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Polity and Governance

Farmers protest and minimum Support Price

Why in News?

Farmers from Punjab, Haryana and other states are protesting at the gates of Delhi seeking repeal of the new farm laws.

New Farm Laws:

- **Essential Commodities (Amendment) Bill, 2020:** aims to provide government with the tool to regulate agri. commodities.
- **Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Bill, 2020:** aimed to provide a legal contract for farmers to enter into written contracts with companies and produce for them.
- **Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation), (FPTC) bill 2020:** aims to Break the monopoly of government-regulated mandis and provide farmers and traders freedom of choice of sale and purchase of Agri-produce.

The **major bone of contention** among the 3 bills is the **FPTC bill that permits sale and purchase of farm produce outside the premises of APMC mandis**. Such trades (including on electronic platforms) shall attract no market fee, cess, or levy "under any State APMC Act or any other State law

Background of the protests

- The new farm bills will enable, according to the government, many private markets to be established and middlemen to disappear. Thus, farmers would be free to sell to any buyer and farm gate prices would rise.
- But the protesting farmers do not accept these claims.
- They believe that farm gate prices would fall with the intensification of a corporate presence in agricultural markets. They also believe that the government, ultimately, wants to phase out the Minimum Support Price (MSP) system.

Why farm protests have been highly intense in Punjab, Haryana?

- The **procurement system and MSP mechanism is strong in Punjab and Haryana**.
- Though the government announces MSPs for 23 crops, only wheat and rice are bought in sufficiently large quantities.
- **For wheat**, MSP mechanism is helpful only in the northern and central states like Punjab, Haryana and Madhya Pradesh.
- **For rice**, the benefit is accrued by the farmers from the states such as Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Punjab and Haryana.
- Other states are hardly benefitted from the MSP mechanism.
- **The 70th round of National Sample Survey for 2012–13 revealed that only 32.2% of paddy farmers and 39.2% of wheat growers in the country were aware of MSPs.**

How MSP is determined?

The CACP determines the MSP, currently based on a formula that was prescribed by the Swaminathan Commission, a government-formed panel that had submitted several reports between December 2004 and October 2006 which set out suggestions for solving the problems faced by farmers.

The formula requires the assessment of three categories of costs:

- **A2:** the actual expenses paid by farmers in cash and kind for seeds, fertilisers, pesticides, paid labour, irrigation, etc.
- **A2+FL:** the A2 cost along with an adjustment for the costs of unpaid family labour (given traditional Indian farming practices involve families).
- **C2: A2+FL** along with all other production costs, including loans, rentals, cost of land and other fixed capital assets, i.e. a comprehensive cost of production.

The MSP is set at a particular level above the C2 for each crop, and applies across the country. In addition to the current C2 level, the CACP also takes into account demand and supply, domestic and international price trends, inter-crop price parity and the likely implications of MSP on consumers of the crop.

Crops covered under MSP?

At present, MSP is provided for **23** crops

- **7 Cereals:** paddy, wheat, maize, sorghum, pearl millet, barley and ragi
- **5 Pulses:** gram, tur, moong, urad, lentil
- **7 Oilseeds:** groundnut, rapeseed-mustard, soyabean, seasmum, sunflower, safflower, nigerseed
- **4 Commercial Crops:** copra, sugarcane, cotton and raw jute

In case of sugarcane, MSP has been assigned a statutory status and as such the announced price is termed as statutory minimum price, rechristened as Fair Remunerative Price (FRP).

On the other hand MSP system is not supported by any law i.e. doesn't have a statutory status.

MSP and farmers:

MSP help in rescuing farmers from low income trap in the following ways:

- **Fixed Remunerations:** The farmers are financially secured against the vagaries of price instability in the market.
- **Diversification of crops:** The MSP announced by the Government of India for the first time in 1966-67 for wheat has been extended to around 24 crops at the present. This will encourage the farmers to grow these diverse crops to maximise their income.
- **Prevents Distress-Sale:** Farmer rarely has surplus savings for buying inputs for the next cropping season. Access to credit (loans) is also difficult for small and marginal farmers. So, they are forced into distress-sale of produce at throw-away prices, and are not able to buy high quality seeds, fertilisers, pesticides & tractor-rent for next cropping season, which will further decrease their income from the next cycle. MSP prevents this phenomenon.
- **Helps informed decision making:** Government announces MSP before the sowing season for 23 crops including cereals, pulses, oilseeds & certain cash crops. This advance information helps the farmer to make an informed decision about which crop to sow for maximum economic benefit within the limitations of his farm size, climate and irrigation facilities.
- **Acts as a benchmark for private buyers:** MSP sends a price-signal to market that if merchants don't offer higher than MSP prices the farmer may not sell them his produce. Thus it acts as an anchor or benchmark for

agro-commodity market. While it doesn't guarantee that market prices will also be higher than MSP, but at least it ensures the market prices will not drastically lower than MSP.

How to improve MSP system in India?

NITI aayog in its report provided with the following recommendations to improve the MSP system in India:

- **Awareness among the farmers** needs to be increased and the information disseminated at the lowest level so that the knowledge would increase the bargaining power of the farmers.
- **Prompt payment:** The delay in payment needs to be corrected and immediate payment should be ensured. For sustainability of farming prompt payment at remunerative rates should be made.
- **Timing of MSP announcement:** MSP should be announced well in advance of the sowing season so as to enable the farmers to plan their cropping.
- **Transport and storage:** More godowns should be set up and maintained properly for better storage and reduction of wastage. Transport facility (say, in the form of providing two wheelers) for Purchase Officers may be considered to help them effectively discharge their work.
- **Updated criterion for fixing MSP:** The criteria for fixing MSP should be current data and based on more meaningful criteria rather than C3.
- The small and marginal farmers can be provided with Procurement Centres in the village itself to avoid transportation costs.

Way Forward

It was found that the MSP has succeeded in providing floor rate for major food grains like paddy and wheat and other produces such as Gram (black & green), spices and oilseeds (groundnut, mustard, till), sugarcane, jute and cotton, and it did not allow market prices to fall below the MSP fixed for them.

Thus **MSP has been very helpful in keeping agriculture in our country alive and we have been able to become self-sufficient in food grains due to it.** It becomes crucial for government to **provide some solid assurance to farmers that it won't be allowed to die down.**

Bhashan Char Island

Why in News?

Recently, Bangladesh has transported more than 1,600 Rohingya refugees to a low-lying Bhashan Char island in the first phase of a controversial planned relocation of 1,00,000 people.

About Bhashan Char Island:

- **Bhashan Char also known as Char Piya**, is an island in **Hatiya, Bangladesh**.
- The island was **formed with Himalayan silt in 2006**.
- It is underwater from June to September annually because of the monsoon, and it has no flood fences.
- In June 2015, the Bangladeshi government suggested **resettling Rohingya refugees on the island under its Ashrayan Project**.
- The proposal was characterized by the UN Refugee Agency as **"logistically challenging"**.
- Bhashan Char is a flood-prone island that emerged from the sea 20 years ago.

Concerns:

- It is flood-prone island;

- Vulnerable to frequent cyclones;
- Too small to occupy and nurture the Rohingya population;
- Chronic overcrowding in camps.

Operation Trident

Why in News?

Every year, India celebrates **December 4 as Navy Day** to commemorate Operation Trident.

Key Highlights:

- The Navy plans to celebrate 2021 as '**Swarnim Vijay Varsh**' as part of commemorating the **50th anniversary of the victory in the 1971 war**.
- The Indian navy fearlessly protects Indian coasts and also renders humanitarian assistance in times of need contributing to India's rich maritime tradition over centuries.

About Operation Trident:

- **A key offensive during the 1971 India-Pakistan War**, when the Indian Navy inflicted heavy damage on Pakistani vessels in Karachi harbour.
- Operation Trident saw the **first use of anti-ship missiles in combat in the region**.
- The operation was conducted on the **night of 4–5 December** and inflicted heavy damage on Pakistani vessels and facilities.
 - While India suffered no losses, Pakistan lost a minesweeper, a destroyer, a cargo vessel carrying ammunition, and fuel storage tanks in Karachi.
- **Trident was followed up by Operation Python** three days later.
 - **Operation Python**, a follow-up to Operation Trident, was launched on the night of 8-9 December 1971.
 - It was launched to counter the Pakistani warships attempt to outsmart Indian navy, after suffering losses during Operation Trident.

Tamil Nadu Commission for Case-wise Data

Why in news?

The **Tamil Nadu government has decided to constitute Commission to conduct a survey for collecting caste-wise data in the state**.

- It is not clear if this will involve a full headcount of all members of every caste, or whether it is better described as a 'survey' than a 'census'.

Why now?

- The move may have been **born out of political expediency**.
- It came in **response to the pre-election agitation organised by the Pattali Makkal Katchi**, a party in Tamil Nadu.
 - It demands **20% exclusive reservation** in education and government jobs for the **Vanniyar community**, its main electoral base.
- With this, the idea of a caste census is back in the realm of public debate.

What is the long-felt need?

- There is a **social and legal necessity for compiling caste-wise data**.
- **The Supreme Court** has also been asking States to produce quantifiable data to justify their levels of reservation.
- The exercise would particularly help Tamil Nadu to retain its **69% total reservation**.
- At the same time, some castes that have either electoral or numerical importance across India have some concerns.
- They are concerned about the manner in which affirmative action programmes based on classes and communities have been implemented so far.
- Be it the **Gujjars, or Jats or the Patidars, or the Vanniyars**, some sections have been linking their prospects of advancement to exclusive reservation.
 - In Tamil Nadu, **Vanniyars' violent 1987-88 agitation resulted in the creation of a 'most backward classes' category entitled to 20% reservation**.
 - Now, some sections of the Vanniyars are apparently dissatisfied about being clubbed with over a hundred other castes.
- It is a reflection on how reservation operates that some castes feel crowded out in the competition.
- They thus aspire for the safety of exclusive reservation.

What is the commission's mandate?

- The proposed commission may not conduct an elaborate enumeration on the lines of the Centre's decennial census.
- **Its mandate is to examine the methodology for collecting caste-wise particulars**, conduct a survey based on that and submit a report.
- It will be quite a challenge to arrive at a sound assessment of the social and educational backwardness of each caste.

What is the legal imperative for a caste count?

- **Basis for Reservation** Over the last two decades, the Supreme Court has been raising questions about the basis for reservation levels being high in various States.
- **Need Quantifiable Data:** In particular, it has laid down that there should be quantifiable data to justify the presence of a caste in the backward class list, as well as evidence of its under-representation in services.
- **Regular Revision:** Supreme Court has also called for periodical review of community-wise lists so that the benefits do not perpetually go in favour of a few castes.
- **Equitable Reservation:** Many community leaders argue that knowing the precise number of the population of each caste would help tailor the reservation policy to ensure equitable representation of all of them.

What was the Centre's initiative in this regard?

- The Census of India has **not collected caste-wise data since 1931**, with the exception of details about SCs and STs.
- The Centre conducted a **'socio-economic caste census (SECC)' in 2011**.
- It was an attempt to **link the collection of caste data along with socio-economic data**.
- This was done so that there could be a **comprehensive assessment of levels of deprivation and backwardness in society**.

- However, presumably because of the lack of reliability of the data collected, or its political and electoral sensitivity, the caste portion of the SECC has not been disclosed so far.

Way forward

- The TN government could possibly seek access to the SECC data pertaining to Tamil Nadu as part of its exercise.
- However, **it should not treat this as a politically expedient move to quell a possible electoral setback** due to the agitation of one party or community.
- Rather, **it should seek to rationalise and deepen its social justice policy with a true assessment of the backwardness of various castes.**
- In all cases, progress towards a casteless and equal society ought to remain the state's ultimate goal.

About SECC 2011

- The Socio-Economic Caste Census of 2011 was a major exercise to obtain data about the socio-economic status of various communities.
- Even though there could be an overlap in the dataset of SECC 2011 with that of the census 2011 taken that year, the findings could be markedly different.
- The general census is conducted in a small window of a month, while the caste census is conducted over a longer period of time, and there is a good deal of revision and correction.
- The SECC 2011 had two components: a survey of the rural and urban households and ranking of these households based on pre-set parameters, and a caste census.
- However, only the details of the economic conditions of the people in rural and urban households were released. The caste data have not been released till now.

Why Caste data of SECC 2011 is not yet released?

- While a precise reason is yet to be disclosed, it is surmised that the data were considered too politically sensitive.
- Fear of antagonising dominant and powerful castes that may find that their projected strength in the population is not as high as claimed may be an important reason.





New Parliament Building

Why in News?

Prime Minister Narendra Modi laid the foundation stone of the new Parliament building on **10th December** in New Delhi.

About

- **Location:** To be built over 64,500 sq m, it will be located a stone's throw from Rashtrapati Bhavan, the official residence of the President of India.
- **Design and structure:** The four-storey building will be triangular and its interiors will have three national symbols - the lotus, the peacock and the banyan tree - as its themes.
- **Estimated cost:** The parliament building alone will cost an estimated 971 crore.

