all political advertisements on social media will require pre-certification from its Media Certification and Monitoring Committees (MCMCs). The IAMAI disagrees: “The onus of pre-certification is on advertisers and not on intermediaries.” The industry body has quoted a 2004 Supreme Court ruling that said parties and candidates must apply to the EC before
issuing TV ads. “Pre-monitoring”, the intermediaries say, would require them to forego legal safe-harbour provisions, which exempt them from liability for content on their platforms before it is brought to their attention.

* Time for companies to remove content in the silence period: In its report, the Commission said that companies must remove content in the 48-hour silence period within three hours of notice. IAMAI did not explicitly respond to this stipulation. IAMAI president Subho Ray said it could either agree to abide by the request “as soon as possible” or explain in a “time-bound manner” why the content could not be taken down.

* Who is a political advertiser? A third unresolved issue mentioned in IAMAI’s response to the EC is whether a expression “political advertiser” also includes those who pay platforms to “boost” or “promote” a post created by somebody else. “...There is... concern regarding individual posts of endorsement that may not qualify as ‘paid political advertisement’ in the most commonly understood form of the term. The ECI [has]... referred to issuing an FAQ on the norms for ‘paid political advertisement’. The platforms request the ECI to expedite this FAQ,” IAMAI said in its response.

India-based social media platform ShareChat sought further clarification from the EC over "what constitutes a political advertisement...; which entities are bound by the obligations to ensure pre-certification, and time frame from when such obligations apply on candidates, parties, and (if relevant) third parties”.

* Citing specific legal provisions: After EC’s first takedown notice to Facebook last week, the company informally pointed out to the EC that it had not cited the specific legal provision that the content had violated. IAMAI’s Ray told The Indian Express: “We want a legal order that cites a legal provision. One, it will help us establish the legality of the notice. And two, in case we challenge it, we will have to explain to the court that this notice does not pass the muster of the cited act or law.” In its response to the EC’s proposed guidelines, IAMAI said: “The platforms would also like to engage with the office of the ECI to train the designated officer on how to reach out to the platforms, and also conduct mock ‘fire drills' to fine tune the process.”

**Why does social media matter so much in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections?**
The Election Commission began conversations about social media in 2013, but the scale and reach of public engagement on Internet-based platforms has increased enormously since then. According to IAMAI, the Internet base has more than doubled to almost half a billion users since the time of the last elections.

Political parties have made a significant advertisement push online. According to Facebook’s advertisement portal, Indians spent almost Rs 10 crore between February 24 and March 9 this year on political ads on the platform. Both the BJP and Congress have expanded their social media volunteers and office-bearer groups massively. Digital marketers, such as the Congress’s Silverpush, have entered the picture.
Most significantly, Facebook’s Cambridge Analytica controversy made election integrity and social media a topic of discussion in India. Cambridge Analytica’s Indian partner Ovleno Business Intelligence (OBI) named the BJP, Congress, and JD(U) as clients on its website, but all the parties denied working with the data firm.

Since then, social media executives have been called into European and American government hearings, and Indian government institutions too, have joined in the questioning of these companies. Twitter came under fire earlier this year for alleged anti-right-wing bias.

(Adapted From Indian Express)

22. How J&K Presidential Orders have worked, why move faces challenge (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Polity & Governance)

Three weeks after President Ram Nath Kovind issued an executive order amending The Constitution (Application to Jammu and Kashmir) Order, 1954 to extend the provisions of the 77th and 103rd Amendments to the state, the Centre’s move has been challenged in the Jammu & Kashmir High Court.

The executive order was issued on March 1, the day after the Union Cabinet approved the proposal of the J&K Governor’s administration to amend the 1954 Order. The Centre said the amendment “will give benefit of promotion in service to the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and also extend the 10 per cent reservation for economically weaker sections in educational institutions and public employment”.

Major J&K parties said the order violated Article 370 — the provision that regulates J&K’s relationship with the Union. On Monday, two lawyers challenged the power of the Governor to make the recommendation without the concurrence of the state government, and pleaded that The Constitution (Application to Jammu & Kashmir) Amendment Order, 2019, and The Jammu and Kashmir Reservation (Amendment) Ordinance, 2019, be struck down.

The 1954 Presidential Order

J&K negotiated the terms of its entry into the Indian Union. When Maharaja Hari Singh signed the Instrument of Accession on October 26, 1947, J&K gave up control over only three subjects: Defence, Foreign Affairs, Communications. A separate Constituent Assembly of J&K was planned to frame the J&K Constitution, and to work out J&K’s constitutional relationship with New Delhi.

Under Article 370, which was part of the Indian Constitution at its commencement on January 26, 1950, only two articles apply to J&K: Article 1, which defines India, and Article 370 itself. Article 370 provides that other provisions of the Indian Constitution can apply to J&K “subject to such exceptions and modifications as the President may by order specify”, and with the concurrence of the state government.
Explained: Understanding Articles 370, 35A

State government was defined as “the person for the time being recognised by the President as the Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir acting on the advice of the Council of Ministers for the time being in office”. The decisions to extend the provisions of the Indian Constitution other than those specified in the Instrument of Accession, however, had to be ratified by the J&K Constituent Assembly.

But the J&K Constituent Assembly was yet to be set up, and the Centre wanted to extend a few provisions of the Constitution to streamline J&K’s relationship with the Union. Thus, a Presidential Order was issued on January 26, 1950 itself, with the state government’s concurrence. On November 5, 1951, J&K’s Constituent Assembly was convened.

The 1950 Order was replaced by The Constitution (Application to Jammu and Kashmir) Order, 1954. This Order, while applying to J&K provisions of Part-III of the Indian Constitution that relates to fundamental rights, introduced Article 35A — which protected laws passed by the state legislature of J&K in respect of permanent residents from any challenge on the ground that they violated any of the fundamental rights.

This order was ratified by the Constituent Assembly that also framed the J&K Constitution, before dispersing on November 17, 1956.

What happened afterward

This 1954 ‘mother order’ had the requisite concurrence of both the state government and the J&K Constituent Assembly. Subsequently, 42 Presidential orders have been issued — all amendments to the 1954 mother order. But none of these amendments to the 1954 Order have fulfilled the requirement of ratification by the J&K Constituent Assembly. The Centre has argued that an elected state government’s consent is enough.

Through these Presidential orders, successive central governments have extended 94 out of the 97 entries in the Union List, and 26 out of the 47 in the Concurrent List to J&K, and made 260 out of the 395 Articles of the Indian Constitution applicable to J&K. This list does not include The Securitisation and Reconstruction of Financial Assets and Enforcement of Securities Interest (SARFAESI) Act, 2002, the GST Acts, and the two constitutional provisions that were extended on March 1.

Views of the Supreme Court

In Prem Nath Kaul vs The State Of Jammu & Kashmir (1959), a five-judge Constitution Bench said “the Constitution-makers were obviously anxious that the said relationship should be finally determined by the Constituent Assembly of the State itself”. A decade later, the court ruled that (Presidential) orders could still be made through Article 370 (Sampat Prakash vs State Of Jammu & Kashmir, 1969).

In 1972, the court, while ruling on the replacement of the elected Sadr-e-Riyasat of J&K by a Governor appointed by the Centre, said the Governor is “head of government aided by a council of ministers”, and “it is not as if the State government, by such a change (replacing the Sadr-e-Riyasat by the Governor) is made irresponsible to the State Legislature...
is no question of such a change being one in the character of the government from a democratic to a non-democratic system”. (Mohd Maqbool Dammoo vs State Of Jammu And Kashmir, 1972)

**Governor and the 1954 Order**

Has the Centre issued an amendment to 1954 Order with the consent of the Governor's administration earlier?

In 1986, an amendment to the 1954 Order issued with the concurrence of Governor Jagmohan administration extended to J&K Article 249 of the Indian Constitution, which describes the power of Parliament to legislate, in the national interest, even on matters in the State List. National Conference leaders A R Rather and Mohammad Shafi Uri challenged the order in the J&K High Court. “The petition is still pending. It was never listed for a hearing,” Rather said.

Amendments were made to the 1954 Order during Governor's Rule in 1993 and 1994 as well. These orders were issued to extend the duration of President's Rule in J&K.

The latest order has the consent of the Governor without the requisite aid and advice of the Council of Ministers. In a situation of Central rule, the Governor acts only as a nominee of the Union government and does not meet the definition of state government as laid down by Article 370 and the Supreme Court.

Major J&K parties have always opposed the amendments to the 1954 Order without ratification by the Constituent Assembly of the state. The Centre could do it because the SC allowed it. The opposition in J&K has been to the route taken by the Centre, and not to the laws themselves.

*(Adapted From Indian Express)*

**23. What is indelible ink used in elections? (Relevant for GS Prelims; Polity)**

This refers to the violet-coloured ink in India that is applied on a voter's forefinger after she exercises her vote. In 1962, the Election Commission in collaboration with the Law Ministry, the National Physical Laboratory of India and the National Research Development Corporation made an agreement with Mysore Paints and Varnish Ltd. to manufacture ink that couldn’t be wiped off easily.

**Who manufactures indelible ink used in elections?**

Mysore Paints was founded in 1937 by Maharaja Krishnaraja Wadiyar IV. The company is the sole supplier of indelible ink for civic body, Assembly and Parliamentary polls. It also supplies ink to about 25 countries. Indelible ink remains bright for about 10 days, after which it starts fading. It is known to contain silver nitrate and is manufactured in secrecy.

*(Adapted from The Hindu)*

**24. What is Absentee Ballot? (Relevant for GS Prelims; Polity)**
This refers to a vote cast by someone who is unable to go to the polling station. The system is designed to increase voter turnout. In some countries, the voter is required to give a reason for not going to the polling station, before participating in an absentee ballot.

**Who is eligible for Postal Ballot (Absentee Ballot) in India?**
In India, a postal ballot is available to only some citizens. The Representation of the People Act, 1950 allows heads of states and those serving in the armed forces to vote through postal means. The Lok Sabha recently passed a Bill to allow proxy voting for NRIs. However, domestic migrants and absentee voters in India cannot cast postal votes.

*(Adapted from The Hindu)*

**25. What is First-past-the-post system? ( Relevant for GS Prelims; Polity)**

The first-past-the-post (FPTP) system is also known as the simple majority system. In this voting method, the candidate with the highest number of votes in a constituency is declared the winner. This system is used in India in direct elections to the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies.

**What are pros and cons of First-past-the-post system?**
While FPTP is relatively simple, it does not always allow for a truly representative mandate, as the candidate could win despite securing less than half the votes in a contest. In 2014, the National Democratic Alliance led by the Bharatiya Janata Party won 336 seats with only 38.5% of the popular vote. Also, smaller parties representing specific groups have a lower chance of being elected in FPTP.

*(Adapted from The Hindu)*

**26. What is Tactical Voting? (Relevant for GS Prelims; Polity)**

Also known as strategic voting, this refers to the act of voting for a particular candidate or political party not because the voter necessarily supports them but because she wants to prevent some other party or candidate from winning. For example, a voter who prefers a leftist candidate would vote for a centrist candidate in order to prevent a right-wing candidate from winning because the leftist candidate is weak in that constituency.

*(Adapted from The Hindu)*

**27. What are the powers and duties of Lokpal? (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Polity & Governance)**

On March 19, Justice Pinaki Chandra Ghosh was appointed as India’s first Lokpal. The announcement came after a delay of five years as the Lokpal and Lokayukta Act, which envisaged appointment of a Lokpal at the Centre and Lokayuktas in the States to look into cases of corruption against certain categories of public servants, was passed in 2013. Now
that the Lokpal chairman and eight members have been appointed, there may arise many questions related to its functions, duties and powers. Here, we seek to answer some questions about its functioning and the procedure for dealing with complaints against public servants under the Prevention of Corruption Act.

**Who are the public servants covered by Lokpal Act?**
The Lokpal has jurisdiction to inquire into allegations of corruption against anyone who is or has been Prime Minister, or a Minister in the Union government, or a Member of Parliament, as well as officials of the Union government under Groups A, B, C and D. Also covered are chairpersons, members, officers and directors of any board, corporation, society, trust or autonomous body either established by an Act of Parliament or wholly or partly funded by the Centre. It also covers any society or trust or body that receives foreign contribution above ₹10 lakh.

**What happens if a charge is made against the PM?**
The Lokpal cannot inquire into any corruption charge against the Prime Minister if the allegations are related to international relations, external and internal security, public order, atomic energy and space, unless a full Bench of the Lokpal, consisting of its chair and all members, considers the initiation of a probe, and at least two-thirds of the members approve it. Such a hearing should be held in camera, and if the complaint is dismissed, the records shall not be published or made available to anyone.

**How can a complaint be made and what happens next?**
A complaint under the Lokpal Act should be in the prescribed form and must pertain to an offence under the Prevention of Corruption Act against a public servant. There is no restriction on who can make such a complaint. When a complaint is received, the Lokpal may order a preliminary inquiry by its Inquiry Wing, or refer it for investigation by any agency, including the CBI, if there is a prima facie case. Before the ordering of an investigation by the agency, the Lokpal shall call for an explanation from the public servant to determine whether a prima facie case exists. This provision, the Act says, will not interfere with any search and seizure that may be undertaken by the investigating agency. The Lokpal, with respect to Central government servants, may refer the complaints to the Central Vigilance Commission (CVC). The CVC will send a report to the Lokpal regarding officials falling under Groups A and B; and proceed as per the CVC Act against those in Groups C and D.

**What is the procedure for preliminary inquiry?**
The Inquiry Wing or any other agency will have to complete its preliminary inquiry and submit a report to the Lokpal within 60 days. It has to seek comments from both the public servant and “the competent authority,” before submitting its report. There will be a ‘competent authority’ for each category of public servant. For instance, for the Prime Minister, it is the Lok Sabha, and for other Ministers, it will be the Prime Minister. And for department officials, it will be the Minister concerned.

A Lokpal Bench consisting of no less than three members shall consider the preliminary inquiry report, and after giving an opportunity to the public servant, decide whether it
should proceed with the investigation. It can order a full investigation, or initiate departmental proceedings or close the proceedings. It may also proceed against the complainant if the allegation is false. The preliminary inquiry should normally be completed within 90 days of receipt of the complaint.

**What happens after the investigation?**
The agency ordered to conduct the probe has to file its investigation report in the court of appropriate jurisdiction, and a copy before the Lokpal. A Bench of at least three members will consider the report and may grant sanction to the Prosecution Wing to proceed against the public servant based on the agency’s chargesheet. It may also ask the competent authority to take departmental action or direct the closure of the report. Previously, the authority vested with the power to appoint or dismiss a public servant was the one to grant sanction under Section 197 of the Code of Criminal Procedure and Section 19 of the Prevention of Corruption Act. Now this power will be exercised by the Lokpal, a judicial body. In any case, the Lokpal will have to seek the comments of the ‘competent authority’ as well as the public servant’s comments before granting such sanction.

**Who are the functionaries of the Lokpal?**
The Lokpal will have a Secretary, who will be appointed by the Lokpal Chairperson from a panel of names prepared by the Central government. The Secretary will be of the rank of Secretary to the Government of India. The Lokpal will have to appoint an Inquiry Wing, headed by a Director of Inquiry, and a Prosecution Wing, headed by a Director of Prosecution. Until these officers are appointed, the government will have to make available officers and staff from its Ministries and Departments to conduct preliminary inquiries and pursue prosecution. The institution will also have to appoint other officers and staff.

**Is there any norm for disclosure of assets?**
Yes. Public servants will have to declare their assets and liabilities in a prescribed form. If any assets found in their possession is not declared, or if misleading information about these are furnished, it may lead to an inference that assets were acquired by corrupt means. For public servants under the State governments, the States have to set up Lok Ayuktas to deal with charges against their own officials.

*(Adapted From The Hindu)*

**28. Why Jet Airways is finding difficult to survive? (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Polity & Governance)**

Soaring fuel prices, loss of pricing power and fractious bailout talks have severely affected operations.

The story so far: Over the past few weeks, two-thirds of Jet Airways’ fleet has been grounded as talks over a bailout continue among Jet, its lenders and Etihad, which owns a 24% stake in the airline. Jet Airways has cancelled flights and suspended operations to several destinations, including Abu Dhabi.
**How did Jet’s fortunes nosedive?**
Jet Airways is an example of what soaring fuel prices and loss of pricing power due to relentless competition in the market can do to an airline company. Aviation turbine fuel accounts for more than half of the costs of an airline company, and the company has no control over it. As a full-service carrier, Jet also has a higher cost structure than low-cost carriers such as IndiGo or SpiceJet. In the ten years to 2017-18, Jet has reported a net profit only thrice, for the years ended March 2017, 2016 and a small profit in 2011, according to BSE data. With a negative net worth of over ₹7,242 crore and cash flows under strain, the airline could not repay its dues to banks and aircraft lessors on time. While the banks — Jet owes them ₹8,414 crore — have exhibited patience and tried to work with the company to help it take off again, the lessors have lost patience and repossessed their aircraft. Now, just about a third of Jet’s fleet is in the air, with the rest either grounded or repossessed by lessors.

**What is Etihad’s role?**
Jet roped in Etihad in April 2013 with a $379 million investment, a move that was expected to help lower debt while bringing in operational efficiency.

The airline has again sought the help of Etihad, but the latter, plagued by its own losses, has refused to play ball. The Gulf-based carrier hasn’t cleared the restructuring scheme designed by a lender consortium as it would have meant a reduction in its equity stake in the company. Etihad also wants Jet promoter and chairman Naresh Goyal to play a less important role, going by its insistence on capping his stake in the airline at 24%. Mr. Goyal is obviously not pleased. The banks, whose money is at stake, seem to be caught between the two.

**Is Jet the only carrier to suffer?**
No, the entire airline industry is in trouble of one kind or another that can be directly traced to high costs. Fresh trouble arose when the new Airbus A320neo planes of IndiGo reported problems with the Pratt & Whitney engine that could lead to stalling of the aircraft or even a forced shutdown of the engine mid-air. IndiGo had to ground these planes until the engine manufacturer fixed the problem. The recent crashes of the Boeing 737 MAX 8 plane, flown by Indonesia’s Lion Air and Ethiopian Airways, have caused problems for SpiceJet and Jet Airways which fly these aircraft in India. While Jet’s planes were already grounded, SpiceJet was forced to ground 15 of its Max 8 planes last week. IndiGo has already curtailed its schedule until the end of this month owing to pilot shortage. IndiGo, which reported profits for the three years ended March 2018, recorded a loss in the quarter ended September 2018.

**Where is Jet placed now?**
Etihad is said to have had enough and wants lenders to take over its 24% stake in Jet, which is also behind on salary payments. Mr. Goyal has written twice recently to the staff members, seeking more time. Jet’s lenders, led by the State Bank of India, are said to have asked Mr. Goyal to step down. Mr. Goyal wrote to Etihad’s board recently, saying that unless the latter infused at least ₹750 crore immediately, the situation at Jet could become “deleterious.” The restructuring plan worked out with banks last month seems to have
collapsed. It is also clear that banks have not been successful in identifying a “strategic partner,” as envisaged in the plan.

**What does the future hold?**

With 16,000 jobs at stake and the general election coming up, the government is turning on the pressure on banks to find a quick solution. What that solution could be is unclear. Using taxpayer money to bail out Jet is not an option as it will be difficult for the ruling party to defend. But patience is running out for Jet’s stakeholders. Lessors of the repossessed aircraft could soon lease them out to its competitors; SpiceJet is said to be interested in 40 of Jet’s grounded aircraft. Pilots, who have threatened to stop work if dues are not paid by April 1, are queuing up for jobs with competing airlines. Lenders are said to be sounding out the Tatas again for buying out the airline. The Tatas did show interest a few months ago, but backed out. Any new investor would like total control of Jet, which Mr. Goyal is unwilling to concede. The final option is for lenders to take the airline to the bankruptcy court. They don’t appear keen on this and would like to save the airline, given the jobs at stake and the disruption a collapse could cause in the industry. But for that, Mr. Goyal has to play ball.

*(Adapted From The Hindu)*

29. **Status of Permanent Commission to Women (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Polity & Governance)**

**Permanent Commission to Women officers in Air Force**

In so far the Indian Air Force is concerned, all Branches, including Fighter Pilots are now open for women officers.

**Permanent Commission to Women officers in Navy**

In Indian Navy all non sea going Branches/Cadre/Specialisation have been opened for induction of women officers through Short Service Commission. In addition to education, Law & Naval Constructor branch/cadre, women SSC officers have been made eligible for grant of Permanent Commission in the Naval Armament branch, at par with the male officers.

The proposal for induction of three new training ships for the Indian Navy is underway. This will provide the requisite infrastructure for training of both men and women officers. Indian Navy will start inducting women in all branches, once the training ships are in place.

**Permanent Commission to Women officers in Army**

Women officers will be granted Permanent Commission in the Indian Army in all the ten branches where women are inducted for Short Service Commission. So, besides the existing two streams of Judge Advocate General (JAG) and Army Education Corps, now PC will be
granted in Signals, Engineers, Army Aviation, Army Air Defence, Electronics and Mechanical Engineers, Army Service Corps, Army Ordinance Corps and Intelligence also to women officers. SSC women officers will give their option for PC before completion of four years of Commissioned Service and they will exercise option for grant of PC and their choice of specialisation.

SSC Women officers will be considered for grant of PC based on suitability, merit etc and will be employed in various staff appointment.

(Adapted From PIB)

30. **Chairperson, Lokpal administers oath of office to the Members, Lokpal (Relevant for GS Prelims; Polity)**

The Chairperson, Lokpal, Sh. Justice P. C. Ghose administered the oath of office to the following Members of Lokpal at a function organised here today:

1. Sh. Justice Dilip Babasaheb Bhosale
2. Sh. Justice Pradeep Kumar Mohanty
4. Sh. Justice Ajay Kumar Tripathi
5. Sh. Dinesh Kumar Jain
6. Smt. Archana Ramasundaram
7. Sh. Mahender Singh
8. Dr. Indrajeet Prasad Gautam

(Adapted From PIB)

31. **Terror Monitoring Group to check terror sympathisers (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Polity & Governance)**

The Ministry of Home Affairs has formed a Terror Monitoring Group (TMG). The group will meet on a weekly basis. The group is a multi-disciplinary monitoring group comprising eight members.

**What will be the functions of Terror Monitoring Group?**

The group will take action against “hard core sympathisers amongst government employees, including teachers, who are providing covert or overt support” to terror-related activities,

In order to take action against terror financing and other related activities in Jammu and Kashmir, group has been constituted.
The TMG has to take coordinated action in all registered cases that relate to terror financing and terror-related activities and bring them to logical conclusion.

(Adapted From The Hindu)

32. Will VVPAT silence those sceptical of EVMs? (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Polity & Governance)

How will the Election Commission ensure a tamper-proof counting process in the coming Lok Sabha election?
The story so far: The Election Commission indicated to the Supreme Court on Friday that if the 50% Voter Verified Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT) slip verification is carried out, it will delay counting by six days. Twenty-one Opposition parties had moved the Supreme Court against the EC’s guideline that VVPAT counting would take place only in one polling station in each Assembly segment in the coming Lok Sabha election.

What is the VVPAT and how does it function?
The Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail device is an add-on connected to the Electronic Voting Machine. It allows voters to verify if their vote has indeed gone to the intended candidate by leaving a paper trail of the vote cast. After the voter casts his or her mandate by pressing a button related on the ballot machine (next to the symbol of the chosen party), the VVPAT connected to it prints a slip containing the poll symbol and the name of the candidate. The slip is visible to the voter from a glass case in the VVPAT for a total of seven seconds and the voter can verify if the mandate that s/he has cast has been registered correctly. After this time, it is cut and dropped into the drop box in the VVPAT and a beep is heard, indicating the vote has been recorded.

Prior to voting, the VVPAT unit is calibrated to ensure that the button pressed on the ballot unit of the EVM is reflected correctly on the printed slips by the VVPAT. The presence of the slips that correspond to voter choice on the EVM helps retain a paper trail for the votes and makes it possible for the returning officer to corroborate machine readings of the vote. The VVPAT machines can be accessed only by polling officers. The units are sealed and can be opened during counting by the returning officer if there’s a contingency. The VVPAT has been a universal presence in all EVMs in the Assembly elections from mid-2017. Only a few VVPAT machines are tallied to account for the accuracy of the EVM. Currently slips in one randomly chosen VVPAT machine per Assembly constituency are counted manually to tally with the EVM generated count. The EC has stated that VVPAT recounts have recorded 100% accuracy wherever it has been deployed in Assembly elections.

Why is the VVPAT necessary?
The EC began to introduce EVMs on an experimental basis in 1998, and it was deployed across all State elections after 2001. EVMs have made a significant impact on Indian elections. Prior to the deployment of EVMs, elections were held with ballot papers. In some States, the election process was vitiated by rigging, stuffing of ballot boxes and intimidation of voters. Besides this, ballot paper-based voting resulted in the casting of a high number of invalid votes — voters wrongly registering their choices instead of placing seals, and so on.
Another level of verification

- While the introduction of EVMs in place of paper ballots increased people's and parties' trust in the polling process, some parties, in October 2010, asked the Election Commission to bring in a mechanism to verify the votes cast
- The EC delegated the issue to its technical committee to gather the design requirements for the VVPAT system
- In 2011, the Electronics Corporation of India Limited and Bharat Electronics Limited designed a prototype and demonstrated it to the committee
- Mock polls were held in such places as Cherrapunji, Ladakh, Thiruvananthapuram and Jaisalmer for a field trial of the VVPAT
- In 2013, the Conduct of Elections Rules, 1961, were amended to use VVPATs along with EVMs

The EVMs allowed for elimination of invalid votes as the voting process was made easier — registering the vote by pressing a button. It also allowed for a quicker and easier tallying of votes. Cumulatively, the tallying and elimination of invalid votes reduced the scope for human error. Secondly, the EVMs made it difficult to commit malpractices as they allowed for only five votes to be registered every minute, discouraging mass rigging of the scale that was seen in earlier days when ballot papers were used. That said, there have been questions raised about the security of the EVMs and whether they can be manipulated and tampered with. The EC has addressed the possibility of tampering by gradually introducing newer security and monitoring features, upgrading EVMs with technological features that allow for dynamic coding and time-stamping of operations on ballot units and later, features such as tamper-detection and self-diagnostics. Furthermore, there are administrative steps that prevent EVMs from being stolen and tampered with. The introduction of the VVPAT adds another layer of accountability to the electoral process. The recount rules out any EVM tampering, despite the safeguards, through an “insider fraud” by EC officials or EVM manufacturers.

What problems have been encountered?
In the initial phase of VVPAT implementation in the Lok Sabha by-elections in States such as Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Maharashtra and the Assembly election in Karnataka, there was a high rate of failure of VVPAT machines due to manufacturing glitches. In the Lok Sabha by-elections in 2017, the rate of VVPAT replacement, owing to glitches, was more than 15%, higher than the acceptable rates of failure (1-2%). In Karnataka, the failure and replacement rate was 4.3%. Coincidentally, the failure rate of the EVM unit (excluding the VVPAT) was very low. These glitches also caused severe disruptions to polling. To account for failure rates, the EC has tried to provide back-up machines to allow for swift replacement. The EC admitted later that the machines had high failure rates owing to hardware issues that occurred during the transport of EVMs and their exposure to extreme weather conditions. It sought to correct these problems by repairing components related to the printing spool of the VVPAT machines. The deployment of many corrected machines in the Assembly elections held recently in Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh resulted in much reduced replacement rates (close to 2.5% in Madhya Pradesh and 1.9% in Chhattisgarh). This suggests that the EC is relatively better prepared to handle VVPAT-
related glitches in the upcoming Lok Sabha election, where the VVPATs will be deployed in nearly 10.5 lakh polling stations nationwide.

**Is the current rate of VVPAT recounts enough?**

Political parties, primarily of the Opposition, have demanded a greater VVPAT recount than the one booth per Assembly/Lok Sabha constituency rule that is now in place. The EC responded to a plea by the Opposition parties in the Supreme Court that there was a need for 50% VVPAT recount, saying such an exercise would delay the counting by six days. Statistically speaking, it does not require a 50% sample to adequately match VVPAT tallies with those of EVMs. The Indian Statistical Institute, Kolkata, has presented a report on possible and appropriate VVPAT counts to the EC, in which it said a sample verification of 479 EVMs and VVPATs of a total 10.35 lakh machines would bring the level of confidence in the process to 99.9936%. The logic behind counting only one booth per constituency in each State stems from the understanding that there are nearly 10.35 lakh polling stations and 4,125 Assembly constituencies in the country.

By counting the slips in at least one VVPAT in each Assembly constituency, the EC argues, a relatively high sample size of the EVMs (0.5%) is verified. Critics have argued that this sample size is not enough to statistically select a potentially tampered EVM within a high confidence level and adjusting for a small margin of error (less than 2%) as the unit of selection must be EVMs in each State rather than the entire country as a whole. One suggestion, by the former bureaucrat Ashok Vardhan Shetty, is for adjusting the VVPAT counting process to factor in the size of the State, population of the constituency and turnout to account for a higher confidence level and a low margin of error. This would entail the certain tallying of more than one VVPAT per constituency, in fact close to 30 per constituency in smaller States and less than five per constituency for larger States. The Supreme Court has said the EC must increase the VVPAT count to more than the current number.

(Adapted From The Hindu)

**33. NIA court acquits Aseemanand, 3 others in Samjhauta train bombing case**

*(Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Polity & Governance)*

**National Investigation Agency (NIA) court decision in Samjhauta train bombing case**

A special National Investigation Agency (NIA) court acquitted four people, including main accused Swami Aseemanand, in the 2007 Samjhauta train bombing case. The court had acquitted all the accused as the prosecution was not able to prove the allegations.

**What is Samjhauta Express bombing case?**

The blasts on the Samjhauta Express, near Panipat, on February 18, 2007, and the subsequent fire in the coaches killed 68 passengers and injured a dozen. Those killed included Indian civilians and government officials, besides a large number of Pakistani nationals.

(Adapted From The Hindu)
International Organizations & Relations

1. How a Prisoner of War must be treated (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; IOBR)

India has cited the Geneva Conventions while demanding the release of Wing Commander Abhinandan who is in Pak Army custody. What do the Geneva Conventions say about the rights of prisoners of war?

India has demanded the immediate return of Indian Air Force pilot Wing Commander Abhinandan Varthaman, captured by Pakistan after his Mi-21 fighter aircraft was shot down in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir during a dogfight with Pakistani fighter jets. India has also lashed out at the “vulgar display of an injured personnel of the Indian Air Force in violation of all norms of international humanitarian law and the Geneva Convention”. A look at the provisions of the Geneva Conventions:

What are the Geneva Conventions?
The 1949 Geneva Conventions are a set of international treaties that ensure that warring parties conduct themselves in a humane way with non-combatants such as civilians and medical personnel, as well as with combatants no longer actively engaged in fighting, such as prisoners of war, and wounded or sick soldiers. All countries are signatories to the Geneva Conventions. There are four conventions, with three protocols added on since 1949.

Does the captured pilot count as a prisoner of war?
The provisions of the conventions apply in peacetime situations, in declared wars, and in conflicts that are not recognised as war by one or more of the parties. Even though India and Pakistan have been careful not to use the ‘war’ word for the operations each has conducted on the other’s territory over two successive days — India has said its airstrikes were a “non-military” intelligence-led operation — both sides are bound by the Geneva Conventions. This means the IAF officer is a prisoner of war, and his treatment has to be in accordance with the provisions for PoWs under the Geneva Conventions.

What are the provisions for PoWs?
The treatment of prisoners of war is dealt with by the Third Convention or treaty. Its 143 articles spread over five sections and annexures are exhaustive, and deal with every kind of situation that may arise for a captive and captor, including the place of internment, religious needs, recreation, financial resources, the kinds of work that captors can make PoWs do, the treatment of captured officers, and the repatriation of prisoners.

The Third Convention is unambiguous about how prisoners must be treated: “humanely”. And the responsibility for this lies with the detaining power, not just the individuals who captured the PoW.
“Any unlawful act or omission by the Detaining Power causing death or seriously endangering the health of a prisoner of war in its custody is prohibited, and will be regarded as a serious breach of the present Convention. In particular, no prisoner of war may be subjected to physical mutilation or to medical or scientific experiments of any kind which are not justified by the medical, dental or hospital treatment of the prisoner concerned and carried out in his interest. Likewise, prisoners of war must at all times be protected, particularly against acts of violence or intimidation and against insults and public curiosity. Measures of reprisal against prisoners of war are prohibited,” says Article 13 of the Convention.

In this sense, the wide publicity given to the video recording of a blindfolded Wing Commander Abhinandan identifying himself to his captives could be held as a violation of the Geneva Conventions, although in a second clip he is heard saying, in response to a question, that he is being treated well. A third clip shows him being beaten by people in civilian clothes as he lies in a small stream.

What rights is a PoW entitled to?
Article 14 of the Convention lays down that PoWs are “entitled to in all circumstances to respect for their persons and their honour”. In captivity, a PoW must not be forced to provide information of any kind under “physical or mental torture, nor any other form of coercion”. Refusal to answer questions should not invite punishment. A PoW must be protected from exposure to fighting. Use of PoWs as hostages or human shields is prohibited, and a PoW has to be given the same access to safety and evacuation facilities as those affiliated to the detaining power.

Access to health facilities, prayer, recreation and exercise are also written into the Convention. The detaining power has to facilitate correspondence between the PoW and his family, and must ensure that this is done without delays. A PoW is also entitled to receive books or care packages from the outside world.

What do the provisions say about the release of prisoners?
Parties to the conflict “are bound to send back” or repatriate PoWs, regardless of rank, who are seriously wounded or sick, after having cared for them until they are fit to travel”. The conflicting parties are expected to write into any agreement they may reach to end hostilities the expeditious return of PoWs. Parties to the conflict can also arrive at special arrangements for the improvement of the conditions of internment of PoWs, or for their release and repatriation.

At the end of the 1971 war, India had more than 80,000 Pakistani troops who had surrendered to the Indian Army after the liberation of Dhaka. India agreed to release them under the Shimla Agreement of 1972. Pakistan can decide to send Wing Commander Abhinandan unilaterally, or negotiate his release with India.

In such situations, who monitors whether the Geneva Conventions are being followed?
The Geneva Conventions have a system of “Protecting Powers” who ensure that the provisions of the conventions are being followed by the parties in a conflict. In theory, each side must designate states that are not party to the conflict as their “Protecting Powers”. In practice, the International Committee of the Red Cross usually plays this role.

During the Kargil War, Pakistan returned Flt Lt Nachiketa, who was captured after ejecting from his burning Mi27, after keeping him for eight days. This was after intense diplomatic efforts by the Vajpayee government and by ICRC. Another PoW, Squadron Ldr Ajay Ahuja, was killed in captivity.

(Adapted from The Indian Express)

2. Chagos archipelago dispute (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; IOBR)

About The Chagos Islands
The Chagos Island referred to by the British as the British Indian Ocean Territory, which is not recognised as such by Mauritius — is home to the U.S. military base Diego Garcia.

In the 1960s and 1970s, inhabitants were removed from the islands. Tensions remain, with Mauritius maintaining that the archipelago remains its integral part.

The Hague international tribunal order
1. In March 2015, a tribunal brought against the U.K. found that the Marine Protected Area brought in by the U.K. around the Archipelago in 2010 (but not including Diego Garcia) actually belongs to Mauritius.

2. Mauritius holds legally binding rights to fish in the waters surrounding the Chagos Archipelago.

3. And directed eventual return of the Chagos Archipelago to Mauritius when no longer needed for defence purposes.

4. To preserve the benefit of any minerals or oil discovered in or near the Chagos Archipelago for Mauritius.

U.K.’s response
1. Last year, the U.K. government announced that it had ruled out the resettlement of the islanders.

2. It also renewed the lease for Diego Garcia, up until 2036, presently used by US as military base.

Recent ICJ order
The International Court of Justice in The Hague has held that Britain’s continued administration of the Chagos archipelago is unlawful. The decision is a landmark in the effort to decolonise the Indian Ocean and return the islands to Mauritius. Britain’s reaction,
however, was predictable and disappointing. It said the ICJ’s is an advisory opinion it will examine, and stressed the security significance of the islands.

**Background**
The agreement to allow Britain to administer the Chagos islands came in 1965, three years before Mauritius gained independence. Mauritius says Britain had made it a pre-condition for independence. This was endorsed by the ICJ, which noted that given the imbalance between the two, the agreement did not amount to “freely expressed and genuine will”. It is a damning assessment of colonial legacies and the attempt by former colonial powers to justify or ignore the indefensible on the basis of ‘agreements’.

*(Adapted from The Hindu)*

**3. Decoding the OIC’s invite to ‘Guest of Honour’ India (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; IOBR)**

The Ministry of External Affairs has said that the invitation to External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj to address the Inaugural Plenary of the 46th Session of the Council of Foreign Ministers of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) is a “welcome recognition of the presence of 185 million Muslims in India and of their contribution to its pluralistic ethos, and of India’s contribution to the Islamic world”.

The meeting will be held in Abu Dhabi on March 1 and 2, for which Swaraj has been invited by Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the Foreign Minister of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) as the “Guest of Honour”.

**Why the OIC matters**
The OIC — formerly Organisation of Islamic Conference — is the second largest inter-governmental organisation in the world after the UN, with a membership of 57 states in four continents. The OIC describes itself as “the collective voice of the Muslim world”, and its stated objective is “to safeguard and protect the interests of the Muslim world in the spirit of promoting international peace and harmony among various people of the world”. The OIC has reserved its membership for Muslim-majority countries. Russia, Thailand, and couple of other small countries have Observer status. At the 45th session of the Foreign Ministers’ Summit in May 2018, Bangladesh, the host country, had suggested that India, where more than 10% of the world’s Muslims live, should be given Observer status, but Pakistan had opposed the proposal.

**Improved ties with UAE, Saudi**
The first-time invitation to India to be a Guest of Honour at the Plenary, especially at a time of heightened tensions with Pakistan following the Pulwama terrorist attack, is a significant diplomatic victory for New Delhi.

The MEA said in its statement Saturday that the invitation indicated “the desire of the enlightened leadership of the UAE to go beyond our rapidly growing close bilateral ties and
forge a true multifaceted partnership at the multilateral and international level” and a “milestone in our comprehensive strategic partnership with the UAE”.

The Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, was a very special Chief Guest at the 68th Republic Day celebrations in 2017, the first time that India laid out the Republic Day red carpet for a leader who was neither a Head of State nor Head of Government.

The Crown Prince, an extremely popular leader across the Middle East who is often known by his initials MBZ, had earlier visited India in February 2016, following a visit by Prime Minister Narendra Modi to the UAE in August 2015.

It is also significant that the invitation to the OIC Foreign Ministers' meet has come days after the visit to India of the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, Mohammed bin Salman. The invite may be an important outcome of the MBS visit, apart from being an indication of New Delhi’s improved ties with both Saudi and the UAE, and the Gulf region as a whole.

**OIC has been pro-Pak on J&K**

The OIC has been generally supportive of Pakistan’s stand on Kashmir, and has issued statements criticising the alleged Indian “atrocities” in the state. As recently as in December 2018, the OIC General Secretariat “expressed strong condemnation of the killing of innocent Kashmiris by Indian forces in Indian-occupied Kashmir”, describing the “direct shooting at demonstrators” as a “terrorist act”, and “called upon the international community to play its role in order to reach a just and lasting solution to the conflict in Kashmir”.

This statement had come soon after Pakistan’s Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi announced that he had contacted the OIC Secretary General “to apprise him about the latest situation in occupied Kashmir and Pakistan’s desire for convening of the meeting of the member states in Islamabad”. Dr Yousef Ahmed Al-Othaimeen of Saudi Arabia has been the OIC Secretary General since November 2016.

The 2017 session of the Council of OIC Foreign Ministers had adopted a resolution “reaffirming the unwavering support... for the Kashmiri people in their just cause”, “expressing deep concern at atrocious human rights violations being committed by the Indian occupation forces... since 1947”, and “paying rich tribute to the valiant people of IoK who... continue to wage heroic struggle”.

At the 2018 meeting in Dhaka, however, “Jammu and Kashmir” figured in only one of the 39 resolutions adopted, that too, along with 12 other states or regions worldwide. Pakistan had complained about the Dhaka Declaration, and accused Bangladesh of circulating the text very late.

**A new India-Pak tussle is expected**

Indeed, India has excellent relations individually with almost all member nations of the OIC — this is a reason why it can at times afford to not take the statements issued by the group as a whole seriously. That said, and despite the invitation to Swaraj — who can be expected
to bring up the terrorist attacks in India in her address — it is important to watch what line the OIC takes on Jammu and Kashmir in its final declaration, which is likely to be issued at the end of the summit on March 2.

A report by the official Emirates News Agency on Saturday said the Abu Dhabi meeting would discuss “issues regarding peace and stability in the Muslim world”, and that “the Council of Foreign Ministers is considering supporting initiatives to promote peace and security, counter extremism, combat the exploitation of religion and hate speech by inculcating the values of moderation and tolerance”. The report described India as a “friendly country” of “great global political stature”.

It is certain that Pakistan would be making every effort to counter the snub delivered to it by the OIC, and is likely to have already begun behind-the-scenes negotiations for a statement on Kashmir, perhaps using last year’s report of the United Nations Human Rights Office that criticised India.

(Adapted from Indian Express)

4. How Balakot changed the familiar script of India-Pakistan military crises (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; IOBR)

In every military crisis from 1987 onwards, India trod with caution while Pakistan seemed to revel in the opposite. India’s newest response signals it is prepared to counter the myth of Pak’s ‘nuclear impunity’.

In the beginning, there were traditional wars between India and Pakistan — in 1947-48, 1965 and 1971. Over the last three decades, we have had a series of military crises — in 1987, 1990, 1999, 2001-02 and 2008 to mention a few—that threatened to blow up into a regular war, but didn’t.

The terror attack in Kashmir that killed 40 CRPF men last month set the stage for a new military crisis that promised to follow the familiar pattern. But New Delhi chose a different response this time — Indian fighter aircraft dropped bombs on a terror camp in Balakot in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and engaged the Pakistan Air Force in aerial combat for the first time since 1971.

As in 1987, so in 2019, there is an apparent discontinuity in the nature of India-Pakistan military conflict. If Pakistan’s acquisition of nuclear weapons made a big difference in 1987, India’s willingness to call Pakistan’s atomic bluff seems to have broken the mould again.

‘Strategic patience’

But first to nuclear weapons. Many see Pakistan’s nukes as a response to India’s first nuclear test in May 1974 that was called a “peaceful nuclear explosion”. If the nomenclature of “PNE” reflected India’s penchant for self-deception, Pakistan was already on the path to acquiring nuclear weapons.
The trigger for Pakistan’s nuclear programme was the war of 1971 — which led to the transformation of East Pakistan into Bangladesh. To the utter shock of Rawalpindi, its two allies — the US and China — did not or could not stop the Indian Army from assisting in the breakup of Pakistan.

The first order of business for Pakistan’s leader Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who took charge of a shrunken Pakistan in January 1972, was to put its nuclear weapon programme on fast track. Gen Zia-ul-Haque, who ousted Bhutto in 1977, intensified the nuclear quest and proudly announced in 1987 that Pakistan had accomplished its “atomic mission”. By the late 1980s, Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi had begun to put together India’s own nuclear arsenal.

Optimists hoped that the dangers of escalation to a nuclear level would compel India and Pakistan to freeze their conflict and manage their bilateral relations responsibly. But the Pakistan Army leadership had other ideas. It saw the nuclear balance giving it the opportunity to embark on a low-intensity conflict against India by supporting cross-border terrorism.

The Pakistan Army had bet that its atomic quiver had neutralised India’s vast conventional military superiority and given it the freedom to bleed India with a thousand cuts. As Pakistan unleashed terror through outfits like Jaish-e-Mohammad and Lashkar-e-Toiba to target India’s civilians and military, New Delhi seemed paralysed by the nuclear factor and unable to retaliate effectively.

Thanks to the fear of nuclear escalation, New Delhi bought into the dogma that “strategic patience” is better than “military adventurism”. An important part of the dogma was the proposition that the Line of Control in Kashmir was sacrosanct and can’t be crossed under any circumstances.

Even when it had to fight a limited war — for example to vacate Pakistani aggression in Kashmir’s Kargil sector in the summer of 1999 — New Delhi issued strict instructions to the armed forces not to cross the LoC. The same was true for the military confrontation with Pakistan during 2001-2002, following the attack on Parliament.

While the government of Atal Bihari Vajpayee ordered full-scale military mobilisation to confront Pakistan’s support for cross-border terrorism on both occasions, the Manmohan Singh government during its decade-long rule convinced itself that military confrontation with Pakistan did not produce any significant political gains — either in the reduction of cross-border terrorism or in the resolution of political disputes with Pakistan. It decided against a military response to the terror attacks on Mumbai at the end of November 2008.

If India chose the “responsible” path of “nuclear restraint” and respected the “sanctity of the LoC”, Pakistan seemed to revel in the opposite. It hoped that the fear of escalation to a nuclear war would bring the international community to compel India to make major concessions on Kashmir.

‘Offensive defence’
Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his National Security Adviser, Ajit Doval, came with a very different theory — that it is possible to strengthen India’s deterrence against major terror attacks from Pakistan — and a commitment to break out of the constraints imposed by nuclear weapons. They also refused to accept the mythology that there is some kind of “divine sanctity” to the LoC. They note that Rawalpindi’s support for cross-border terrorism means Pakistan does not deify the LoC.

Under Modi, New Delhi adopted the strategy of what some have called “offensive defence”. It has chosen to raise the intensity of its military response to Pakistan’s continuous infiltration of terrorists into Kashmir and step up Army actions beyond the Line of Control. New Delhi also conducted “surgical strikes” in September 2016 against terror launchpads across the LoC in response to an attack earlier that month against an Indian Army brigade headquarters in Uri.

The IAF bombing of Balakot in the early hours of February 26 and its aerial encounter with the PAF the next day are part of the strategy to counter Pakistan’s “nuclear impunity”. Many are worried that Modi’s strategy has increased the danger of the South Asian rivals peering down the nuclear abyss.

But Modi and his advisers might argue that it may be worth exploring where the nuclear brink is rather than resigning forever to the impossibility of countering Pakistan’s terrorism. Unlike its predecessors, the Modi government is not frightened by the talk of international intervention and mediation on Kashmir in the event of escalation.

Modi and his advisers are confident that the global reaction can easily be managed. New Delhi seems to believe that international concerns on escalation can, in fact, be turned into pressure against Pakistan to curb its support for terror. That there has been little international empathy for Pakistan (China is the lone exception) after the Balakot bombing underlines the shifting geopolitical fortunes of India and Pakistan over the last three decades.

In its addiction to nuclear weapons and jihadi terror, Pakistan appears to have forgotten the importance of keeping up with India on the economic front. India’s GDP edging towards $3 trillion today is nearly ten times larger than Pakistan’s at about $300 billion. In its obsessive quest for “strategic parity” with India, Pakistan is beginning to fall behind Bangladesh on economic and social development.

Nuclear weapons certainly changed the military balance in favour of Pakistan at the end of 1980s. Pakistan’s steady but relentless relative national decline may be turning that balance in India’s favour in the early 21st century. This may not immediately lead to India prevailing in the prolonged conflict with Pakistan. Nor will Rawalpindi find it easy to change the policies of the last three decades. We may not know how the present and future crises might end, but there is no question that Balakot has changed the familiar script of India-Pakistan military crises.

(Adapted from Indian Express)
5. INDIA-US Trade Issues (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; IOBR)

United States of America today has given a 60-day withdrawal notice to India on the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) benefits extended by US.

Since the review initiated by the US in April 2018 on India’s GSP benefits, India and US have been discussing various trade issues of bilateral interest for a suitable resolution on mutually acceptable terms.

About GSP benefits to India

GSP benefits are envisaged to be non-reciprocal and non-discriminatory benefits extended by developed countries to developing countries. In India’s case the GSP concessions extended by the US amounted to duty reduction of only USD 190 million per annum.

What were complaints from US?

The US had initiated the review on the basis of representations by the US medical devices and dairy industries, but subsequently included numerous other issues on a self-initiated basis. These included issues related to market access for various agriculture and animal husbandry products, relaxation / easing of procedures related to issues like telecom testing / conformity assessment and tariff reduction on ICT products.

What was India’s response?

India was ready to address US concerns regarding medical devices in principle, by putting in place a suitable trade margin approach in a reasonable time frame to balance concerns about fair pricing for the consumers and adequate remuneration for the suppliers. On the issue of dairy market access, India has clarified that while our certification requirement, that the source animal had never been fed animal derived blood meal, is non-negotiable given the cultural and religious sentiment, the requested simplified dairy certification procedure, without diluting this requirement, could be considered. Acceptability of US market access requests related to products like alfalfa hay, cherries and pork was conveyed. On reduction of our IT duties, India’s duties are moderate and not import stopping. Any MFN duty reduction would almost entirely benefit third countries. Accordingly, India conveyed willingness to extend duty concessions on specific items in which there is a clear US interest. On telecom testing, India was willing to consider discussions for a Mutual Recognition Agreement.

Impact of measures

Due to various initiatives resulting in enhanced purchase of US goods like oil and natural gas and coal the US trade deficit with India has substantially reduced in calendar years 2017 and 2018. The reduction is estimated to be over USD 4 Billion in 2018, with further reduction expected in future years on account of factors like the growing demand for energy and civilian aircrafts in India. This reduction has happened in the face of a rising overall US trade deficit, including with some other major economies. India is also a thriving market for US services and e-commerce companies like Amazon, Uber, Google and Facebook with billions of dollars of revenue.
The issue of Indian tariffs being high has been raised from time to time. It is pertinent that India's tariffs are within its bound rates under WTO commitments, and are on the average well below these bound rates. India’s trade weighted average tariffs are 7.6%, which is comparable with the most open developing economies, and some developed economies. On developmental considerations there may be a few tariff peaks, which is true for almost all economies.

India was agreeable to a very meaningful mutually acceptable package on the above lines to be agreed to at this time, while keeping remaining issues under discussion in the future.

(Adapted from PIB)

6. What the US trade rap means (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; IOBR)

US set to remove India from select trade list. What is this list, what led to the move, how can it impact India?

The US has announced that it intends to “terminate” India’s designation as a beneficiary of its Generalized System of Preferences (GSP). This could impact India’s competitiveness in items groups such as raw materials in the organic chemicals sector and intermediary goods in the US market, alongside items such as iron or steel, furniture, aluminum and electrical machinery.

According to the Commerce Ministry, about 1,900-odd products exported to US with GSP may be impacted.

GSP programme
The GSP, the largest and oldest US trade preference programme, allows duty-free entry for over 3,000 products from designated beneficiary countries. It was instituted on January 1, 1976, and authorised under the US Trade Act of 1974. India has been the biggest beneficiary of the GSP regime and accounted for over a quarter of the goods that got duty-free access into the US in 2017.

Exports to the US from India under GSP — at $5.58 billion — were over 12% of India’s total goods exports of $45.2 billion to the US that year. The US goods trade deficit with India was $22.9 billion in 2017.

Curbing of benefits
“The United States intends to terminate India’s and Turkey’s designations as beneficiary developing countries under the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) program because they no longer comply with the statutory eligibility criteria,” stated the office of the US Trade Representative (USTR) in a media release. The move came two days after Trump’s reference to India as a “very-high tariff nation” and his demand for a “reciprocal tax” on goods from India is in keeping with Washington’s concerted attacks on India’s trade stance. Trump cited example of Harley-Davidson motorcycles to substantiate his point about India.
India’s tariff structure
India’s tariffs used to be high until about the late 1990s, with the peak customs duty — the highest of the normal rates — on non-agriculture products steadily coming down from 150% in 1991-92 to 40% in 1997-98 and subsequently, to 20% in 2004-05 and 10 per cent in 2007-08. According to WTO data, India’s average applied tariff is around 13% and it plans to move toward the ASEAN tariff rates progressively (approximately 5% on average). There has, however, been a move to increase duties on a number of items by the government over the last five years.

Eligibility review
The US had launched an eligibility review of India’s compliance with the GSP market access criterion in April 2018, following concerns raised by its medical devices and dairy industry. The Indian government’s attempts to arrive at a “balanced” package that would address the US’s concerns and protect the Indian public’s welfare were not successful.

What are the recent issues?
In 2017, India had capped prices of cardiac stents and knee implants, slashing these over 70% and 60% respectively. The move impacted US giants like Abbott, Medtronic, Boston Scientific and Stryker.

India had also said its requirement that the source animal of dairy products had never been fed animal-derived blood meals was “non-negotiable” from a cultural standpoint and it could not dilute this requirement in its certification procedure.

“India has implemented a wide array of trade barriers that create serious negative effects on United States commerce. Despite intensive engagement, India has failed to take the necessary steps to meet the GSP criterion,” said the USTR statement.

Possible impact
India’s Department of Commerce feels the impact is “minimal”, given that Indian exporters were only receiving duty-free benefits of $190 million on the country’s overall GSP-related trade of $5.6 billion.

Some experts feel the move will not have a major impact on India also because it has been diversifying its market in the Latin American and the African region and its trade with countries of the Global South has also been expanding at a “very competitive pace”.

At the same time, the move could hit Indian exporters if it gives an edge to competitors in its top export categories to the US.

What next
These changes announced may not take effect until at least 60 days after the notifications are sent to the US Congress and the governments of India, and will be enacted by a Presidential Proclamation.
India, in June 2018, had intended to impose higher tariffs on 29 goods imported from the US in retaliation to the country's decision to impose hefty tariffs on imported steel and aluminum products. The move, which could potentially impact products like walnuts, almonds and chickpeas, has been deferred several times.

Commerce Secretary Anup Wadhwan indicated that the government would continue to engage in “internal” discussions on these issues and that the “door for discussions” with the US was “always open”.

(Adapted From Indian Express)

7. Why is GSP vital to India-U.S. trade ties? (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; IOBR)

What is the programme?
The Generalized System of Preferences is the largest and oldest United States trade preference programme. The U.S. intended it to promote economic development by eliminating duties on some products it imports from the 120 countries designated as beneficiaries.

When was it introduced?
It was established by the Trade Act of 1974. According to the website of the U.S. Trade Representative, the GSP helps spur sustainable development in beneficiary countries by helping them increase and diversify their trade with the U.S. The U.S. also believes that moving GSP imports from the docks to U.S. consumers, farmers, and manufacturers supports tens of thousands of jobs in the U.S. The other benefit is that “GSP boosts American competitiveness by reducing the costs of imported inputs used by U.S. companies to manufacture goods in the United States.” The Trade Representative says the GSP is important to U.S. small businesses, many of which rely on the programmes’ duty savings to stay competitive.

Why is it important for India?
The Indian export industry may not feel the pinch of the GSP removal for India by the U.S. The loss for the industry amounts to about $190 million on exports of $5.6 billion falling under the GSP category. But specific sectors, such as gem and jewellery, leather and processed foods will lose the benefits of the programme. A producer may be able to bear 2-3% of the loss from the change, but not more. The loss, in export of some kinds of rice for example, may even exceed 10%. The landed price of goods from India has to be the same as it was before the GSP was removed. If not, consumers of those products in the U.S. would gravitate to producers that enjoy the GSP benefits and hence are able to offer lower prices. Obviously, it is difficult to get back a customer that a competitor takes away.

Why is India in the cross-hairs?
The U.S. conducts periodic reviews of the programme. The review for India, taken up last year, focussed on ‘whether it is meeting the eligibility criterion that requires a GSP beneficiary country to assure the U.S. that it will provide equitable and reasonable access to
its market.’ The Trade Representative accepted two petitions asserting that India did not meet the criterion: one from the National Milk Producers Federation and the U.S. Dairy Export Council, and the other from the Advanced Medical Technology Association. India wants dairy products, which could form part of religious worship, certified that they were only derived from animals that have not been fed food containing internal organs. Other exporters such as EU nations and New Zealand certify their products, but the U.S. has so far not done so. Second, India has recently placed a cap on the prices of medical devices, like stents, that impacts U.S. exports of such devices.

What can the Indian government do?
The government must offer fiscal help to the affected sectors. But the obvious question is: what can India do if it has to be compliant with World Trade Organisation rules that protect all its members equally from undue sops given to exporters? A wry answer is that if the U.S. is not playing by WTO rules, other countries too need to be able to protect their industries. But it is possible to offer some breather to producers suffering losses from the GSP removal, even while being WTO-compliant. The Centre could consider refund of taxes for goods not under GST. Use of electricity or petrol in the manufacture of such goods but for which an input credit is not available could qualify here. Helping such sectors would also protect jobs; especially when job creation is at a low.

(Adapted from The Hindu)

8. Italy’s plan to endorse the Belt and Road Initiative (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; IOBR)

Italy’s plan to endorse the Belt and Road Initiative, the first such move by a G7 member, will boost China’s global ambitions. On its inception in 2013, the BRI envisaged linking about 65 countries along a modern Silk Road, the transformation of China into a high-income economy and the renminbi’s elevation into a global currency.

What is the plan under BRI?
Today, it has expanded to over 80 countries, mostly least developed and developing economies, as Beijing seeks to bolster its Made in China 2025 industrial policy. The lure of the BRI is attributed largely to the informal nature of the deals Beijing negotiates with partner-states, with attractive loan terms and sans political strings. Their opaque nature has spurred criticism that recipients risk being pushed into a debt trap.

Italy’s entry to BRI
However, Italy, an EU founder-member, will be the first major developed economy to participate in the BRI. Rome’s ruling eurosceptic and anti-establishment coalition has been enthusiastic in signing on. Its timing is seen to have something to do with the difficulties the government has faced in balancing its growth targets with the EU’s stringent fiscal norms. These tensions surfaced in recent negotiations with Brussels that led to a revised Italian budget. Italy is counting on its BRI endorsement to boost investment in it, given recent reductions in Chinese outflows into the EU. Rome is expected to sign an MoU to participate in the mammoth endeavour during a visit this month of President Xi Jinping.
Italy's move comes at a moment of increasing concern in European capitals, especially Paris and Berlin, to counter Chinese mergers and acquisitions of European firms to protect the bloc's strategic economic sectors. The Trump administration has, in keeping with its America First policy, invoked national security provisions rarely deployed in international trade and targeted Beijing with punitive import tariffs, ostensibly to protect domestic industries. China's phenomenal economic expansion since joining the WTO in 2001 has almost altered the global landscape. But attempts to block Chinese businesses may prove short-sighted. Instead, Western democracies should strive to live up to their repeated pledges, since the 2007-08 global financial crisis, to eschew protectionism and promote rules-based open and free global competition.

(Adapted from The Hindu)

9. Venezuela crisis: All you need to know(Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; IOBR)

Over the last two months, Venezuela has been going through a political and economic crisis with two claimants to the President’s chair and the US imposing sanctions to pressure the incumbent regime. Matters reached a head last week when opposition leader Juan Guaidó, who has declared himself acting President and has the support of the West, returned home after a self-imposed exile to cheering crowds in Caracas. He is trying to force out left-wing dictator Nicolas Maduro, President since 2013, who has declared himself winner of a controversial election.

Ever since the global crude oil downturn, Venezuela has slipped into an economic crisis. Its crime rate has doubled and inflation multiplied. The West-imposed sanctions have now led to a prolonged electricity blackout. A look at the events leading to the political crisis:

Rise of the leader
Guaidó, 35, was born in the beach town of Vargas, which was severely hit by flash floods in 1999. The family moved to Caracas, where Guaidó studied engineering. It was in 2006 that Guaidó emerged in politics, as one of the principal leaders campaigning for freedom of the press amid a crackdown by then President Hugo Chávez. Guaidó formed his party, Voluntad Popular, which is today leading the fight against Maduro. This year, Guaidó’s party declared him President of the National Assembly, the country’s Parliament.

The 2018 presidential elections marked a watershed in in Venezuela politics. Alleged irregularities led to the elections being discredited by several countries. Amid all this, Maduro assumed the presidency for a second time, leading to protests throughout the country.

With the executive and the judiciary under his control, Maduro sought to curtail the powers of the National Assembly.
The National Assembly resisted, with Guaidó questioning the government’s legitimacy. On January 22, Guaidó declared himself interim President. The West was quick to recognise his claim.

On February 23, Guaidó left for Colombia, circumventing a travel ban imposed on him by Venezuela’s Supreme Court. He also travelled to Brazil, Paraguay, Argentina, and Ecuador, lobbying for humanitarian aid to be sent to crisis-hit Venezuela.

Guaidó’s return to Venezuela on March 4 was marked by spectacle. Ambassadors from 12 countries, including the United States, Germany, and Spain, arrived at the airport, impeding paramilitary forces from detaining Guaidó. The fuming Maduro expelled the German Ambassador on March 6.

**What next**

Many believe that Guaidó’s return could spell trouble for Maduro. It appears difficult for Maduro to act against Guaidó, given his position as the National Assembly's President, popularity among the masses, and the fact that 56 countries (according to a Reuters report) have now acknowledged his claim to the presidency. While the West backs Guaidó, Russia and China are supporting the government.

The Reuters report, however, quoted former US envoy Elliott Abrams as saying there are no signs that Maduro is open to negotiations to end the political impasse.

*(Adapted from Indian Express)*

**10. India is world's second-largest arms importer (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; IOBR)*

**Saudi Arabia- Largest**

India was the world's second-largest arms importer from 2014-18, ceding the long-held tag as largest importer to Saudi Arabia, which accounted for 12% of the total imports during the period.

**India-Second largest**

“India was the world’s second largest importer of major arms in 2014–18 and accounted for 9.5% of the global total,” according to the latest report published by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI).

**Reason for decrease in imports**

Indian imports decreased by 24% between 2009-13 and 2014-18, partly due to delays in deliveries of arms produced under licence from foreign suppliers, such as combat aircraft ordered from Russia in 2001 and submarines ordered from France in 2008, the report stated.
Source countries
Russia accounted for 58% of Indian arms imports in 2014–18, compared with 76% in 2009-13. Israel, the U.S. and France all increased their arms exports to India in 2014-18. However, the Russian share in Indian imports is likely to go up sharply during the next five-year period as India signed several big-ticket deals recently, and more are in the pipeline. These include S-400 air defence systems, four stealth frigates, AK-203 assault rifles, a second nuclear attack submarine on lease, and deals for Kamov-226T utility helicopters, Mi-17 helicopters and short-range air defence systems. The report noted that despite the long-standing conflict between India and Pakistan, arms imports decreased for both countries in 2014-18 compared with 2009-13.

Pakistan at 11th
Pakistan stood at the 11th position, accounting for 2.7% of all global imports. Its biggest source was China, from which 70% of arms were sourced, followed by the U.S. at 8.9% and, interestingly, Russia at 6%.