New seat of power		NEW PARLIAMENT BUILDING	
A look at some of the features of the proposed four-storey Parliament building			
Shape: Triangular Total area: 64,500 square metres Main spaces: Lok Sabha, Rajya Sabha and Central Lounge	 The National Emblem will crown the new Parliament building	Gearing up: Construction workers walking past a hoarding featuring the new Parliament building. ■ REUTERS	
THEME OF INTERIORS Lok Sabha Peacock (National bird) Rajya Sabha Lotus (National flower) Central Lounge Banyan (National tree)	CAPACITY  Lok Sabha 888 seats (current chamber can accommodate 552 people)  Rajya Sabha 384 seats ■ The Lok Sabha Hall will also have additional capacity, up to 1,272 seats, to host joint sessions	Construction was scheduled to start in December, but the works have been stopped till the Supreme Court disposes of challenges to the project	
		Estimated cost ₹971 crore	Contractor Tata Projects Ltd. Architect HCP Design, Planning and Management
		Completion deadline: October 2022, in time for the winter session of Parliament in the 75th year of Independence	

- **Duration:** The building is expected to be ready before India's 75th Independence Day (in 2022). However, construction cannot yet begin as a legal challenge is pending in the Supreme Court.
- The new parliament building will be the highlight of the ambitious 20,000 crore Central Vista project that PM Modi said will become "a symbol of a new and self-reliant India".

Central Vista

- Delhi's central vista, home to the grand complex of government buildings, is one of the most recognisable sites in India.
- The long and grassy avenue sweeps down from the India Gate war memorial to the Rashtrapati Bhavan, or president's residence, with the circular Parliament House building in between.
- It was designed by British architects Lutyens and Herbert Baker following the 1911 decision to move the capital of the British Raj from Calcutta to Delhi.
- The geometric design, with wide avenues and sprawling lawns, was modelled on European capitals such as Paris but was also infused with Indian influences from the architecture of Hindu temples to the red-stoned grandeur of Mughal forts.
- The vista remains the only area in India designated grade 1 heritage status.

Why is it needed?

- The present Parliament building is **85-year-old** and suffers from **inadequacy of space to house members and their staff**.
- It suffers from **structural issues** and the **building needs to be protected** because of its heritage, it is a major attraction for the tourists who visit the country.
- The new Parliament building will have **high-quality acoustics and audio-visual facilities**, improved and comfortable seating arrangements, effective and inclusive emergency evacuation provisions, with high-level security for the members.
- **Central Vista is an essential ingredient of sovereignty and pride**, and also where recreational spaces are available for enjoyment by the citizens.



Important features of the building

- The national emblem will crown the new parliament, the ceiling of which will have fresco paintings (similar to those in Rashtrapati Bhawan) and carpets with traditional designs.
- Interior walls will have shlokas inscribed - to retain some of the characteristics of the existing parliament.
- **Dholpur stone** will be the primary construction material (as it was with the current building) and red granite may replace red sandstone in some interior sections. Special care will be taken during construction to ensure minimal disturbance and environmental safeguards.
- **Seating capacity:** The new Parliament House will have a seating arrangement of 888 members in the Lok Sabha. At present, India has 543 Lok Sabha seats.
 - Similarly, **384 members will be able to sit in the Rajya Sabha** of the new Parliament House, which currently has 245 seats.

- When a joint meeting of the two houses is convened at the new Parliament House, the hall earmarked for it will have a seating arrangement of **1,272 members**. At present, the joint meeting of the two Houses is held at the Centre Hall with only 430 seats.
- The new Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha halls will have increased seating capacities (888 and 384 seats, respectively) in anticipation of an expanded Parliament; a 25-year-old freeze on increasing state-wise distribution of seats ends in 2026.
- **Atmanirbhar Parliament:** The new Parliament building will be an intrinsic part of the vision of 'Atmanirbhar Bharat' as artisans and sculptors from all over the country would contribute to and showcase India's cultural diversity in the new building.
- **Earthquake safety:** The new Parliament building will also be able to withstand earthquakes.

The current Parliament building

- The present Parliament House was inaugurated on **January 18, 1927**. Its architectural work was entrusted to **Sir Herbert Baker**.
- The giant circular building with its 144 sandstone columns was designed by Sir Edward Lutyens, who also designed the heart of Delhi – from the seat of the government in the North Block to the iconic Connaught Place.
 - Sir Herbert Baker wanted the Parliament House to be triangle-shaped. A central hall should be built in between.
 - But then British architect Sir Edwin Lutyens opposed it. He had suggested shaping it round in his proposal. Ignoring Herbert Baker's suggestion, the British had accepted Edwin Lutyens' proposal.
- The existing Parliament building will be **conserved as an archaeological asset of the nation**.

Draft Indian Ports Bill, 2020

Why in News?

Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways has circulated draft of **Indian Ports Bill 2020** for public consultation which will repeal and **replace the Indian Ports Act, 1908**.

Aim:

To enable the structured growth and sustainable development of ports to attract investments in the Port sector for optimum utilisation of the Indian Coastline by effective administration and management of ports.

Key Provisions of the Bill:

- Constitution of Maritime Port Regulatory Authority
- Formulation of the National Port policy and National Port plan in consultation with Coastal State Governments, State Maritime Boards and other stakeholders.
- Formulation of specialised Adjudicatory Tribunals namely Maritime Ports Tribunal and Maritime Ports Appellate Tribunal to curb anti-competitive practises in the port sector and act as a speedy and affordable grievance redressal mechanism.

SC Verdict on Merit and Reservation

Why in news?

The Supreme Court, in the recent **Saurav Yadav v State of Uttar Pradesh**, has ruled that the quota policy was not intended at denying meritorious candidates job opportunities even if they belong to reserved categories.

What does this mean?

- Candidates belonging to reserved categories like **SCs, STs, and OBCs** can be appointed under open or general category, if they qualified on their own merit.
- These candidates will not be counted under the reserved category.

What is the case about?

- The case came up in the context of complications that arise from trying to specify the relationship between vertical and horizontal reservations.
- Articles 15(4) and 16(4) enable **vertical reservation**.
 - This is based on categorising the population in terms of SC, ST, OBC and General Category.
- On the other hand, **horizontal reservation** cuts across these vertical reservation categories.
 - These can include reservation for women, differently-abled persons, freedom fighters, army veterans and such
 - The Supreme Court called it as “interlocking reservations” in *Indra Sawhney and Others v Union of India* (1992).
- Earlier, the Court had made it clear that horizontal reservation ought to be generally understood in compartmentalised terms.
- This came as a nod to recognition of inequalities within each vertical category.
- But, in the present case, the problem was different. It is however illustrative of some of the interpretive absurdities of the system.

What is the challenge in the present case?

- There were 3,295 constable posts in the General Category of which 188 went to women (20% reservation for women).
- **In filling up the General Category vacancies, OBC women were not considered.**
- To note, **the last female candidate selected in General Category secured 274.8298 marks.** 21 applicants in the OBC female category scored more than these marks.
- However, **these OBC candidates were not considered against the available General Category seats.**
- In short, **they were excluded from competing from the General Category positions even though they have scored more**, simply because they were OBC.
- This, in effect, shows that some state governments are trying to use the open category seats as a quota for general category candidates or in other words, for upper castes.
 - **Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh excluded reserved category women for consideration in the general category.**
 - **Rajasthan and Gujarat, amongst others, included them.**

What is the present SC verdict?

- **The Supreme Court has ruled against the UP government**, clarifying the relationship between horizontal and vertical reservations.
- It reiterated the principle that **groups eligible for horizontal reservation cannot be excluded from the open category seats** just because they are from other vertical reservation categories.
- **E.g. women from all categories (vertical) are eligible to be considered for the open category**

- The open category seats are not meant to be a quota for the non-reserved categories.
- **Merit** - The Court has often, very unhelpfully, contrasted merit with reservation.
- In popular parlance too, **merit is seen to be a deviation from reservation**.
- But this has always been a **mistaken view of the relationship between merit and reservation**.
- In principle, reservation is an instrument for identifying merit in individuals from historically marginalised communities.
- In the present case, the UP government was ironically using the General Category to exclude meritorious candidates.
- By ruling this out, the court has rightfully upheld merit and reservation.
- The Court clarified on the fairness in the application of the selection criteria (merit) within the overall framework of reservation.

Electoral Bonds and Right to Information

Why in News?

The Central Information Commission (CIC), the lead body for implementing the **Right to Information Act 2005**, has ruled that the **disclosure of identity of electoral bond scheme donors will not serve any larger public interest** and will violate provisions of the Act itself.

- The electoral bond scheme allows citizens and corporates to buy monetary instruments from the State Bank of India (SBI) and donate them to political parties, who can redeem them for money.
- According to the Association for Democratic Reforms, political parties have received a total of 12,452 electoral bonds worth Rs. 6210.39 crore till January 2020.

About:

- The “disclosure of names of donors and the donees may be in contravention of provisions contained in **section 8 (1) (e) (j) of the RTI Act itself**,
 - Section 8 of the RTI Act prohibits sharing of third-party information without the written consent of the third party.
 - However, the section also says that the information can be shared if the information officer is convinced that it would serve “larger public interest”.

About Electoral Bonds:

- The electoral bond scheme was notified by the Centre in 2018 and it allows citizens and corporates to buy **monetary instruments from the SBI** and donate them to a political party, which is then free to redeem it for money.
- It is like a **promissory note** that can be bought by any Indian citizen or company incorporated in India and the citizen or corporate can then donate the same to any eligible political party of his/her choice.
 - These bonds are issued in multiples of Rs. 1,000, Rs. 10,000, Rs. 1 lakh, Rs. 10 lakh and Rs. 1 crore without any maximum limit.

RTI Act, 2005:

- It sets out the rules and procedures regarding citizens’ right to information.
- It **replaced the former Freedom of Information Act, 2002**.
- This act was enacted in order to consolidate the fundamental right in the Indian constitution ‘freedom of speech’.

- Since **RTI is implicit in the Right to Freedom of Speech and Expression under Article 19** of the Indian Constitution, it is an implied fundamental right.
- Key Provisions- Section 4 of the RTI Act requires suo moto disclosure of information by each public authority.
 - **Section 8 (1)** mentions exemptions against furnishing information under the RTI Act.
 - **Section 8 (2)** provides for disclosure of information exempted under the Official Secrets Act, 1923 if the larger public interest is served.

Economics

Historic recession: On India's GDP slump

Why in News?

Provisional estimates of GDP for the second quarter of the 2020-21 show economic output shrank by **7.5%**, following the **23.9%** contraction in the first quarter.

- **The economy shrunk for a second successive quarter, marking a recession for the first time in independent India's history.**

Estimates

- Provisional estimates of gross domestic product for the second quarter of the year ending in March 2021 show economic output shrank by 7.5%, following the 23.9% contraction in the first quarter.
- Not only has the economy shrunk for a second successive quarter, marking a recession for the first time in independent India's history, but the **overall GDP figure of 33,14,167 crore (at 2011-12 prices) reveals output has slid back to the lowest level in 12 quarters.**
- This one fact alone ought to give cause for serious concern, notwithstanding the apparent improvement in economic momentum that helped narrow the contraction from the preceding period's precipitous fall.
- Even there, a closer look at both the expenditure side and the gross value added across various industry categories leaves little room for comfort.

Fall of Aggregate Demand

- **Private consumption expenditure** — the single biggest component propelling GDP with a share exceeding 50% at constant prices and edging toward 60% in current prices — continued to shrink albeit at a slower pace (-11.3%), reflecting both consumer wariness to spend amid the pandemic and the impact of lost jobs and reduced incomes.
- And, **government consumption spending that was hitherto a bulwark** and what kept the bottom from falling out in the first quarter when it grew 16%, contracted by 22% revealing the precarious state of public finances.
- Taken together, **demand was largely missing.**

- And even though the contractions in gross fixed capital formation, exports and imports all narrowed, it was a puzzling almost fourfold growth in 'discrepancies' at 56,962 crore that limited the extent of decline in the overall GDP.

Agricultural growth

- In the real economy, electricity and other utility services joined agriculture in posting growth, expanding **4.4%**, as the post-lockdown resumption of industrial activity lifted power and water consumption.

Industrial growth

- Surprisingly, manufacturing GVA inexplicably jettisoned its correlation with official IIP data on the sector: while the latter had signalled an **average contraction of 6.7% in the July-September period**, GVA data from the NSO showed manufacturing rebounding to a marginal 0.6% expansion after a 39% collapse in the preceding quarter.
- One possible explanation for this uptick in provisional manufacturing GVA is that the year-earlier period had witnessed a contraction and the statistical effect of a low base coupled with inventory restocking likely lifted the figure.

Real estate and professional services

- Financial, real estate and professional services, which contribute about a fourth of the GVA, widened contraction from the first quarter, **shrinking 8.3%**.
- Clearly, the financial services sector is not in good health and is an ominous portent for the economy given its crucial role in credit intermediation.

Way forward

The economy urgently needs a **robust demand stimulus** if a protracted slump is to be prevented.

Arbitration Body for Financial Disputes

Why in News?

The **rising number of financial disputes and their changing nature highlights the need for an arbitration body for financial disputes** in India.

What is litigation and arbitration?

- **Litigation** is a process followed in the courts which are under the administration of the state to resolve disputes between parties.
- **In arbitration**, the parties can consult an arbitration tribunal on their own. In this, hearing is done in a private setting and it provides some amount of control to the parties.
 - To note, while arbitration is typically a binding process, mediation is a non-binding process.
- The process of litigation is generally expensive than arbitration.
- Arbitration does not get stuck in formal procedures to be followed and therefore is able to avoid delays.

What is the practice so far?