Global trends
Globally, the volume of international transfers of major arms in 2014-18 was 7.8% higher than in 2009-13 and 23% higher than in 2004-2008. The five largest exporters in 2014-18 were the United States, Russia, France, Germany and China, which together accounted for 75% of the total volume of arms exports in 2014-18. “The flow of arms increased to the Middle East between 2009-13 and 2014-18, while there was a decrease in flows to all other regions,” the report said.

China, which has emerged as a major arms exporter, has increased its share by 2.7% for 2014-18 compared to 2009-13. Its biggest customers are Pakistan and Bangladesh.

As Indian imports reduced, Russian exports of major arms were dented, decreasing by 17% between 2009-13 and 2014-18. The report said this was partly due to “general reductions in Indian and Venezuelan arms imports”, which have been among the main recipients of Russian arms exports in previous years.
(Adapted from The Hindu)

11. Behind crashes that killed 346: Problem with Boeing 737 MAX (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; IOBR)

Two deadly crashes in a span of less than five months involving one of the most modern aircraft in the market, the Boeing 737 MAX 8, have prompted aviation authorities and airlines to draw similarities between the two incidents. On October 29 last year, shortly after takeoff from Jakarta, a MAX 8 operated by Lion Air went down into the Java Sea after loss of control.

On Sunday, a Nairobi-bound jet of the same make operated by Ethiopian Airlines crashed minutes after it had become airborne in Addis Ababa. A total of 346 people were killed in the two accidents.

Why has there been a global panic reaction to the Ethiopian Airlines crash?
While even a preliminary cause for the plane going down in Addis Ababa is yet to be ascertained, the events preceding the crash of another aircraft of the same model have raised the red flag. To begin with, both airliners went down minutes after takeoff. In both cases, the pilots are reported to have requested a return to the airport after takeoff, suggesting problems with control. Even as both accidents are being investigated, these similarities have made airlines and regulators cautious. Authorities in China and Indonesia have asked local airlines there to ground Boeing 737 MAX 8 aircraft as a precaution and to ensure their airworthiness. The aircraft, the latest in line of Boeing's 737 family, is being considered by major 737 operators as a replacement model for the hundreds of 737 NG that are in operation today. Boeing has delivered 350 737 MAX aircraft so far, according to information on its website.

What is the problem with Boeing 737 MAX?
The latest Boeing 737 model, it is equipped with a manoeuvring characteristics augmentation system (MCAS), which is responsible for pushing the aircraft's nose down when it senses a high angle of attack that may lead to an aircraft stall. If an aircraft’s nose is too high, the plane loses speed and is likely to enter a stall — a state in which it loses flight and can fall from the sky like a stone. The MCAS was designed to prevent such an eventuality. However, in the case of the Lion Air aircraft, the flight preceding the one that crashed experienced certain problems in the angle-of-attack sensor installed on the aircraft, which led to the MCAS falsely believing that the plane was about to enter a stall. A report issued by Indonesia's air accident investigator documented that the maintenance logs for the accident aircraft recorded problems related to airspeed and altitude on each of the four flights that occurred over the three days prior to the fatal flight. On those flights, the pilot was able to recover. However, the next flight on that aircraft could not be recovered.

The Ethiopian plane had flown for only 1,400 hours before it crashed, and Ethiopian Airlines is believed to have a good safety record. In both the Lion Air and Ethiopian Airlines
cases, the pilots tried to return to the airport a few minutes after takeoff but were not able to make it back. And both flights experienced drastic fluctuations in vertical speed during ascent. As per aviation safety experts, an aircraft should not record negative vertical speeds during the initial ascent. It is only when the aircraft is about to reach its destination and departs from cruising altitude that negative vertical speeds are meant to be recorded. Both the Lion Air and Ethiopian Airlines planes recorded unstable vertical speeds, according to data sourced from Flightradar24.

**What measures has India taken?**
In India, two airlines, SpiceJet and Jet Airways, operate a total of 17 737 MAX planes. After the Lion Air incident, the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) instituted a daily reporting mechanism from both airlines, and “no significant concern” was observed. After the latest crash, while India has not grounded the aircraft, the DGCA issued additional safety instructions to both airlines for operations of these aircraft. As per the DGCA, engineers and maintenance personnel looking after the aircraft have been instructed to factor in additional checks, particularly those pertaining to the jet’s autopilot and stall management systems. The airlines must also ensure that crew members operating the 737 MAX have undergone training as per updated guidelines issued by DGCA on December 3, following the Lion Air accident. It has also said that the pilot commanding the aircraft should have at least 1,000 hours of flying experience on the Boeing 737 NG aircraft type, and the co-pilot at least 500 hours.

**Has there been a blanket grounding of a fleet worldwide when there were problems with any aircraft model?**
In cases where there are incidents that highlight safety concerns with an aircraft, the manufacturer and the regulatory authority of the country that approved production of the aircraft model take a call on grounding of the planes. In case of the US, its regulator Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) had, in 2013, announced grounding of Boeing 787 Dreamliner aircraft – launched that year – following heating problems with lithium ion batteries in the plane that caused the battery to catch fire. The FAA grounding had followed voluntary groundings by Japan’s All Nippon Airways and Japan Airlines, which were among the early buyers of the model. Following the crash in Addis Ababa, Ethiopian Airlines, too, voluntarily grounded its entire fleet of 737 MAX aircraft, and the move was followed by Cayman Air and Morocco’s Royal Air Maroc.

(Adapted from Indian Express)

12. The IS is facing defeat, but the search for a political solution in Syria should continue (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; IOBR)

**Present state of IS**
The Islamic State, which at its peak controlled territories straddling the Iraq-Syria border of the size of Great Britain, is now fighting for half a square kilometre in eastern Syria.

The Syrian Democratic Forces, the Kurdish-led rebel group assisted by the U.S., has effectively laid siege to Baghouz, the eastern Syrian village where about 500 IS jihadists...
along with 4,000 women and children are caught. When the IS lost bigger cities such as Raqqa and Deir Ezzor in eastern Syria, militants moved to Baghouz and the deserts in the south. After the SDF moved to Baghouz, several civilians fled the village.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights estimates that nearly 59,000 people have left IS-held territory since December, and at least 4,000 jihadists have surrendered since February.

Both President Donald Trump and the SDF commanders say victory against the IS is imminent. Victory in Baghouz will also mean the IS’s territorial caliphate is shattered.

Since the battle for Kobane in 2015, which marked the beginning of the end of the IS, Syrian Kurdish rebels have been in the forefront of the war. Naturally, the SDF would claim the final victory against the IS.

**What is the analysis?**

However, the liberation of Baghouz or the destruction of the territorial caliphate does not necessarily mean that the IS has been defeated. It is basically an insurgent-jihadist group. It has established cells, especially in Syria and Iraq, which have continued to carry out terror attacks even as IS territories kept shrinking. The group has a presence in Syria’s vast deserts, a tactic its predecessor, al-Qaeda in Iraq, successfully used when it was in decline during 2006-2011 after its leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi was killed by the U.S.

When the Syrian civil war broke, the remnants of AQI found an opportunity for revival and rebranded themselves as the Jabhat al-Nusra, al-Qaeda’s branch in Syria. The IS was born when al-Nusra split. The U.S., the Kurdish rebels, the Syrian government and other stakeholders in the region should be mindful of the geopolitical and sectarian minefields that groups such as the IS could exploit for their re-emergence. Mr. Trump has already announced the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Syria. The Turkish government of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is wary of the rapid rise of the Syrian Kurds, who are organisationally and ideologically aligned with Kurdish rebels on the Turkish side. The Syrian regime, on its part, has vowed to re-establish its authority over the Kurdish autonomous region in the northeast. If Turkey and Syria attack Kurdish rebels, who were vital in the battle against the IS, that would throw northeastern Syria into chaos again, which would suit the jihadists. To avoid this, there must be an orderly U.S. withdrawal and a political solution to the Syrian civil war.

*(Adapted from The Hindu)*

**13. Cabinet approves accession of India to The Nice Agreement on the International classification of goods and services for the purposes of registration of marks, Vienna Agreement for setting up an International classification of the figurative elements of marks and The Locarno Agreement for establishing an International classification for industrial designs (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; IOBR)*

The Union Cabinet has approved the proposal for accession of India to
(i) The Nice Agreement concerning the International classification of Goods and Services for the purposes of registration of marks,

(ii) The Vienna Agreement establishing an International Classification of the figurative elements of marks, and

(iii) The Locarno Agreement establishing an International classification for industrial designs.

What is the purpose of accession?
1. Accession to the Nice, Vienna and Locarno Agreements will help the Intellectual Property Office in India to harmonise the classification systems for examinational of trademark and design applications, in line with the classification systems followed globally.

2. It would give an opportunity to include Indian designs, figurative elements and goods in the international classification systems.

3. The accession is expected to instill confidence in foreign investors in relation to protection of IPs in India.

4. The accession would also facilitate in exercising rights in decision making processes regarding review and revision of the classifications under the agreement.

What is Nice Agreement concerning the International classification of Goods and Services for the purposes of registration of marks?
The Nice Agreement, concluded at Nice in 1957, revised at Stockholm in 1967 and at Geneva in 1977, and amended in 1979, establishes a classification of goods and services for the purposes of registering trademarks and service marks (the Nice Classification).

The competent offices of the Contracting States must indicate in official documents and in any publication they issue in respect of the registration of marks the numbers of the classes of the Classification to which the goods or services for which the mark is registered belong.

What is Vienna Agreement establishing an International Classification of the figurative elements of marks?
The Vienna Agreement, concluded in Vienna in 1973 and amended in 1985, establishes a classification (the Vienna Classification) for marks that consist of, or contain, figurative elements.

The competent offices of Contracting States must indicate in official documents and in any publication they issue in respect of the registration of marks the numbers of the categories, divisions and sections of the Classification to which the figurative elements of those marks belong.

What is Locarno Agreement establishing an International classification for industrial designs?
The Locarno Agreement, concluded at Locarno in 1968 and amended in 1979, establishes a classification for industrial designs (the Locarno Classification).

The competent offices of the Contracting States must indicate in official documents and in any publication they issue in respect of the deposit or registration of industrial designs the numbers of the classes and subclasses of the Classification to which the goods incorporating the designs belong.

(Adapted From PIB)

14. China places hold on listing Azhar as designated terrorist (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; IOBR)

China has placed a technical hold on the listing request for Pakistan-based terror group Jaish-e-Mohammad’s (JeM) leader Masood Azhar at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) 1267 Committee.

No reason given by China
No reason for a hold — which lasts for three months and then can be extended for another six — need be given, and China gave none.

What has been the implication?
“This has prevented action by the international community to designate the leader of Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), a proscribed and active terrorist organization which has claimed responsibility for the terrorist attack in Jammu and Kashmir on 14 February 2019.

The listing request, which was co-sponsored by the United States, United Kingdom and France on February 27, came in response to the suicide attack that killed over 40 CRPF jawans in Pulwama on February 14. Had it gone through, it would have resulted in Azhar being designated as a terrorist and subjected him to sanctions, including an arms and travel ban as well as an asset freeze.

Why the ban was justified?
JeM is a United Nations-designated terrorist group. Azhar is the founder and the leader of JEM, and he meets the criteria for designation by the United Nations. JEM has been responsible for numerous terrorist attacks and is a threat to regional stability and peace.

(Adapted From The Hindu)

15. What next after China’s block to designate Masood Azhar as global terrorist (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; IOBR)

Beijing has once again blocked New Delhi’s move to get Jaish chief Azhar listed by UN as a global terrorist. Yet there are some takeaways for India in the way it has lobbied support. Where can this lead to?
How often has China blocked UN action against Jaish-e-Mohammed terrorist Masood Azhar?
In the last 10 years, China has repeatedly blocked India’s listing proposals at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 1267 sanctions committee to designate Azhar as a global terrorist. Beijing blocked it for the first time in 2009, after India had moved the proposal in the aftermath of the 26/11 Mumbai attack. In February 2016, after the Pathankot attack, India put forward a fresh proposal. China intervened at Pakistan’s behest and placed a technical hold on India’s move, and did so again in October 2016. It subsequently used its veto power to block the proposal in December 2016, a day before the end of the technical hold. Following a proposal by the US, the UK and France on January 19, 2017 to designate Azhar as a terrorist China once again employed a technical hold and blocked the proposal in November 2017.

So, India was prepared to see China doing so again?
There were indications, in the form of continuous and consistent statements from Beijing about “rules and procedures”. So, when Beijing finally placed a technical hold just about an hour before the deadline for no objections, New Delhi would have been prepared for such an outcome.

Is this latest move different from the previous occasions when China acted similarly?
This latest move is significant. In 2009 and 2016, it was India that had moved the proposal. This had prompted China and Pakistan to build a narrative that New Delhi was trying to score political points over Islamabad. So in 2017, when India asked its influential strategic partners US, UK and France to move the proposal, it negated the narrative that it was a India-Pakistan tussle and was rather placed as the international community’s fight against terrorism.

This time, India not only got the same three countries to move the proposal but also involved 10 more countries as co-sponsors. Besides the US, the UK and France, which are permanent UNSC members, the other 10 countries included four non-permanent UNSC members – Germany, Poland, Belgium and Equatorial Guinea – as well as Japan, Australia, Italy, Bangladesh, Maldives and Bhutan.

What is significant is that the Quad members – US, Japan and Australia – have co-sponsored the proposal, in a sign of a strategic alignment. This helps India’s case that the listing of Masood Azhar is a global cause, and a key element of the global fight against terrorism.

Are there also continuities in the way China has gone about blocking India’s proposals on listing Azhar?
China has always used Pakistan, as senior Indian officials say, a “strategic weapon” against India. This is reflected in Beijing’s blocking of the Azhar proposal. As per New Delhi’s assessment, Azhar is a valuable strategic asset by Pakistan’s military and intelligence establishment. Beijing is mindful of the cosy relationship between Rawalpindi and Jaish, and does not want to upset it.
Beyond the listing of Azhar, China has also been blocking India’s aspirations to become a member of the Nuclear Suppliers Group.

**What does China gain by repeatedly frustrating India and the global consensus on fighting terrorism emanating from Pakistan?**

For China, Pakistan is an “all-weather ally” and an “iron brother”. It has strategic investments in Pakistan, including the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. For its all-weather friend, it is ready to take a hit on its reputation, even if it means that it is perceived to be standing on the wrong side of the global fight against terrorism.

**Is there anything at all for India to feel satisfied about after the latest disappointment?**

The support from the global community, which was reflected in the 13 co-sponsors of the listing proposal, is a reflection of broad global support India has been able to rally. In the current bout of Indo-Pak tension, China had taken a very calibrated position – which India sees as a positive – until its blocking of the proposal on Azhar. China did not slam India in the first couple of days after the Balakot airstrike for violation of Pakistan’s territorial sovereignty and integrity. That was perceived to be a good signal from Beijing. Then, China also signed the UNSC condemnation statement, which named Jaish, and criticised the terrorist attack in Pulwama. For the record, more than 110 countries issued statements between Pulwama and Balakot, the majority of them favouring India.

**What is the way forward for Indian diplomacy on this issue?**

The technical hold gives India nine months to lobby with China, so that it lifts the hold and allows the listing of Azhar. That may seem a tall order, and it will be incumbent on India to find leverages with China so that it acts as per India’s desire. In 2017, when China wanted to become vice-president of the Financial Action Task Force, India agreed to support its candidature against Japan (a close strategic partner of India), in return for Beijing’s support for Pakistan’s ‘grey listing’. That was a major moment of transactionalism with Beijing. India will need to find such transactional points in the next nine months – a trade-off on a vote or a crucial election – so that it can influence Beijing’s behaviour.

India will also need to work all its diplomatic levers so that Pakistan takes concrete and verifiable actions against terrorism. The FATF gives India an opportunity; it can try and persuade the international community to even blacklist Pakistan by May-September this year, if Islamabad doesn’t take action against terrorists and terror groups, including Azhar and Jaish.’

*(Adapted From Indian Express)*

16. **Itself in grey zone, why Pakistan complained to terror finance watchdog about India (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; IOBR)**

A delegation of the APJG, which is a regional association of the FATF, is scheduled to reach Islamabad on March 24, and following a review over the next two days, submit its report to the FATF.

Website: [www.prepmate.in](http://www.prepmate.in)  
Telegram Channel: [@upscrepmate](https://t.me/upscrepmate)  
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Pakistan’s Finance Minister Asad Umar has written to the president of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) asking that India be removed as co-chair of the FATF’s Asia-Pacific Joint Group (APJG), which is reviewing Islamabad’s progress on action against terrorist financing. A delegation of the APJG, which is a regional association of the FATF, is scheduled to reach Islamabad on March 24, and following a review over the next two days, submit its report to the FATF.

Umar wrote to FATF president Marshall Billingsea that “India’s animosity towards Pakistan is well-known and the recent violation of Pakistan’s airspace and dropping of bombs inside Pakistani territory was another manifestation of India’s hostile attitude.” He asked FATF to appoint any other member country as co-chair “to ensure that the review process is fair, unbiased and objective”.

**The FATF**
The FATF was established in July 1989 by a G-7 Summit in Paris to examine and develop measures to combat money laundering. In October 2001, it expanded its mandate to incorporate efforts to combat terrorist financing as well. The FATF’s objectives are “to set standards and promote effective implementation of legal, regulatory and operational measures for combating money laundering, terrorist financing and other related threats to the integrity of the international financial system”.

The FATF monitors the progress of members and non-members in implementing the FATF Recommendations, “a comprehensive and consistent framework of measures which countries should implement in order to combat money laundering and terrorist financing, as well as the financing of proliferation of weapons of mass destruction”. It identifies jurisdictions with “weak measures to combat money laundering and terrorist financing (AML/CFT) in two FATF public documents that are issued three times a year”.

The FATF’s decision-making body, the FATF Plenary, meets three times in Paris between July and June — usually in October, February and June. The FATF’s 38 members (36 member jurisdictions and two regional organisations, the European Commission and Gulf Cooperation Council), two observer jurisdictions (Indonesia and Saudi Arabia), and multiple observer organisations (mainly international banks and law enforcement bodies) attend the Plenary. India is an FATF member; Pakistan is not.

**The APJG**
APJG is a working group that functions under the FATF, and is not to be confused with the Asia/Pacific Group (APG) headquartered in Sydney, Australia. The APG is the largest of nine FATF-Style Regional Bodies (FSRBs) whose 41 members include both India and Pakistan. Eleven of these members are members of FATF as well. India became a member of the APG in March 1998; Pakistan in May 2010.

The APG examines AML/CFT efforts of members countries every 10 years. Pakistan will be reviewed in 2019-20. “While FATF will look into the 26-point action plan, APG will hold a separate review,” an Indian official said.
26-point plan
In 2018, FATF approved the nomination for monitoring of Pakistan under its International Cooperation Review Group, commonly known as the 'grey list'. The resolution against Pakistan was moved by the US, and supported by the UK, France, Germany, and India. It said Pakistan was not doing enough to comply with anti-terrorist financing and anti-money laundering regulations.

In June 2018, Pakistan submitted a 26-point action plan to the FATF, committing to implement it over the next 15 months. The action plan included a squeeze on the finances of Jamaat-ud-Dawa, Falah-i-Insaniyat, Lashkar-e-Taiba, Jaish-e-Mohammad, Haqqani Network and the Afghan Taliban. The failure to negotiate the action plan could have led to Pakistan being blacklisted.

In January 2019, the FATF decided to keep Pakistan on the grey list, based on a review that concluded that the country had made “limited progress” in curbing money laundering and terrorism. Expressing dissatisfaction, FATF said Pakistan could “not demonstrate a proper understanding of the terror financing risks posed by Daesh (ISIS), al-Qaeda, Jamaat-ud-Dawa, Falah-i-Insaniyat Foundation, Lashkar-e-Taiba, Jaish-e-Mohammad, Haqqani Network, and persons affiliated with the Taliban”.

Whether Pakistan remains in the grey list or is placed in the black list will be clear by October 2019. Pakistan was on the FATF watchlist between 2012 and 2015 as well, but only for money laundering.

What happens now
Officials said it was unlikely that Pakistan’s complaint against India to the FATF would have an impact. Pakistan is not a member of FATF; India, on the other hand, has been an active member in the FATF and in its various sub-groups after 2013 following New Delhi’s effort to introduce changes to the AML/CFT systems and laws. In June 2013, the FATF recognised that India had made significant progress in addressing deficiencies identified in its mutual evaluation report, and decided that it should be removed from the regular follow-up process.

India has been lobbying hard with the US for the strict monitoring of Pakistan, and highlighting the funding of terrorist activities by that country. India has in the past provided evidence of the involvement of Pakistani officials in peddling fake currency, and planning attacks on Indian assets on foreign soil.

(Adapted From Indian Express)

17. Christchurch massacre (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; IOBR)

New Zealand was shaken to its core recently when at least 49 people were killed by a gunman in two mosques in Christchurch.
Brenton Harrison Tarrant, the suspect, livestreamed the massacre on social media after releasing a white supremacist manifesto that called for removing the “invaders” and “retaking” Europe.

- The 27-year-old Australian, who the authorities said was not on any intelligence watch list, apparently travelled to New Zealand to carry out the attack. His targets were clearly Muslims, who make up less than 1% of New Zealand’s population.

- The manifesto and the symbols he carried suggest that he was influenced by far-right terrorists and their anti-Muslim, anti-immigration and anti-Semitic ideology. He came in military fatigues, wore neo-Nazi emblems and was listening in his car to a song devoted to Bosnian war criminal Radovan Karadžić.

- The manifesto lauds Anders Breivik, the Norwegian far-right terrorist who killed 77 people in 2011 and released a 1,518-page racist manifesto. He saw President Donald Trump as a “symbol of renewed white identity and common purpose”.

**Position of Right wing racist terror**

- Right-wing racist terror, which has largely been on the fringes in the post-War world, is emerging as a major political and security threat, especially in white-majority societies.

- In recent years, mosques in Germany and France have been targeted; in Britain an MP was stabbed to death; and in the U.S. a synagogue was attacked, leaving 11 people dead.

- In most cases, the attackers were obsessed with immigration and the far-right ideas of Euro-Christian white racial purity, which is fundamentally not different from the ideology of the Nazis. The language these attackers use resembles that of mainstream anti-immigrant politicians in Western countries, such as Mr. Trump, who wanted to ban Muslims from entering the U.S.; Viktor Orbán, the Prime Minister of Hungary, who wants to defend “Christian Europe”; or Italian Interior Minister Matteo Salvini, known for his hardline views on migrants.

**What is the need of the hour?**

Societies worldwide should wake up to the growing danger right-wing racist terrorism poses, and not view it as mere isolated, irrational responses to Islamist terror. It has to be fought politically, by driving a counter-narrative to white supremacism, and by using the security apparatus, through allocation of enough resources to tackle all threats of violence.

*(Adapted From the Hindu)*

**18. What next for Brexit? (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; IOBR)**

With the deadline for Britain leaving the EU approaching, Prime Minister May’s proposals have been rejected yet again by Parliament. Amid the uncertainty, a look at various possible courses of events.
With less than two weeks to go for the March 29 scheduled date, the nature of Britain’s exit from the European Union, or Brexit — if it happens at all — remains uncertain as ever. A series of developments over the last one week has left a number of possibilities wide open. Will Britain and the EU be able to renegotiate an extended deadline? Will Britain eventually leave without a deal? Is it possible that British citizens will vote in a fresh referendum, and what would that be about? A look at where things stand, and what could possibly follow:

**What has happened on Brexit so far?**
In a referendum on Thursday June 23, 2016, those favouring Brexit (Leave) won by 52% to 48% (Remain). The “transition period” is scheduled to begin on March 29 and end on December 31, 2020. In November 2018, the UK and the EU agreed to the terms of the exit, known as the withdrawal agreement. However, the agreement has failed to clear British Parliament, with MPs voting against it twice this year. On January 15, they voted 432-202 to reject the deal. Prime Minister Theresa May renegotiated certain terms with the EU, but on March 12, MPs voted against the agreement again, this time by 391 votes to 242. The following day, the MPs rejected the idea of leaving the EU without a deal — an option called “No deal”. Then on March 14, they voted 413-202 in favour of Prime Minister May asking the EU for a delay to carry out Brexit. That puts a question mark on whether Brexit will happen on March 29 after all.

**What is in the deal?**
An explainer on the BBC News website lists out various aspects:

**PAYMENTS:** This relates to payments that the UK makes to the EU budget. As its financial obligations for leaving, the UK has agreed to continue making these payments until the end of the transition period, and the bill is expected to be £39bn. The withdrawal agreement, however, leaves the option of the transition period being extended. If that happens, there will have to be additional payments, to be agreed later.

**IRISH BACKSTOP:** The backstop is among the most contentious of issues. It is part of the withdrawal agreement, meant to ensure that there is no hard border between the Republic of Ireland (which will remain in the EU) and Northern Ireland (which is part of the UK). The backstop will come into effect if the transition period ends without wider agreements being reached. Under the withdrawal agreement, it would keep Northern Ireland in the EU Customs Union. This has raised concerns about a part of the UK being trapped in the backstop.

**OTHER BORDERS:** During the transition period, EU citizens will be free to live and work in the UK, and vice versa. Once the period ends, it will be able to set its own rules on immigration. The PM claims the UK will be “taking back control” of its borders. If the transition period continues, EU citizens will be able to carry on moving to the UK.

**LAWS:** As of now, the European Court of Justice has the final say on disputes on matters of EU law. Brexit supporters want the last word to be with a UK court. During the transition, the UK will have to continue following EU rules and abiding by ECJ rulings.

**What happens next?**

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There are a number of possibilities, the first of which is getting the EU to agree for an extension of Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty (see ‘The Language of Brexit’), which in effect means asking for more time. The request would be taken up at an EU Summit on March 21-22. If Prime Minister May asks for a short extension and all EU member states agree, Brexit can still happen by the schedule. On the other hand, if May asks for a longer extension and all EU members agree, Brexit could be delayed beyond the EU Parliament elections in May (with Britain taking part). If the EU turns down either request, it could lead to a “No deal” Brexit.

How does the “No deal” option work?
It would be legal for the UK to unilaterally cancel Brexit, without the need for agreement from the other 27 EU countries, the BBC explains, citing an ECJ ruling. However, it is not clear what that process would be.

When will the UK decide whether to ask for a longer or a shorter extension?
The government reportedly plans to hold another vote this week. If the Speaker allows the vote, the PM can present it as a choice between passing the deal with a short Brexit delay or rejecting it and facing a longer extension. If successful, the PM could go to the EU Summit and request the short extension.

What if the request is for a longer extension, and the EU agrees?
The delay would keep open a number of possibilities. For one thing, the prospect of “No deal” would remain, but that would happen at a later date. If the EU agrees to renegotiate the deal, the UK Parliament would still need to clear it. If either of these does not happen, various possibilities (besides “No deal”), are listed out on the BBC News website:

REFERENDUM: When Parliament voted to ask the EU for a delay, it also rejected a fresh referendum. BBC News explains, however, that a referendum is possible, although not likely. It could be a non-binding referendum with the question to be determined. That would subject to Parliament approval, with a new piece of law to make a referendum happen and to determine the rules, the website quoted an BBC News analyst as saying.

PARLIAMENT ELECTION: If an election is held, the PM would hope for a mandate in the newly elected House. If she proposes an election, it will need the approval of two-thirds of the MPs.
NO-CONFIDENCE MOTION: If the government loses such as motion, it will open up new possibilities. It will set off a 14-day countdown. During this period, either the current government or a new one will face a vote of confidence. If either one wins, it takes over. If not, a general election will follow.

If there is an election, what are the political leanings of the Leave and Remain camps, respectively?
Theresa May is a Conservative, with Labour in opposition, but that may not reflect in how voters relate to Brexit. Although economic views have in the past helped predict British political support, Brexit is different, according to ‘The Interpreter’ column in The New York Times. It noted that on this issue, voters’ social views are far more relevant. “People on the
libertarian end of the spectrum tended to vote Remain, while those on the authoritarian end tended to vote Leave. The result is that Brexit views slice across people's party identity. Both parties’ voters and legislators include a mix of Leavers and Remainers. There isn’t a ‘Leave’ party and a ‘Remain’ party,” it said.

(Adapted From Indian Express)

19. UN World Happiness Report- 2019 (Relevant for GS Prelims and Mains Paper II; IOBR)

WORLD HAPPINESS REPORT
The World Happiness Report is a measure of happiness published by the United Nations Sustainable Development Solutions Network ((SDSN). Data is collected from people in over 150 countries. Each variable measured, reveals a score on a scale running from 0 to 10 that is tracked over time and compared against other countries. The final score is the weighted average of all the variables. These variables are 6 in number: real GDP per capita, social support, life expectancy, freedom to make life choices, generosity, and perceptions of corruption. Each country is also compared against a hypothetical nation called Dystopia. Dystopia represents the lowest national averages for each key variable and is, along with residual error, used as a regression benchmark.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT SOLUTIONS NETWORK
In 2012, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon launched the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) to mobilize global scientific and technological expertise to promote practical problem solving for sustainable development, including the design and implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

SDSN aims to accelerate joint learning and help to overcome the compartmentalization of technical and policy work by promoting integrated approaches to the interconnected economic, social, and environmental challenges confronting the world. The SDSN works closely with United Nations agencies, multilateral financing institutions, the private sector and civil society.

The secretariat of the Sustainable Development Solutions Network is located in Paris, France, and New York, the United States. SDSN releases World Happiness Report.

2019 report
The UN’s seventh annual World Happiness Report, which ranks the world’s 156 countries on “how happy their citizens perceive themselves to be”, also noted that there has been an increase in negative emotions, including worry, sadness and anger.

India has score 140th rank in 2019 report, 7 ranks down from 2018 report. The list is topped by Finland for the second year in a row. The Nordic nation is followed by Denmark, Norway, Iceland and The Netherlands.
Pakistan is ranked 67th, Bangladesh 125th and China is place at 93rd. People in war-torn South Sudan are the most unhappy with their lives, followed by Central African Republic (155), Afghanistan (154), Tanzania (153) and Rwanda (152).

(Adapted From The Hindu)

20. Kazakhstan-renames-capital-‘Nursultan’-after-ex-President-(Relevant-for-GS-Prelims;-IOBR)

Kazakhstan's new interim President was sworn in on March 20 following the shock resignation of the country's long-time ruler. The new ruler in his first official act renamed the capital after his predecessor:

Kassym-Jomart Tokayev took office after Nursultan Nazarbayev, the only leader an independent Kazakhstan had ever known, suddenly announced he was stepping down.

Change of capital's name
Mr. Tokayev immediately proposed changing the name of the Central Asian nation's capital from Astana to Nursultan, or “Sultan of Light” in Kazakh, and parliament approved the change within hours.

Political situation at present
The Senate also appointed Mr. Nazarbayev's eldest daughter Dariga Nazarbayeva as Speaker, setting her up as a potential contender to succeed her father.
Mr. Tokayev, 65, will serve out the rest of Mr. Nazarbayev's mandate until elections due in April 2020, though the former President retains significant powers in the country he ruled for nearly three decades.

Earlier change of name of capital
Mr. Nazarbayev changed the capital from Kazakhstan's largest city Almaty to Astana in 1997, transforming it from a minor provincial town into a futuristic city of skyscrapers.

Mr. Nazarbayev achievements
Mr. Nazarbayev, 78, ruled Kazakhstan since before it gained independence with the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union. He steered the country through a major transformation, developing huge energy reserves and boosting its international influence, but was accused of cracking down on dissent and tolerating little opposition.