- **Financial institutions** and banks have **traditionally opted for litigation instead of arbitration** for dispute resolution.
- Litigation, traditionally, offered a more potent forum for recovery of money and resolving financial disputes. This is because the judges are vested with stronger powers than an arbitrator is.
- Litigation, as opposed to arbitration, **allows judges to exercise multiple powers** vested in them.
 - These include interim measures, summary judgments, warrants for non-appearance, etc.
- These options are not available in arbitration.
- In addition, the public nature of disputes in courts and media attention allows the banks to create pressure on the defaulters.

What is the changing trend?

- The traditional view of litigating in financial disputes changed following the 2008-09 financial crisis.
- This is due to the highly complex nature of financial transactions and a need for confidentiality.
- The financial institutes felt a need for adjudicators who possess a deep knowledge of finance and an understanding of complex transactions.
- In addition to these, the institutions opted for a private forum for adjudications, to keep things confidential.
- This is because financial disputes of large quantum often lead to public distress, resulting in negative variations in listed stocks.
- So, **banks and financial institutions are increasingly opting for arbitration instead of litigation.**
- Another reason is that **it is easier to enforce an arbitral award as opposed to a court judgment** which can be appealed multiple times.
- Given this change, many arbitral institutions have created panels of arbitrators specialising in banking and finance.
- The arbitral institutions have themselves altered their rules to accommodate the peculiar needs of financial disputes.

Where does India stand?

- There is a rise of financial disputes in India, **including defaults by some of the biggest Indian corporations.**
 - These include **Anil Ambani's Reliance Group, Vijay Mallya's Kingfisher and Nirav Modi's Firestar Diamonds.**
- Considering this, **there is a need for providing a specialised institution to deal with financial arbitrations.**
- Presently, no such body for financial arbitration exists in India.
- Any such arbitration continues to be adjudicated by retired judges.
 - **These are, notably, generalists and do not possess a specialised knowledge** of finance and financial markets.
- An alternative would be a body such a P.R.I.M.E. Finance rendering assistance to financial arbitrations.
 - **P.R.I.M.E. Finance** - Panel of Recognised International Market Experts in Finance

Way Forward:

- **The Institute of Chartered Accountants of India (ICAI)** is one such institution that possesses a body of some of the most prominent financial experts in India.
- Perhaps, **the government should create a panel in consultation with the ICAI for facilitation of financial arbitrations.**
- The Government has been making strides towards establishing India as an arbitration friendly jurisdiction.
- Given this, such a move would attract arbitrations in India from other countries as well.

APMC Markets - from being a Solution to a Problem

Why in News?

APMC (Agriculture Produce Market Committee) was enacted as the solution to the problems of the Farmers, however recent reform by the Government and consequent Protest by the Farmers against the Farm reform as a whole and APMC in particular highlighting the concerns of the Farmers regarding change in APMC act.

How did the APMC act help?

- From the 1960s, **there have been concerted efforts to bring all wholesale markets for agricultural produce in various states under the Agriculture Produce Market Regulation (APMR) acts.**
- All states, **except Kerala, Jammu and Kashmir and Manipur**, enacted such laws.
- The APMC Acts mandated that the **sale/purchase of agricultural commodities is carried out in a specified market area.**
- Producer-sellers or traders pay the requisite market fee, user charges, levies and commissions for the commission agents (arhatias).
- **These charges were levied irrespective of whether the sale took place inside APMC premises or outside it.**
- Also, the charges varied widely across states and commodities.
- In the initial years, **APMC acts helped remove malpractices.**
- It freed the farmers from the exploitative power of middlemen and mercantile capital.
- The golden period for APMC markets lasted till around 1991.

How did APMCs become a problem then?

- With time, **there was a considerable loss in growth in market facilities.**
- By 2006, it had declined to less than one-fourth of the growth in crop output after which there was no further growth.
- This increased the woes of Indian farmers.
- **Market facilities did not keep pace with the increase in output.**
- But regulation did not allow farmers to sell outside APMC markets.
- So, the farmers were left with no choice but to seek the help of middlemen.
- **Due to poor market infrastructure, more produce is sold outside markets than in APMC mandis.**
- The net result was a system of interlocked transactions that robs farmers of their choice to decide to whom and where to sell.
- This, **ultimately, subjected farmers to exploitation by middlemen.**
- Over time, APMC markets have been turned from infrastructure services to a source of revenue generation.
- In several states, commission charges were increased without any improvement in the services.
- And to avoid any protests from farmers against these high charges, most of these were required to be paid by buyers like the FCI (Food Corporation of India).
- This resulted in a heavy burden on the Centre.
- It also increased the logistics cost for domestic produce and reduced trade competitiveness.
- Given the above drawbacks, successive governments at the Centre made attempts to persuade the states to make appropriate changes in their APMC acts.
- But for 18 long years, the progress in reforms remained slow.

What is the latest move?

- It is in the above backdrop that the **Farmers' Produce Trading and Commerce Act 2020 (FPTC Act)** was brought in. The FPTC Act gives farmers the freedom to sell and buy farm produce at any place in the country.
- They can sell and buy in APMC markets or outside the mandated area, to any trader, like sale of milk.
- The Act also allows transactions on electronic platforms to promote e-commerce in agriculture trade.

DUET (Decentralised Urban Employment and Training) for urban areas

Why in News?

- There is a **crisis of employment in the urban informal sector**, as millions of workers have lost their job due to periodic lockdowns, and may or may not retrieve it soon.
- Our public institutions and public spaces (schools, colleges, health centres, bus stands, jails, shelters, hostels, parks, museums, offices, etc.) have a **chronic problem of poor maintenance**.
- There is growing interest in an **employment guarantee act**, but little experience of relief works in urban areas. **Decentralised Urban Employment and Training' (DUET) could act as a step towards urban employment guarantee.**

What is the need for social protection in urban areas?

- The COVID-19 crisis has drawn attention to the insecurities that haunt the lives of the urban poor.
- Generally, they are less insecure than the rural poor, partly because fall back work is easier to find in urban areas.
- Nevertheless, the urban poor are exposed to serious contingencies.
- **These include both at individual** (such as illness and underemployment) **and collective** (lockdowns, floods, cyclones, financial crises and so on) levels.
- There is, thus, a need for better social protection in urban areas.

What are the possible options?

- **Universalising the Public Distribution System in urban slums** would be a step forward, and it can be done under the National Food Security Act.
- But food grain rations do not take people very far.
- **Employment-based support** is one way of doing more.
 - **It has two major advantages:** self-targeting, and the possibility of generating valuable assets or services.
- There has been much discussion, in recent months, of a possible urban employment guarantee act.
- The specifics of the act, however, are not so clear, and there is little experience of relief work in urban areas.
- The Decentralised Urban Employment and Training (DUET) is a proposal in this regard.

How does DUET work?

- The government, State or Union, would issue **"job stamps"**, each standing for one day of work at the minimum wage.
- **The job stamps would be liberally distributed to approved public institutions.**
- These may include educational institutions, hospitals, museums, shelters, jails, offices, transport corporations, public-sector enterprises, neighbourhood associations, urban local bodies, etc.

- **These institutions would be free to use the stamps to hire labour for odd jobs** and small projects that do not fit easily within their existing budgets and systems.
 - The **“service voucher”** schemes popular in some European countries works the same way.
 - But the difference is that they are used by households instead of public institutions, for the purpose of securing domestic services.
 - **The service vouchers are not free, but they are highly subsidised**, and households have an incentive to use them.
- Wages, paid by the government, would go **directly to the workers’ accounts against job stamps certified by the employer.**
- **To avoid collusion**, an independent placement agency would take charge of assigning workers to employers.

What are the advantages?

The DUET approach would help in -

- activating a multiplicity of potential employers
- avoiding the need for special staff
- facilitating productive work, among others
- It would also ensure that workers have a **secure entitlement to minimum wages, and possibly other benefits.**
- Notably, there is **no dearth of possible DUET jobs.** Many states have a chronic problem of dismal maintenance of public premises.
- To work well, **DUET would have to include some skilled workers** (masons, carpenters, electricians and such).
- That would widen the range of possible jobs.
- **It would also help impart a training component** - workers could learn skills “on the job” as they work alongside skilled workers.

How about giving priority to women workers?

- This should not be like a minimum quota for women. Instead, **as long as women workers are available, they should get all the work.**
- In fact, **women could also run the placement agencies**, or the entire programme for that matter.
- To facilitate women’s involvement, most of the work could be organised on a part-time basis, say four hours a day.
- **A part-time employment option would be attractive for many poor women in urban areas.**
- It would give them some economic independence and bargaining power within the family, and help them to acquire new skills.
- **Giving priority to women would have two further merits.**
- **First**, it would reinforce the self-targeting feature of DUET.
- This is because women in relatively well-off households are unlikely to go (or be allowed to go) for casual labour at the minimum wage.
- **Second**, it would promote women’s general participation in the labour force.
 - India has one of the lowest rates of female workforce participation in the world.
 - According to 2019 National Sample Survey data, only 20% of urban women in the age group of 15-59 years spend time in “employment and related activities” on an average day.
 - This stifles the productive and creative potential of almost half of the adult population of the country.

What are the challenges?

- How far will the public institutions concerned make active use of the job stamps is a big question.
- In the DUET scheme, **the use of job stamps relies on a sense of responsibility among the heads of public institutions**, not their self-interest.
- It is, thus, not easy to guess how intensively job stamps will be used.

The best way to find out is to give the scheme a chance, may be by way of a pilot scheme in select districts or even municipalities.

Invest India wins UN Investment Promotion Award

Why in News?

The United Nations (UNCTAD) has declared Invest India- the National Investment Promotion Agency of India- as a **winner of the 2020 United Nations Investment Promotion Award.**

Key Highlights:

- The award recognizes and celebrates the outstanding achievements and best practices of Investment Promotion Agencies (IPAs) across the globe.
- This United Nations Investment Promotion Award is the most coveted award for Investment Promotion Agencies.
- UNCTAD is a central agency that monitors performance of IPAs and identifies global best practices.
- Germany, South Korea and Singapore have been some of the past winners of the award.

About Invest India

- It is the **national investment promotion and facilitation agency**
- **Set up in:** 2009
- It is a **non-profit venture**
- Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade, Ministry of Commerce and Industry.
- **Focus:** Sector-specific investor targeting and development of new partnerships to enable sustainable investments in India.
- It also partners with substantial investment promotion agencies and multilateral organizations.
- It actively works with several Indian states to build capacity and bring in global best practices in investment targeting, promotion and facilitation areas.

The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD)

- It was **established in 1964** as a permanent intergovernmental body.
- It deals with trade, investment, and development issues.
- **Goal:** Maximize the trade, investment and development opportunities of developing countries and assist them in their efforts to integrate into the world economy on an equitable basis.
- **Established by:** United Nations General Assembly in 1964
- It reports to the UN General Assembly and United Nations Economic and Social Council.
- **Primary objective:** To formulate policies relating to all aspects of development including trade, aid, transport, finance and technology.
- The permanent secretariat is in **Geneva, Switzerland**

Sobering Inflation

Why in news?

As per the recently released Consumer Price Index report, **inflation moderated to 6.93% in November** when compared to previous month's data of 7.61%.

Why Inflation moderated?

- Headline level of inflation eased due to slower price rise in the food and beverages which is a major driver of retail inflation.
- Due to bumper kharif crops harvests, inflation of cereals slowed down to 2.32% from 3.39%.
- Increased market arrivals of vegetables slowed down the price rise of food items.
- Inflation for vegetables slipped from 22.51% in October to 15.63% in November.
- Earlier RBI in its monetary policy statement reported that prices of perishables will get softened in winter.
- Petrol and diesel prices eased to 11.06%.
- However inflation still remained in double digits for 6 items in the basket excluding vegetables.
- Protein rich foods- pulses, eggs, meat and fish-registered higher levels of inflation.

Will this trend continue in the coming months?

- With recovery from the pandemic, it is unlikely to foresee any further appreciable softening of food prices in December.
- This because of higher transportation costs of farm produce from agrarian hinterland to destination.
- This will be in contravention to the RBI's forecast of inflation in the third-quarter of the fiscal- 6.8%.
- To achieve RBI's target, headline inflation need to be around 5.86% for this month.
- However in the next 3 months general prices are expected to rise, policymakers must guard against easing vigilance on prices.
- But a growth-supportive measure needs to be taken keeping price stability at the focus.
- Unchecked inflation can cause multiple risks to the nascent economic recovery.

Labour Law Issues - Apple-Wistron Case

Why in News?

The recent case of violence at **Wistron's iPhone manufacturing plant** also highlights the **challenges faced by contract workers in India**.

Why Wistron Violence happened?

- Recently, Wistron's iPhone manufacturing plant was attacked by thousands of contract workers **over alleged non-payment of wages**, resulting in theft and loss of goods worth hundreds of crores.
- Whereas, **Wistron stated that it had deposited the money in the account of the contractor** (staffing firms) and the action will be taken against that firm.
- In response, **Apple has put Wistron Corp. on probation by not giving new orders** after an audit of the serious lapses in labour practices.

As per the initial findings, some serious lapses have been found out in labour practices.

- Wistron became **fully operational in August 2020**, with around **5,000 employees** and rapidly scaled up its contractual employee strength from around 3,000 to nearly 8,500, due to rising demand.

- It was followed by **increase in shift timing from eight-hour to 12-hour shifts**. On the other hand, contractors were not paying the workers their full wages as per their contract. Wages were being paid very late and in some cases slashed from Rs 22,000 to Rs 8,000 in some cases.
- There was **no employee grievance redressal system in place**. Final argument which triggered violence was broke out over the **attendance system not capturing the exact work hours of workers**.

Who are contract workers?

- Contract workers are hired by the contractors' company and paid by them only, they are not on the payrolls of the company on whose shop floors they work.
- Company transfers payments to contractor companies as per the agreements and contractor companies make payment to the contract workers. Principal employers/companies are responsible for the welfare facilities of the workers.
- As per the data of the Annual Survey of Industries (2017-18), 36.4 percent of total production workers in the registered factory sector, are contract workers.

What are the issues faced by the contract workers?

- **Firstly**, Contract workers are often tasked with the same jobs as regularly employed workers but have limited social security benefits, receive lower wages, and operate under poor working conditions.
- **Secondly**, Sub-contracting itself has become multi-layered. In many cases, Subcontractors themselves are Hiring labor from multiple subcontractors/third party work supply firms. Setting accountability in this case becomes very difficult.
- **Third**, Despite providing the provision of Fixed-term employees in the Code on Industrial Relations, firms continue to rely on contract workers, because
 - The cost of hiring contract workers continues to remain lower compared to cost of hiring fixed-term employees, who are required to be paid pro-rata wages and social security including gratuity.
 - In the case of contract workers monitoring, legal compliance and litigation costs are shifted onto the contractors.
- **Fourth**, Code on Industrial Relations is itself vague regarding major aspects of contract workers
 - The basic issue is that the provisions of fixed-term employment in India are open-ended i.e. does not specify a minimum or maximum tenure for hiring fixed-term employees or the number of times the contract can be renewed.
 - Workers may find themselves moving from one fixed-term contract to another, without any assurance of being absorbed as permanent workers by their employer.
- **Fifth**, Labour Code on Occupational Safety and Health provides exceptions by allowing the use of contract workers in core activities under certain conditions such as a sudden increase of volume of work in the core activity which needs to be accomplished in a specified time.

What should be done?

- **Firstly**, the use of contract labour in core activities excluding services such as security, catering and sanitation, should be completely prohibited by government.

- **Second**, Conflict between the Code on Occupational Safety and Health and Code on Industrial Relations regarding contractual labours should be resolved immediately. Former allows contract labour in some exceptions.
- **Third**, it is notable that Wistron increased the no. of contractual workers after the launch of Production Linked Incentive (PLI) Scheme, which is limited for 5 years and on the incremental sales. Such employment generating schemes should have a provision that the jobs generated should be on the firms' payroll and not the contractors'.
- **Fourth**, As Atmanirbhar Bharat Rozgar Yojana, is offering provident fund subsidies to employers for hiring new formal workers. This together with PLI scheme should be leveraged to generate formal employment.
- **Fifth**, as an immediate step, a compulsory grievance redressal mechanism for contractual workers should be established.

Code on Industrial Relations (2020)

- Under the code, government introduced the option of fixed-term employment, in a bid to discourage the use of contract workers.
- Such employees can be employed without mediation of contractors. These employees are though assured of benefits same as permanent workers in the establishment, but are not entitled to any advance termination notice or any payment in lieu of termination.



Changing Geopolitical Realities in West Asia

Why in News?

Iran's senior-most nuclear scientist **Mohsen Fakhrizadeh** was assassinated recently near Tehran. Iran sees indications of Israeli role in this.

- Fakhrizadeh was widely regarded as a key figure in Iran's nuclear weapons programme and his assassination for which no one has yet claimed responsibility will have serious geopolitical implications in West Asia and beyond.

What does the assassination signify?

- The murder underlines a familiar political truth in the Middle East.
 - It is not that important if you are right or wrong; what really matters is whether you are weak or strong.
- In this light, the assassination of Mohsen Fakhrizadeh highlights Iran's growing strategic vulnerabilities.
- It also points to a continuing regional realignment against Iran marked by the normalisation of ties between some key Arab states and Israel.
- This geopolitical turbulence in the Middle East has major consequences for the Indian subcontinent, which has intimate religious, economic, and strategic ties with the Middle East.

Emerging trends in the Middle East:

Iran's growing isolation in the region:

- **The U.S. under Trump administration, Israel and the Gulf Arabs have a shared interest in preventing Joe Biden from renewing nuclear diplomacy with Iran** and ending its isolation.
- **The assassination of Fakhrizadeh is about achieving that political objective.**
- If Iran retaliates vigorously, it will invite an all-out confrontation with Israel and the US.
- This will kill the prospects for a productive engagement with the Biden administration.
- On the other hand, holding back will expose Iran's weakness.
 - It will also sharpen Iran's internal divisions between pragmatists who want to engage the US and the hardliners who want a confrontation.
- The frequent attacks on high-profile Iranian targets raise questions about the hostile penetration of Iran's society.
- The exposure of Iran's internal political weakness is compounded by the massive economic pain imposed by the U.S.

Rapid transformation of Arab relations with Israel

- **The fear of Iran has been driving Gulf Arabs to embrace Israel.**
- In the recent days, Bahrain and the UAE have normalised ties with Israel.
- There is speculation of an impending normalisation of ties between Israel and Saudi Arabia.

Deepening rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Turkey

- Saudi Arabia and Turkey are in a tussle for the leadership of the Muslim world.
- Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the UAE want to return the Middle East towards political and religious moderation.
- But the once secular Turkey under Recep Tayyip Erdogan has become the new champion of political Islam.
- Turkey's new religious zeal provides a good ideological cover for Erdogan's ambitions to expand its geopolitical influence in the Middle East.
 - **Erdogan's Turkey is now hostile to India** and has joined Pakistan in taking up the Kashmir question at international forums.
 - However, Saudi Arabia and UAE are not much on Pakistan's side in this regard.
 - More recently, there have been reports of UAE deliberately blocking Pakistani labour exports to the UAE.
 - If Pakistan continues its tilt towards Turkey, Saudi Arabia, which hosts more than 2 million Pakistan workers, could surely follow the UAE example.

Where do Pakistan and Bangladesh stand in this?

- **Pakistan** - Pakistani pragmatists long wanted to establish ties with Israel and neutralise Delhi's connection with Israel.
- But the growing weight of Islamist ideology, conspiracies, and relentless propaganda equating Palestine with Kashmir seemed to hold Pakistan back.
- However, the context has dramatically altered with the normalisation of ties between the Gulf Arabs and Israel.
- Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan has talked of pressure, apparently from Saudi Arabia and the UAE, on recognising Israel.
- Pakistan also knows the value of having a sensible relationship with Israel and its useful spinoffs in the U.S.
 - Pakistan is notably trying to limit U.S.'s current political tilt towards India.
- **Bangladesh** - If Pakistan recognises Israel, Bangladesh would not want to be left behind.
- Economic and technological collaboration with Israel will give Bangladesh's economy and foreign policy a big boost.

- Like Pakistan, Bangladesh, too, could use a new Jewish connection to cope with the mounting criticism in the U.S. of Bangladesh's political freedoms and human rights under PM Sheikh Hasina.
- Bangladesh and Pakistan, two of the world's largest Islamic nations, recognising Israel would be a great ideological and political bonus for it.

What is the significance of these developments?

- Narratives about the Middle East have been central to the evolution of the Indian subcontinent's religious and nationalist politics over the last century.
- But the old ideas that defined South Asian discourse on the Middle East are beginning to fade and barely correspond to the changing reality.
- **India** - India has made some important adjustments to its engagement with the Middle East in recent years.
- Nevertheless, it can't ignore the rapid changes taking place in the region.
- On the other hand, Pakistan and Bangladesh can't afford to take the Middle East for granted and view the region solely through the religious prism.
- For now, the challenge for the South Asian states is to manage the consequences of the geopolitical changes in the Middle East and seize the new opportunities that are presenting themselves.

UN Decides Cannabis Not a Dangerous Narcotic

The **UN Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND)** decided to **remove cannabis from Schedule IV of the 1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs**.

Key Highlights:

- **India has voted with the majority at the United Nations to remove cannabis and cannabis resin** from the list of most dangerous substances.
- From the past 59 years, cannabis had been subject to the strictest control schedules, which even discouraged its use for medical purposes.
- Background- Back in January 2019, the World Health Organisation (WHO) made six recommendations related to the scheduling of cannabis in UN treaties, including the deletion of cannabis and cannabis resin from Schedule IV of the Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, 1961.
 - **Schedule IV** is the category of drugs that are considered to have "particularly dangerous properties" in comparison to other drugs.
- During the CND's March 2019 session, many countries had requested more time to study the endorsements and define their positions.

Significance of the move:

- It is listed alongside opioids like heroin – which are discouraged from even being used for medicinal purposes.
- This vote has opened the door to recognizing the medicinal and therapeutic potential of cannabis.

What is Cannabis?

- **Cannabis is a generic term** used to denote the **several psychoactive preparations of the plant Cannabis sativa**.
 - The major psychoactive constituent in cannabis is Delta-9 tetrahydrocannabinol (THC).
- **The Mexican name 'marijuana'** is frequently used in referring to cannabis leaves or other crude plant material in many countries.

➤ Most species of cannabis are dioecious plants that can be identified as either male or female.

- The unpollinated female plants are called **hashish**.
- **Cannabis oil (hashish oil)** is a concentrate of cannabinoids obtained by solvent extraction of the crude plant material or the resin.
- Cannabis is the most widely cultivated, trafficked and abused illicit drug in the world.

Uses:

- It has been found **useful in cancer treatment** like in multiple myeloma.
- Many people **suffering from anxiety and depression** are known to buy it legally in the US and bring it back to India for personal use in small quantities.

Affects:

- Cannabis **impairs cognitive development (capabilities of learning)**, including associative processes, free recall of previously learned items is often impaired when cannabis is used both during learning and recall periods.

Cannabis in the context of India:

- In India, cannabis, also known as **bhanga, ganja, charas or hashish**, is typically eaten (bhanga golis, thandai, pakoras, lassi, etc.) or smoked (chillum or cigarette).
- Ayurvedic texts refer to cannabis as a treatment for several maladies, and it is categorised as **Upavisha Varga** (sub poisonous), and its recreational use has been described as toxic.
- **Odisha is one of the leading cannabis-producing States in India.**

Legal Provisions in the context of India:

- **The Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act, 1985 (NDPS Act)** outlaws the recreational use of cannabis.
 - Under the Act, the production, manufacture, possession, sale, purchase, transport, and use of cannabis is a punishable offence.
- **The NDPS Act, however, does not apply to the leaves and seeds of cannabis plants.**
- In case the CBD is extracted from the leaves of the cannabis, then technically it is not illegal.
- **CBD oil manufactured under a licence issued by the Drugs and Cosmetics Act, 1940** can be legally used.
- **The Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB)** is vested with the power to charge individuals in cases related to the illegal use and supply of narcotics.
- However, the use of cannabis as a medicine is not much prevalent in India.

Know about the UN Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND):

- The **Vienna-based CND** was founded in **1946**.
- It is the **UN agency mandated to decide on the scope of control of substances** by placing them in the schedules of global drug control conventions.
- Currently, **over 50 countries allow medicinal cannabis programmes, and its recreational use has been legalised in Canada, Uruguay and 15 states of the USA.**

Nepal in Turmoil

Why in News?**Why in news?**

Nepal PM K.P. Sharma Oli recommended the President to **dissolve the Parliament**.

Why was the Parliament dissolved?

- Last week, **ordinance was made by the PM to amend the Constitutional Council Act.**
- **The act will weaken the checks & balances in the system and empowers the PM to make crucial appointments.**
- So, the opposition and other leaders within the ruling party demanded to withdraw the ordinance.
- Earlier he agreed to withdraw the ordinance but later he decided to dissolve the Parliament.

What will happen now?

- Nepal's Constitution allows for **dissolving the House before its five-year term only if there is a hung assembly.**
- Now this decision will be challenged in the Supreme Court.
- If Supreme Court agrees with the decision, elections will be held a year ahead of schedule.

What is the root cause for this crisis?

- Mr. Oli's Communist Party of Nepal (UML) and its alliance came to power in 2017 with a huge majority.
- Within a year, CPN-UML and CPI (Maoist Centre) merged to form Nepal Communist Party (NCP).
- This merger provided opportunity to steer the country towards democracy from many crises.
- But fundamental differences aroused between the NCP's two factions.
- Mr. Oli's had an authoritarian drive & refused to share power with the Maoist faction.
- In recent months, there were also calls from the party for Mr. Oli to step down.
- If this crises continues, split cannot be ruled out.
- This might push Nepal back to political instability amid slowing economy & Coronavirus crisis.

France's draft law against 'Islamism'**Why in News?**

The French cabinet presented a draft law that targets **"radical Islamism"** (although the word "Islamist" is not part of the text).

Key Features of the Proposed Law

- The law aims to envisage range of measures that includes school education reforms to make sure Muslim children do not drop out of school.
- It aims to provide strict controls on preachers and mosques.
- The law will provide rules against hate campaigns online.
- When the law comes into force, the French mosques will see increased surveillance on their activities, especially financing.

- The French Government under the law will be empowered with greater powers to shut down places of worship. These places of worship are those that receive public subsidies. They will be shut down if they go against the republican principles such as gender equality.
- The Community leaders being targeted by extremist PUTSCH will receive protection under the law. PUTSCH is a violent attempt to overthrow a government.
- The law will severely suppress the home-schooling of children over three years. This is because through this, the parents enrol them in underground Islamic structures.
- The law will punish doctors issuing virginity certificates.
- The law will ban the officials from granting residency permits to polygamous applicants.
- The law allows to interview couples separately prior to their weddings to find out if they are forced in to marriage.