Mr. Nazarbayev will continue to enjoy significant powers thanks to his Constitutional status as “Leader of the Nation”, life-time position as chief of the security council and head of the ruling Nur Otan party.

(Adapted From The Hindu)

President Donald Trump said it’s time for the U.S. to “fully recognize” Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights, a political gift to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu just weeks before a tough re-election vote.

**What will be effect of Trump recognition of Israeli sovereignty over Golan heights?**
The remark -- which would break with decades of U.S. policy -- could prove decisive in swaying Israeli voters just as Netanyahu faces corruption allegations that have marred his campaign. It is also likely to draw a rebuke from the international community, which never recognized Israel’s sovereignty over the territory it captured in 1967.

**What did Trump say on Golan heights?**
After 52 years it is time for the United States to fully recognize Israel’s Sovereignty over the Golan Heights, which is of critical strategic and security importance to the State of Israel and Regional Stability!

**What is the importance of Golan Heights to Israel, Syria and US?**
The future of the plateau, a scenic area containing important water sources, had long been considered a subject for negotiation in any potential peace agreement with Syria. Now, with Syria wracked by a civil war that includes support from Iran, Israel wants its control over the area to be recognized worldwide.

Netanyahu is scheduled to visit the White House next week ahead of his April 9 re-election vote. While he’s officially coming for the AIPAC conference, an annual pro-Israel policy gathering, his visit will serve up excellent campaign material back home.

The U.S. had signaled strongly in recent weeks it was ready to accept Israeli sovereignty. In an annual report on human rights released last week, the State Department referred to the Golan Heights, the West Bank and Gaza as “Israeli-controlled,” not “Israeli-occupied.”

American support for Israel has strengthened under Trump, who moved the U.S. Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem in 2018 and backed out of the nuclear agreement his predecessor Barack Obama negotiated with Iran, a cherished goal of Netanyahu.

*(Adapted from Bloomberg.com)*

**22. Italy signs new ‘Silk Road’ protocol with China (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; IOBR)*

Italy signed a “non-binding” protocol with China to take part in Beijing’s new “Silk Road” of transport and trade links stretching from Asia to Europe.

In doing so, Italy became the first G7 country to sign up for the massive project which has sparked unease in the U.S. and the European Union (EU) as China aspires to a greater world role.
Visiting Chinese President Xi Jinping and Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte both attended a ceremony for the signing of 29 Memoranda of Understanding which Italian media said were worth €5 billion-€7 billion.

**Benefits to China and Italy**
The infrastructure initiative is expected to yield $1 trillion mutual benefits to both countries.

The accords also foresee the opening up of the Chinese market for Italian oranges as well as a partnership for Chinese tourism giant Ctrip, notably with Rome's airports.

*(Adapted From The Hindu)*

23. **What is the Belt and Road Initiative, and why is China pushing it hard? (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; IOBR)**

Fissures surface in China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative, but Beijing pushes hard on the project to leverage its influence worldwide.
The story so far: Six years ago, Chinese President Xi Jinping launched a mammoth infrastructure project straddling many countries and continents. Of the projects, the most ambitious is the $60+ billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, aimed at linking China’s Xinjiang province with the Arabian Sea.

**What is it?**
The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), also known as the One Belt One Road Initiative, is the most emblematic of China’s economic and industrial might, as of its ambitions for global, political and strategic influence. The appellation has come to signify the many Beijing-backed infrastructure projects that predate Mr. Xi’s ascent.

When Mr. Xi announced the BRI’s formal launch in Kazakhstan in 2013, there were few signs that the policy would command the heft and reach it has acquired since. BRI partnerships encompass infrastructure investments in the construction, transport, aviation, telecommunications and energy sectors stretching across many countries in Asia and Africa. A number of Latin American and Caribbean states recently signed a memorandum of understanding to join the BRI. The so-called 16+1 (China) grouping of central and eastern European countries includes 11 states from the European Union (EU). Rome endorsed the BRI last week, the first among the Group of 7 most industrialised nations to do so. The move has caused consternation in Brussels and Washington, which are grappling with the many fissures that have surfaced in the trans-Atlantic alliance.

Typically, the terms around BRI bilateral tie-ups are fluid and amorphous in nature, premised on negotiation and accommodation rather than being underpinned by rigidly written-down rules and procedures. The upside to this style of doing things is the flow of investment on seemingly soft terms to places hard up for basic infrastructure. The politically neutral stance of Beijing-backed deals starkly contrasts with much western hypocrisy and high-mindedness about respect for the rule of law and human rights. The downside is the risk of falling into a prolonged debt trap and the uncertainty over contractual obligations between the parties. With the rise of populist forces in many countries in recent years, the world’s open trading system has come under a protectionist strain. Perhaps, there are signs in the BRI of the beginnings of a different kind of globalisation.

**Why did China push for it?**
The BRI is, above all, a response to slowing domestic economic growth earlier this decade, accentuated by a slump in Chinese exports to developed countries following the 2007-08 economic meltdown. As infrastructure spending at home became less sustainable, Beijing shifted the emphasis in a big way to boosting the global competitiveness of domestic businesses. During the BRI’s fifth anniversary in September, Mr. Xi described this flagship programme as an economic cooperation initiative rather than a geopolitical or military alliance. But the more common narrative is that the large infrastructure investments in the least developed and developing countries have enabled Beijing to leverage its influence around the world, potentially altering the established rules of the global order.

**How many major BRI projects are in the works?**

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It is hard to put a precise number on them because projects are negotiated informally between investor and recipient countries. But they are clearly in the thousands, unprecedented in the history of development cooperation, in terms of the volume of investment and potential benefits. Let us begin with the Greek harbour of Piraeus. Backed by Chinese investment, the port has climbed from the world’s 93rd container port in 2010 to 38th in 2017. This stupendous success has apparently raised expectations even higher. A most strategic BRI venture is the East Coast Rail Link (ECRL), which would connect Malaysia’s less developed east coast to southern Thailand and the capital Kuala Lumpur. The newly elected government of Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad suspended the project last year, owing to reservations about the cost of financing by the China Communication Construction Company. Following Beijing’s willingness to address Kuala Lumpur’s concerns, the ECRL has been brought back on track with revisions to its pricing and size. There are other large Malaysian gas and oil pipeline projects that were suspended owing to the alleged misappropriation of funds during the previous government. They might eventually be revived, just as the rail project.

By far the most ambitious BRI project is the $60+ billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. Once the Gwadar city port in coastal Balochistan is built, its strategic location, near the Strait of Hormuz, will connect the Arabian Sea and the Gulf of Oman, the arterial route to world oil transport. The force of Balochi opposition to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, as to most other projects, essentially comes down to a demand to reallocate its promised benefits rather than an outright roll-back. India has opted to stay out of the BRI owing to concerns of national sovereignty and integrity, choosing instead to stick with the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. New Delhi’s reservations are entirely understandable, given that the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, a core BRI endeavour, passes through the Pakistan-occupied Kashmir.

Where does the BRI go from here?

Many BRI projects are said to have overshot their original estimated cost. The burgeoning debt burden recipient countries have thus accumulated has led to questions over the long-term viability and benefits of such ventures. While these may be legitimate concerns, it is equally true that it is still early days in the evolution of the BRI. Another concern for the BRI is its current dependence on the U.S. dollar to fund the bulk of its projects. But unlike some years ago, its stocks of the greenback are in limited supply. Conversely, the renminbi is yet to emerge as a full-fledged global currency. That may leave China with the option of adopting a co-financing strategy. Such cooperation with multilateral banking institutions would be a welcome balancing act. Western critics have attacked the initiative as new colonialism, or Marshal Plan for the 21st century. China has generally played down such comparisons, drawing parallels with the U.S. endeavour to rebuild Europe as a counter to the Soviet Union after World War II. Beijing has embarked upon a ‘Made in China 2025’ industrial policy, an audacious bid for global dominance in artificial intelligence, aerospace, and 5G telecommunication, among others. Washington’s current trade dispute with China aims fundamentally to challenge this growing dominance. It has even portrayed Chinese competition in terms of an ultimate threat to U.S. national security, invoking provisions rarely used in international trade disputes. The outcome of negotiations between the world’s two largest economies to break the deadlock would echo across the Belt and Road.
process. Italy’s endorsement of the BRI is a potential game changer. Other major economies may follow Rome’s lead, in much the same way as the initial resistance to China’s Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank eventually evaporated. That opens room to indulge in some idle speculation about how closely or little the new Silk Road would one day resemble the current order of things. The answer would depend upon who among its innumerable participants can wield the maximum influence and ultimately emerge winners or losers. One day, the BRI might remain Chinese in all but name. That may be the next phase of globalisation in the making.

(Adapted From The Hindu)

24. Mueller delivers report on Trump-Russia investigation to attorney general (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; IOBR)

Attorney General William Barr told congressional leaders in a letter that he may brief them on the special counsel's “principal conclusions” as early as this weekend, a surprisingly fast turnaround for a report anticipated for months.

Written by Sharon LaFraniere and Katie Benner
Special counsel Robert Mueller on Friday delivered a report on his inquiry into Russian interference in the 2016 election to Attorney General William Barr, the Justice Department said, bringing to a close an investigation that has consumed the nation and cast a shadow over President Donald Trump for nearly two years.

Barr told congressional leaders in a letter that he may brief them on the special counsel's “principal conclusions” as early as this weekend, a surprisingly fast turnaround for a report anticipated for months. The attorney general said he “remained committed to as much transparency as possible.”

In an apparent endorsement of an investigation that Trump has relentlessly attacked as a “witch hunt,” Barr said Justice Department officials never had to intervene to keep him from taking an inappropriate or unwarranted step. The department's regulations would have required Barr to inform the leaders of the House and Senate Judiciary committees about any such interventions in his letter.

A senior Justice Department official said Mueller would not recommend new indictments, a statement aimed at ending speculation that Trump or other key figures might be charged down the line. With department officials stressing that Mueller’s inquiry was over and his office closing, the question for both Trump's critics and defenders was whether the prosecutors condemned the president’s behavior in their report, exonerated him — or neither. The president’s lawyers were already girding for a possible fight over whether they could assert executive privilege to keep parts of the report secret.

Since Mueller’s appointment in May 2017, his team has focused on how Russian operatives sought to sway the outcome of the 2016 presidential race and whether anyone tied to the Trump campaign, wittingly or unwittingly, cooperated with them. While the inquiry,
started months earlier by the FBI, unearthed a far-ranging Russian influence operation, no public evidence emerged that the president or his aides illegally assisted it.

Nonetheless, the damage to Trump and those in his circle has been extensive. A half-dozen former Trump aides were indicted or convicted of crimes, mostly for lying to federal investigators or Congress. Others remain under investigation in cases that Mueller’s office handed off to federal prosecutors in New York and elsewhere. Dozens of Russian intelligence officers or citizens, along with three Russian companies, were charged in cases that are likely to languish in court because the defendants cannot be extradited to the United States.

Republicans immediately seized upon the news that no more indictments are expected as a vindication of Trump and his campaign. Those reports “confirm what we’ve known all along: There was never any collusion with Russia,” Rep. Steve Scalise of Louisiana, the second-highest-ranking House Republican, said in a statement.

Democrats, including some of those hoping to supplant Trump in the White House in the 2020 election, insisted that Mueller’s full report be made public, including the underlying evidence. In a joint statement, Speaker Nancy Pelosi of California and Sen. Chuck Schumer of New York, the top Senate Democrat, warned Barr not to allow the White House a “sneak preview” of the document.

“The White House must not be allowed to interfere in decisions about what parts of those findings or evidence are made public,” they said.

Not since Watergate has a special prosecutor’s inquiry so mesmerized the American public. Polls have shown that most Americans want to know its findings, and the House unanimously passed a nonbinding resolution to publicize the report.

Barr’s letter said he would decide what to release after consulting with Mueller and Rod Rosenstein, the deputy attorney general who has overseen his investigation. Justice Department officials emphasized that the White House had been kept at a distance.

Only a handful of law enforcement officials have seen the report, said Kerri Kupec, a department spokeswoman.

Although a White House lawyer was notified that Mueller had delivered it to Barr, no White House official has seen the report or been briefed on it, according to Sarah Huckabee Sanders, the White House press secretary. “The next steps are up to Attorney General Barr, and we look forward to the process taking its course,” she said.

Rudy Giuliani, one of the president’s personal lawyers, said he planned to remain in Washington over the weekend in part because Barr might update Congress on Mueller’s findings.
He sidestepped a question about whether the president’s lawyers were seeking to review the report before any of it becomes public. White House lawyers have been preparing for the possibility they may need to argue some material is protected by executive privilege, especially if the report discusses whether the president’s interactions with his top aides or legal advisers are evidence of obstruction of justice.

Even though Mueller’s report is complete, some aspects of his inquiry remain active and may be overseen by the same prosecutors once they are reassigned to their old jobs in the Justice Department. For instance, recently filed court documents suggest that investigators are still examining why former Trump campaign chairman Paul Manafort turned over campaign polling data in 2016 to a Russian associate who prosecutors said was tied to Russian intelligence.

Mueller looked extensively at whether Trump obstructed justice to protect himself or his associates. But despite months of negotiations, prosecutors were unable to personally interview the president.

Trump’s lawyers insisted that he respond only to written questions from the special counsel. Even though under Justice Department policy, a sitting president cannot be indicted, Trump’s lawyers worried that his responses in an oral interview could bring political repercussions, including impeachment, or put him in legal jeopardy once he is out of office.

Trump has helped make Mueller a household name, attacking his investigation an average of about twice a day as an unfair, politically motivated attempt to invalidate his election. He never forgave former Attorney General Jeff Sessions for recusing himself from the Russia inquiry, an action that cleared the way for his deputy, Rosenstein, to appoint Mueller.

Trump reiterated his attacks on the special counsel this week, saying Mueller decided “out of the blue” to write a report, ignoring that regulations require him to do so. But the president also said the report should be made public because of “tens of millions” of Americans would want to know what it contains.

“Let people see it,” Trump said. “There was no collusion. There was no obstruction. There was no nothing.”

In court, the evidence amassed by the Mueller team has held up. Every defendant who is not still awaiting trial either pleaded guilty or was convicted by a jury. Although no American has been charged with illegally plotting with the Russians to tilt the election, Mueller uncovered a web of lies by former Trump aides.

Five of them were found to have deceived federal investigators or Congress about their interactions with Russians during the campaign or the transition. They include Manafort; Michael Flynn, the president’s first national security adviser; and Michael Cohen, Trump’s former lawyer and longtime fixer. A sixth former adviser, Roger Stone, is to stand trial in November on charges of lying to Congress.
Those who know Mueller, a former FBI director, had predicted a concise, legalistic report devoid of opinions — nothing like the 445-page treatise that Ken Starr, who investigated President Bill Clinton, produced in 1998. Operating under a now-defunct statute that governed independent counsels, Starr had far more leeway than Mueller to set his own investigative boundaries and to render judgments.

The regulations that governed Mueller, who was under the supervision of the Justice Department, only required him to explain his decisions to either seek or decline to seek criminal charges in a confidential report to the attorney general. The attorney general is then required to notify the leadership of the House and Senate judiciary committees.

Despite pledging transparency, Barr may be reluctant to release the part of Mueller’s report that may be of most interest: who the special counsel declined to prosecute and why, especially if Trump is on that list.

The department’s long-standing practice, with rare exceptions, is not to identify people who were merely investigative targets to avoid unfairly tainting their reputations, especially because they would have no chance to defend themselves in a court of law. Rosenstein, who has overseen Mueller’s work and may have a say in what is released, is a firm believer in that principle.

In a May 2017 letter that the president seized upon as justification for his decision to fire James Comey as FBI director, Rosenstein severely criticized Comey for announcing during the previous year that Hillary Clinton, then a presidential candidate, would not be charged with a crime for mishandling classified information as secretary of state. Releasing “derogatory information about the subject of a declined criminal investigation,” Rosenstein wrote, is “a textbook example of what federal prosecutors and agents are taught not to do.” Weighing that principle against the public’s right to know is even more fraught in the president’s case. If Mueller declined to pursue criminal charges against Trump, he might have been guided not by lack of evidence, but by the Justice Department’s legal opinions that a sitting president cannot be indicted. The department’s Office of Legal Counsel has repeatedly advised that the stigma and burden of being under prosecution would damage the president’s ability to lead.

Rep. Jerrold Nadler, D-N.Y., the head of the House Judiciary Committee, has argued that the department’s view that presidents are protected from prosecution makes it all the more important for the public to see Mueller’s report.

“To maintain that a sitting president cannot be indicted, and then to withhold evidence of wrongdoing from Congress because the president cannot be charged, is to convert DOJ policy into the means for a cover-up,” he said before the House approved its nonbinding resolution to disclose the special counsel’s findings.

Some predict that any disclosures from Mueller’s report will satisfy neither Trump’s critics nor his defenders, especially given the public’s high expectations for answers.
Washington Post-Schar School poll in February illustrated the sharp divide in public opinion: It found that of those surveyed, most Republicans did not believe evidence of crimes that Mueller’s team had already proved in court, while most Democrats believed he had proved crimes that he had not even claimed.

(Adapted The Indian Express)

25. Golan Heights; Where are they, and why do they matter? (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; IOBR)

President Donald Trump has said “it is time for the US to fully recognize Israel’s sovereignty over the Golan Heights”. What is this area, who lives here, and why is it contentious?

The land
The Golan Heights are a fertile plateau of around 1,300 sq km area lying to the north and east of the Sea of Galilee, which Israel seized from Syria during the Six-Day War of 1967, and has occupied ever since. The Golan overlooks both Israel and Syria, and offers a commanding military vantage. Syrian forces made an abortive bid to take it back during the Yom Kippur War of 1973; the 1974 ceasefire agreement, however, left most of the area in Israeli hands. In 1981, Israel passed the Golan Heights Law, which extended Israel’s “laws, jurisdiction and administration” to the area, in effect annexing it. A UNSC resolution declaring the imposition of Israel’s law “in the occupied Syrian Golan Heights… null and void and without international legal effect” has not changed the situation on the ground, although the frontier has not seen major hostilities for more than 40 years. In 2000, Israel and Syria made a failed attempt at negotiating a settlement.

The inhabitants
Around 50,000 people are estimated to live on the Golan, divided almost equally between Israeli Jewish settlers and Arabic-speaking Druze people of Syrian origin, who follow a monotheistic Abrahamic religion related to Ismaili Shia Islam. The Druze have remained loyal to the regimes of Bashar al-Assad and his father Hafez al-Assad over the decades, and refused Israeli citizenship.

Trump’s move
Trump’s tweet marked a reversal of decades of US policy, which has refused to condone the Israeli occupation of Golan, and urged that the dispute must be resolved diplomatically. The President has earlier recognised the disputed city of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital, moved the American Embassy there from Tel Aviv, and stopped aid to Palestinian refugees. Last year, the US voted against a ritual annual UN resolution condemning Israel’s continued seizure of the Golan Heights. Because nothing is happening on Golan and nobody expects...
Israel to pull back in any case, Trump's tweet does not change anything — what it does, however, is extend legitimacy to Israel's position, and boost Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu's hardline agenda as he seeks a fifth term in the April 9 elections.

Strategic theatre

Israel argues that Golan is a security buffer against the war in Syria, and Netanyahu has said that if Israel were to withdraw, it would have "Iran [which backs Syria's Assad and has vowed Israel's destruction] on the shores of the Sea of Galilee". In 2014, rebel forces fighting the Assad regime took control of the Quneitra province on the Syrian side of Golan, but government forces took back the territory last year, and began facilitating the return of UN troops to their positions. The United Nations Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) and United Nations Truce Supervision Organisation (UNTSO) have camps and posts in the area. The Israeli and Syrian armies are separated by a 400 sq km demilitarized zone which neither side can enter. There is a solitary crossing, which, before the beginning of the civil war in Syria, was used by UN forces, Druze civilians, and to transport agricultural produce.

(Adapted From Indian Express)

26. What next in Nirav Modi extradition effort (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; IOBR)

On Friday, arrested jeweller Nirav Modi will appear in court in London. His counsel is likely to seek his release on bail, while the UK authorities will present India’s case against him and the Interpol warrant based on which he was arrested, as a key accused in the Rs 13,500 crore PNB scam case.

The arrest by Scotland Yard officially sets the stage for the beginning of extradition proceedings, although it remains to be seen when and how fast New Delhi will be able to bring him back, if at all.

Nirav Modi: India, UK & extradition

India and the UK have an Extradition Treaty, signed in 1992 and in force since November 1993. To get Nirav Modi sent back to the country, Indian agencies will have to send an extradition request through diplomatic channels, besides sending a team of probe officials to assist the Crown Prosecution.

Interpol had issued a red corner notice on the request of Enforcement Directorate. Recently, British journalist Mick Brown of The Daily Telegraph tracked him on the streets of London. The arrest followed days later.

Extradition treaties are bilateral in character. Most of them, however, appear to follow a traditional set of principles, going by many judicial pronouncements. First, extradition applies only with respect to offences clearly stipulated as such in the treaty, and the
accused is proceeded against only in connection with the offence for which his extradition was requested. Second, the offence for which extradition is sought should be an offence under the national laws of the requesting country as well as of the requested country. In the current context, Article 2 of the India-UK Extradition Treaty states that an extradition offence is one which, under the laws of each contracting state, is punishable by imprisonment for at least one year. Among the charges pressed in India against Nirav Modi, the CBI FIR includes IPC section 409 for criminal breach of trust, under which the maximum punishment is life imprisonment.

**Previous extradition requests**

India has not yet managed to secure any extradition from the UK under the treaty. The most recent request is for extradition of Vijay Mallya. Eight other requests are pending. These are for Rajesh Kapoor (2011) for forgery and fraud; Tiger Hanif (2004) for alleged involvement in terrorism; Atul Singh (2012) in connection with sex crimes; Raj Kumar Patel (2009) for forgery, Jatinder Kumar Angurala and Asha Rani Angurala (2014) for bank fraud and cheating; Sanjeev Kumar Chawla (2004) for cricket betting; and Shaik Sadiq (2004) for conspiracy and theft.

In addition, the UK has rejected extradition requests for Raymond Varley, Ravi Shankaran, Velu Boopalan, Ajay Prasad Khaitan, Virendra Kumar Rastogi and Anand Kumar Jain. Varley, wanted for sex crimes, claimed that he was suffering from dementia and he was not the man wanted in India. The UK court rejected India's request on the basis of his claim of dementia. The request for extradition of Shankaran, accused in the Navy war room leak, was rejected by the British court for lack of evidence. The requests for extradition of Boopalan, Khaitan, Rastogi and Jain, too, were rejected by the UK court on grounds of insufficient evidence.

On the other hand, Bangladeshi national Mohammad Abdul Shakur, wanted in the UK on murder charges, was extradited from India recently under the treaty.

A list of 60 fugitives who are wanted by India, and are reportedly hiding in Britain, has been shared between the two countries. The UK, for its part, has provided a list of 17 people whose custody it has sought under the Mutual Legal Assistance Treaty.

*(Adapted From The Indian Express)*

**27. Indo-Sri Lanka Joint Exercise Mitra Shakti-VI (Relevant for GS Prelims; IOBR)**

Opening ceremony of Exercise MITRA SHAKTI VI, a 14 days joint training exercise of the Indian Army and the Sri Lankan Army has been held on 27 March at Diyatalawa Parade Ground in Diyatalawa, Badulla District, Sri Lanka. This is the sixth edition of the joint exercise between the two nations. The exercise is being conducted from 26 March to 08 April 19.

The Indian Army contingent comprises of a company group from BIHAR Regiment and a similar strength from the First Gemunu Watch Battalion of Sri Lankan Army. Brigadier
HPNK Jayapathirana, General Officer Commanding 21 Division of Sri Lankan Army was the chief guest for the opening ceremony.

The primary focus of the exercise is to train and equip the contingents to undertake joint counter insurgency and counter terrorist operations in urban/rural environment under the United Nations flag. The exercise provides an ideal platform for both contingents to share their operational experience and expertise while being instrumental in broadening interoperability and cooperation between the armies of India and Sri Lanka.

(Adapted From PIB)

28. Behind Mali conflict: settled vs nomadic farmers, rise of militant outfits (Relevant for GS Prelims; IOBR)

Last weekend, unidentified gunmen massacred villagers in Bankass in the Mopti region of central Mali. Those killed – the toll has now crossed 150 including women and children – belonged to an ethnic group called Fulani. The gunmen were reportedly dressed in traditional hunting gear of the Dogon, a group that has been involved in ethnic conflict with the Fulani.

The Fulani are largely Muslim and the conflict has been violent following the emergence of Islamist groups in the last few years. Days before the latest attack, a group affiliated to the al-Qaeda had killed 23 Malian soldiers days earlier. Now, militia of a Dogon group have been blamed for the massacre of Fulani villagers; while the group has denied responsibility, the Mali government has banned it.

Dogon and Fulani
The Dogon have lived in the central plateau region of Mali for centuries. They follow settled agriculture and traditional religious practices, and are often identified by their mask dances. There have been various estimates for their population, most of which put it at less than 1 million.

The Fulani, also known as the Fula people, are the largest ethnic group in a massive region that spreads across West Africa and parts of Central Africa, with most estimates putting their population at 30 million, and some counting over 40 million. While they are widely dispersed, the Fulani also include the largest nomadic pastoral community in the world, about a third of their population. These largely Muslim herders have at times come into conflict with settled agricultural communities, such as the Dogon in Mali. In Nigeria, too, similar violence has been reported between Fulani and settled farmers.

Rise of conflict
In Mali, Dogon people have often accused the Fulani of bringing their cattle onto their farms and destroying their crops. Although this has led to violence at times, competition over resources was frequently resolved by negotiation, BBC News reported. After militant Islamist conflict began in northern Mali in 2012, and spread to central areas by 2015, the region began to be marked by more instability.
Armed groups
The group that was outlawed following the massacre calls itself Dan Na Ambassagou, which means “hunters who trust in God” in the Dogon language. It was created in 2016 and came to prominence last year. Islamist groups, the ASS denies this.

Action taken
Mali President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita has banned Dan Na Ambassagou.

(Adapted From The Indian Express)

29. U.S. circulates draft resolution on Azhar in Security Council (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; IOBR)

Draft resolution by US
The U.S. recently took the lead in bringing sanctions against Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) chief Masood Azhar at the United Nations by circulating a draft resolution among Security Council members. The listing request — the fourth such unsuccessful one in a decade — followed the February 14 suicide attack on a CRPF convoy in Pulwama in Jammu and Kashmir.

China stalled listing request
The move comes weeks after the 1267 Sanctions Committee failed to designate Azhar as a terrorist, after China placed a hold on a listing request that the U.S., the U.K., and France had brought before the Committee.

Wording of resolution
It condemns, “in the strongest terms the heinous and cowardly suicide bombing in Jammu and Kashmir, which resulted in over 40 Indian paramilitary forces dead and dozens wounded on 14 February 2019, for which a member of JeM has claimed responsibility.”

Details of draft resolution
The draft resolution on Massod Azhar identifies him as the founder of the JeM and seeks to impose sanctions on him. The draft resolution also says Azhar is associated with ISIL or al-Qaeda for “participating in the financing, planning, facilitating, preparing, or perpetrating of acts” and “supplying, selling or transferring arms and related material to” or otherwise supporting the JeM. The Jem itself was listed by the UNSC as a terror group in 2001.

Reaction of China
China, reacting to the draft, accused the U.S. of bypassing the UNSC 1267 Committee.

US accused China of protecting violent Islamic terrorist groups from sanctions at the UN.

UNSC passed Resolution 2462
In a related but separate development, the UNSC passed Resolution 2462 on terrorism financing.
The resolution stresses “the primary responsibility of Member States in countering terrorist acts and reiterating their obligation to prevent and suppress the financing of terrorist acts as well as its call upon all States to become party to the international counter-terrorism conventions and protocols as soon as possible.”

Resolution 2462 on terrorism financing highlights the obligation states have that prohibit them from making financing available for the benefit of terror organizations “even in the absence of a link to a specific terrorist act.”

The resolution reminded all states that those who participate in the financing, planning, participating or perpetration of terrorist acts or in supporting terrorist acts have to be brought to justice — and that such acts are established as serious crimes as per domestic laws.

Significantly, the resolution also reaffirms that member states must ensure their counter-terrorism measures uphold international human rights and refugee law, fundamental freedoms and the rule of law and that a “failure to comply with these and other international obligations...is one of the factors contributing to increased radicalization to violence and fosters a sense of impunity.”

(Adapted From The Hindu)

30. Robert Mueller’s Trump Russia probe and its aftermath (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; IOBR)

Robert Mueller has submitted his report on the 2016 U.S. presidential election to the Attorney-General. What’s next?
The story so far: Special Counsel Robert Mueller, who was investigating the alleged Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, handed over his report to the Justice Department earlier this month. While the full report, which runs into over 300 pages, is yet to be released to lawmakers or the public, Attorney-General William Barr released a summary of the report to Congress on March 24.

Why was the probe launched?
The allegations of Russian interference go back to the campaign days. On September 22, 2016, two Democratic lawmakers on the Senate and House Intelligence Committees alleged that Russia was trying to influence the election outcome. Two weeks later, the office of Director of National Intelligence released an assessment that said Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered an “influence campaign” against Hillary Clinton, the Democratic presidential candidate. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) started an inquiry into the alleged Russian efforts and possible collusion between Russia and the campaign of Republican candidate Donald Trump. When President Trump fired FBI Director James Comey in May 2017, there was a clamour among lawmakers, especially Democratic members, for the appointment of special counsel to probe the allegations. On May 17, Deputy Attorney-General Rod Rosenstein appointed Mr. Mueller as Special Counsel to carry out the investigation. The scope of the probe included the claim that there was collusion
between the Trump campaign and Russia and “any matters that arose or may arise directly from the investigation.” Basically the two questions the Special Counsel needed to answer were: Were there any links between Mr. Trump or the Trump campaign and the Russians; and Did the President obstruct justice by firing Mr. Comey and through other actions?

**Did Russia interfere in the election?**
The Russian interference theory is largely centred upon two claims — 1) Kremlin-connected Russians ran a social media propaganda targeting Ms. Clinton. 2) the Russian intelligence was directly involved in hacking into Democratic National Committee (DNC) servers and leaking emails into the Internet. Democratic Party leaders have held that these actions helped Mr. Trump beat Ms. Clinton in the 2016 election, while the Trump campaign has always rejected the charges. Mr. Putin has also denied any Russian role in the U.S. election. But Mr. Mueller, who had issued 2,800 subpoenas and about 500 search warrants and held about 500 witness interviews, concluded that Russia interfered in the election — through a disinformation campaign and hacking — affirming the earlier assessment of U.S. intelligence agencies.

**Who did Mueller indict?**
During the course of the investigation, the Special Counsel had indicted dozens, including Russian citizens as well as Mr. Trump’s aides. In February 2018, 13 Russians and three Russian companies, including the troll firm Internet Research Agency, were indicted for attempts to influence the election. Five months later, Mr. Mueller named 12 members of Fancy Bear, a cyberespionage wing of the GRU, Russia’s military intelligence agency, for hacking the DNC emails in 2016. Paul Manafort, Mr. Trump’s former campaign chief; Michael Flynn, the President’s first pick for the post of National Security Adviser; Rick Gates, Mr. Manafort’s business partner; and George Papadopoulos, a former campaign adviser of Mr. Trump, all pleaded guilty to charges, ranging from financial crimes, obstruction of justice and lying to federal agents on ties with Russians. Mr. Mueller has also indicted Konstantin Kilimnik, another business partner of Mr. Manafort, and Roger Stone, a long-time adviser of Mr. Trump.