What has the response been?

- The proposed law has raised concerns that it could stigmatise France's Muslim community, the largest in Europe.
- The sharpest criticism of the Bill has come from abroad.
- Turkish President Recep Erdogan has been strongly criticising French President Emmanuel Macron in recent months.
 - He has called the proposed law an "open provocation".
- The Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Egypt's top cleric, has called Macron's views "racist".
- Critics have expressed alarm that the Bill could lead to the merger of the Islamic religion with Islamism, a political movement.
- This might lead to the alienation of French Muslims.
- Nevertheless, there have been members of the community who have come out in support of the law.

Why is it significant politically?

- Macron faces re-election in 2022.
- So, seemingly, he is appealing to France's right-wing voters after facing a series of electoral losses in 2020.
- Macron, who describes his politics as "neither right nor left" [he was with the Socialist Party until 2009] faces a challenge from right-wing politician Marine Le Pen.
- The President has also been facing protests over a proposed "global security" legislation.

Bangladesh Signs First Preferential Trade Agreement (PTA)

Why in News?

Recently, **Bangladesh signed its first Preferential Trade Agreement (PTA) with Bhutan** allowing **duty-free access to a range of goods** between the two countries.

- The trade volume between the two countries is approximately **50 million dollars with 7.56 million of export and 42.09 million import into Bangladesh.**


- Bangladesh is expected to sign 11 more PTAs and Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) with countries like Indonesia and Nepal by June next year.

About:

- This is the first PTA Bangladesh has signed with any country in the world since its independence.
- **The agreement was signed on the occasion marking the 50 years of diplomatic ties** between the two nations.
- As per the agreement, **100 Bangladeshi products** will get duty free access to Bhutan and **34 products from Bhutan** will get duty free access into Bangladesh.
- More items can be added in the list later on the basis of discussion between the two countries.
- In 1971, Bhutan was the first country in the world, followed by India as the second, to recognise Bangladesh as an independent country.

AT A GLANCE

- Bangladesh signs its maiden PTA with Bhutan today
- 100 Bangladeshi goods will enter Bhutan duty-free
- 34 Bhutanese items will enjoy duty-free benefit in Bangladesh
- In 2018-19, Bangladesh exported goods worth \$7.56m to Bhutan and imported goods worth \$42.09m
- The figures were \$0.61m and \$12.16m respectively ten years ago



What is preferential trade arrangement (PTAs)?

- It is unilateral trade preferences between the two nations.
- It includes the **Generalized System of Preferences schemes**, as well as **other non-reciprocal preferential schemes granted a waiver by the General Council**. Information on PTAs notified to the WTO is available in the
 - Under the Generalized System of Preferences, developed countries grant preferential tariffs to imports from developing countries.

India has signed bilateral FTAs with Sri Lanka (1998), Afghanistan (2003), Thailand (2004), Singapore (2005), Bhutan (2006), Nepal (2009), Korea (2009), Malaysia (2011) and Japan (2011).

The Antitrust Suit against Facebook

Why in news?

The US federal government and governments of 48 states and territories have **sued Facebook for illegally crushing competition**. The lawsuits filed have put under the scanner the acquisition by Facebook of Instagram and WhatsApp.

What are the charges against Facebook?

- The US Federal Trade Commission's (FTC) lawsuit accused Facebook of **eliminating competition with the acquisitions**, even though the FTC itself had approved the deals.
- The FTC has alleged that Facebook "is illegally maintaining its personal social networking monopoly through a years-long course of anticompetitive conduct".
 - The case has been filed under Section 2 of the Sherman Act, which the FTC enforces through Section 5 of the FTC Act.
 - Section 2 of the Sherman Act prohibits companies from using anti-competitive means to acquire or maintain a monopoly.
- **Facebook's 2012 acquisition of Instagram for \$1 billion and the 2014 acquisition of WhatsApp for \$19 billion are being cited as attempts to illegally eliminate competition.**

- The FTC has also accused Facebook of imposing “**anti-competitive conditions on software developers**”.
- **Facebook restricted its “third-party software developers’** access to valuable interconnections to its platform”.
 - It did this by exercising strict control over its application programming interfaces or APIs.
 - E.g. Facebook shut down API access for Twitter’s short video app Vine (introduced in 2013), effectively restricting its ability to grow.
- In all, FTC says Facebook’s practices have -
 - harmed competition and left “consumers with few choices for personal social networking
 - deprived advertisers of the benefits of competition

Facebook’s acquisition of Instagram and WhatsApp

- **Instagram** - The FTC has noted that the acquisition of Instagram came at a time when users were switching “from desktop computers to smartphones”.
 - Users were thus “increasingly embracing photo-sharing”.
- Facebook quickly recognized that Instagram would be an existential threat to Facebook’s monopoly power.
- So, when Facebook was not able to compete with Instagram, it “ultimately chose to buy” the app to eliminate the threat.
- Likewise, when a rising Snapchat was seen as a potential competitor to Facebook, the company made an unsuccessful attempt to buy it.
- Later, it copied Snapchat’s most popular feature Stories in Instagram, followed by Facebook and WhatsApp.
- Instagram now has more than a billion users; Snapchat has around 250 million daily active users.
- **WhatsApp** - The FTC says that Facebook did the same with WhatsApp too.
- When it realised that WhatsApp was “clear global ‘category leader’ in mobile messaging,” it bought out the competition.
- FTC notes that Facebook acquiring WhatsApp also meant that “any future threat will have a more difficult time gaining scale in mobile messaging”.
- This has largely been true.
 - WhatsApp dominates the mobile messaging space, and currently has over 2 billion users globally; more than 400 million in India alone.
 - No other messaging app comes even close, except perhaps Facebook’s own Messenger.
- Notably, Instagram and WhatsApp are two products that are more appealing to younger users and in new geographies.
- These are therefore crucial to driving Facebook Company’s growth.

What does the FTC lawsuit aim for?

- Notably, the FTC had approved the Instagram and WhatsApp deals.
- It says that it can, and often does, challenge approved transactions when they violate the law.
- But FTC says its “action challenges more than just the acquisitions”.
- The aim now is to roll back Facebook’s anti-competitive conduct and restore competition.
- The lawsuit seeks “divestitures of assets, including Instagram and WhatsApp”.
- So if the FTC wins, Facebook might be forced to sell Instagram and WhatsApp.
- FTC also wants to “prohibit Facebook from imposing anti-competitive conditions on software developers”.
- This means Facebook will have to “seek prior notice and approval for future mergers and acquisitions”.

How has Facebook responded?

- The company has said it is **not true that it has no competition**, and named “Apple, Google, Twitter, Snap, Amazon, TikTok and Microsoft”.
- It said that the lawsuits ignored the fact that users could and did move often to competing apps.
- Facebook has also questioned the “attack” on its acquisitions.
 - It recalled that the FTC had cleared the Instagram deal after an in-depth review.
 - The WhatsApp transaction had been reviewed by the European Union as well.
 - Regulators correctly allowed these deals to move forward because they did not threaten competition.
- It said the FTC has “seemingly no regard for settled law or the consequences to innovation and investment”.
- Facebook has thus called the lawsuits “revisionist history”.
- According to Facebook, this is not how “antitrust laws are supposed to work” and “those hard challenges are best solved by updating the rules of the Internet.”
- Regarding the API restrictions, Facebook argues that it is allowed to choose its business partners.
 - YouTube, Twitter, and WeChat have done well despite these API policies.

Morocco-Israel deal

Why in News?

Morocco has become the fourth Arab country to normalise ties with Israel in five months.

- On December 10, U.S. President Donald Trump announced the deal, claiming that the series of normalisation agreements between Arab countries (the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan and now Morocco) and the Jewish state was bringing peace to West Asia.
- In October, as parts of its deal to get Sudan to normalise ties with Israel, Washington removed Sudan from its ‘State Sponsor of Terrorism’ list, of which it made been a part for over 27 years.

What does Morocco get in return?

- In return for Morocco’s decision to establish formal ties with Israel, the S. has **recognised Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara**, a disputed territory in north-western Africa, which has been under Moroccan control for decades.
- Morocco has long been campaigning internationally, using economic pressure and diplomacy, for recognition of its claims to Western Sahara.
- It got what it wanted from the deal with Israel, a country with which it had developed covert ties for decades.

History of Western Sahara dispute

- Western Sahara is large, arid and sparsely populated region that shares a border with **Morocco, Algeria and Mauritania** and has a long Atlantic coast was a Spanish colony. The region is home to the Sahrawi tribe.
- In the 1970s, when international and local pressure mounted on Spain to vacate its colonies in Africa, Libya and Algeria helped



found a Sahrawi insurgency group against the Spanish rule in Western Sahara.

- In 1975, as part of the **Madrid Accords with Morocco and Mauritania, Spain decided to leave the region**, which was then called Spanish Sahara.
- **According to the accords**, Spain would exit the territory before February 28, 1976 and until then, the Spanish Governor General would administer the territory, with help from two Moroccan and Mauritanian Deputy Governors.
- Both Morocco and Mauritania moved troops to Western Sahara to assert their claims.
- **Sahrawi insurgency group (Polisario Front) backed by Algeria continued the guerrilla resistance, demanding their withdrawal.** On February 27, 1976, a day before Spain ended its presence, the Polisario Front declared the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) in Western Sahara.
- The SADR has been recognised by several African countries and is a member of the African Union.

What is UN Court's view on the dispute and the basis of Morocco's claim?

- Morocco and Mauritania had laid claims to Western Sahara even when it was a Spanish colony.
- In 1974, the International Court of Justice was asked by the U.N. General Assembly to look into the legal ties, if any that existed between Western Sahara and Morocco and Mauritania at the time of its colonisation by Spain in the 19th century.
- The court found no evidence "of any ties of territorial sovereignty" between the Western Sahara and either Morocco or Mauritania, but stated that there were "indications" **that some tribes in the territory were loyal to the Moroccan Sultan.**
- In its conclusion, the court endorsed the General Assembly Resolution 1541 that affirmed that to ensure decolonisation, complete compliance with the principle of self-determination is required.
- **But King Hassan II of Morocco hailed the court's opinion as vindication of country's stand** and moved troops across the northern border to Western Sahara. Mauritania joined in later. It set the stage for a three-way fight with the Polisario Front resisting both countries.

How did the conflict progress over the decades?

- The three-way conflict lasted for almost four years. In August 1979, Mauritania signed a peace treaty with Polisario, bringing the country's military involvement in Western Sahara to an end.
- When Mauritanian forces withdrew from the southern part of the desert that they had occupied, Morocco swiftly advanced troops.
- The war continued between Moroccan troops and the Polisario Front.
- In 1991, when a ceasefire was finally achieved, Morocco had taken control of about 80% of the territory. The independence referendum, promised in the 1991 ceasefire, is yet to take place
- The war had forced almost 200,000 Sahrawis to flee the territory to neighbouring Algeria, where Polisario is running squalid refugee camps
- The SADR is operating largely from the eastern flank of Western Sahara and the refugee camps.
- Moroccan troops have built a **huge sand wall called Berm**, from the Atlantic coast of Western Sahara to the mountains of Morocco, dividing the territories they control from that of Polisario.

What impact will the Israel deal have on the conflict?

- The normalisation deal between Morocco and Israel itself will not have any direct bearing on Western Sahara.
- But the concession the U.S. has given to Morocco — **Washington's recognition of Moroccan occupation of Western Sahara in return for Morocco's agreement with Israel** — could flare up the conflict.

- The uptick in hostilities in the region would further destabilise Western Africa and undermine decades worth of efforts by both the US and France to rid the region of Islamist insurgencies.
- Recently, Morocco launched an offensive into the U.N.-controlled buffer zone between the two sides and in return, Polisario said it would resume armed conflict.
- After the Trump administration's recognition of Morocco's claim, Polisario said it would continue fighting until Moroccan troops are forced to withdraw.
- **The S. move would upset Algeria, the biggest backer of Polisario.**
- **Among the countries that condemned the U.S. decision is Russia,** which said the recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara "is a violation of international law".

Rebooting India-Bangladesh ties

Why in news?

Recently a virtual summit was held between **Indian Prime Minister and his Bangladesh counterpart.**

How was the existing relation between the countries?

- India played a major role in **Bangladesh's liberation struggle in 1971.**
- Bangladesh is seen as a major pillar in India's neighbourhood first policy.
- It is India's largest trading partner in South Asia & seen as all-weather friend for India.

What are the current issues affecting the relations?

- There are **frequent clashes at the borders** of both the countries.
- As per the report of Rights Watchdog, in the first six months of this year, at least 25 Bangladeshis were killed in border clashes.
- The **Teesta water dispute** remains unresolved.
- **The Citizenship (Amendment) Act & the proposed National Register of Citizens** has created a negative impression about India.
- Moreover, **China is making inroads into Bangladesh** through infrastructure investments & expanding economic cooperation.

What are the challenges Bangladesh PM faces?

- **War crimes and corruption trials** has weakened the traditional opposition parties.
- But she continues to face challenge from other Islamist factions.
- Recently, **Hifazat-e-Islam (Islamist group) organised mass protests against French President** for his support to depict Prophet in cartoons.
- They also opposed government's plan to build a statue for country's founding father-Bangabandhu Mujibur Rahman.
- They stated that installing statues is prohibited in Islam & it would be pulled down.
- But in the Victory Day speech, PM said that country should not be divided on religious lines in an indirect reference to Hifazat.

How can India help Bangladesh in addressing these issues?

- India should support her to **fight against the radical elements.**
- It should also not allow ruling party Ideological inclinations to spoil the historical relationship between the countries.

- India should take a **broader view of the changing scenario** and growing competition in South Asia.
- It must reach out to Dhaka with an open mind.
- Bangladesh's golden jubilee celebration of its Independence can be used as an opportunity for India to strengthen ties.

Post-Brexit Trade Agreement

Why in news?

Britain and the European Union have struck a **provisional free-trade agreement as part of the Brexit deal**.

What is the Brexit deal and why is it needed?

- The UK formally exited the European Union on **31 January 2020**.
- After this, it entered an **11-month transition period**.
- The UK's post-Brexit transition period officially ends on **31 December 2020**.
- The two sides thus attempted to strike a deal to define key aspects of their relationship ahead of this deadline.
- These included areas such as a viable trade agreement, defence, security and immigration.
- The deal is also likely to lay down rules of governance.
- This will dictate how any deal is enforced and the penalties if one party violates the terms of a mutually-approved agreement.
- Further, the two parties will have to finalise agreements on issues like airline safety and information sharing.

Why is the delay?

- Talks stretched on as both sides were unable to agree on major points.
- These particularly included fishing rights, governance, and guaranteeing a '**level playing field**' on government subsidies and regulations.
- A level playing field essentially means that in order to trade with the **EU's single market**, the UK will have to follow the same rules and regulations.
- This is to ensure that it does not have an unfair advantage over other EU businesses.

Why is fishing such a big deal?

- Fishing is a **relatively small part of the economy** on both sides of the English Channel.
 - It was just 0.02% of the overall economy both in the UK and in the EU.
- However, the issue is extremely emotive and its political consequences far outweigh the economic impact on both sides.
- For the EU, access for its boats is an important precondition for a trade agreement.
- On the other hand, Britain sees it as a symbol of sovereignty that needed to be regained.
- Policy - Even though Britain formally left the EU on **January 31, 2020**, it still has to adhere to the EU's rules until the year end, including the bloc's Common Fisheries Policy.
- So, till then, the fishing fleets of every country involved have full access to each other's waters.
- This goes well beyond the territorial water that covers the first **12 nautical miles (22km)** from the coast.
- But the volume of fish, depending on the species, are to be claimed by each country as per a complex national quota regime.
 - This has been formulated using historical data going back to the **1970s**.
- The UK government wants to significantly increase the British quota share in this.

- But EU negotiators have been pushing Britain to continue to allow their fishing crews to have access to its waters.
- The EU, meanwhile, wants to divide the amounts of fish that each country's boats are allowed to catch in a way that will not be renegotiated every year.
- With the present deal, there is now a **five-and-a-half-year transition** period that guarantees continued access for the affected EU states.
- Nevertheless, the reduced terms for the latter are expected to help British fisheries.

What is the significance of the present deal?

- The agreement comes four and a half years after Britain decided to leave the EU in 2016.
- The agreement averts a catastrophic '**no deal**' scenario.
 - Failure to strike a deal before the December 31 deadline would result in a 'no-deal Brexit'.
- This could have far-reaching ramifications both domestically and internationally.
- The country now faces a potential **4% loss of GDP over 15 years**, compared to remaining in the EU.
- Leaving without any agreement would have led to a potential loss of an estimate 6% of GDP.
- Moreover, the U.K. relies on the EU for about **75%** of food product imports.
- So, a zero duty trade is of great significance to consumers and the retail economy.
- By striking a zero-tariff and zero-quota deal, the UK and the EU will be able to safeguard the trade of goods between them, which amounts to around **\$1 trillion annually**.
- The tariff-free trade accord in goods should mitigate somewhat the consequences of Britain's decision to leave the EU.
- A no deal would have also strained the already-tense relations between the UK and EU for some time, which is now prevented.

Environment

Apex Committee for Implementation of Paris Agreement (AIPA) constituted

Why in News?

The Government of India has recently constituted the Apex Committee for the Implementation of the Paris Agreement (AIPA).

India's Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs):

- These are the accounts of the voluntary efforts to be made by countries that are a part of the Paris Agreement, to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and mitigate the impacts of anthropogenic climate change.
- India had submitted its NDCs in 2015. The three quantitative goals in the Indian NDCs are:
 - A 33-35 percent reduction in the gross domestic product emissions intensity by 2030 from 2005 levels.
 - A 40 percent share of non-fossil fuel based electricity by 2030.
 - Creating a carbon sink of 2.5-3 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide through afforestation programmes.
 - Apart from these, there are five other non-quantitative goals in the Indian NDCs.
- The NDCs are to be implemented in the post-2020 period.

About the AIPA:

- The committee, with the secretary, Union Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC) as the chairperson, has been constituted with the purpose of ensuring a coordinated response on climate change matters that protects the country's interests.
- The committee will ensure that India is on track towards meeting its climate change obligations under the Paris Agreement including its submitted Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs).
- With its 17 members, it has the responsibility of formulating policies and programmes for implementing them.
- The AIPA also has the responsibility of regularly communicating and reporting the NDCs to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).
- It will also define the responsibilities of the government ministries that would be crucial in achieving the country's climate change mitigation and adaptation goals.
- The AIPA will also act as a national authority for the regulation of carbon markets in India under the Paris Agreement.

Significance:

- Will be crucial for raising India's concerns around climate financing and carbon markets.
- To take the issue of carbon credits (from Kyoto Protocol) forward, which was one of the hottest points of contention at Madrid (COP 25).

Paris Climate Agreement

- It is a historic international accord signed in **2015**, that brings almost 200 countries together in setting a common target to reduce global greenhouse emissions in an effort to fight climate change.
- The Paris Agreement comes under the broad umbrella of the **United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)**.
 - UNFCCC is a convention held in 1992 to combat climate change.
 - **Kyoto Protocol (1997)** was another major international commitment under UNFCCC.

Provisions:

- The pact seeks to keep global temperature rise to **below 2 degrees celsius** from pre-industrial levels, and to try and limit the temperature increase even further to **1.5 degrees Celsius**.
- For this, each country has pledged to implement targeted action plans that will limit their greenhouse gas emissions.

Under the agreement, **rich and developed countries will provide financial and technological support** to the developing world in their quest to fight and adapt to climate change.

Indian Peacock Softshell turtle

Why in News?

Recently, a turtle of a **vulnerable species was rescued** from a fish market in Silchar Assam.

- The rescued species is Indian peacock softshell turtle.

About the species:

- **Scientific name:** Nilssonina hurum
- It is confined to **India, Bangladesh and Pakistan.**
 - In India it is widespread in the northern and central parts of the Indian subcontinent.



Characteristics:

- It has a large head, downturned snout with low and oval carapace of dark olive green to nearly black, sometimes with a yellow rim.
- The **head and limbs are olive green.**
- The males possess relatively longer and thicker tails than females.

Habitat:

- Found in rivers, streams, lakes and ponds with mud or sand bottoms.
- It is omnivorous, juveniles observed feeding on mosquito larvae and fish, while adults consume snails, earthworms and vegetation etc.

Conservation status:

- IUCN : Vulnerable
- IWPA : Schedule I
- CITES : Appendix I

Major Threats:

- It is heavily exploited for **its meat and calipee** (the outer cartilaginous rim of the shell).
- Threats in the River Ganga to the species are those generic for all large river turtles, including reduction of fish stock, as a result of overfishing, pollution, increase in river traffic, and sand-mining, among others.

Malayan Giant Squirrel

Why in News?

A recent study by the **Zoological Survey of India (ZSI)** has projected that numbers of the **Malayan Giant Squirrel (Ratufa bicolor)** could decline by 90% in India by 2050.

Key takeaways

- According to the ZSI, destruction of its habitat could restrict the squirrel to only southern Sikkim and North Bengal by 2050,.
- **Only 43.38% of the squirrel's original habitat in India is**



now favourable to it

- By 2050, the favourable zone could shrink to 2.94% of the area the species was meant to inhabit.

Important value addition

- The Malayan Giant Squirrel is **one of the world's largest squirrel species**.
- It has a dark upper body, pale under parts, and a long, bushy tail.
- **IUCN Status:** Near Threatened
- It is protected under **India's Wildlife Protection Act**.
- **Found in India:** West Bengal, Sikkim, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, and Nagaland.
- **Other Countries:** Southern China, Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, Burma, the Malayan Peninsula, Sumatra, and Java.
- **It is found mostly in evergreen and semi-evergreen forests**, from plains to hills at elevations of 50 m to 1,500 m above sea level.

Two New Zoos Granted Recognition by Central Government

In news

- Two new zoos were granted recognition recently.
- These are – **Rajgir Zoo Safari in Nalanda, Bihar** and **Shaheed Ashfaq Ullah Khan Prani Udyaan in Gorakhpur, Uttar Pradesh**

Rajgir Zoo Safari, Nalanda, Bihar

- The zoo is established exclusively comprising on only safari enclosures which offer larger space for captive animals.
- **The animals are not in cages but they are free to roam over a forest area.**
- The zoo is located close to the historically important Nalanda.

Shaheed Ashfaq Ullah Khan Prani Udyaan, Gorakhpur, U.P.

- With the establishment of this zoo, the state of Uttar Pradesh has a total of **9 zoos**.
- It is the **second biggest zoo in Uttar Pradesh after Kanpur Zoological Park**.

First eco-bridge for reptiles and smaller mammals in Uttarakhand

In news

Uttarakhand, recently built its first eco-bridge for reptiles and smaller mammals in **Nainital district**.

Key Highlights

Eco-ducts or eco-bridges aim to enhance wildlife connectivity that can be disrupted because of highways or logging.

Eco-bridges include:

- **Canopy bridges** usually for monkeys, squirrels and other arboreal species);
- **Concrete underpasses or overpass tunnels** or viaducts usually for larger animals;
- **Amphibian tunnels** or culverts.

Usually these bridges are overlaid with planting from the area to give it a contiguous look with the landscape.

Lakshadweep Declared an Organic Union Territory

Why in news?

Entire Lakshadweep group of islands has been declared as an organic agricultural area under the **Participatory Guarantee System (PGS)** of India.

- **Lakshadweep is the first Union Territory to become 100% organic** as all farming is carried out without the use of synthetic fertilisers and pesticides.

Lakshadweep

- It is India's smallest Union Territory.
- It is an archipelago consisting of **36 islands**.
- There are three main group of islands: **(1) Amindivi Islands; (2) Laccadive Islands; (3) Minicoy Island**.
- All are tiny islands of coral origin (Atoll) and are surrounded by fringing reefs.

Participatory Guarantee System

- PGS is a process of certifying organic products, which ensures that their production takes place in accordance with laid-down quality standards.
- The certification is in the form of a documented logo or a statement.
- **Implemented by:** Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers' Welfare.
- It is only for farmers or communities that can organise and perform as a group within a village or a cluster of contiguous villages.
- It is applicable only to farm activities such as crop production, processing, and livestock rearing, and off-farm processing by PGS farmers of their direct products.

12th GRIHA Summit

Why in News?

Recently, the inaugural session of the **12th Green Rating for Integrated Habitat Assessment (GRIHA) Summit** was organised virtually.

12th GRIHA Summit:

- **Theme:** Rejuvenating Resilient Habitats.
- **Purpose:** To serve as a platform to deliberate on innovative technologies and solutions which shall help in creating robust mechanisms for developing sustainable and resilient solutions for the benefit of the entire community.
- **Launch Event:** The Vice President of India launched the SHASHWAT magazine and the book '30 Stories Beyond Buildings' during the event.

Additional Facts:

- **Building Fitness Indicator (BFI):** It is a self-assessment online tool launched by GRIHA Council to assess safety and hygiene standards for workplaces in India.
- **Global Housing Technology Challenge India (GHTC-India):** It was organised by the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs in 2019 with an aim to identify and mainstream best available and proven construction

technologies that are sustainable, green and disaster-resilient to enable a paradigm shift in housing construction.

- **GRIHA:** It is an independent, not-for-profit society jointly setup by The Energy and Resources Institute(TERI) and the Ministry of New and Renewable Energy (MNRE).
- **Purpose:** It evaluates the environmental performance of a building holistically over its entire life cycle, based on quantitative and qualitative criteria, thereby providing a definitive standard for green buildings and sustainable habitats.

Himalayan Serow

Why in News?

A Himalayan serow has been sighted for the first time in the **Himalayan cold desert region (Spiti, Himachal Pradesh)**.

Key Points

Description:

Himalayan serow **resembles a cross between a goat, a donkey, a cow, and a pig.**

Physical Features:

It's a medium-sized mammal with a large head, thick neck, short limbs, long, mule-like ears, and a coat of dark hair.

Species Type:

- There are several species of serows, and all of them are found in Asia.
- **The Himalayan serow, or *Capricornis sumatraensis* thar, is restricted to the Himalayan region.**
- Taxonomically, it is a subspecies of the mainland serow (*Capricornis sumatraensis*).



Diet:

Himalayan serows are **herbivores**.