**Did the probe exonerate Trump?**
Mr. Trump has always been critical of the inquiry. He called it a politically motivated “witch hunt”. He had attacked Mr. Rosenstein, who ordered the probe, and his former Attorney General Jeff Sessions, who recused himself from it. The supporters of the investigation were waiting for the final report to know whether the Special Counsel would establish the collusion theory. While Mr. Mueller concluded that the Russian government tried to interfere with the presidential election, he did not establish that the Trump campaign conspired or coordinated with the Russian government. Neither did it not conclude that Mr. Trump’s actions obstructed justice. Attorney General Barr quoted Mr. Mueller in his four-page summary: “…while this report does not conclude that the President committed a crime, it does not exonerate him.” The report led Mr. Barr and Mr. Rosenstein to reach their own conclusion — Mr. Trump’s actions didn’t meet the Justice Department’s standards for bringing charges.

**What lies ahead?**
The President has claimed moral victory. He says the report vindicates his position that there was no collusion and has launched a broadside at the Democrats who backed the probe. The Democrats have indicated that they will not give up the issue. They want the Attorney General to hand over the full report to Congress at the earliest. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi asked the Attorney General to “show us the report and we can draw our own conclusions.” House Judiciary Committee Chairman Jerry Nadler (Democrat, New York) has said the committee will call Mr. Barr to testify on the report. It’s to be seen whether the report has damning details of Mr. Trump’s actions that may not warrant criminal indictment but could be politically expensive. Besides, Mr. Trump’s legal troubles are far from over. The House Intelligence Committee is conducting its own probe into the Russia story. The U.S. Attorney’s Office for the Southern District of New York continues to probe alleged campaign finance violations. Michael Cohen, the President’s former lawyer and a former vice-president of the Trump Organization, has pleaded guilty to campaign finance violations. So while Mr. Trump will try to use the report for his political benefits, other legal troubles could be awaiting him.

(Adapted From The Hindu)

Geography

1. El Niño rising: Will it affect Indian monsoon? (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper I; Geography)

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) of the United States recently announced the development of a weak El Niño in the equatorial Pacific Ocean that was expected to continue for a few months at least. The status of El Niño at this time of the year is usually the first indication of the kind of rainfall that is to be expected during the monsoon season later in the year.

What is El Niño?
El Niño is a phenomenon in which surface temperatures in the equatorial Pacific Ocean see an unusual rise. Over the years, it has been found to have a strong bearing on monsoon rainfall in India. While warmer temperatures are known to suppress monsoon rainfall, the opposite phenomenon of La Niña has been found to be helpful in bringing good rainfall.

The outlook
In its announcement on February 14, NOAA said weak El Niño conditions had already built up in January and were likely to continue (with 55% probability) until the spring season in the northern hemisphere (mid-March to mid-June). It said that the probability of El Niño persisting into the summer was “50 per cent or less”.

More relevant to the Indian monsoon, the warming in the Niño 3.4 region of the Pacific Ocean, the region whose sea surface temperature is seen as be the best marker for the impact on India’s rainfall, has been forecast to remain in excess of 0.5°C above normal.
More frequent
El Niño events repeat themselves in a two- to seven-year cycle, with a strong El Niño expected every 10-15 years. However, since 2000, five El Niño events have already happened, and this year could witness a sixth one.

New scientific research is pointing to increased frequency of extreme El Niños due to climate change. A paper published in Nature Climate Change in July 2017 had suggested that such extreme events could happen twice as often as today if the average annual global temperatures reached 1.5°C above pre-industrial times.

(Adapted from Indian Express)

2. Why the Brahmaputra needs long bridges (Relevant for GS Prelims; Geography)

The Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs last week approved the construction of a four-lane bridge over the Brahmaputra. It will be the country’s longest, and will boost connectivity and commerce in the region.

How the bridge helps
At 19.28 km, it will connect Dhubri in Assam to Phulbari in Meghalaya. It is projected to reduce the travel distance between these two places from 205.3 km to 19.282 km, and travel time from 5 hours to 20 minutes.

As of now, the only means of going directly from Dhubri to Phulbari is by boat. It takes approximately 3 hours, and while returning it takes 5 hours against the current. This will come down to 25-30 minutes at the most after the bridge comes up.

Brahmaputra again
The current longest road and rail-road bridges of the country are already over the Brahmaputra. The Dhola-Sadiya bridge (road) runs 9.15 km, and the Bogibeel bridge (rail-road) is 4.94 km.

**Why there is need of bridges?**
The Brahmaputra, running 670 km in Assam, is extremely wide at some places. “It is the narrowest in Guwahati, say about 1 km, and the widest in Dibrugarh, over 15 km stretching to 20 km. Assam is bisected by the Brahmaputra and it numerous tributaries. Naturally, people are handicapped when they have no means to cross the river.

Inaugurating the Bogibeel bridge in 2018, Prime Minister Narendra Modi had said three bridges over the Brahmaputra were completed in the last four-and-a-half years and another five were being built.

*(Adapted From Indian Express)*

**3. Mozambique hit by cyclone (Relevant for GS Prelims; Geography)*

The death toll in Mozambique climbed to more than 400 after a cyclone devastated it. Cyclone Idai hit the coast of central Mozambique.

Nearly 90,000 Mozambicans have been moved into shelters, while thousands of others are still stranded in floodwaters. The government estimates that around one million people have been affected by the storm.

*(Adapted From The Hindu)*

**4. How rocks in Meghalaya cave connect Northeast monsoon to El Niño (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper I; Geography)*

A new study led by researchers from a US university, on the rock formations in a cave near Cherrapunji in Meghalaya, has found new evidence to suggest that India’s winter rainfall could be influenced by the state of the ocean waters in the faraway Pacific. What is that connection, and how do the rocks provide evidence of it?

**El Niño & monsoons**

India’s summer monsoon, in the months of June, July, August and September, which brings in about 70% of annual rainfall in the country, is already known to be heavily influenced by the variability in sea-surface temperatures of Pacific Ocean, a condition referred to as El Niño Southern Oscillation (ENSO). A warmer than usual Pacific Ocean, off the coast of South America, is known to suppress the monsoon rainfall in India.

This relationship is not so strongly established with the winter monsoon, also called as the northeastern monsoon, which occurs during the months of October, November and December and is vital for several regions in the Northeast and India’s eastern coast. More
than 50% of the annual rains in coastal Andhra Pradesh, Rayalaseema, Tamil Nadu, south interior Karnataka, and Kerala comes during these winter months.

ENSO is known to have an impact on the winter monsoon as well but is weaker and opposite. The warming of sea-surface waters, for example, is seen to help winter rainfall rather than suppressing it. The impact varies in time and space. The influence is weaker in October and stronger in November and December. Similarly, the rainfall over southeastern peninsular India and Sri Lanka is strengthened with warming ocean, but is diminished over Thailand, Vietnam and the Philippines.

**Unexpected connection**

The latest study, led by researchers of Vanderbilt University in Nashville, US, claims to have found new evidence to suggest that the state of Pacific Ocean do indeed impact the winter rains. It says the “unexpected connection” between winter rainfall amounts in northeast India and climatic conditions in the Pacific Ocean, could help in predicting the rainfall during the winter months.

The researchers, Jessica Oster of the Vanderbilt University, and Sebastial Breitenbach of Ruhr University Bochum in Germany, have published their findings in the journal Scientific Reports. Their findings are based on more than three years of research on stalagmites (mineral deposits, mainly limestone, in caves) of the Mawmluh Cave, near Cherrapunji, in the East Khasi Hills district. These solid stalagmite structures, or mineral deposits, are the result of slow but steady water dripping in the caves, and contain several thin layers of different kinds of minerals that get picked up while the water is flowing.

From a careful study of the composition of these stalagmites, scientists can deduce the amount of rainfall that could have happened over the caves in the past, or even whether the water was a result of local rainfall, or had flown in from a different place. Using such techniques, the researchers in this case were able to estimate local variations in rainfall in the past, and then correlate it with old ocean records of the Pacific Ocean.

“These new results... suggest that potentially powerful information about annual rainfall variability in northeast India has gone unnoticed in stalagmite records thus far,” Vanderbilt University said on its website.

The stalagmites indicate the recurrence of intense, multi-year droughts in India over the last several thousand years, the university said. It added that stalagmite records from monsoon regions, including India, are vital to understanding past variability in the global climate system and the underlying reasons for this variability.

(Adapted From indian Express)

5. Why European Parliament has voted out daylight saving time (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper I; Geography)
Earlier this week, European Parliament voted to scrap the custom of DST, or daylight saving time. Followed twice a year by some 70 countries, including those in the European Union, it involves resetting clocks ahead by an hour in spring, and behind by an hour in autumn.

**Why DST at all**
The key argument is that DST is meant to save energy. This is an idea that is now debated across the world.

According to those in favour of DST, if clocks show a later sunrise and later sunset, it means a longer evening daytime. Individuals will complete their daily work routines an hour earlier, and that extra hour of daylight means — or is supposed to mean — lower consumption of energy.

Written accounts suggest that a group of Canadians in Port Arthur (Ontario) were the first to adopt the practice on July 1, 1908, setting their clocks an hour ahead. Other parts of Canada followed suit. In April 2016, during World War I, Germany and Austria introduced DST to minimise the use of artificial lighting. It gradually caught on in many countries. In the EU, clocks in the 28 member states move forward on the last Sunday in March and fall back on the last Sunday in October. India does not follow daylight saving time.

**Why not**
In a recent article, Popular Science magazine cited studies to list out the disadvantages of DST. One hour of lost sleep in the US, one study calculated, increases the fatal crash rate by 5.4% to 7.6% for six days following the transition.

Other studies found a higher rate of workplace injuries after the switch, leading to loss days of work; a slight drop in stock market performance; health problems as a result of disruption of the circadian rhythm (body clock) — and even longer sentences ordered by judges deprived of sleep.

The vote in European Parliament followed a survey by the European Commission. Out of 4.6 million responses, 84% voted in favour of scrapping DST, The Guardian reported.

**What next**
The move, passed by 410 votes to 192, comes into effect in 2021. EU member states will choose between “permanent summertime” or “permanent wintertime”. Those who choose the former will reset their clocks for the last time in March 2021; those who choose the latter would do so in October 2021.

For the UK, which is on its way to exiting the EU, it presents new complications. The change would apply to the UK if it stays in the EU, and also during an extended transition period that is part of the Brexit deal, The Guardian reported. It explained that if the House of Commons should ratify the withdrawal agreement in the next three weeks, and go into an extended transition period, the UK government would have to implement the directive without any say. It could, however, backtrack once the extension period is over.
Economics

1. Regulating drug prices (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Economics)

What has been the impact of market-based pricing?
The largest share of out-of-pocket expenditure on health is due to medicines (approximately 70%, according to the NSSO). This is a major access barrier to healthcare, especially for the poor. Health experts have criticised the Drug (Prices Control) Order (DPCO), 2013 for doing little to increase the affordability of medicines. Data from the Department of Pharmaceuticals show that the majority of medicines have price reductions of 20% or less.

How are prices regulated?
The DPCO controls the prices of all essential medicines by fixing ceiling prices, limiting the highest prices companies can charge. The National List of Essential Medicines (NLEM) is drawn up to include essential medicines that satisfy the priority health needs of the population. The list is made with considerations of safety, efficacy, disease prevalence and the comparative cost-effectiveness of medicines, and is updated periodically by an expert panel set up for this purpose under the aegis of the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare. This list forms the basis of price controls under the DPCO.

What is the mechanism for price capping?
The NLEM 2015 contains 376 medicines on the basis of which the National Pharmaceutical Pricing Authority (NPPA) has fixed prices of over 800 formulations using the provisions of the DPCO. However, these formulations cover less than 10% of the total pharmaceutical market. The DPCO follows a market-based pricing mechanism. The ceiling price is worked out on the basis of the simple average price of all brands having at least 1% market share of the total market turnover of that medicine.

Have any other methods been used?
Prior to 2013, the DPCO followed a cost-based pricing mechanism that was based on the costs involved in manufacturing a medicine along with reasonable profit margins. Health experts have argued that this policy resulted in comparatively lower prices than the current market-based policy.

Since the implementation of the DPCO, 2013, the NPPA has made certain departures from the market-based pricing mechanism, which was found to be insufficient for ensuring affordability. This has been done through the use of special powers to act in public interest under Paragraph 19 of the DPCO, to regulate the prices of cardiac stents and knee implants. These moves have brought about dramatic price reductions: 85% in the case of stents and 65% in the case of knee implants.
What about cancer drugs?
“The government is planning to cap the trade margins for highly priced drugs for cancer and rare diseases to bring down their prices,” says Malini Aisola, health researcher and co-convenor of the All India Drug Action Network. She explains that this move is in the wake of recent amendments to the DPCO that exempted patented medicines and rare disease drugs from price controls. But Ms. Aisola claims that the trade margin capping will not sufficiently bring down prices. “We urge the government to take serious policy measures to ensure true affordability such as through price controls, implementation of the national rare disease policy and the use of legal flexibilities under patent law,” she says.

(Adapted from The Hindu)

2. A new zone for Andhra Pradesh: What could change for the Railways, state (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Economics)

Railway Minister Piyush Goyal announced a new Railway zone based in Visakhapatnam, fulfilling a demand from Andhra Pradesh politicians pending since the creation of Telangana nearly five years ago.

Was a new Railway zone promised to Andhra at the time of bifurcation?
The TDP (and of late even the BJP’s Andhra Pradesh unit) has been demanding this ever since Hyderabad and Secunderabad — headquarters of South Central Railway — went to Telangana. It has been argued that getting a zonal Railway headquarters is important for local pride; also, that The Andhra Pradesh Reorganisation Act, 2014, had “promised” this.

The Thirteenth Schedule of the Act says under the head ‘Infrastructure’ that the “Indian Railways shall, within six months from the appointed day, examine establishing a new railway zone in the successor State of Andhra Pradesh and take an expeditious decision thereon”.

Does the Indian Railways have a state-specific character?
The Indian Railways was envisaged as a modern organisation with a pan-India presence and character. Currently, the Railways have 17 zonal headquarters in 14 cities: Kolkata, Patna, Gorakhpur, Allahabad, Delhi, Secunderabad, Chennai, Hubballi, Mumbai, Jaipur, Bilaspur, Jabalpur, Guwahati, and Bhubaneswar. They are not necessarily in state capitals, nor is every state “represented” on the list.

Advertising
Two zones — Central and Western — are headquartered in Mumbai; Kolkata has Eastern and South Eastern, apart from the Kolkata Metro. In its replies to Parliament, the Railway Ministry in most cases presents facts and figures zonewise, rather than statewise. It says zones and divisions (a zone is divided into divisions) are created based on administrative and operational needs.

How did the zones of the Indian Railways come into existence?
Following independence, India worked to consolidate 42 big and small railways owned by the princely states and other entities into a single network. In 1947, the country's total rail network was 54,380 km, and included networks as small as Sangli (8 km) or as big as Nizam State Railway (2,125 km).

In 1951-52, six zonal railways were created to “amalgamate the smaller independent lines into contiguous areas of self-sufficient zones having economic unity and natural flow of traffic”, said an internal report of the Railways that examined whether a new zone for Andhra Pradesh was feasible. The intention was to bring down overheads, eliminate duplication of work, “unnecessary correspondences”, and inter-railway adjustments, and ensure more expeditious disposal of business. The internal assessment report was submitted to the Ministry last year.

How is the Indian Railways network administered?
Each zonal railway is a self-governed unit with a jurisdiction and boundary. A train passes through multiple zones (and divisions) on its journey, crossing from one administrative entity to another at ‘interchange’ points where it is “handed over” to the next zone. Each zone is responsible for the smooth operation and punctuality of a train while it is in its jurisdiction.

Boundaries that do not add to the efficiency of the Railways are avoidable, officials say. The final product offered by the Indian Railways is, after all, a train that cuts across regional and geographical boundaries on its journey, says the internal assessment report. An increase in the number of jurisdictions without a clear need is akin to erecting more checkpoints or barriers on a road when the smooth flow of traffic is the key requirement, officials say. “A new barrier will slow down train operations to a considerable extent…, affect the mobility, commercial viability, and result in wastage of precious capacity, rolling stock and manpower,” the assessment says.

What specific challenges could the creation of the new zone pose?
Waltair (Visakhapatnam) division, which loads around 60 million tonnes of freight every year (which is quite high for a division), will become a zonal headquarters. A part of Waltair division will be merged with the adjacent Vijayawada division, and another part will become the new Rayagada division. This break-up of East Coast Railway (which has Waltair division) will create operational bottlenecks, reduce flexibility in the loading and unloading of freight, and could hit the revenue generation capability of the zone, critics of the move argue.

South Central Railway, which will be reorganised for the new zone, will be disrupted as well. “Due to its critical size, ports, industries and mineral hubs are well served by its internal cycles. Any realignment of the present zonal system will have a detrimental effect,” says the assessment.

Rayagada in Odisha, where the only significant railway installation currently is a yard, will have to be turned into a divisional headquarters of the new zone, as per the government’s decision. This will mean both capital expenditure and recurring expenditure. Creating a zonal headquarters in Waltair, too, will involve costs.
But will the move help Andhra?
In general, a new Railway zone does little for a state or its people. Groups C and D vacancies are filled through Railway Recruitment Board exams; there are already 21 such boards for 17 zonal Railways, and the exams are open to any qualifying Indian citizen. Each zonal headquarters has a Railway Recruitment Cell to fill Group D jobs, but the same rules apply there, too.

Amaravati, the new capital of Andhra Pradesh, is in the Vijayawada-Guntur division, and is already well connected to the rest of India by five lines. Projects for rail-connectivity infrastructure in the area have already been sanctioned, and a new zone does not help much.

Floodgates could now be opened for more state-specific zones and divisions. Demands for at least 52 new divisions and 26 new zones have already been made. Odisha MPs have in the past objected to the realignment of Bhubaneswar-based East Coast Railway, of which Waltair is the premium division. Some Odisha leaders have told the Railways that if Visakhapatnam is taken away from ECoR, the state should be compensated with new divisions like Rourkela, Jharsuguda, and Jajpur-Keonjhar.

(Adapted from Indian Express)

3. Analysis of SEBI’s new rules to protect those investing in liquid mutual funds (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Economics)

What are new regulations on liquid mutual funds?
According to new regulations issued by the Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI), liquid mutual funds holding debt securities with a maturity term of more than 30 days will have to value these securities on a mark-to-market basis. Until now, liquid mutual funds could report the value of debt instruments with a maturity term of up to 60 days using the amortisation-based valuation method. Only debt securities with a maturity term of over 60 days were to be valued on a mark-to-market basis. So the new rule seemingly narrows the scope for amortisation-based valuation.

What is the need of new rules?
Amortisation-based valuation, which is completely detached from the market price of the securities being valued, allowed mutual funds to avoid the volatility associated with mark-to-market valuation. SEBI’s new rules come in the midst of the crisis in Infrastructure Leasing and Financial Services (IL&FS) that led to various fund managers reporting the value of the same debt instruments issued by the infrastructure lender at vastly different levels. The chief financial markets regulator believes that mandating mutual funds to report the value of a greater share of their holdings on a mark-to-market basis can lead to a better and more objective valuation of these securities.

What can be implications?
By exempting securities with a maturity period of up to 30 days from mark-to-market valuation, however, SEBI may be doing no favour to individual investors. This is because
the new SEBI rule gives a strong incentive for liquid mutual funds to invest more of their funds under management in securities with a maturity period of fewer than 30 days; this helps avoid the volatility of mark-to-market accounting and the need to provide a fair account of the value of their investments. What is likely is a decrease in the yields received on securities maturing in 30 days or less and an increase in the yields on debt instruments with a maturity period of 31 to 60 days. It will, however, do nothing to make investors in mutual funds become more informed about the real value of their investments.

The latest SEBI rules are also in direct contrast to the usual accounting practices when it comes to the valuation of securities. Generally accepted accounting principles mandate securities with the least maturity to be reported on a mark-to-market basis while allowing the amortisation-based method to be employed to value other securities with longer maturity periods. This makes sense as the profits and losses associated with securities with shorter terms are closer to being realised by investors when compared to longer-term securities. SEBI would do well to mandate that all investments made by liquid mutual funds should be valued on a mark-to-market basis. Simultaneously, it should work on deepening liquidity in the bond market so that bond market prices can serve as a ready reference to ascertain the value of various debt securities.

What is amortisation-based method and mark-to-market based method?
Amortization is an accounting technique used to lower the cost value of a finite life or intangible asset incrementally through scheduled charges to income. Amortization is the paying off of debt with a fixed repayment schedule in regular installments over time like with a mortgage or a car loan.

Mark-to-market refers to denoting or relating to a system of valuing assets by the most recent market price.

(Adapted from The Hindu)


The National Company Law Tribunal’s approval of ArcelorMittal’s bid for the insolvent Essar Steel Ltd is significant for several reasons.

Largest single recovery of debt
First, the ₹42,000-crore bid will be the largest single recovery of debt under the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code (IBC) enacted in 2016. Assuming that the original resolution plan submitted to the NCLT stands, the secured lenders will manage to recover about 85% of their dues. The 15% haircut that they will suffer should be seen against the extraordinarily high amount of over ₹49,000 crore that is due from Essar Steel.

Clarity on law
Second, the case, which took 583 days to resolve, compared to the 270 days provided under the Code, has tested several aspects of the law and set important precedents for the future.
Among the aspects that have been clarified during the long resolution process for Essar Steel are the eligibility of those who have defaulted in repaying their borrowings elsewhere to bid, the time-limits for bidding and the place of unsecured, operational creditors under the resolution mechanism.

**Result**

Finally, this was seen as a marquee case for the IBC, given the high profile of the company and its promoters, and the amount at stake. The battle royal between multinational players to acquire the insolvent company was proof, if any were needed, of the quality and importance of the underlying asset. In the event, the successful culmination of the Essar Steel case will be a big leg-up for the insolvency resolution process that is less than three years old.

To be sure, though the NCLT has given the go-ahead, the last word on the subject may not have been heard as the existing promoters could go in appeal against the verdict. The Code provides for an appeal to the National Company Law Appellate Tribunal and then to the Supreme Court, and it is unlikely that the promoters, who bid a much higher ₹54,389 crore, will let go without a fight. The banks, though, will be hoping that the process ends in the next couple of weeks as they would want to account for the receipts from the resolution process within this financial year.

After all, only four cases (excluding Essar Steel) out of the initial list of 12 big defaulters referred by the Reserve Bank of India for resolution back in June 2017 have been successfully resolved till now. Insolvency and Bankruptcy Board of India data also point to a pile-up of cases in the various benches of the NCLT. As many as 275 companies, representing 30% of the total of 898 undergoing resolution, have exceeded the 270-day limit set for resolution under the Code. This can be partly explained by the attempt of promoters to tie down the process through appeals at every stage, but the fact is that there is a need for more benches of the NCLT to clear the pile-up. The government would do well to look into this issue.

(Adapted from The Hindu)

5. India ranks 11th in gold holding'(Relevant for GS Prelims; Economics)
India, which is the world’s largest consumer of gold, has the 11th largest gold reserve, with the current holding pegged at 607 tonnes, as per the latest report by the World Gold Council (WGC).
India’s overall position in terms of total gold holding would have been tenth had the list included only countries. Whereas, International Monetary Fund (IMF) is included and is third on the list with total gold reserves of 2,814 tonnes.

**Global Trend**
The numero uno slot is occupied by the U.S., which boasts of gold reserves of 8,133.5 tonnes, followed by Germany with 3,369.7 tonnes. Italy and France complete the top five list with reserves of a little over 2,400 tonnes each. Meanwhile, among Asian countries, China and Japan have more reserves of the precious metal when compared to India. China has reserves of 1,864.3 tonnes, while Japan has gold reserves of 765.2 tonnes. Pakistan, with its gold reserves of 64.6 tonnes, occupies the 45th position.

(Adapted from The Hindu)

6. In light of L&T and Mindtree, a look at how hostile takeover bids have played out over the years (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Economics)

Two of India’s elder statesmen could be watching the battle for control at Bengaluru-based software services firm Mindtree, with local engineering giant Larsen & Toubro having mounted a hostile — or unsolicited — takeover bid. Pranab Mukherjee and Manmohan Singh were impacted in different ways by what was possibly the country’s first major hostile takeover attempt.

In 1983, NRI businessman Swraj Paul bought into Delhi-based firms Escorts and DCM under a new scheme that allowed NRIs to invest in Indian companies. When he acquired more than the holdings of the promoters, Indian business houses sought the support of Mukherjee, then Finance Minister, to prevent a takeover and to frame a policy to protect established Indian companies. The matter reached Parliament, a legal battle followed, and the government eventually went in for a mediation to convince Paul to sell his shares back to the promoters, the H P Nanda family (Escorts) and the Shri Ram family (DCM).

Mukherjee has recounted all this in The Turbulent Years. On the other hand, Manmohan Singh, who was then RBI Governor, has referred to serious disagreements between him and Mukherjee. “Sometimes there was tension. For instance, there was that famous case of Swraj Paul’s investments,” Singh’s daughter Daman Singh quotes him as saying in her book. What Singh was referring to was the attempt to browbeat the RBI into approving the deal. In a rare instance, the government directed the RBI to carry out its instructions, saying that the central bank was only an agent for implementation of a government scheme, which Singh protested.

**Then & now**
Over four decades later, an aggressive attempt at gaining control of a company will hardly bother political leaders, especially in an election season. Rather than the government explicitly stepping in, securities market regulator SEBI is empowered to regulate takeovers and mergers of publicly listed companies. India now has takeover rules or regulations, the first ones approved in 1994 and tweaked a couple of times since.
The rules do not quite define a hostile takeover, except to say that it is broadly an unsolicited bid or attempt by a person without any arrangement or a memorandum of understanding with the persons currently in control of the targeted company. Hostility (if the word could be used) arises in the case of the attempt on Mindtree as its founders Subroto Bagchi, Krishnakumar Natarajan, N S Parthasarathy and Rostow Ravananan, who jointly control over 13 %, have opposed L&T coming in, saying it is a threat to the unique organisation that they have collectively built over 20 years and with a differentiated corporate culture.

The trigger for all this is the decision of the firm’s biggest shareholder — V G Siddhartha, promoter of Cafe Coffee Day and son-in law of former Karnataka Chief Minister S M Krishna — to exit by selling his 20.4% share to L&T.

**India & the world**

Globally, takeover attempts face resistance on account of cultural differences between the targeted company and the acquirer. Yet it is far more common outside India, with many viewing such changes as a disciplining mechanism and also beneficial to minority shareholders because the stock price vaults.

When attempted, hostile takeovers have rarely succeeded in India. An undivided Reliance attempted to take control of L&T in 1989, having bought in though a transaction involving a Bank of Baroda subsidiary. Dhirubhai Ambani took over as L&T chairman; Mukesh and Anil Ambani came on board.

With influential shareholders involved, the L&T management mounted a push-back and Reliance had to exit by selling their shares to the Birlas, who too exited later. The government stepped in when British American Tobacco was attempting to take control of ITC. Other hostile attempts include that by ICI for Asian Paints, and by India Cements for Raasi Cements.

**What next**

The takeover regulations in such cases stipulate that the acquirer will have to make an open or public offer for buying out 26% from the minority shareholders (in Mindtree). To achieve this, L&T will need to depend not just on such shareholders but also on institutional shareholders such as investment institutions and overseas investors. It has offered to buy 31% at Rs 980 a share, which will mean spending Rs 5,027 crore. The other possibility is that the existing promoters manage to bring a strategic partner — known as a white knight for stepping in to support the incumbent promoters — or raise funds to buy back shares.

(Adapted From Indian Express)

7. Dollar-rupee swap scheme (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Economics)
The Reserve Bank of India’s decision last week to resort to a dollar-rupee swap, instead of the traditional open-market purchase of bonds, to infuse liquidity into the economy marks a significant shift in the central bank’s liquidity management policy.

**What is dollar-rupee swap scheme?**
Under the three-year currency swap scheme, which is scheduled to open in next week, the RBI will purchase $5 billion from banks in exchange for rupees. The central bank will infuse as much as ₹35,000 crore into the system in one shot at a time when liquidity generally tends to be squeezed.

**What will be the implications of dollar-rupee swap scheme?**
1. For the banks, it is a way to earn some interest out of the forex reserves lying idle in their kitty.
2. Apart from injecting fresh liquidity into the economy, the move will have implications for the currency market even as it helps shore up the RBI’s dollar reserves.
3. Bond yields rose on the day following the announcement of the swap scheme last week, reflecting the prevailing opinion among traders that the RBI may gradually reduce its dependence on the regular bond purchase scheme to manage liquidity within the economy.
4. While traditional open market operations distort the bond market, the new forex swap scheme will introduce new distortions in the currency market.
5. The rupee’s recent rally against the dollar has been halted by the RBI’s decision to infuse rupees and suck out dollars through the swap scheme. Even so, it is worth noting that the rupee has appreciated significantly in value terms against the dollar since the low reached in October as foreign investors have begun to pour money into the Indian economy.

**Evaluation of dollar-rupee swap scheme**
Overall, the dollar-rupee swap is a useful addition to the RBI’s policy toolkit as it offers the central bank a chance to directly influence both the value of the rupee and the amount of liquidity in the economy at the same time using a single tool.

In the aftermath of the liquidity crisis in the non-banking financial sector, it can be an effective way to lower private borrowing costs as well. The coming elections, which can lead to an increase in cash withdrawals from banks, may have also played a role in the RBI’s larger decision to boost liquidity in the system.

**Factor which will determine success of dollar-rupee swap scheme**
The way banks respond after receiving fresh liquidity from the RBI, however, will determine the success of the new liquidity scheme to a large extent. Businesses could benefit from the greater availability of liquidity, but only if banks aggressively pass on the benefit of lower rates to their borrowers. If banks choose to deposit the fresh RBI money in safe government securities at low yields, as they have done in the past, the de facto cap on the government’s borrowing costs will remain intact. But if banks manage to find
alternative ways to deploy their money, the RBI’s new liquidity scheme could end up raising borrowing costs for the government, punishing it for fiscal indiscretion.

(Adapted From The Hindu)

8. Nirav Modi denied bail, to stay in London jail till March 29 (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Economics)

Nirav Modi arrested in London
Indian diamond businessman Nirav Modi, accused in the ₹13,000 crore Punjab National Bank fraud case, was denied bail. The hearing before district judge Marie Mallon took place a day after Modi was arrested at a bank branch in London by the Metropolitan Police.

Why Nirav Modi was denied bail?
The judge said that she wasn’t inclined to give Modi bail because of the “high value amount” involved in the allegations against him and the “substantial grounds” for believing he would “fail to surrender” before the court if bail were granted.

(Adapted From The Hindu)

9. Govt. earns ₹85,000 crore from disinvestment in 2018-19, overshoots target (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Economics)

The government has overshot its disinvestment target for the second consecutive year, according to the Ministry of Finance. As against a target of ₹80,000 crore for disinvestment for the 2018-19, the divestment receipts have touched ₹85,000 crore. During the current financial year, Department of investment and Public Asset Management (DIPAM) has realised the proceeds through 28 transactions. In 2017-18, the government had earned a little more than ₹1 lakh crore from disinvestments against a target of ₹72,500 crore.

The government has also earned large amounts from the sale of Exchange Traded Funds (ETFs), with the latest edition, so far, having earned it ₹10,000 crore.