Geographical Location:

- They are typically found at **altitudes between 2,000 metres and 4,000 metres**. They are known to be found in eastern, central, and western Himalayas, but not in the Trans Himalayan region.
- **The Trans-Himalayas Mountain Region** or Tibet Himalayan Region is located to the north of the Great Himalayas **which consists of Karakoram, Ladakh, Zaskar and Kailash mountain ranges.**

Latest Sighting:

- The animal was spotted near Hurling village in Spiti, Himachal Pradesh.

- **Spiti lies in the cold mountain desert region of the western Himalaya**, and its valley floor has an average elevation of 4,270 metres above sea level, making the sighting special as Serows are generally not found at this altitude.
- This is the **first recorded human sighting of the serow in Himachal Pradesh**. The animal has been spotted a few times earlier in the state, but that has always been through camera traps.
- The animal has also been spotted in the **Rupi Bhaba Wildlife Sanctuary**, and in the higher reaches of Chamba.
 - The Sanctuary is locally well known for its extensive alpine pastures as well as the numerous treks, trails and passes that connect it with the neighboring Great Himalayan National Park and Pin Valley National Park.

Conservation Status:

- **IUCN Red List:** Vulnerable
- **CITES:** Appendix I
- **The Wildlife Protection Act, 1972:** Schedule I



Antimicrobial resistance

Why in News?

Antimicrobial resistance is growing exponentially and is becoming a global health and development threat.

What is the Antimicrobial resistance?

- Antibiotic resistance (AMR) occurs **when germs like bacteria and fungi develop the ability to defeat the drugs designed to kill them**.
- Globally, about 35% of common human infections have become resistant to available medicines.
- About 700,000 people die every year because antimicrobial drugs are becoming less effective to combat pathogens.
- **India being the largest consumer of antibiotics in the world**, AMR is a serious problem.
- **According to The Lancet study**, in India approximately 58,000 new-born children die annually from sepsis because antimicrobial drugs are becoming less effective.

Why AMR occurs?

- Human activity has significantly accelerated the process of microorganisms developing resistance to antimicrobial agents.
- **The misuse and overuse of antimicrobials for humans, livestock and agriculture** is seen as cause for AMR.
- **Water is seen as major mode for the spread of AMR**, especially in places with inadequate water supply, sanitation and hygiene.
- India has a capacity to treat only about 37% of the sewage generated annually & rest is discharged into natural water bodies without treatment.
- The release of untreated effluents from households, health, pharmaceutical facilities and agricultural run-off is propagating resistant microorganisms.

What are the initiatives taken to combat AMR?

- **UNEP in its 2017 Frontiers Report**, identified AMR as one of six emerging issues of environmental concern.
- In 2017, the UN Environment Assembly advocated for understanding the role of environmental pollution in spreading AMR.
- UN agencies are working together to develop the **One Health AMR Global Action Plan** that addresses the issue in human, animal, and plant health and food and environment sectors.
- In 2020, MoEF&CC issued draft standards which sets the residue limits of 121 antibiotics to be released from drug production units.
- Governments need to factor in new research before it is becoming a threat to human & environment.

One Health AMR Global Action Plan

- **The 'One Health' approach:** The rational use of antibiotics in humans, animals, and agriculture warrants coordinated action in all sectors. These multi-sectoral, multidisciplinary and multi-institutional actions constitute the 'One Health' approach.
- It is reinforced by the fact that all the epidemics in the current millennium (SARS, MERS, bird flu and COVID-19) have originated from animals because of unwanted excursion of humans into animal domains.
- **The COVID-19 pandemic** has emphasised the urgency of implementing One Health.
- **One platform for experts:** This effort utilises existing expertise and infrastructure in various sectors with a focus on inter-sectoral coordination, collaboration, and communication.
- **Human-animal-environment interface:** The approach supports focussed actions on the human-animal-environment interface for the prevention, detection and response to the public health events that influence global health and food security.
- **Implementation of One Health:** It permits a strong and continuous national narrative on zoonoses. It advocates a multi-sectoral response to public health problems, particularly pandemics, as also to address issues related to AMR.

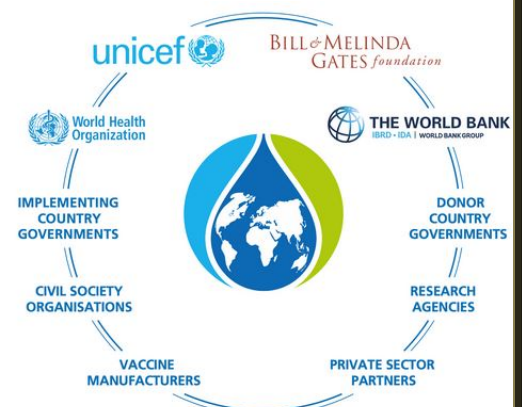
Gavi: International vaccine alliance

Why in News?

Union Health Minister has been nominated by the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunisation (GAVI) as a member on the GAVI Board.

About GAVI:

- **GAVI is a public-private global health partnership with the goal of increasing access to immunisation in poor countries.**
- GAVI has **observer status at the World Health Assembly.**
- GAVI has been praised for being innovative, effective, and less bureaucratic than multilateral government institutions like the WHO.
- **Members:** the WHO, UNICEF, the World Bank, the vaccine industry in both industrialized and developing countries and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation among others.
- GAVI programmes can often produce quantified, politically appealing, easy-to-explain results within an election cycle, which is appealing to parties locked in an election cycle.



Its function

- It currently supports the **immunization of almost half the world's children**, giving it the power to negotiate better prices for the world's poorest countries and remove the commercial risks of manufacturers.
- It also provides funding to strengthen health systems and train health workers across the developing world.

Significance of India's membership

- **The GAVI Board is responsible for the strategic direction and policymaking oversees** the operations of the Vaccine Alliance and monitors programme implementation.
- With membership drawn from a range of partner organisations, as well as experts from the private sector, the Board provides a forum for balanced strategic decision making, innovation and partner collaboration.

Emergency Use Authorization (EUA) for Drug makers**Why in News?**

The US drug maker Moderna said it was applying for emergency use authorisation for its vaccine in India.

Regular procedure for drug approval:

Vaccines and medicines, and even diagnostic tests and medical devices, require **the approval of a regulatory authority before they can be administered.**

- In India, the regulatory authority is the Central Drugs Standard Control Organisation (CDSCO).
- For vaccines and medicines, approval is granted after an assessment of their safety and effectiveness, based on data from trials.
- The approval is granted after an assessment of their safety and effectiveness, based on data from trials. In fact, approval from the regulator is required at every stage of these trials.
- This is a long process, designed to ensure that medicine or vaccine is absolutely safe and effective.
- The fastest approval for any vaccine until now — the mumps vaccine in the 1960s — took about four-and-a-half years after it was developed.

Exceptions for emergency

- In emergency situations, like the current one, regulatory authorities around the world have developed mechanisms to grant interim approvals.
- However, there should sufficient evidence to suggest a medical product is safe and effective.
- Final approval is granted only after completion of the trials and analysis of full data; until then, EUA allows the medicine or the vaccine to be used on the public.

What is the process of getting a EUA in India?

- India's drug regulations do not have provisions for a EUA, and the process for receiving one is not clearly defined or consistent.
- Despite this, CDSCO has been granting emergency or restricted emergency approvals to Covid-19 drugs during this pandemic — for remdesivir and favipiravir in June, and itolizumab in July.

Associated risks

- The public has to be informed that a product has only been granted a EUA and not full approval.

- In the case of a Covid-19 vaccine, for example, people have to be informed about the known and potential benefits and risks.

Not a compulsion

- There has been an ongoing debate over whether people have the option of refusing to take the vaccine.
- Incidentally, no country has made vaccination compulsory for its people.
- Initially, all vaccines are likely to be deployed on emergency use authorizations only. Final approval from may take several months, or years.

Google's online cloud storage

Why in news?

From June 1, 2021 Google's online cloud storage policy will undergo a major change.

Google's existing policy

- Regular Google Account Users will get **15GB** of free storage space towards the user's Gmail, Drive and Photos.
- However, this free space is not counted for photos uploaded in Google Photos app.
- Usually, photos of higher resolution are compressed & saved without running out of space on the free account.

New changes in the policy

- **From June 1, 2021, Google Photos will not be free** & will be counted towards the account storage.
- Photos & videos of original resolution which are uploaded will not be affected as they are counted against the online storage available in your account.

Why Google is making this change?

- It says that **people are uploading more content than ever before—more than 4.3 million GB are added across Gmail, Drive, and Photos every day.**
- It needs to make these changes to keep pace with the growing demand.
- Further, users who are dependent on Google Photos will have to make payments for using its cloud service.
- Under its Google One program, it starts at 200GB for Rs 210 per month, 2TB for Rs 650 per month or Rs 6500 per year, 10TB at Rs 3,250 per month and 20TB at Rs 6,500 per month.

How will the existing users be affected?

- All photos and videos uploaded before June 1, 2021 will continue to remain free, will not be counted against the storage & won't be deleted.
- But all those uploaded post June 1, 2021 will be counted against the Google's free space.
- If more photos and videos uploaded, users have to pay for their services.
- However, existing paid Google One account users will not be affected by these changes.

Why is Google deleting content from inactive accounts?

- As per its new policy, Google will delete content from inactive accounts (accounts inactive for more than two years).
- Account can be kept active by periodically visiting Gmail, Google Photos and Google Drive.
 - Those who are within their storage quota and in good-standing will not be affected.
- If the storage limit is exceeded for 2 years, content will be deleted. & Google will warn before it decides to delete.

HL-2M Tokamak: The Artificial Sun of China

Why in News?

China successfully powered up its “artificial sun” nuclear fusion reactor for the first time marking a great advance in the country’s **nuclear power research capabilities**.

Key Highlights:

- **The HL-2M Tokamak reactor is China’s largest and most advanced nuclear fusion experimental research device.**
- **Name of the mission:** Experimental Advanced Superconducting Tokamak (EAST).
- **Location:** Sichuan province
- The reactor is often called an “**artificial sun**” due to the enormous heat and power it produces.
- It uses a powerful magnetic field to fuse hot plasma and can reach temperatures of over 150 million degrees Celsius which is approximately ten times hotter than the core of the sun.
- Scientists hope that the device can potentially unlock a powerful clean energy source.

Nuclear Fusion

- Nuclear fusion is a reaction in which two or more atomic nuclei are combined to form one or more different atomic nuclei and subatomic particles (neutrons or protons).
- Fusion is the process by which the sun and other stars generate light and heat. It is a nuclear process, where energy is produced by smashing together light atoms.
- It is the opposite reaction of fission, where heavy elements like Uranium and Thorium are split apart.

Nuclear Fusion Reaction

- For a nuclear fusion reaction to occur, it is necessary to bring two nuclei so close that nuclear forces become active and glue the nuclei together.
- Nuclear forces are small-distance forces and have to act against the electrostatic forces where positively charged nuclei repel each other.
- This is the reason nuclear fusion reactions occur mostly in high density, high-temperature environment (millions of degree Celsius) which is practically very difficult to achieve under laboratory conditions.

Japan’s Hayabusa 2 mission

Why in News?

Six years after Japan's Hayabusa2 mission was launched, it is set to return back to Earth. It will be carrying samples from the Ryugu asteroid that orbits the Sun.

More on the news:

- The mission is similar to NASA's OSIRIS-REX mission that brought back samples from asteroid Bennu.
 - Though NASA's OSIRIS-REx mission successfully picks samples from asteroid Bennu, the asteroid is thought to be made up mostly of nickel and iron (as per NASA).
- According to the Japanese Aerospace Exploration Agency (JAXA), this is the first time that a probe has visited a celestial body that is under 100 metres in diameter.

About the Hayabusa2 mission:

- **Launched in 2014:** When the spacecraft was sent on a six-year-long voyage to study the asteroid Ryugu and collect samples that it is now bringing back to the Earth.
 - The spacecraft will drop a landing capsule, which contains the asteroid sample back to the Earth.
 - After dropping off the capsule containing the sample, the spacecraft will continue to move further to another asteroid called 1998 KY26 where it will reach by 2031.
- **Arrived at the asteroid in mid-2018:** After which it deployed two rovers and a small lander onto the surface.
 - In 2019, the spacecraft fired an impactor into the asteroid's surface to create an artificial crater, which allowed it to collect the samples.
- **Significance:** Asteroids like Ryugu are interesting because they are near the Earth and might pose an impact threat, one day in the far future.

About an asteroid:

- Asteroids are rocky objects much smaller than planets that orbit the Sun. They are also called **minor planets**.
- Asteroids are **divided into three classes**.
 - Those found in the **main asteroid belt between Mars and Jupiter**, which is estimated to contain somewhere between 1.1-1.9 million asteroids.
 - **The second group is that of trojans**, which are asteroids that share an orbit with a larger planet. NASA reports the presence of Jupiter, Neptune and Mars Trojans. In 2011, they reported an Earth Trojan as well.
 - **The third classification is Near-Earth Asteroids (NEA)**, which have orbits that pass close by the Earth. More than 10,000 such asteroids are known, out of which over 1,400 are classified as potentially hazardous asteroids (PHAs).

Significance of studying asteroids:

- **To look for information:** About the formation and history of planets and the sun since asteroids were formed at the same time as other objects in the solar system. For example, Bennu hasn't undergone drastic changes since its formation over billions of years ago and therefore it contains chemicals and rocks dating back to the birth of the solar system.
- **To look for asteroids that might be potentially hazardous:** For instance, scientists are interested in studying Bennu because it is relatively close to the Earth.