(Adapted from The Hindu)

10. Reserve Bank of India postponed the implementation of the Indian Accounting Standards (Ind AS) norms for banks (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Economics)

Reserve Bank of India postponed the implementation of the Indian Accounting Standards (Ind AS) norms for banks indefinitely. The RBI had initially planned to implement the norms starting April 1, 2018 in order to bring Indian accounting standards in line with international standards, but the Centre’s delay in enacting the necessary amendments have delayed the implementation for banks for another year.

What is expected from implementation of Accounting Standard on banks?

Website: www.prepmate.in
Prepmate Cengage Books Preview: https://prepmate.in/books/
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Youtube channel: PrepMate Edutech
It is believed that the adoption of the accounting standard could cause banks to prematurely recognise losses on their loans and build up the necessary underlying capital required to overcome the impact of such losses.

**How are proposed accounting norms for banks different from existing practices?**

Under the proposed norms, financial institutions like banks will have to calculate expected credit losses (ECL) on their loans during each reporting period and make necessary adjustments to their profit-and-loss account even before a borrower may default on a certain loan.

This is in contrast to the present accounting norms wherein banks incur credit losses in their books only after outstanding loans have been in a state of default over a certain number of days as stated in the rules laid down by the RBI.

**What is the position of banks on new Accounting standards?**

Given the losses they would likely have to incur, it is understandable why banks would try to avoid adopting the accounting norms for as long as possible. So the delay in the implementation of the Ind AS norms is not surprising at all. Further, to adjust to the new norms, banks will have to improve their ability to forecast future credit losses with precision. Until this happens, bank earnings could experience volatility. The Central government, which has been trying to bail out public sector banks without carrying out the structural reforms required to clean up balance sheets, might also prefer to delay the enactment of the legislation.

For the new norms will cause more outstanding loans to be added to the huge existing pile of bad loans and cause further headaches to the government. According to estimates made by India Ratings & Research, public sector banks would have to make additional provision of over a trillion rupees if the norms are adopted right away. The Centre may not be able to foot the bill, and may instead prefer to help public sector banks to hide the true size of their bad loans. This does not bode well for the health of the banking system as banks that do not recognise their problems might not resolve them.

*(Adapted From The Hindu)*

**11. India has highest number of poor despite 27 crore moving out of poverty in 10 years: report (Relevant for GS Prelims; Economics)*

India has reduced its poverty rate drastically from 55% to 28% in 10 years, with 271 million people moving out of poverty between 2005-06 and 2015-16, according to the Global MPI 2018 Report prepared by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative. The report, covering 105 countries, dedicates a chapter to India because of this remarkable progress. However, India still had 364 million poor in 2015-16, the largest for any country, although it is down from 635 million in 2005-06.
The report measures MPI, or multidimensional poverty index, which it says can be broken down to show “who is poor” and “how they are poor”. This factors in two measures, poverty rate as a percentage of the population, and intensity as the average share of deprivations that poor people experience. The product of these two is MPI. If someone is deprived in a third or more of 10 weighted indicators, the global index identifies them as “MPI poor”.

In India, poverty reduction among children, the poorest states, Scheduled Tribes, and Muslims was fastest, the report says. Of the 364 million people who were MPI poor in 2015-16, 156 million (34.6%) were children. In 2005-06 there were 292 million poor children in India, so the latest figures represent a 47% decrease or 136 million fewer children growing up in multidimensional poverty.

Although Muslims and STs reduced poverty the most over the 10 years, these two groups still had the highest rates of poverty. While 80% of ST members had been poor in 2005-06, 50% of them were still poor in 2015-16. And while 60% of Muslims had been poor in 2005-06, 31% of them were still poor in 2015-16.

Bihar was the poorest state in 2015-16, with more than half its population in poverty. The four poorest states —Bihar, Jharkhand, Uttar Pradesh, and Madhya Pradesh — were still home to 196 million MPI poor people, which was over half of all the MPI poor people in India. Jharkhand had the greatest improvement, followed by Arunachal Pradesh, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, and Nagaland. At the other end, Kerala, one of the least poor regions in 2006, reduced its MPI by around 92%.
Global findings
Worldwide, the report found, 1.3 billion people live in multidimensional poverty in the 105 developing countries it covered. This represents 23%, or nearly a quarter, of the population of these countries. These people are deprived in at least one-third of overlapping indicators in health, education, and living standards, it says.

While the study found multidimensional poverty in all developing regions of the world, it was seen to be particularly acute in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. These two regions account together for 83% (more than 1.1 billion) of all multidimensionally poor people in the world.

Additionally, two-thirds of all multidimensionally poor people live in middle-income countries, with 889 million people in these countries experiencing deprivations in nutrition, schooling, and sanitation, just like those in low-income countries.

The report describes the level of global child poverty as staggering, with children accounting for virtually half (49.9%) of the world’s poor. Worldwide, over 665 million children live in multidimensional poverty. In 35 countries, at least half of all children are MPI poor. In South Sudan and Niger, some 93% of all children are MPI poor.
(Adapted From The Indian Express)

12. Bringing Nirav back (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Economics)

Why extradition of the main accused in the PNB fraud case, now in a U.K. prison, will take time

The story so far:
The long-awaited push by India to extradite Nirav Modi — the key accused in the Punjab National Bank fraud case — kicked off last week. Things didn’t go quite according to plan: Mr. Modi’s legal team had been in talks with the Metropolitan Police’s extradition unit and he was to hand himself over as part of a voluntary process this week. However, he was arrested last Tuesday after an Indian-origin clerk at a bank in central London recognised him and alerted the police, pushing things forward unexpectedly.

What happened to his bail plea?
He has twice been denied bail following hearings at Westminster Magistrates Court — most recently on Friday. This came despite assurances such as £1 million in security, an offer to wear an electronic tag and his defence team’s insistence that he saw London as a “haven” which he had no intention of fleeing. Chief Magistrate Emma Arbuthnot said there was a risk he would fail to surrender to the court and pointed to the large amount involved in the alleged fraud ($1-2 billion), as well as his attempts to move elsewhere — including by seeking citizenship in the South Pacific island of Vanuatu. She acknowledged that there were “inconsistencies” in some of the witness accounts against him but did not believe these were enough grounds to override cause for concern.

What happens next?
Mr. Modi will remain in prison — for now HM Wandsworth, one of Western Europe’s biggest prisons. He will appear through videolink for a brief technical hearing on April 26. The prosecution has until May 24 to present the papers, which will be followed by further time for the defence to present theirs. Mr. Modi can appeal the bail ruling to a higher court, parallel to the extradition proceedings. Moving to the main extradition trial at Westminster Magistrates Court could take months: with Vijay Mallya, the case management hearings began in June 2017 after his arrest in April, while the trial began in December.

How is the case similar to Mallya’s? déjà vu,”
“I’m having a sense of quipped Ms. Arbuthnot on Friday. There were certainly parallels: a high-profile, high-net-worth individual — associated with high-living and expensive tastes — wanted by India on charges of fraud and attempting to conceal the proceeds. There were also teams from the Enforcement Directorate and the Central Bureau of Investigation present at both proceedings, while Modi’s barrister, Clare Montgomery, and his solicitor, Anand Doobay, also represented Mr. Mallya.

Are there lessons from the Mallya case?
The Mallya case had been cast as a watershed moment for the way in which Indian authorities worked with Britain on extradition. That case was meant to have honed India’s
understanding of the system and the standards, documentation and evidence that were expected in such cases. However, that it still needs improvements became quickly evident on Friday as the judge and defence lawyer made sharply worded criticism of the state of the papers — in particular the numbering and indexing — with the judge insisting on the presentation of “clean” papers henceforth.

**What are the differences?**
While Mr. Mallya maintained a high profile before the start of proceedings here and owned property in the U.K., the prosecution positioned Mr. Modi as being uncooperative with authorities. They allege that he had attempted to bribe and threatened to kill a witness and applied pressure on others, and contested the defence’s suggestion that he had never left the country since the scandal broke, pointing to a trip to the U.S. they said he made this February. The judge herself described the allegations of witness intimidation and attempts to destroy evidence (including a phone and a server) as “very unusual” in a fraud case.

**How will the case proceed?**
Barrister Toby Cadman, acting for the Crown Prosecution Service, who is representing India, told the court that Mr. Modi was wanted in India on charges of fraud and money laundering. Under dual criminality requirements in the U.K.-India extradition treaty, an extradition offence must be punishable by at least 1 year in prison under both countries’ legal systems. However, the treaty states that extradition may be refused if the offence is of a “political character” and this could come into play and be invoked by the defence team as it was in the Mallya case. As the defence’s bail arguments also made plain, they are likely to point to the inconsistencies in witness accounts and challenge the idea of a systematic and deliberate attempt to defraud the bank through letters of undertaking.

*(Adapted From The Hindu)*

**Environment**

1. Why are fires frequent at the Bandipur reserve? *(Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Environment)*
What happened?
A five-day fire that raged through the Bandipur Tiger Reserve has reportedly burnt more than 15,400 acres of forests. Between February 21 and 25, the reserve saw 127 fire counts in various ranges of the 912 sq km forest. The largest of the fires was contained recently.

While Karnataka Forest Department officials scrambled to put out the blaze, an Indian Air Force helicopter sprayed over 19,000 litres of water in seven sorties.

While fires are not uncommon at Bandipur, what has surprised officials is their intensity and frequency. The worry now is the long-term damage to the ecosystem, which is a part of the Nilgiri Biosphere that hosts the world’s largest tiger population, at more than 575 (2014 census).

How did it start?
The 2018 monsoon was particularly strong, but the year-end northeast monsoon has failed. If the monsoon led to dense growth, the blistering heat since September has turned vegetation brittle and dry, with vast swathes becoming tinderboxes. As with most forest fires, it is assumed that Bandipur’s ignition was man-made. Forest Department officials believe miscreants set fire in multiple locations.

The suspicion stems out of a growing animosity between the Department and forest-dwellers who accuse officials of harassment through the wildlife rules. Any investigation into the fires is unlikely to pinpoint a cause or culprits. Strong gusts ensured that the fires spread quickly. Compounding matters is the ubiquity of lantana camara, an invasive weed species native to South America, that has spread through nearly two-thirds of the forest area.

Over 400 fire watchers were placed, but questions have arisen whether the precautions were enough, especially since Bandipur has had frequent fires.

How susceptible is it to fires?
Bandipur is a dry deciduous forest in the rain shadow region of the Western Ghats, and is no stranger to fires. Periods of drought invariably lead to fires. In 2017, a forest guard was killed while attempting to douse a fire in the region.

A study has shown that between 1974 and 2014, 67% of the Nilgiri Biosphere had seen some form of forest fire, with Bandipur having reported the most incidents. However, the number of forest fires had considerably come down over the decades as the Forest Department attempted to pre-empt them through fire control lines and fire watchers, notes the study.

What is the impact?
The country’s forest policy encourages a zero forest fire approach for its protected landscapes — whether it is Bandipur or the rainforests of the upper Western Ghats.
Scientific literature have shown this blanket approach may be doing harm to dry, deciduous forests where trees have evolved to co-exist with fire.

Jayashree Ratnam from the National Conservation for Biological Sciences and fellow authors have noted in a recent study that the trees in this landscape were closer to those in a savanna than in rainforests 100 km away. Trees have dramatically thicker barks, implying that they had evolved to be fire-resistant.

“When fires are relatively frequent, adult tree mortality in these systems is very low. Many saplings sprout shortly after the fire from underground reserves, and the system returns to its original state in a few years,” she told The Hindu.

Conversely, when fires are suppressed — including by curbing the tribal practices of controlled fire burning — a greater biomass builds up that can lead to high intensity fires which affect the ecosystem negatively. Moreover, there might be a correlation between fire suppression and growth of lantana camara, which has replaced the grassy undergrowth in many areas.

(Adapted from The Hindu)

2. Fifteen of the 20 most polluted cities in the world are in India ( Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Environment)
Fifteen of the top 20 most polluted cities in the world are located in India, according to an analysis of air quality in several cities around the world.

Gurugram, in Haryana, topped the list with an average annual particulate matter (PM 2.5) quality of 135 g/m³ (micrograms/cubic metre), in 2018. Delhi — a frequent fixture on global pollution hotspots — was only the 11th most noxious city behind Lahore, Pakistan (10th) and Hotan, China (8th). The other cities in India that made the list of 20 were Ghaziabad, Faridabad, Bhiwadi, Noida, Patna, Lucknow, Jodhpur, Muzaffarpur, Varanasi, Moradabad, Agra, Gaya and Jind.

Country wise
When ranked by country, Bangladesh emerged as the most polluted followed by Pakistan and India respectively.

Overall performance
Of the cities analysed, 64% exceeded the WHO’s annual exposure guideline (10g/m³) for fine particulate matter, also known as PM2.5. India’s annual guidelines range from 40-60 g/m³, depending on whether they are residential or industrial areas.

Every single one of measured cities with data in the Middle East and Africa exceeded the WHO guideline, while 99% of cities in South Asia, 95% of cities in Southeast Asia and 89% of cities in East Asia breached this level.

Basis of ranking
The ranking — a one of its kind study that relies on ground-based sensors located in 3,000 cities from 73 countries — was compiled by IQAir Group, a manufacturer of air-monitoring sensors as well as purifiers and environmentalist group Greenpeace.

Pollution hubs
Jakarta and Hanoi emerged as Southeast Asia’s two most polluted cities and average concentrations in the cities in China fell by 12% from 2017 to 2018. Beijing ranks now as the 122nd most polluted city in the world in 2018 and China, the 12th most polluted country in the world. Of the countries analysed, Iceland emerged as the one with the cleanest air.

(Adapted From The Hindu)

3. Political will is integral to the tackling of India’s hazardous air pollution (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Environment)

Air quality across Indian cities
An assessment of the quality of air across countries and in cities has come as a fresh warning to India on the levels of deadly pollutants its citizens are breathing. The IQ AirVisual 2018 World Air Quality Report published in collaboration with Greenpeace underscores that Delhi remains an extremely hazardous city to live in. The national capital exposes people to air containing annual average fine particulate matter (PM2.5) of 113.5
micrograms per cubic metre, when it should be no more than 10 micrograms as per WHO guidelines. In fact, Gurugram, which borders Delhi, fares even worse with a PM2.5 level of 135.8 micrograms, while 15 of the 20 cities worldwide ranked the worst on air pollution metrics are in India. Delhi’s air quality has been making headlines for years now.

**Measures of mitigation**

Yet, measures to mitigate emissions have not moved into crisis mode: the launch this year of the National Clean Air Programme for 102 cities and towns, including the capital, talks only of long-term benefits of mitigation programmes beyond 2024, and not a dramatic reduction in near-term pollution. This has to change, and an annual target for reduction be set to make governments accountable. Achieving a reduction within a short window is not impossible if there is the political will to reform key sectors: transport, biomass and construction.

**Monitoring of air quality**

The monitoring of air quality in real time across cities and towns in India is far from adequate or uniform. The evidence from Delhi, which is relatively more robust, has clear pointers to what needs to be done. The Ministry of Heavy Industries and Public Enterprises learnt from a commissioned study last year that dusty sources such as roads, construction sites and bare soil added about 42% of the coarse particulate matter (PM10) in summer, while in winter it was a significant 31%. Similarly, PM10 from transport varied between 15% and 18% across seasons. Yet, it is the even more unhealthy PM2.5 penetrating the lungs that causes greater worry. Vehicles contributed 18-23% of these particulates, while biomass burning was estimated to make up 15-22%, and dusty sources 34% during summer.

These insights provide a road map for action. The Delhi government, which has done well to decide on inducting 1,000 electric buses, should speed up the plan and turn its entire fleet green. A transition to electric vehicles for all commercial applications, with funding from the Centre’s programme for adoption of EVs, should be a priority in cities. Cutting nitrogen and sulphur emissions from industrial processes needs a time-bound programme supervised by the Environment Ministry. These are priority measures to get urban India out of the red zone.

*(Adapted from The Hindu)*

### 4. Protecting the Sundarban wetlands (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Environment)

On January 30, the Indian Sundarban was accorded the status of ‘Wetland of International Importance’ under the Ramsar Convention. The Sundarbans comprises hundreds of islands and a network of rivers, tributaries and creeks in the delta of the Ganga and the Brahmaputra at the mouth of the Bay of Bengal in India and Bangladesh. Located on the southwestern part of the delta, the Indian Sundarban constitutes over 60% of the country’s total mangrove forest area. It is the 27th Ramsar Site in India, and with an area of 4,23,000 hectares is now the largest protected wetland in the country.
**Why is this important?**
The Convention on Wetlands of International Importance, better known as the Ramsar Convention, is an international agreement promoting the conservation and wise use of wetlands. It is the only global treaty to focus on a single ecosystem. The convention was adopted in the Iranian city of Ramsar in 1971 and came into force in 1975. Traditionally viewed as a wasteland or breeding ground of disease, wetlands actually provide freshwater and food, and serve as nature's shock absorber. Wetlands, critical for biodiversity, are disappearing rapidly, with recent estimates showing that 64% or more of the world's wetlands have vanished since 1900. Major changes in land use for agriculture and grazing, water diversion for dams and canals and infrastructure development are considered to be some of the main causes of loss and degradation of wetlands.

**How did it qualify?**
The Indian Sundarban met four of the nine criteria required for the status of ‘Wetland of International Importance’ — presence of rare species and threatened ecological communities, biological diversity, significant and representative fish and fish spawning ground and migration path. The Indian Sundarban, also a UNESCO world heritage site, is home to the Royal Bengal Tiger. The Ramsar website points out that the Indian Sundarban is also home to a large number of “rare and globally threatened species, such as the critically endangered northern river terrapin (Batagur baska), the endangered Irrawaddy dolphin (Orcaella brevirostris), and the vulnerable fishing cat (Prionailurus viverrinus).” Two of the world’s four horseshoe crab species, and eight of India’s 12 species of kingfisher are also found here. Recent studies claim that the Indian Sundarban is home to 2,626 faunal species and 90% of the country’s mangrove varieties.

**Will the status help?**
Environmentalists and forest officials say the Ramsar status will help to highlight conservation issues of the Sundarbans at the international level. The part of the Sundarban delta, which lies in Bangladesh, was accorded the status of a Ramsar site in 1992, and with Indian Sundarban getting it too, international cooperation between the two countries for the protection of this unique ecosystem will increase. This could lead to a better conservation strategy for flagship species such as the tiger and the northern river terrapin.

**What are the threats?**
While the Indian Sundarban is a biodiverse preserve, over four million people live on its northern and northwestern periphery, putting pressure on the ecosystem. Concerns have been raised about natural ecosystems being changed for cultivation of shrimp, crab, molluscs and fish.

The Ramsar Information Sheet lists fishing and harvesting of aquatic resources as a “high impact” actual threat to the wetland. The other threats are from dredging, oil and gas drilling, logging and wood harvesting, hunting and collecting terrestrial animals. Salinity has been categorised as a medium and tourism as a low impact actual threat in the region. Experts believe that while the Ramsar status may bring in international recognition to the
Indian Sundarban, the wetland, which along with anthropogenic pressures, is also vulnerable to climate change and requires better management and conservation practices.

(Adapted from The Hindu)

5. GEO-6 is released; warnings for India (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Environment)

What is Global Environment Outlook?
Global Environment Outlook (GEO) is a series of reports on the environment issued periodically by the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP). The GEO project was initiated in response to the environmental reporting requirements of UN Agenda 21 and to a UNEP Governing Council decision of May 1995 which requested the production of a new comprehensive global state of the environment report. Six GEO reports have been published to date: GEO-1 in 1997; GEO-2000 in 1999; GEO-3 in 2002; GEO-4 in 2007; GEO-5 in 2012 and GEO-6 in 2019.

What does the report say?
The sixth edition of the Global Environment Outlook from the UN Environment Programme has come as another stark warning: the world is unsustainably extracting resources and producing unmanageable quantities of waste. The model of economic growth depends on the extraction of ever-higher quantities of materials, leading to chemicals flowing into air, water and land. This causes ill-health and premature mortality, and affects the quality of life, particularly for those unable to insulate themselves from these effects.

What are the pointers for India?
The UN report, GEO-6, on the theme “Healthy Planet, Healthy People,” has some sharp pointers for India. It notes that East and South Asia have the highest number of deaths due to air pollution; by one estimate, it killed about 1.24 million in India in 2017.

As India’s population grows, it must worry that agricultural yields are coming under stress due to increase in average temperature and erratic monsoons. The implications of these forecasts for food security and health are all too evident, more so for the 148 million people living in severe weather ‘hotspots’. Evidently, the task before India is to recognise the human cost of poorly enforced environment laws and demonstrate the political will necessary to end business-as-usual policies. That would mean curbing the use of fossil fuels and toxic chemicals across the spectrum of economic activity.

What are the interventions required?
There are some targeted interventions that only require the resolve to reduce air and water pollution, and which in turn promise early population-level benefits. Aggressive monitoring of air quality in cities through scaled-up facilities would bring about a consensus on cutting emissions of greenhouse gases, and provide the impetus to shift to cleaner sources of energy. It is significant that GEO-6 estimates that the top 10% of populations globally, in terms of wealth, are responsible for 45% of GHG emissions, and the bottom 50% for only 13%. Pollution impacts are, however, borne more by the poorer citizens.
Combating air pollution would, therefore, require all older coal-based power plants in India to conform to emission norms at the earliest, or to be shut down in favour of renewable energy sources. Transport emissions are a growing source of urban pollution, and a quick transition to green mobility is needed. In the case of water, the imperative is to stop the contamination of surface supplies by chemicals, sewage and municipal waste. As the leading extractor of groundwater, India needs to make water part of a circular economy in which it is treated as a resource that is recovered, treated and reused. But water protection gets low priority, and State governments show no urgency in augmenting rainwater harvesting. New storage areas act as a supply source when monsoons fail, and help manage floods when there is excess rainfall.

(Adapted From The Hindu)

6. State of India’s Carbon emissions (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Environment)

Rise in India’s carbon emissions in 2018
India emitted 2,299 million tonnes of carbon dioxide in 2018, a 4.8% rise from last year, according to a report by the International Energy Agency (IEA). India’s emissions growth this year was higher than that of the United States and China — the two biggest emitters in the world — and this was primarily due to a rise in coal consumption. China, the United States, and India together accounted for nearly 70% of the rise in energy demand.

Overall emissions of India
India’s per capita emissions were about 40% of the global average and contributed 7% to the global carbon dioxide burden. The United States, the largest emitter, was responsible for 14%.

What are India’s commitments under UNFCCC?
As per its commitments to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, India has promised to reduce the emissions intensity of its economy by 2030, compared to 2005 levels. It has also committed to having 40% of its energy from renewable sources by 2030 and, as part of this, install 100 GW of solar power by 2022.
India says it will cost at least $2.5 trillion (₹150 trillion approx.) to implement its climate pledge, around 71% of the combined required spending for all developing country pledges.

(Adapted from The Hindu)

**Science and Technology**

1. **Minister Nitin Gadkari’s urine-to-urea idea: Experiments and constraints (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Science & Technology)**

Union Road Transport and Highways Minister Nitin Gadkari recently told that if India could store the urine of its people and use it to manufacture urea, it would no longer need to import the chemical compound used to manufacture fertiliser.

**India’s urea needs**

India consumes about 30 million tonnes of urea annually, of which 24 million tonnes is indigenously produced and 6 million tonnes is imported. Urea prices in India are lower than those in neighbouring countries of South and Southeast Asia, as well as China.

**Urea from urine**

Across the world, scientists have studied the extraction of urea from urine, and the use of urine as fertiliser for its nitrogen content.

In 2011 in South Africa, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation announced a grant of $400,000 to the University of KwaZulu-Natal’s Pollution Research Group for an initiative aimed at exploring design and implementation of a toilet system that would lead to the safe disposal and recovery of valuable material from excreta.

A part of the project was to filter urine and flush water to create a high-quality water stream, with the concentrated urine stream being processed to separate urea and other salts. The research is ongoing.

In the early 1990s, Sweden started a urine separation project, as a part of which special toilets and storage tanks were fitted in people’s homes and the urine was used locally. “The first phase of modern urine diverting toilets took off in the early 1990s targeting single households and summer houses and more than 10 ecovillages... One major environmental feature of many ecovillages was their sanitation system. The urine from these installations was either reused or disposed of on the premises or used by a nearby farmer,” said a study conducted by researchers from three Stockholm-based organisations. (Urine Diversion: One Step Towards Sustainable Sanitation: 2006)

The paper traced the progress of the project from the first phase to the second over five years, and its movement from rural to urban settings in the second phase. Between 2000
and 2005, the project faced a backlash over lack of municipal support. In the fourth phase, municipal bodies adopted sanitation policies that encouraged reuse.

According to estimates, in 2006, there were a little over 10,000 porcelain urine diversion toilets installed in homes in Sweden, along with a few 15 larger systems.

**Unsure in India**
Experts closer home, however, say that the process of collecting, storing, transporting and isolating urea from urine is fraught with troubles.

“First, we will have to change our toilet system entirely, similar to what Sweden did, and install special toilets where urine and solid waste are stored separately. Specialised underground tanks will also have to be set up. Urea can be extracted from urine using several chemical procedures. The problem is in scaling up and making the project feasible,” said a senior professor at Delhi University.

*(Adapted from Indian Express)*

**2. National Common Mobility Card, NCMC- India’s first indigenously developed payment platform (Relevant for GS Prelims and Mains Paper III; Science & Technology)**

Prime Minister Narendra Modi launched One Nation, One Card for transport mobility. The Indigenous Automatic Fare Collection System based on One Nation One Card Model i.e. National Common Mobility Card (NCMC) is the first of its kind in India.

India’s First Indigenously Developed Payment Eco-system for transport consisting of NCMC Card, SWEEKAR (Swachalit Kiraya: Automatic Fare Collection System) and SWAGAT (Swachalit Gate) is used on NCMC Standards.

**About National Common Mobility Card**
These are bank issued cards on Debit/Credit/Prepaid card product platform. The customer may use this single card for payments across all segments including metro, bus, suburban railways, toll, parking, smart city and retail. The stored value on card supports offline transaction across all travel needs with minimal financial risk to involved stakeholders. The service area feature of this card supports operator specific applications e.g. monthly passes, season tickets etc.

Ministry of Housing & Urban Affairs brought to the fore the National Common Mobility Card (NCMC) to enable seamless travel by different metros and other transport systems across the country besides retail shopping and purchases.

**Background:**
Public Transport is extensively used across India as the economical and convenient mode of commuting for all classes of society. Cash continues to be the most preferred mode of fare payments across the public transport. However, there are multiple challenges
associated with the cash payment e.g. cash handling, revenue leakages, cash reconciliation etc. Various initiatives have been taken by transit operators to automate & digitize the fare collection using Automatic Fare Collection System (AFC). The introduction of closed loop cards issued by these operators helped to digitize the fare collection to a significant extent. However, the restricted usability of these payment instruments limits the digital adoption by customers.

(Adapted from PIB)

3. CCR5-delta 32: The rare mutation that could help stop HIV (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Science & Technology)

The remarkable research breakthrough that appears to have cured the anonymous “London Patient” of HIV is based on a stem cell transplant involving CCR5-delta 32 homozygous donor cells. This is the same treatment that cured Timothy Ray Brown, known as the “Berlin Patient” when he received two stem cell transplants in 2007 and 2008.

In 2009, Brown’s doctor, Berlin-based haematologist Gero Hütter, reported success (Long-Term Control of HIV by CCR5 Delta32/Delta32 Stem-Cell Transplantation: NEJM), and a decade on, the American recipient of his treatment remains HIV-free.

With the case of the London Patient, reported in Nature Tuesday, scientists have successfully duplicated Dr Hütter's CCR5-delta 32 experiment from 13 years ago, with less pain than Brown, the pioneering survivor of HIV, had to endure.

Dr Hütter put Brown through an allogeneic stem cell transplant, which involved replacing his immune system with donor hematopoietic stem cells (usually found in bone marrow) so that his immune system could be regenerated, with no malignant cells. Importantly however, the donor he chose carried what is called a CCR5-delta 32 mutation.

On the surface membrane of immune cells is a protein called CCR5, which is, as a post on the Nature Education blog Scitable puts it, “like a door that allows HIV entrance into the cell”. However, about 1% of people of Northern European descent, mainly Swedes, are born with a mutation known as CCR5-delta 32, which “locks ‘the door’ which prevents HIV from entering into the cell”.

Simply put, HIV uses the CCR5 protein to enter immune cells, but it can’t latch on to cells that carry the delta 32 mutation. IciStem, a consortium of European scientists studying stem cell transplants to treat HIV infection, has a database of 22,000 donors with this HIV-resistant mutation.

IciStem scientists are tracking 38 HIV-infected people who have received bone-marrow transplants, including six from donors without the delta 32 mutation. The London Patient is 36 on that list; Number 19, the so-called “Düsseldorf Patient”, has been off anti-HIV drugs for four months now, The New York Times reported on Tuesday.
Incidentally, CCR5 is the protein that Chinese scientist He Jiankui claimed to have modified with CRISPR/Cas9 gene editing in at least two children in an attempt to make them resistant to HIV.

(Adapted From Indian Express)

4. What to make of the new HIV-cure claim (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Science & Technology)

As HIV researchers met in Seattle the day after it was reported in Nature that a second patient appears to have been cured of infection with the virus, excitement and questions hung in the air. In the end, the majority view seemed to favour caution — hope, though real, must be tempered with realism. Several reports analysed what the landmark research means, at the moment.

Does anything change for people living with HIV?
Not immediately. The “London Patient” provides “proof of concept” — a potential path to a cure for HIV. But cure is not around the corner, and infected patients are nowhere near a situation in which they can hope to stop taking their pills soon. There are 35 million HIV-positive people in the world, and bone marrow transplants from donors with the HIV-resistant CCR5-delta 32 mutation — which both “Berlin Patient” Timothy Ray Brown and the anonymous London Patient received — will not be a likely treatment option for most. Also important: as a report in The New York Times pointed out, the London Patient was not the first attempt to replicate the success with the Berlin Patient, only the first that seems to have not failed.

How is remission different from cure?
Being cured would mean getting rid of the virus forever; remission would mean it is there, but under control for the time being. Before the second case was reported, Brown’s had been the only one of a cure. In all other attempts, the virus had come back after the patient stopped anti-HIV medication. The London Patient has been HIV-free for 18 months since he stopped taking drugs. To some that means a cure; however, as Dr Annemarie Wensing of the University Medical Centre Utrecht, who was quoted by The NYT, said, “We don’t have any international agreement on what time without viral rebound is necessary to speak about cure.”

Indeed, some patients have had remission even without a bone-marrow transplant. Their immune system appears to be successful in controlling the virus, even without drugs. But it is not clear how this happens.

When is a treatment based on this success expected?
In a decade perhaps, several specialists have said. But that treatment would cover only those types of HIV that rely on the CCR5 surface protein to break into the immune cells. The X4 form of HIV, which uses a different protein, would not be tackled by treatment based on the delta 32 mutation.
While it would be premature to expect a cure or remission soon, the rapid progress in gene therapy and gene editing bring hope. The widely criticised Chinese doctor He Jiankui, has in fact, claimed to have modified the CCR5 protein in at least two children using CRISPR/Cas9 gene editing technology.

(Adapted from Indian Express)

5. Belle II : particle accelerator experiment (Relevant for GS Prelims & GS Mains Paper III; Science & Technology)

What is Belle II?
Belle II, a particle accelerator experiment located in Tsukuba, Japan, is a unique facility in the world. Here, electrons and positrons (anti-electrons) collide to produce B mesons in order to study the breakdown of symmetry in these decays.

What is the Indian link in Belle II?
As an international collaboration involving 26 countries, Belle II has an Indian link -- a team led by physicists and engineers from the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research, Mumbai, have built the fourth layer of the vertex detector.

What is the focus of Belle II?
The focus at Belle II is on B-mesons — particles that contain the B-quark, also known as the beauty or bottom quark. In particular, experiment focuses on the differences between the decay of the B-mesons and that of their antiparticles, the anti B-mesons.

What will the experiment seeks to answer?
At the time of the Big Bang some 13.7 billion years ago, the universe was in a fully symmetric state with equal quantities of matter and antimatter. Yet, today, we are in this extremely antisymmetric state. The question is how did we get here?

Which is the other similar experiment?
In addition to other experiments at CERN, the European Organisation for Nuclear Research, there's one experiment that is devoted to B quark physics — the LHCb or the Large Hadron Collider beauty experiment. In this, two proton beams are collided at high energies and the results are observed.

Anomalous interactions among particles
In the Standard Model – the core theory of particle physics – there are generations of low mass particles (leptons); electrons, the muon and the relatively heavy cousin of the electron, the tau are the leptons. These particles are expected to have identical interaction strengths, the so-called couplings, in the Standard Model of weak interactions in physics. However, in particle decays where only leptons are produced (leptonic decays), it appears that the tau and muon particles have identical couplings. Specifically, interactions where a kaon particle decays to muon and a kaon decays to electron seem to have the same coupling to 1%. But B decays to tau leptons when compared to B decays to muon or electron are not on equal footing.
“There is a hint of an anomaly there at 4 standard deviation,” says Dr. Browder, excitedly. However, he adds a word of caution: “We’d like to get much more data to see whether this is a fluctuation or whether we can pin this down and declare we have found new physics!”

There is a similar thing in the B quark to S quark decay: The so-called Penguin decays. “If any one of this can be established, it would be fairly new physics,” he adds, mentioning that the Chennai group led by Rahul Sinha of The Institute of Mathematical Sciences works on the angular correlation in these decays.

6. Fact Check: How does autopilot match up to a (good) pilot? (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Science & Technology)

Investigators believe pilots of the Lion Air B737 MAX 8 weren’t fully conversant with the plane’s automated systems. The aircraft in the Ethiopian crash was a Boeing of the same make.

Except when landing or taking off, modern aircraft largely fly on their own. In the aftermath of the Lion Air and Ethiopian Airlines crashes, questions have been raised over automation. Investigators believe pilots of the Lion Air B737 MAX 8 weren’t fully conversant with the plane’s automated systems. The aircraft in the Ethiopian crash was a Boeing of the same make.

Is too much automation making aircraft unsafe?
Critics of “over-automation” say pilots spend more time trying to understand complicated automated systems than actually flying, The New York Times reported, based on multiple interviews with pilots and instructors. If computers malfunction at any time, a pilot who is more a “systems operator” than an aviator could be too late reacting.

Old concerns
* Back in 1997, an American Airlines pilot-training video flagged the overdependence on automation.

* About six years ago, the US aviation regulator Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) asked pilots to practise tackling an aircraft that is losing lift. But it did not enforce the direction until this week.

* In 2011, a US federal study found that in 60% of 46 recent accidents, pilots struggled to fly manually, and were sometimes confused by complicated automation systems

* In 2013, another US government report recommended that pilots should focus on flying better manually. In the Asiana Airlines crash in San Francisco that year, investigators found an over-reliance on automation.

* In 2016, an internal report indicted the FAA for not making sure that pilots were adequately trained in manual flying, and for not monitoring how much manual flying they really did.
* Sully Sullenberger, the hero pilot who landed a loaded aircraft in the Hudson off Manhattan in 2009, has been quoted as warning that fatal accidents were “inevitable if we continue down this path (of relying too much on automation)

**Industry constraints**

Aircraft are becoming increasingly more automated and the global shortage of pilots is growing, so airlines are using less experienced pilots who, as an international airline pilot with a PhD on pilot training told The NYT, “can punch the buttons” but may not “be able to fly that airplane when it breaks”. One pilot in the Ethiopian crash had flown 200 hours — a small fraction of what the FAA requires, but the same as the requirement for a commercial pilot’s licence in India.

Some critics have blamed insurance companies for capping the amount of manual flying training that flight school students are allowed in poor visibility. Others have argued that the real problem isn’t with the training, but with the loss of learnt skills once pilots get used to autopilot.

After the 2013 San Francisco crash, investigators found that Asiana had “emphasised the full use of all automation and did not encourage manual flight”, The NYT reported.

**A stellar record**

Still, automation has made a massive contribution to improving airline safety. Many pilots say the advantages of automation are too many to bear comparison with any risks it might carry in certain situations. The NYT quoted former FAA inspector David Williams as saying: “The data is there that we’ve got a good system. The reduction of training is overridden by the advances in the equipment.”

All the world’s 47 airlines flying nearly 350 MAX 8s have now grounded these planes. Until then, MAX 8s had completed an estimated 8,600 flights in a typical week, according to data from Flightradar24.

*(Adapted From Indian Express)*

**7. West Nile Virus; an unfamiliar disease, newly in focus in India (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Science & Technology)**

The bite of an infected mosquito is the commonest mode of human infection. West Nile Virus can also spread through blood transfusion, from an infected mother to her child, or through exposure to the virus in laboratories.

On Sunday, a six-year-old boy died in Kozhikode from West Nile Virus infection. This has caused some alarm because the virus is relatively unknown in India. What is WNV, how did it reach Kerala, and is there a need to exercise extra caution?

**The infection**

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According to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, WNV is the leading cause of mosquito-borne diseases in the continental United States. It has so far been detected in almost all kinds of mosquitoes, not just the common three — Anopheles, Culex and Aedes — but also in lesser-known types such as Culiseta, Mansonia and Psorophora. It occurs during the summer months in the US, unlike other mosquito-borne diseases such as dengue, malaria and chikungunya, which occur all year round in India.

**Cause & effect**
The bite of an infected mosquito is the commonest mode of human infection. WNV can also spread through blood transfusion, from an infected mother to her child, or through exposure to the virus in laboratories. It is not known to spread by contact with infected humans or animals, or even when the infected animal is ingested, provided it has been adequately cooked.

Unlike other mosquito-borne diseases, WNV does not cause symptoms in everybody that contracts the virus. One in five people develops symptoms and requires medication. One in 150 people may go on to develop serious illness, or even die. However, WNV is dreaded because of the effects, often irreversible, that it has on the brain.

Ordinarily, the symptoms are the same as in any other viral fever — and include fever, headache, weakness, etc. But WNV can also cause nervous system symptoms such as stupor, disorientation, convulsion, tremors and loss of vision. Older people are more vulnerable, as are those with existing chronic conditions such as diabetes, hypertension, cancer, or those who have recently undergone organ transplants.

**Where it is common**
The virus is commonly found in Africa, Europe, the Middle East, North America and West Asia. The World Health Organization (WHO) documents that it was first isolated in a woman in the West Nile district of Uganda in 1937. It was identified in birds (crows and columbiformes like doves and pigeons) in the Nile delta region in 1953. Before 1997, WNV was not considered pathogenic for birds — but then, a more virulent strain caused the death in Israel of different bird species, presenting signs of encephalitis and paralysis. Human infections attributable to WNV have been reported in many countries in the World for over 50 years, the WHO says.

**Should you panic?**
No. There are no reports so far of the virus spreading to other parts of the country. Over the years, cases have been sporadic, and have occurred mostly in the Northeast. In the last three years, 12 cases have been reported outside the Northeast. In 2016, 15 cases were reported from the region; in 2017, 22 cases from Assam, Manipur, Tripura and Nagaland; in 2018, 22 cases from the entire region. That is why, says Dr Raman Gangakhedkar, head of Epidemiology and Communicable Diseases at the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR), the path the virus took en route to Malappuram, where the six-year-old victim is originally from, may be of academic interest, but has little relevance from a public health perspective. The fact that the numbers of WNV are far lower than those of the other better known mosquito-borne diseases like dengue etc., Dr Gangakhedkar explains, is that “the
transmission is not very efficient, the replication rate of the organism is different". However, there is no marker or predictor of who will develop WNV symptoms after infection and who won’t, and who will have a brain incursion and develop neurological symptoms, and who won’t.

**Precautionary measures**
The Centre has sent a team from the National Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) to help Kerala health authorities deal with the West Nile Virus. The team includes Dr Ruchi Jain, RHO Thiruvananthapuram; Dr Suneet Kaur, assistant director, NCDC; Dr E Rajendran, entomologist, NCDC, Kozhikode; and Dr Binoy Basu, EIS Officer, NCDC. The Indian Council of Medical Research has also been alerted and a close watch is being maintained at central and state levels.

*(Adapted From indian Express)*

8. **HL-2M Tokamak: Artificial sun under development in China (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Science & Technology)**

**What is artificial Sun?**
The HL-2M Tokamak device is designed to replicate the nuclear fusion process that occurs naturally in the sun and stars to provide almost infinite clean energy through controlled nuclear fusion, which is often dubbed as the "artificial sun." China plans to complete the construction of the artificial sun this year, achieving an ion temperature of 100 million degrees Celsius.

The inside of the Tokamak is where plasma is heated to 100 million degrees Celsius.
What are the challenges in making Artificial Sun?
Achieving an ion temperature above 100 million degrees Celsius is one of the three challenges to reach the goal of harnessing the nuclear fusion. The core of the sun is widely believed to be 15 million degree Celsius.

The artificial sun's plasma is mainly composed of electrons and ions, and the country's existing Tokamak devices have achieved an electron temperature of over 100 million degrees Celsius in its core plasma, and an ion temperature of 50 million degrees Celsius, and it is the ion that generates energy in the device.

The other two challenges are containing the fusion within a limited space in the long term, and providing a sufficiently high density profile.

Which is the international experiment on artificial Sun?
The International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor (ITER) is a large international scientific project that is a global collaboration of 35 countries, including China, Russia and the US.

(Adapted From India Today)

9. PSLV-C45 project/ Emisat mission will mark several firsts for ISRO (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Science & Technology)

Emisat mission scheduled for launch on April 1. The mission is special on account of following factors:

1. For one, it will be ISRO’s first attempt at placing payloads in three different orbits. The chief payload — the 436 kg Emisat — will be injected into a 749 km orbit. After that, the fourth stage of the rocket will be manoeuvred to a 504 km orbit for releasing 28 international satellites.

Once that job is over, the fourth stage will be restarted and guided to an altitude of 485 km. For the next six months, this stage will serve as an orbital platform for spacebased experiments.

2. The orbital platform will also sport solar panels. This is also the first time.

3. The launch vehicle itself is a new variant, designated PSLV-QL. For the first time, ISRO will be employing four XL strap-on motors on the first stage.
4. The PSLV-C45 mission also marks a milestone for ISRO’s Indian Institute of Space Science and Technology (IIST). One of the three experiments aboard the orbital platform is the IIST’s Advanced Retarding Potential Analyser for Ionospheric Studies (ARIS). This is the first time that an IIST payload is flying aboard an ISRO mission. ARIS will study the structure and composition of the ionosphere.

5. The other two experimental payloads aboard the orbital platform are the Automatic Identification System (AIS), an ISRO payload for maritime satellite applications, and the Automatic Packet Repeating System (APRS), meant to assist amateur radio operators.

6. Emisat, the chief payload on PSLV-C45, is meant for electromagnetic spectrum measurements, according to the ISRO. It will released into an orbit at 749 km, the ISRO said. C-45, which is set for lift-off from the second launchpad at Sriharikota, will mark the 47th flight of the PSLV.

**Foreign co-passengers**

As many as 28 small foreign co-passenger satellites will also travel to space with it, but to a lower orbit at 504 km. They include 24 small satellites from the U.S., among them 20 which are part of previous customer Planet Labs’ earth observation constellation. The other four customers are from Lithuania, Spain and Switzerland.

Knowledgeable sources said the 436-kg satellite would serve as the country's roving device for detecting and gathering electronic intelligence from enemy radars across the borders as it circles the globe roughly pole to pole every 90 minutes or so. Other highly placed officials confirmed that its payload comes from one or more laboratories of the Defence Research & Development Organisation. For the third successive PSLV mission, the ISRO plans to reuse the rocket’s spent fourth stage or PS4 to host short experiments.

*(Adapted From The Hindu)*

**10. All you need to know about Mission Shakti (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Science & Technology)**

**What is Mission Shakti?**

On March 27, 2019 India conducted Mission Shakti, an anti-satellite missile test, from the Dr. A P J Abdul Kalam Island launch complex. This was a technological mission carried out by DRDO. The satellite used in the mission was one of India’s existing satellites operating in lower orbit. The test was fully successful and achieved all parameters as per plans. The test required an extremely high degree of precision and technical capability.

The significance of the test is that India has tested and successfully demonstrated its capability to interdict and intercept a satellite in outer space based on complete indigenous technology.

With this test, India joins an exclusive group of space faring nations consisting of USA, Russia and China.
**Which satellite was used?**  
The satellite used was an Indian satellite.

**Which Missile/Interceptor was used?**  
The DRDO’s Ballistic Missile Defence interceptor was used, which is part of the ongoing ballistic missile defence programme.

**There are other ways to demonstrate ASAT capabilities such as “fly-by tests” and Jamming. Why has India used the particular technology of Kinetic Kill?**  
This is a technology where we have developed capability. Space technologies are constantly evolving. We have used the technology that is appropriate to achieve the objectives set out in this mission.

**Does the test create space debris?**  
The test was done in the lower atmosphere to ensure that there is no space debris. Whatever debris that is generated will decay and fall back onto the earth within weeks.

**Why did we do the test?**  
India has a long standing and rapidly growing space programme. It has expanded rapidly in the last five years. The Mangalyaan Mission to Mars was successfully launched. Thereafter, the government has sanctioned the Gaganyaan Mission which will take Indians to outer space.

India has undertaken 102 spacecraft missions consisting of communication satellites, earth observation satellites, experimental satellites, navigation satellites, apart from satellites meant for scientific research and exploration, academic studies and other small satellites. India’s space programme is a critical backbone of India’s security, economic and social infrastructure.

The test was done to verify that India has the capability to safeguard our space assets. It is the Government of India’s responsibility to defend the country’s interests in outer space.

**Why was the test done now?**  
The tests were done after we had acquired the required degree of confidence to ensure its success, and reflects the intention of the government to enhance India’s national security. India has seen an accelerated space development programme since 2014.

**Is India entering into an arms race in outer space?**  
India has no intention of entering into an arms race in outer space. We have always maintained that space must be used only for peaceful purposes. We are against the weaponisation of Outer Space and support international efforts to reinforce the safety and security of space based assets.

India believes that Outer space is the common heritage of humankind and it is the responsibility of all space-faring nations to preserve and promote the benefits flowing from advances made in space technology and its applications for all.
India is a party to all the major international treaties relating to Outer Space. India already implements a number of Transparency and Confidence Building Measures (TCBMs) – including registering space objects with the UN register, pre-launch notifications, measures in harmony with the UN Space Mitigation Guidelines, participation in Inter Agency Space Debris Coordination (IADC) activities with regard to space debris management, undertaking SOPA (Space Object Proximity Awareness) and COLA (Collision Avoidance) Analysis and numerous international cooperation activities, including hosting the UN affiliated Centre for Space and Science Technology Education in Asia and Pacific. India has been participating in all sessions of the UN Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space. India supported UNGA resolution 69/32 on No First Placement of Weapons on Outer Space. We see the No First Placement of weapons in outer space as only an interim step and not a substitute for concluding substantive legal measures to ensure the prevention of an arms race in outer space, which should continue to be a priority for the international community. India supports the substantive consideration of the issue of Prevention of an Arms Race in Outer Space (PAROS) in the Conference on Disarmament where it has been on the agenda since 1982.

**What is the international law on weapons in outer space?**
The principal international Treaty on space is the 1967 Outer Space Treaty. India is a signatory to this treaty, and ratified it in 1982. The Outer Space Treaty prohibits only weapons of mass destruction in outer space, not ordinary weapons.

India expects to play a role in the future in the drafting of international law on prevention of an arms race in outer space including inter alia on the prevention of the placement of weapons in outer space in its capacity as a major space faring nation with proven space technology.

India is not in violation of any international law or Treaty to which it is a Party or any national obligation.

**Is the test directed against any country?**
The test is not directed against any country. India’s space capabilities do not threaten any country and nor are they directed against anyone.

At the same time, the government is committed to ensuring the country’s national security interests and is alert to threats from emerging technologies. The capability achieved through the Anti-Satellite missile test provides credible deterrence against threats to our growing space-based assets from long range missiles, and proliferation in the types and numbers of missiles.
11. Case of the ‘imported’ embryo: the how, the why, and what the law says (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Science & Technology)

Earlier this month, the Directorate of Revenue Intelligence (DRI) arrested a Malaysian national who was allegedly attempting to import a nitrogen canister containing a frozen human embryo. The arrest, first of its kind in India, led to a search at an fertility clinic in Mumbai.

Why store embryos
In medical terms, the unborn offspring is an embryo from the day of fertilisation until the eighth week of pregnancy; after that, it is a foetus. Following in vitro fertilisation (outside the body), some couples choose to freeze embryos that are left over. This would allow
patients to conceive at a later time. Embryos are frozen from the second day of fertilisation, using techniques to halt physiological or biological development. The embryo is stored in liquid nitrogen or nitrogen vapour at a temperature below -190°C. In 2017, a 24-year-old frozen embryo made headlines after it was used to give birth in the US.

Until five years ago, facilities for embryo freezing were limited in India. Several couples stored embryos abroad and imported them when they wanted to conceive. Today, India has many embryo freezing banks at par with those in the West, said Dr Narendra Malhotra, former president of Indian Society for Assisted Reproduction (ISAR).

Why import them
One possible reason for importing embryos could be to meet demands from Indian couples for a baby with "non-Indian looks". Dr Malhotra said he often gets requests for European gametes from couples.

In the latest case, experts suspect it is also possible that a Malaysian couple had commissioned illegal surrogacy in India. Malaysia does not allow surrogacy. In India, the Surrogacy (Regulation) Bill, 2016, passed by Lok Sabha in 2018, bans commercial surrogacy but permits altruistic surrogacy. India offers cheaper IVF procedures, at costs one-half to one-third of those in the US.

In 2017, a Thai national was arrested for smuggling six tubes of semen stored in liquid nitrogen to Laos for surrogacy. Embryos or gametes were getting routed to surrogacy clinics, ART clinics and IVF clinics.

The latest case
DRI officials alleged that the arrested Malaysian national, Partheban Durai, had smuggled embryos at least eight times to Mumbai, after declaring these as stem cells. This time, he carried the nitrogen canister- as large as a mini gas cylinder- in his hand luggage and did not put it for X-ray screening, officials said. It was allegedly meant for delivery at Indo-Nippon IVF Fertility Centre.

The DRI said its team conducted a mock delivery through Durai, and that the director of the clinic received the canister. The director, Dr Goral Gandhi, refused to comment. Her lawyer Sujay Kantawala said, “These are false allegations, no delivery was staged.” While Gandhi has moved a petition challenging the DRI action, Durai is out on bail and in custody of Malaysian consulate.

Indian laws
In October 2015, the Director General of Foreign Trade moved the import of human embryos from the ‘restricted’ to the ‘prohibited’ category, except for research purposes. The next month, the Ministry of Home Affairs banned commercial surrogacy for foreign nationals in India. Since then, the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) has stopped giving no-objection-certificates for import of embryos or gametes. Export is allowed on a case basis for couples who froze their embryos or gametes in India before the surrogacy ban was enforced, and wish to continue IVF in another country.
IVF experts have urged for regulation rather than prohibition. “There are lots of Indian couples who froze their eggs or embryos abroad while living there. Now that they have migrated to India, they wish to continue IVF here,” said Dr Jaideep Malhotra, current ISAR president. Alternatively, those with terminal illness may travel abroad for treatment and preserve their healthy gametes before initiating radiation or chemotherapy. Once treatment is over, they may wish to bring it back to India. “These are genuine problems that Indians face and the government must allow import in such cases,” said IVF expert Dr Duru Shah.

In a draft regulation submitted to Director General of Foreign Trade and Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, the ICMR has suggested ways to regulate import of embryos and gametes – matching of DNA of embryo with that of importing couple, justifiable reasons for import, a mandatory check on exporting and importing clinic. “This is to ensure foreign couples do not send their embryo for surrogacy,” said Dr R S Sharma, senior director at ICMR, who was involved in drafting the guidelines.

(Adapted From The Indian Express)

Social Issues

1. Assam’s tea country where lethal liquor takes lives (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper I; Social Issues)

Spurious ‘sulai,’ or country spirit, has often taken lives in Assam. But the cheap liquor was seldom a large-scale killer until more than a week ago when it felled 157 people in and around two tea estates in eastern Assam’s Golaghat and Jorhat districts. The disaster forced the State to crack down on illicit breweries that allegedly thrive on a nexus between bootleggers and excise and police officials.

Where did the tragedy happen?
On February 21, death struck at the Halmira Tea Estate in Golaghat when plantation workers gathered to celebrate a birth. Local hospitals soon began to fill with patients from villages around Halmira and Borhola Tea Estate in Jorhat district. Preliminary investigations pointed to the ‘sulai’ having come from the same source. The tragedy happened within a certain radius of the two estates not far from each other, but social activists involved with the health of plantation workers said it could have been anywhere across Assam’s tea-growing areas comprising 65,000 major and small gardens.

What caused the deaths?
Excise Minister Parimal Suklabaidya said a lethal combination of methanol and liquid molasses claimed the lives of plantation workers. The National Human Rights Commission took note of the methanol content and issued notice to the State government, asking it for a report on the cause of death and the action taken. Excise officials said ‘sulai’ traditionally involved fermenting molasses and breaking it down to ethyl alcohol, or ethanol, and carbon
dioxide at a controlled temperature. A process of distillation over firewood yielded the clear, pungent liquor with alcohol content of up to 45%. But high demand and commercialisation saw illegal manufacturers using the cheaper methanol, an alcohol that provides the same kick as ethanol and occurs naturally at low levels in fermented drinks, but is far more toxic. If not produced by standardised factories, a higher dose of methanol can cause multiple organ failure.

Why are gardens affected?
A survey done a decade ago by an NGO in 64 tea estates of Sonitpur district revealed 87% of plantation workers aged above 40 were addicted to alcohol. This addiction, activists say, is a colonial hangover; the British planters made rectified spirit easily and cheaply available to the earliest plantation workers to let them forget the trauma of being uprooted from their central Indian homes 170 years ago. Alcoholism coincided with another habit the British introduced — salted tea — to counter dehydration.

What are corrective measures?
In 2017, the BJP government amended the Excise Rules for “scientific brewing” and to end the control of the country liquor market by a few barons. Companies were offered licences, expected to fetch ₹200 crore in annual revenue, to bottle hygienic country spirit. A firm in Jorhat set up an automated plant to produce ‘sulai’ with 12% alcohol. But illicit brewers have been cashing in on the demand with cheaper stuff that sells higher on weekly pay day or during a social occasion, as was the case in Halmira.

(Adapted from The Hindu)

2. Six choke to death after entering septic tank in Tamil Nadu (Relevant for GS Mains Paper I; Social Issues)

What happened?
Six persons, including a 53-year-old shop-keeper and his two young sons, died of asphyxiation in the septic tank of a house in a village near Sriperumbudur in Kancheepuram district.

According to the police, Krishnamoorthi ran a shop just outside his home in Selvaperumal Nagar near Sriperumbudur. He had engaged a few conservancy workers to clean and repair the septic tank. The workers left after completing their task before noon, and Krishnamoorthi went inside the tank to check whether the work had been done properly. He lost consciousness after inhaling poisonous gases and fell down inside the tank.
His sons, realising their father had fainted, jumped in to rescue him. They too felt uncomfortable and collapsed. On seeing them fall, the family's tenant Paramasivam, Lakshmikandan, a worker in a gas agency and a migrant worker who had come to the shop to buy something, tried to rescue the three, and climbed in. But all of them were asphyxiated by the noxious fumes.

(Adapted Form The Hindu)
Internal Security

1. Security agencies putting together details of JeM’s threat not only to India but also to West (Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Internal Security)

As India, supported by France, prepares a fresh proposal to place Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) chief Masood Azhar on the ban list operated by the United Nations Security Council’s 1267 committee, security agencies are putting together new details of the outfit’s threat not only to India but also to the West.

What are the details?
A senior official said they would highlight how the JeM’s parent outfit, Harkat-ul-Ansar (HuA), included by the U.S. in its list of Foreign Terrorist Organisations in 1999, had been rechristened as Jaish-e-Mohammad and continued to train terrorists for attacks against the U.S. troops in Afghanistan.

Another senior official said Balakot, the JeM training camp that was hit in a precision strike by the Indian Air Force (IAF) last week, was established after the Taliban collapsed in Afghanistan in 2001.

“The primary aim of the establishment of this camp was to train people to go to Afghanistan to attack the U.S. troops there. Their next objective was to train fidayeen [suicide bombers] and then the local militants. As many as two-thirds of the militants trained here were sent to Afghanistan,” the senior official said.

When was JeM found?
The JeM’s creation could be linked to the popularity surrounding Masood Azhar after his release from India in 1999. He was released in exchange for the passengers of the Indian Airlines aircraft IC 814 that was hijacked from Nepal.

“He was the general secretary of the newly established Harkat-ul-Ansar (HuA) in 1994 and was on a mission in J&K when he was arrested on February 11 the same year. After he was released [in 1999], the HuA was included in the U.S. list which compelled the outfit to rename itself as the Harkat-ul-Mujahideen (HuM). Azhar decided to float a new outfit, JeM. He received assistance from Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), the then Taliban regime in Afghanistan, Osama bin Laden and several Sunni sectarian outfits of Pakistan,” said the official.

He said the formation of the outfit was endorsed by three religious school chiefs in Pakistan, Mufti Nizamuddin Shamzai of the Majlis-e-Tawan-e-Islami, Maulana Mufti Rashid Ahmed of the Dar-ul Ifta-e-wal-Irshad and Maulana Sher Ali of the Sheikh-ul-Hadith Dar-ul Haqqania.

After India and other foreign countries put pressure on Pakistan, post 2001 attack on the Indian Parliament by the outfit, Azhar was arrested by Pakistani security forces on
December 29, 2001. However, a three-member Review Board of the Lahore High Court ordered on December 14, 2002, that Azhar be released. He was never detained or arrested after that.

(Adapted from The Hindu)

2. Boeing: crashed and grounded ( Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Internal Security)

Two crashes of Boeing’s popular 737 MAX aircraft minutes within take-off raise questions about safety and control systems.

The crash of an Ethiopian Airlines plane, five months after the Lion Air crash in Indonesia, has forced Boeing to ground all its 737 MAX aircraft.

What is 737 MAX?
The Boeing 737 MAX series is a single aisle aircraft fitted with high-bypass twin-turbofan engines. It is the fourth generation variant of the Boeing 737 aircraft, a base model which has been in production since the 1960s. In the commercial aviation business, it is locked in competition with the Airbus A320, another single aisle and newer aircraft family, manufactured by Boeing’s European rival, Airbus SE, in the high stakes and crucial short-haul aircraft market.

For Boeing, this model is the fastest-selling aircraft in its history — it cites about 5,000 orders from over 100 customers. Currently, there are four commercial variants (MAX 7, 8, 9, 10), with a seating capacity that varies between 172 and 230. With its CFM-manufactured LEAP engines, the 737 MAX family has, depending on the variant, a flying range of up to 7,130 km. The suffix MAX is a coinage meant to highlight the potential of the aircraft in offering the “maximum competitive advantage” to customers.

The flight deck and cabin have had several enhancements, which include more flight control software, some automated controls and touches such as better lighting and overhead storage. The engines, which have composite components in some stages, offer significantly better fuel efficiency — a key draw for customers — compared to earlier engines on the third generation 737 variants.

What led to the global grounding?
On October 29 last year, a two-month-old Boeing 737 MAX 8, operated by low-cost airline Lion Air of Indonesia, crashed approximately 12 minutes after being airborne, killing its 189 passengers and crew. The pilot, with more than 6,000 flight hours and the co-pilot, with more than 5,000 hours, formed an experienced team. Last Sunday, on March 10, another flight by a four-month-old 737 MAX 8, operated by Ethiopian Airlines, crashed approximately six minutes after takeoff. All 157 passengers and crew were killed.

The disparity in the flight hours of the crew, about 8,000 for the pilot, and just 200 hours for the co-pilot, has led to some scrutiny. Similarities between the two events, of the flight crew reporting certain technical difficulties, requesting a return to base, the scientific tracking of an unstable flight trajectory and airspeeds and also the ‘gathering of some technical evidence’ (in Ethiopia), have led analysts to conclude that there could be an issue
with one of the aircraft’s key control systems. It may take time for data from the black boxes to be analysed and acted upon.

**How did India react?**

It was in two quick stages, which impacted the operations of the country's two 737 MAX operators, private airlines Jet Airways and SpiceJet, with a fleet of 5 and 12 aircraft respectively (according to data from the Directorate-General of Civil Aviation, the country’s nodal aviation agency). Another aircraft data site puts the fleet composition at 9 and 14 respectively. The DGCA initially permitted operations to continue, with key directives that kicked in from March 12.

In a notice, dated March 11 (now withdrawn), taking into account “compliance of all manufacturer Standard Operating Procedures/operations circulars and Federal Aviation Administration [FAA] emergency Airworthiness Directives,” it advised additional actions for airline engineers and maintenance crew such as “no minimum equipment list (MEL) release” — a list which allows aircraft operation, under specified conditions — if there were control system red flags. It also mandated key checks during aircraft transit. Finally, flight operations departments were to ensure, among other things, that the minimum experience levels of the two pilots were “1,000 and 500 hours” respectively.

The DGCA said these were “interim safety measures” and there was communication with the manufacturer and the FAA. On March 13, it issued a follow-up notice, deciding that “the operation of B-737 MAX aircraft would not take place from/to Indian airports and transit or enter into Indian airspace effective from March 13 till further notice.” All operations ceased by 4 p.m. local time.

**How was it overseas?**

The ban was rolled out in phases. In the Asia-Pacific region, the grounding, on March 11, by the Civil Aviation Administration of China, which took the global lead, has hit the largest 737 MAX fleet in operation. Figures (compiled in early March 2018) from a leading fleet data site show that of the estimated 371 MAX aircraft in operation, a quarter, or close to 97 planes, are used by a raft of China-based airlines. With over 50 operators based in 34 countries, the Asia-Pacific region is the base for close to 37% of the worldwide fleet. The U.S. follows next with 30.2%. The situation was a bit different in the U.S., with the FAA playing outlier and then announcing a grounding.

**Is the aircraft flawed?**

We don’t know as yet. Some media reports cite the huge financial impact of the global grounding per day and potential damage to an order book estimated to be several billions — there is even a figure of “half-a-trillion dollars” floating around. Even worse are signs of a loss in airline confidence: some affected airlines are contemplating demanding compensation (low-cost carrier Norwegian Air has been quite vocal about this, highlighting a “1% loss of its seat capacity”); while other carriers, such as Lion Air, are trying to up the ante by making veiled threats of order cancellations and buying Airbus aircraft. Kenya Airways, though not a 737 MAX operator, says it could re-consider a potential order. Some others still are considering scouting around for third generation and “safer” 737 variants.
But the main attention is now on a control system in the plane. Preliminary analysis of both crashes has focussed on the “anti-stalling system” called the Manoeuvering Characteristics Augmentation System (MCAS). It was introduced after the newer and more fuel efficient engines for this aircraft type, which have a much larger diameter and heavier weight than earlier ones, have had to be fixed higher and more forward on the wings than done previously for the earlier 737 models, consequently making changes to the aircraft’s flight profile. As a result, there has been a possibility of the aircraft, while in flight, pitching a bit more higher than intended. In certain stages of flight, this could lead to what is called a stall which can have dangerous consequences.

The automated MCAS comes in here. With the Angle of Attack (AoA) sensors, it detects when the aircraft is at risk and initiates corrective manoeuvres using the stabilisers. A senior Boeing 737 pilot told The Hindu that the MCAS is supposed “to work quietly in the background.” The MCAS could force the aircraft into a dive if there are erroneous inputs from the AoA sensors (An FAA emergency airworthiness directive highlighted this). After the Indonesia crash, some pilot unions, especially in the U.S., flagged it as being a nasty surprise and there having been inadequate exposure to, information about and training for this feature. There is some commentary on this putting it down to the manufacturer not thinking of creating awareness of this feature to be a necessity.

**Are safety issues new to aviation?**

No. Aviation incidents have led to a review of every aspect of the aviation ecosystem. For example, Airbus SE faced a crisis when its Airbus A320 aircraft suffered accidents just after its introduction (1988 onwards); there was one incident in India (1990). Its “fly-by wire” controls were deemed too advanced and complex but the aircraft flies on, ticking many boxes for several airlines. More recently, Airbus had a significant technical issue with an engine type (the manufacturer is sorting it out) on its Airbus A320 Neo aircraft. In 2013, Boeing rode out a crisis, but with the cost of compensation, affecting its composite-built aircraft, the Boeing 787 ‘Dreamliner’, and involving its lithium-ion batteries.

**Where does this leave Boeing?**

An extended grounding — which some experts estimate could be till May or beyond — could hit its bottom line. The Ethiopian crash even caused it to drastically tone down the unveiling of a newer model of its flagship Boeing 777 family, with its unique feature of partially folding wings. Given the reported conflict of interest in certification of aircraft, Boeing will have to work fast and transparently.

It will have to look at tackling the issue from three angles, as aviation experts like Diogenis Papiomytis of consulting firm Frost and Sullivan have suggested: if it is a software issue, it could be sorted out in the planned battery of software upgrades — this could be soon. If it is about better pilot training, it will have to work out revamped and comprehensive training modules across the world and additional type certification. Aviation authorities will also have to maintain vigil as passenger safety is paramount.
This could affect some airlines in terms of costs. Finally, if it is traced to a structural issue, the American aerospace giant could be hitting an air pocket, with ripple effects down the aviation global supply chain. The 737 is a cash cow, but there are already those who accuse Boeing of pushing its 52-year-old plane model too far. It’s over to Renton now.

(Adapted From The Hindu)

**Miscellaneous**

1. **Shanti Swarup Bhatnagar Prize for Science and Technology (Relevant for GS Prelims)**

Prime Minister, Shri Narendra Modi, attended the award ceremony for the Shanti Swarup Bhatnagar Prize for Science and Technology, at Vigyan Bhawan in New Delhi, on 28 February 2019. The Prime Minister conferred the Shanti Swarup Bhatnagar Prizes for 2016, 2017 and 2018 to the awardees. He also addressed the gathering.

**About Shanti Swarup Bhatnagar awards**

The Shanti Swarup Bhatnagar Prize is named after the founder Director of the Council of Scientific & Industrial Research, Dr. Shanti Swarup Bhatnagar. The Shanti Swarup Bhatnagar Prize for Science and Technology (SSB) is a science award in India given annually by the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) for notable and outstanding research, applied or fundamental, in biology, chemistry, environmental science, engineering, mathematics, medicine and Physics. The purpose of the prize is to recognize outstanding Indian work (according to the view of CSIR awarding committee) in science and technology. It is the most coveted award in multidisciplinary science in India. The award is named after the founder Director of the Council of Scientific & Industrial Research, Shanti Swarup Bhatnagar. It was first awarded in 1958.

Any citizen of India engaged in research in any field of science and technology up to the age of 45 years is eligible for the prize. The prize is awarded on the basis of contributions made through work done in India only during the five years preceding the year of the prize. The prize comprises a citation, a plaque, and a cash award of 5 lakh (US$7,000). In addition, recipients also get Rs. 15,000 per month up to the age of 65 years.

2. **Cabinet approves promulgation of Aadhaar and Other Laws (Amendment) Ordinance, 2019**

The Union Cabinet, chaired by the Prime Minister Narendra Modi has approved the promulgation of an Ordinance to make amendments to the Aadhaar Act 2016, Prevention of Money Laundering Act 2005 & Indian Telegraph Act 1885. The amendments proposed are the same as those contained in the Bill passed by the Lok Sabha on 4th January 2019.

**Impact:**
The amendments would enable UIDAI to have a more robust mechanism to serve the public interest and restrain the misuse of Aadhaar. Subsequent to this amendment, no individual shall be compelled to provide proof of possession of Aadhaar number of undergo authentication for the purpose of establishing his identity unless it is so provided by a law made by Parliament.

Salient Features
The salient features of the amendments are as follows—

• Provides for voluntary use of Aadhaar number in physical or electronic form by authentication or offline verification with the consent of Aadhaar number holder;

• Provides for use of twelve-digit Aadhaar number and its alternative virtual identity to conceal the actual Aadhaar number of an individual;

• Gives an option to children who are Aadhaar number holders to cancel their Aadhaar number on attaining the age of eighteen years;

• Permits the entities to perform authentication only when they are compliant with the standards of privacy and security specified by the Authority; and the authentication is permitted under any law made by Parliament or is prescribed to be in the interest of State by the Central Government;

• Allows the use of Aadhaar number for authentication on voluntary basis as acceptable KYC document under the Telegraph Act, 1885 and the Prevention of Money-laundering Act, 2002.

• Proposes deletion of section 57 of the Aadhaar Act relating to use of Aadhaar by private entities;

• Prevents denial of services for refusing to, or being unable to, undergo authentication;

• Provides for establishment of Unique Identification Authority of India Fund;

• Provides for civil penalties, its adjudication, appeal thereof in regard to violations of Aadhaar Act and provisions by entities in the Aadhaar ecosystem.

Background:
The Supreme Court in its judgement dated 26.9.2018 in W.P (civil) No.494 of 2012 and other tagged petitions held Aadhaar to be constitutionally valid. However, it read down/struck down few sections of the Aadhaar Act and Regulations and gave several other directions in the interest of protecting the fundamental rights to privacy.

Consequently it was proposed to amend the Aadhaar Act, Indian Telegraph Act and the Prevention of Money Laundering Act in line with the Supreme Court directives and the report of Justice B.N.Srikrishna (Retd.) committee on data protection, in order to ensure
that personal data of Aadhaar holder remains protected against any misuse and Aadhaar scheme remains in conformity with the Constitution. Towards this, the Aadhaar and Other Laws (Amendment) Bill, 2018 was passed by the Lok Sabha in its sitting held on 4th January, 2019. However, before the same could be considered and passed in the Rajya Sabha, the Rajya Sabha was adjourned sine die.

(Adapted from PIB)

3. Scheme for Higher Education Youth in Apprenticeship and Skills (SHREYAS) (Relevant for GS Prelims)

Government launched the Scheme for Higher Education Youth in Apprenticeship and Skills (SHREYAS) for providing industry apprenticeship opportunities to the general graduates exiting in April 2019 through the National Apprenticeship Promotional Scheme (NAPS). The program aims to enhance the employability of Indian youth by providing ‘on the job work exposure’ and earning of stipend.

SHREYAS is a programme conceived for students in degree courses, primarily non-technical, with a view to introduce employable skills into their learning, promote apprenticeship as integral to education and also amalgamate employment facilitating efforts of the Government into the education system so that clear pathways towards employment opportunities are available to students during and after their graduation.

Ministries involved

SHREYAS is a programme basket comprising the initiatives of three Central Ministries, namely the Ministry of Human Resource Development, Ministry of Skill Development & Entrepreneurship and the Ministry of Labour & Employment viz the National Apprenticeship Promotion Scheme (NAPS), the National Career Service (NCS) and introduction of BA/BSc/BCom (Professional) courses in the higher educational institutions.

How will the program work?

SHREYAS portal will enable educational institutions and industry to log in and provide their respective demand and supply of apprenticeship. The matching of students with apprenticeship avenues will take place as per pre-specified eligibility criteria. The State Governments are expected to play a major role in securing apprenticeship opportunities, apart from the Sector Skill Councils, so that general degree students passing out in April 2019, gain the option of industry & service sector apprenticeship.

Stakeholders

Role of the Institutions: The higher education institutions would explain the scheme alongwith various options to the students who are in the final year, and elicit their interest in participation. After collecting interest from various students, the institution would register on the SHREYAS portal, duly indicating the skill job roles alongwith likely number of students in each role.

Role of SSCs: SSCs would identify industries for apprenticeship, and would also conduct assessment leading to certification. They would be communicated the interest of the
students as registered by the HEIs. They would, based on this, arrange and confirm the establishments where the students would be provided as apprenticeships. Based on this, the HEIs would collect and furnish, full details of the participating students. The SSC will enrol them as apprentices and generate contracts between the student and the business enterprise. They will also conduct assessment of the candidate on completion of the apprenticeship and issue certification. Whereas the certification is not a guarantee for placement, it is expected to vastly enhance his choice of securing employment either in the same enterprise or any other enterprises in that sector.

Role of MSDE (NSDC): MSDE operates the NAPS programme through NSDC. They would not only monitor the programme, progress of the apprentices, but would finance the programme by disbursing the claims from the business enterprises towards stipend reimbursement as per the NAPS. The ongoing efforts of the SSCs would be monitored by MoSDE, which would also periodically introduce new SSGs into the SHREYAS fold. The entire programme would progress with dynamic interface & information sharing between MHRD and MoSDE.

**Financing**
Under the NAPS scheme, Central Government shares 25% of the stipend per month subject to a maximum of Rs.1500 p.m during the period of the apprenticeship. Apart from that, an amount upto Rs.7500 will be met towards basic training cost, where needed.

**Target**
In all the tracks together, it is proposed to cover 50 lakh students by 2022.

(Adapted from PIB)


As part of the ongoing India Bangladesh defence cooperation, a joint military exercise Sampriti-2019 is being conducted at Tangail, Bangladesh. The eighth edition of Exercise Sampriti, commenced at the

The aim of the exercise is to increase mutual cooperation, bonhomie and camaraderie between the two armies through interoperability and joint tactical exercises.

(Adapted from PIB)

5. **Swachh Survekshan 2019 Awards (Relevant for GS Prelims)**

Indore has been awarded the cleanest city in the country in the Swachh Survekshan 2019 (SS 2019) awards while Bhopal has been declared as the cleanest capital. Ujjain has bagged the award for being the cleanest city in the population category of 3 lakh to 10 lakh.

Indore has now retained the top spot in the survey of being the cleanest city for a consecutive three years. Every year, cities and towns across India are awarded with the
title of 'Swachh Cities' on the basis of their cleanliness and sanitation drive as a part of the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan that was launched in 2014. Sixty-four lakh citizens participated in the survey which included more than 4,000 cities in 2019. Indore has reported a 70% drop in vector-borne ailments in 2019, which is being attributed to Swachh Bharat Abhiyan.

About Swachh Survekshan Awards
Every year, cities and towns across India are awarded with the title of 'Swachh Cities' on the basis of their cleanliness and sanitation drive as a part of the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan that was launched in 2014.

Survey methodology
The survey was carried out by the Quality Council of India, which had deployed 421 assessors for on the spot assessment of 17,500 locations in 500 cities and towns, of which 434 participated. Another 55 people regularly monitored the survey process in real time.
The criteria and weightages for different components of sanitation related aspects used for the survey were:

a) Municipal documentation (solid waste management including door-to-door collection, processing, and disposal, and open defecation free status. These carried 45 per cent of the total 2,000 marks.
b) Citizen feedback – 30 per cent (450 + 150 marks)
c) Independent observation – 25 per cent (500 marks)

(Adapted from PIB)

6. ArcelorMittal to take over debt-ridden Essar Steel (Relevant for GS Prelims)

After a protracted legal battle, the National Company Law Tribunal (NCLT), Ahmedabad, approved a ₹42,000 crore resolution plan of global steel magnate ArcelorMittal to take over the debt-ridden Essar Steel in Gujarat. The approval for the mega deal came almost 583 days after the NCLT began the insolvency proceedings, instead of the mandated 270 days.

Bankruptcy proceedings on Essar Steel
Essar Steel runs a 10-million-tonne steel mill at Hazira in Gujarat and owes over ₹49,000 crore to over two dozen banks, led by the state-run SBI, and has been under bankruptcy proceedings since June 2017. Approval of the deal translates into a haircut of about 14% for the lenders.

Essar Steel’s was one of the 12 large non-performing assets accounts identified by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) for bankruptcy proceedings to recover dues of banks and financial institutions.

Soon after the RBI’s direction, the largest lender SBI and Standard Chartered Bank filed insolvency proceedings against the company at the Ahmedabad Bench of the NCLT in June 2017.
With the NCLT’s verdict, the original promoters of Essar Steel, Shashi and Ravi Ruia, have lost control of their once flagship facility.

Earlier, in October 2018, the deal was approved by Essar Steel’s Committee of Creditors (CoC).

Since then the deal was pending before the tribunal for final approval amid several litigations including the final last-ditch bid from the Ruia family with an offer of ₹54,389 crore for debt settlement to retain their family jewel.

The erstwhile promoters offered to clear all dues of lenders and vendors in full if the CoC dropped the insolvency proceedings and allowed the family to retain the facility. The lenders rejected the settlement plan as did the tribunal.

However, while rejecting the Ruias’s offer, the NCLT had said that the ₹54,389-crore offer by Essar Steel Asia Holding, which was much higher than ArcelorMittal’s bid, was not maintainable as the only way to make a proposal to withdraw from the insolvency process is through Section 12A.

Also, the provisions of Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code (IBC) prevented the promoters from making the bid.

Section 29A of the IBC, which bars promoters of a defaulting company from bidding in the insolvency process meant the Ruias were not allowed to place a bid for the company despite making a settlement offer of over ₹54,000 crore.

(Adapted from The Hindu)

7. INDO-OMAN Joint Ex Al Nagah 2019 (Relevant for GS Prelims)

Indo Oman Joint Exercise Al Nagah III 2019, a joint military exercise between Indian and Royal Army of Oman (RAO), is taking place in Oman.

About the exercise
The Indian Army and RAO contingents have been specifically selected for the exercise based on expertise and professional competence and will take part in the two-week-long event that will see them hone their tactical and technical skills in joint counter insurgency and counter terrorist operations in semi-urban scenario in mountainous terrain under UN mandate. Due emphasis will be laid on increasing interoperability between forces from both countries which is crucial for success of any joint operation.

Objective of exercise
Ex Al Nagah 2019 will contribute immensely in developing mutual understanding and respect for each other's military as also facilitate in tackling the worldwide phenomenon of terrorism.
(Adapted From PIB)

8. New Zealand mosque shootings (Read only for understanding)

The main suspect in the shootings at two New Zealand mosques was charged with one count of murder, a day after the attacks that killed 49 people and wounded dozens, prompting the Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern to vow reform of the country's gun laws.

Who was the shooter?
Brenton Harrison Tarrant is a 28-year-old Australian citizen. Tarrant has been identified as a suspected white supremacist, based on his social media activity.

Footage of the attack on one of the mosques was broadcast live on Facebook, and a "manifesto" denouncing immigrants as "invaders" was also posted online via links to related social media accounts.
U.S. President Donald Trump, who condemned the attacks as a "horrible massacre", was praised by the accused gunman in a manifesto posted online as "a symbol of renewed white identity and common purpose".

What happened?
The video showed a man driving to the Al Noor mosque, entering it and shooting randomly at people with a semi-automatic rifle with high-capacity magazines. Worshippers, possibly dead or wounded, lay on the floor, the video showed.

At one stage, the shooter returns to his car, changes weapons, re-enters the mosque and again begins shooting. The camera attached to his head follows the barrel of his weapon like some macabre video game.

Forty-one people were killed at the mosque, seven at a mosque in the Linwood neighbourhood and one died in hospital, police said. Hospital officials said some of the wounded were in a critical condition.

Worst attack
The attack, which Ms. Ardern labelled as terrorism, was the worst-ever peacetime mass killing in New Zealand and the country raised its security threat level to the highest.

Gun laws to be changed
The main suspect was a licenced gun owner, who used five weapons during his rampage, including two semi-automatic weapons and two shotguns.

The authorities were working to find out how he had obtained the weapons and a licence, and how he was able to enter the country to carry out the attacks.

Concern over targeting of Muslims
Political and Islamic leaders across Asia and Middle East voiced concern over the targeting of Muslims.

“I blame these increasing terror attacks on the current Islamophobia post-9/11,” Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan posted on social media. “1.3 billion Muslims have collectively been blamed for any act of terror.”

Muslims account for just over 1% of New Zealand’s population, a 2013 census showed, most of whom were born overseas.

(Adapted from The Hindu)

9. BJP man Pramod Sawant to be Goa's new Chief Minister (Read only for understanding)

Following a day of political wrangling and uncertainty, Bharatiya Janata Party leader Pramod Sawant was named as the next Chief Minister of Goa, to succeed Manohar Parrikar.

11th Chief Minister of Goa
The 45-year-old Mr. Sawant, who is the Speaker of the Goa legislative assembly, will be sworn in as the 11th Chief Minister of Goa.

(Adapted From The Hindu)

10. Karen Uhlenbeck bags Abel Prize for maths (Relevant for GS Prelims)

The Abel Prize in mathematics was awarded to Karen Uhlenbeck of the U.S. for her work on partial differential equations, the first woman to win the award, the Norwegian Academy of Science and Letters said.

Dr. Uhlenbeck, 76, is a visiting senior research scholar at Princeton University, as well as visiting associate at the Institute for Advanced Study (IAS), both in the U.S.

About Abel Prize
The Abel Prize was established on 1 January 2002. The purpose is to award the Abel Prize for outstanding scientific work in the field of mathematics. The prize amount is 6 million NOK (about 750,000 Euro) and was awarded for the first time on 3 June 2003.

(Adapted From The Hindu)

11. Indo-Sri Lanka joint Exercise Mitra shakti-VI (Relevant for GS Prelims)

Exercise MITRA SHAKTI is conducted annually as part of military diplomacy and interaction between armies of India & Sri Lanka. The joint exercise for the year 2018-19 will be conducted from 26 March to 08 April 2019 in Sri Lanka.
What does the exercise aim for?
The aim of the exercise is to build and promote close relations between armies of both the countries and to enhance ability of joint exercise commander to take military contingents of both nations under command. The exercise will involve tactical level operations in an international Counter Insurgency and Counter Terrorist environment under United Nations mandate. Exercise MITRA SHAKTI-VI will go a long way in further cementing relationship between both the nations and will act as a catalyst in bringing synergy and cooperation at grassroots levels between both the armies.

(Adapted From PIB)

12. Can Rahul Gandhi’s basic income scheme be a game changer? (Read only for understanding)

On Monday, the Congress announced a minimum basic income guarantee scheme, which envisages providing Rs 72,000 annually to the 20% most poor of the country’s families. That would mean five crore families and 25 crore people will benefit directly, the Congress said.

This one-of-its-kind scheme in the world, announced by party president Rahul Gandhi as a key step towards the eradication of poverty, could come under attack for the fiscal costs involved for ensuring its rollout. But can it be a game-changer? The idea recalls a key precedent in welfare politics.

Midday meal
In 1982, the Budget of the M.G. Ramachandran government in Tamil Nadu announced a midday meal programme for all children, named the Chief Minister's Nutritional Meal Programme. Bureaucrats initially dug their heels in when it came to taking its implementation forward. At a meeting in the state secretariat in Madras, now Chennai, MGR sensed the resistance of bureaucrats. He asked them whether any of them knew what it felt to go without meals, and told them he had experienced it personally in his family, and was determined to introduce a scheme which would ensure that children would not go hungry. The message was that the programme would have to be implemented, irrespective of the costs involved. The scheme was also much criticised by the central government then. Years later, the Centre, the World Bank, economists and governments have showcased the midday meal scheme as a classic study of successful welfare politics.

UBI & minimum income
A minimum guaranteed income scheme is one where a set of the population — in this case the poorest 20% — get an assured amount in their bank accounts, which could help them meet their basic needs. Such schemes can be unconditional, meaning that the beneficiary is free to spend the cash without any strings attached, but that is not yet clear in the one announced by the Congress.

The income support scheme is being spoken of in the same breath as a universal basic income (UBI) scheme, an idea that is gaining popularity in many parts of the world. At best,
the kind of income support schemes proposed, such as the one by the Congress in India
Wednesday, is a quasi-UBI. That is because a UBI by its very definition reaches out to all
citizens of a country or territory, irrespective of income levels.

What the proposal envisages is a minimum monthly income of Rs 6,000 for poor
households, with the scheme being capped for those with an monthly income of Rs 12,000.
Schemes like these hold the potential of boosting farm gate prices and also consumption.

Primarily, it address the issue of income inequality or poverty. According to those who
make a strong case for such schemes, these are the best form of social justice for those left
behind in an economy, as they offer a safety net to the poor against shocks such as income
fluctuations, lack of employment and health issues.

Additionally, the scheme comes with the promise of easing the burden on the government,
which implements multiple social welfare schemes that have not quite helped in reducing
poverty. What that means is that if the government were to eliminate some of the current
subsidised schemes (for food, fertiliser and fuel) and allow the beneficiaries to exercise
their own choices on how to spend the minimum guaranteed income, then it would be able
to focus on providing other public goods and better delivery. Other benefits being cited are
greater financial inclusion, with more among the poor accessing banking services, which
can lead to greater penetration of financial services.

The downside
The primary resistance to such schemes is about the costs involved. Some economists, such
as Vijay Joshi, a distinguished professor of Oxford University who has worked with both the
government and the RBI, especially during the early part of liberalisation in 1991-92,
believe that a UBI will work in India. Other fiscal experts fear that this is feasible only when
other subsidies are eliminated. Politically, that is not easy as India’s experience in cutting
subsidies for fertiliser or fuel has shown.

There is also the challenge of identifying the beneficiaries, targeting, leakages or
misallocation. The Tendulkar Committee identified 269 million as below the poverty line,
or 21.9% of the population in 2011. The committee headed by C Rangarajan estimated this
at 363 million. There has been debate as to how much of a decline there has been in these
numbers since then. There is concern about whether the government has the capacity to
implement these programmes. Economists also cite the issue of “moral hazard” — assured
income leading to reduced incentives to work, or failure to build or create durable assets.
Such criticism had been directed at MNREGA, introduced by the previous government.

Fiscal costs
In his book India’s Long Road — The Search for Prosperity, Vijay Doshi estimated the cost
of providing a basic income for 2014-15. To raise the average income of the poor to the
poverty line, the uniform transfer of funds required would be Rs 17,505 for each household
annually. This meant that the cost of underwriting that for 21.9% of the population would
be 0.76% of GDP; for 100% of the population, 3it would .49 % of GDP.
Former Chief Economic Adviser Arvind Subramanian, who fuelled a debate on UBI in the 2016-17 Economic Survey, reckoned that a quasi-UBI for 75% would work out to 4.9% of GDP.

Assuming full coverage, the tab for the government could be Rs 3.6 lakh crore. That can impact the fisc, especially in a slowing economy and when revenues aren’t buoyant, and lead to macro-in-stability.

**Experiments elsewhere**
Other countries are experimenting with such schemes. Finland, one of the world’s richest countries, kicked off a trial programme targeting 2000 of its unemployed. Scotland has started a basic income pilot scheme spread over the next two years, in a few areas, to look at different options. So have the Netherlands, Spain and Kenya.

**Challenges ahead**
In many ways, these guaranteed income schemes are an implicit recognition that generating jobs is becoming progressively difficult. India too is finding it difficult, given its resource constraints and with private investments yet to revive. Such schemes can be financed either by fresh taxes, which is virtually impossible, or by raising resources — by monetising assets such as land, selling state—owned firms, eliminating major subsidies, or withdrawing tax giveaways.

One argument, made by the Pune International Centre in a policy paper for the upcoming polls, is that rather than spend money on a UBI, the state should focus on supplying public goods and using resources better for ensuring delivery of quality primary education, health and law & order.

Where a proposal such as a guaranteed minimum income scheme could score, however, is on grounds of equalisation. Empirical evidence gathered by the 14th Finance Commission showed that in terms of share of Plan outlay, government investments and exemptions, it was the country’s richer states that gained. That imbalance may be addressed this time. The big issue, however, is the potential for another imbalance — on the macroeconomic front; in other words, the cost of underwriting or implementing the scheme efficiently on a pan-India basis over a five-year horizon. That will count politically. Or it could run the risk of backfiring. Identifying the beneficiaries with an income of below Rs 12,000, and the benchmark for that in terms of assets or income streams or metrics, could be a stiff test. On these challenges will depend whether the scheme can be a game-changer like MGR’s midday meal scheme.

*(Adapted From Indian Express)*

**13. Young Scientist Programme (Yuvika) (Relevant for GS Prelims)***
The Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) has launched a special programme for School Children called “Young Scientist Programme” “YUva Vlgyani KAr yakram” (युविका कार्यक्रम) from this year.

What is Yuvika Program?
The Program is primarily aimed at imparting basic knowledge on Space Technology, Space Science and Space Applications to the younger ones with the intent of arousing their interest in the emerging areas of Space activities. ISRO has chalked out this programme to “Catch them young”.

The residential training programme will be of around two weeks duration during summer holidays and it is proposed to select 3 students each from each State/ Union Territory to participate in this programme covering state, CBSE, and ICSE syllabus. Those who have just finished 9th standard (in the academic year 2018-19) and waiting to join 10th standard (or those who have started 10th Std just now) will be eligible for the programme. The selection will be based on the 8th Std marks. The programme is planned at 4 centres of ISRO during the second half of May 2019.

(Adapted From PIB)

14. Barring arms: on New Zealand banning semi-automatic guns (Read only for understanding)

Ban on MSSA in News Zealand
Just days after a terrorist attacked two mosques in Christchurch, gunning dead 50 worshippers and injuring dozens in a hail of bullets, New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern announced a ban on military style semi-automatics (MSSA) and assault rifles.

While New Zealanders don’t enjoy a constitutional right to bear arms — like the U.S. Second Amendment protection — the island nation of just under five million people has traditionally had a high level of gun ownership, with estimates putting the figure upwards of 1.2 million firearms. In a clear reflection of the national mood and the readiness of the political class to take rapid and resolute action against the deadly weapons, the government won bipartisan agreement ahead of the ban, and the Opposition National Party leader endorsed it. New Zealand joins its neighbour across the Tasman Sea, Australia, in outlawing semi-automatics.

In Australia’s case too, the 1996 National Firearms Agreement and buyback programme followed a deadly massacre in Tasmania’s Port Arthur earlier that year. A lone gunman had used a semi-automatic rifle to shoot and kill 35 people, and wound 18 others, in a rampage across multiple locations in the popular tourist area.
Why MSSA are dangerous?
The fact that MSSA are almost twice as deadly in killing and maiming victims. The researchers found that given their ease of use, capacity to accept large magazines and fire high-velocity bullets, the semi-automatics were significantly more lethal. Both nations, however, allow licensed ownership of firearms, especially by farmers who need them for “pest control and animal welfare”.

That the terrorist, an Australian, chose Christchurch to carry out his rampage shows Canberra’s strict licensing and registration norms have had a deterrent effect. It should be a prompt for the U.S. to proactively move to tighten its gun laws, before more innocent lives are lost in preventable mass shootings.

(Adapted From The Hindu)

15. Coffee Board Activates Blockchain Based Marketplace in India (Relevant for GS Prelims)

Coffee Board launched blockchain based coffee e-marketplace. This pilot project will help integrate the farmers with markets in a transparent manner and lead to realisation of fair price for the coffee producer. It will also reduce the number of layers between coffee growers and buyers and help farmers double their income.

What is special about Indian Coffee?
India is the only country in the world where entire coffee is grown under shade, handpicked and sun dried. It produces one of the best coffees in the world, produced by small coffee growers, tribal farmers adjacent to National Parks and Wild Life Sanctuaries in the Western and Eastern Ghats, which are two of the major bio-diversity hot spots in the world. Indian coffee is highly valued in the world market and sold as premium coffees. The share of farmers in the final returns from coffee is very meagre.

What are the expected benefits from Blockchain based market place?
Blockchain based market place app for trading of Indian coffees is intended to bring in transparency in the trade of Indian coffee, maintain the traceability of Indian coffee from bean to cup so as the consumer tastes real Indian coffee and the grower is paid fairly for his coffee produced. This initiative will help in creating a brand image for Indian Coffee through traceability in reducing growers dependency an intermediaries by having a direct access to buyers for a fair price for their produce, in finding right coffee suppliers for exporters and within the stipulated time to meet the growing demands and in building a better trust and long term relationship due to increased visibility towards the traceability and transparency of the produce.

(Adapted From PIB)

16. GI Certification for five varieties of Indian coffee (Relevant for GS Prelims)
The Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade, Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Government of India has recently awarded Geographical Indication (GI) to five varieties of Indian coffee. They are:

- Coorg Arabica coffee is grown specifically in the region of Kodagu district in Karnataka.
- Wayanaad Robusta coffee is grown specifically in the region of Wayanad district which is situated on the eastern portion of Kerala.
- Chikmagalur Arabica coffee is grown specifically in the region of Chikmagalur district and it is situated in the Deccan plateau, belongs to the Malnad region of Karnataka.
- Araku Valley Arabica coffee can be described as coffee from the hilly tracks of Visakhapatnam district of Andhra Pradesh and Odisha region at an elevation of 900-1100 Mt MSL. The coffee produce of Araku, by the tribals, follows an organic approach in which they emphasise management practices involving substantial use of organic manures, green manuring and organic pest management practices.
- Bababudangiris Arabica coffee is grown specifically in the birthplace of coffee in India and the region is situated in the central portion of Chikmagalur district. Selectively hand-picked and processed by natural fermentation, the cup exhibits full body, acidity, mild flavour and striking aroma with a note of chocolate. This coffee is also called high grown coffee which slowly ripens in the mild climate and thereby the bean acquires a special taste and aroma.

The Monsooned Malabar Robusta Coffee, a unique specialty coffee from India, was given GI certification earlier.

**Coffee cultivation in India**

In India, coffee is cultivated in about 4.54 lakh hectares by 3.66 lakh coffee farmers of which 98% are small farmers. Coffee cultivation is mainly done in the Southern States of India:

- Karnataka – 54%
- Kerala – 19%
- Tamil Nadu – 8%

Coffee is also grown in non-traditional areas like Andhra Pradesh and Odisha (17.2%) and North East States (1.8%).

India is the only country in the world where the entire coffee cultivation is grown under shade, hand-picked and sun dried. India produces some of the best coffee in the world, grown by tribal farmers in the Western and Eastern Ghats, which are the two major biodiversity hotspots in the world. Indian coffee is highly valued in the world market and sold as premium coffee in Europe.

**What are the benefits expected from GI certification?**

The recognition and protection that comes with GI certification will allow the coffee producers of India to invest in maintaining the specific qualities of the coffee grown in that particular region. It will also enhance the visibility of Indian coffee in the world and allow growers to get maximum price for their premium coffee.

*(Adapted From PIB)*