Singapore approves sale of lab-grown meat in world first

Why in News?

JOKTA ACADEMY, SCO 78-79, 2ND FLOOR, SECTOR 15D, CHANDIGARH

Singapore Food Agency (SFA) has approved the sale of a lab-grown meat product. This is the first time cultured meat has been cleared for sale anywhere in the world.

Key Highlights:

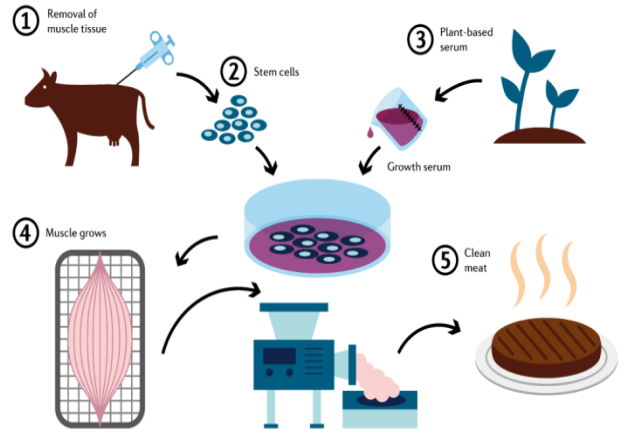
What is Lab Grown Meat?

- Lab Grown Meat or Cultured meat is meat produced by in vitro cell culture of animal cells instead of from slaughtered animals.

How is lab-grown different from plant-based meat?

- The plant based meat is made from plant sources such as soy or pea protein while cultured meat is grown directly from cells in a laboratory.
- In terms of cellular structure, cultured or cultivated meat is the same as conventional meat — except that cultured meat does not come directly from animals.

Production stages of Clean meat



Advantages of Lab Grown Meat:

- The lab grown meat could reduce land use by more than 95%, climate change emissions by 74-87% and nutrient pollution by 94%.
- As meat is created in clean facilities, the risk of contamination by pathogens such as salmonella and E coli is significantly reduced thereby reducing the threat posed to public health by growing antibiotic resistance.

HGCO19

Why in News?

India's first indigenous **mRNA vaccine candidate, HGCO19, has received approval from Indian Drug regulators to initiate Phase one and two human clinical trials.**

Key highlights:

- **HGCO19 has been developed by Gennova, Pune** and supported with seed grant under the Ind-CEPI mission of the Department of Biotechnology.
- **The mRNA vaccines do not use the conventional model to produce immune response.**
- Instead, they carry the molecular instructions to make the protein in the body through a synthetic RNA of the virus.
- mRNA-based vaccines are scientifically the ideal choice to address a pandemic because of their rapid developmental timeline.
- The mRNA vaccine is considered safe as is non-infectious, non-integrating in nature, and degraded by standard cellular mechanisms.

Indian Railways launches Hospital Management Information System (HMIS)

Why in News?

Indian Railways has launched the Hospital Management Information System (HMIS). This information system will **provide better health care facilities to its work force.**

HMIS Trial Project

- The system will make **use of the information technology to develop the information system.** HMIS Trial Project has been launched for the South Central Railway zone.
- The project will bring a **paradigm shift in the health care systems** that are maintained by Indian Railways.
- The system will improve the quality of health services and it will aid in the utilization of resources in a transparent manner.
- This system has been developed by the **Indian Railways in coordination with RailTel Corporation Limited.**



Significance of the Project

- It will minimize the Patients waiting time at the hospitals.
- It will make available the medical records to the team of doctors at all times.
- Through this project, the Indian Railways will economize the drug management.
- The system will help the railways to better utilize the resource management.
- The system will help in integrating the headquarter hospitals and ancillary centres.
- The project will comprise of 20 modules thus will benefit the medical fraternity and hospital beneficiaries.

Key Objectives of the project

- The project has been launched with an objective of providing a **single-window clearance to the hospital administration activity including the clinical, Pharmacy, diagnostics, examinations and industrial health.**
- The system will also effectively manage all the health facilities and monitor the performance of hospitals in the administrative channel.
- The system also seeks to **impart the quality health care services for its beneficiaries** and will also improve the patient turn-around time.

Virus Variant - VUI 202012/01

Why in news?

- **India suspended all flights from and to the UK until December 31, from 21 December 2020,** amid concerns about a **new variant of SARS-CoV-2** that is spreading and growing rapidly there.
- Several other countries, too, have suspended UK flights and imposed travel restrictions.

What is the new variant?

- The new SARS-CoV-2 variant was revealed to be the reason behind the rapid surge in Covid-19 cases in **South and East England**.
- It is being referred to as VUI-202012/01 (the first 'variant under investigation' in December 2020), or the B.1.1.7 lineage.
- The variant is the **result of multiple mutations** in the **spike protein of the novel coronavirus SARS-CoV-2** as well as mutations in other genomic regions of the RNA virus.
- The variant was identified in genomic surveillance by **COVID-19 Genomics UK (COG-UK)**.
 - It is a consortium that analyses genome sequencing data from the UK.
 - COG-UK is the largest contributor to the global Covid-19 database GISAID (Global Initiative on Sharing All Influenza Data).
- UK authorities have already notified the World Health Organization about the variant.

How significant are mutations?

- Whenever a virus replicates and circulates in a human population, **mutations occur naturally**.
- This occurs at a rate of around one to two mutations per month in the global phylogeny.
- In fact, **for SARS-CoV-2, there are currently around 4,000 mutations in the spike protein**.
- It is difficult to predict whether any given mutation is important when it first emerges, given the continuous emergence of new mutations.
- Understanding their significance may be possible based on experimental work that shows a link between the mutation and a subtle change in virus biology.
- However, it would take considerable time and effort to test the effect of many thousands of combinations of mutations.

What is the case with VUI 202012/01?

- The VUI-202012/01 has **23 mutations in all**.
- A few of these are seen in the region of the virus that binds to the human receptor.
- However, a single mutation has been found to increase the binding affinity, making the variant more transmissible.
- **COG-UK identified this mutation as "N501Y"**, in an area of the spike protein that binds to a key protein in the human cell, **the ACE2 receptor**.
- The location of the mutations in the receptor-binding domain of the spike glycoprotein raises the possibility that this variant is antigenically distinct from prior variants.
- This was an indication that the alterations may, theoretically, result in the virus becoming more infectious.
- Mutations in the spike protein, the part of the virus that makes it infectious, can change how the virus interacts with human cells.

Why is this notable?

- **SARS-CoV-2 being an RNA virus tends to have a higher mutation rate**.
- But the presence of 23 mutations strongly suggests that the variant has not emerged through gradual accumulation of mutations.
- According to COG-UK, it is probably due to prolonged infection in a single patient, potentially with reduced immunocompetence.

What is the imminent threat with transmissibility?

- Public Health England (PHE) said data from whole-genome sequencing, epidemiology and modelling suggests that the new variant “transmits more easily than other strains”.
- However, it also emphasised that there is “no evidence” that the variant is more likely to cause severe disease or mortality.
- The variant has the potential to increase by over 0.4 the number of people a person can infect.
- There is “currently insufficient data to draw any conclusion” on the underlying mechanism of increased transmissibility, the age distribution of cases and disease severity.
- Continuing investigations are thus on to understand things better.
- PHE said that mortality was a “lagging indicator” and it would continually monitor this in the following weeks.
- The cluster differs by 29 nucleotide substitutions from the original Wuhan strain.
- Three sequences from Denmark and one from Australia, from samples collected in November 2020, cluster with the UK variant.
- This most likely indicates that international spread has occurred, although the extent remains unknown.
- Since far fewer SARS-CoV-2 genomes are sequenced at regular intervals in India, it is unclear if the variant is already present here.

Will this affect vaccination processes?

- **It is unlikely that the mutations would make the COVID vaccines that have secured emergency use approval and the ones in final stages of testing less effective.**
- This is because vaccines produce antibodies against many regions of the spike protein.
- Also, there is the **T-cell immunity** that would come into play to clear the virus.
- However, as the virus accumulates more mutations, there is a possibility that vaccines might require minor tweaking.
- The emergence of the new variant underlines the compulsion to undertake surveillance following vaccination to track vaccine effectiveness.
- Appearance of vaccine-escape mutants has to be looked for.
- The emergence of the new variant with increased transmissibility is one more reason for strict adherence to non-pharmaceutical interventions.

T-cell immunity

- T Cells also called T lymphocyte, type of leukocyte (white blood cell) that is an essential part of the immune system.
- T cells are one of two primary types of lymphocytes—B cells being the second type—that determine the specificity of the immune response to antigens (foreign substances) in the body.
- T cells originate in the bone marrow and mature in the thymus.

PM WANI: India's New Public Wi-Fi Project

Why in news?

TRAI recently proposed the development of the **Wi-Fi Access Network (WANI) architecture**, capable of delineating access services from telecommunications infrastructure.

- The Plan—The cornerstone of India's New Digital Communications Strategy (2018-2022) is a **single interoperable network** for the provision of internet and Wi-Fi connectivity to all Indians.

- TRAI invites companies / entity leaders in the country to contribute to the development of a country-wide interoperable Wi-Fi network, as PDOs, throughout the world.
- A partnership model will be applied to the new pilot project called Wi-Fi Access Network Interface (WANI).
- Small businessmen and shoppers can set up Wi-Fi hotspots (or PDO), acquire bandwidth, and resell bandwidth to end-users at a low price, from multiple internet service providers (ISPs).

Features

- It is open for the public
- One-time KYC for users
- Easy to access and quick redressal of complaints
- Single click connection facility
- It has good features like favourites and so on
- It comes with good connection speeds
- Multiple users or multiple profiles can be added or used

What the WANI pilot will look to establish

- **Easy entry of small operators:** Any entity should be able to easily deploy paid Wi-Fi access points and open it for the public use. Entrepreneurs, small shop, and companies should be able to easily register, setup and operate a PDO with the least amount of maintenance possible.
- **One-click payments and easier connectivity:** Users should be able to easily discover WANI's Wi-Fi hotspots (differentiated SSID), perform one-click payments and connect one or more devices
- **Cheap sachet-sized packs:** Wi-Fi usage must be sold to users for consumption in small sachets in denominations of Rs 2 to Rs 20
- **Unbundling the last mile:** Providers including PDO providers, hardware & software providers, authentication and KYC providers will unbundle their services, allowing "multiple parties in the (telecom) ecosystem to come together and enable large scale adoption" of Wi-Fi.
- **Dismantle Monopoly:** TRAI said that WANI will try to establish a multi-provider, interoperable, collaborative model, to increase innovation, dismantle monopolies, and pass benefits to the end user.
- **Payment integration:** TRAI suggested that WANI could be directly integrated with all kinds of payments providers including wallets, credit/debit cards, net banking, and UPI.

Who can be part of the WANI pilot?

- **Public Data Office Providers:** Small shops, bakeries, eateries, café outlets, cinema halls, museums, residential builders, are examples of Public Data Offices or PDOs. These PDOs have features of Public Call Offices (PCOs) but aggregates mobile data instead of providing cheap voice calls.
 - Public Data Office Aggregators (PDOAs) are PDOs who aggregate Wi-Fi hotspots, bandwidth. PDOAs can also independently operate their own Wi-Fi hotspots and provide it to the public using either free or paid model.
- **App Providers:** Any mobile app company that can provide and manage eKYC (via mobile no. or Aadhaar) as well as digital payment providers.
- **Hotspot providers:** Any domestic or foreign company manufacturing or providing Wi-Fi/hotspot hardware, software services. Such providers will also unbundle their service/product to make it easier for PDOs to set up Wi-Fi hotspots.

Wi-Fi

- It is a networking technology that uses radio waves to allow high-speed data transfer over short distances.

- Wi-Fi allows **Local Area Networks (LANs)** to operate without cables and wiring, making it a popular choice for home and business networks.
- Wi-Fi can also be used to provide **wireless broadband Internet** access for many modern devices, such as laptops, smartphones, tablet computers, and electronic gaming consoles.
- Wi-Fi-enabled devices are able to connect to the Internet when they are near areas that have Wi-Fi access, called **"hot spots"**.
- According to Cisco Annual Internet Report (2018-2023), there will be nearly 623 million public Wi-Fi hotspots across the world by 2023, up from 169 million hotspots as of 2018.
 - Within this, the highest share of hotspots by 2023 will be in the Asia Pacific region at 46%. As per the calculations of the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI), based on Cisco's estimates, India should have 100 million Wi-Fi hotspots by 2023.

Centre for Development of Telematics

- **C-DOT was established in 1984** as an **autonomous Telecom R&D centre of DoT**, Government of India.
- It is a registered society under the **Societies Registration Act, 1860**.
- It is a registered '**public funded research institution**' with the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research (DSIR), Ministry of Science & Technology.

Himachal Pradesh current Affairs

Government trying to obtain GIs for products native to the State

Why in News?

The Himachal Pradesh government is trying to obtain GIs (Geographical Indication) tags for five products from the state. These are **Karsog Kulth, Thangi of Pangi, Chamba Metal Crafts, Chamba Chukh, and Rajmah of Bharmour**.

Key Highlights:

- **Karsog Kulth:** Kulthi or Kulth (horse gram) is a legume grown as a kharif crop in Himachal Pradesh. Kulth grown in the Karsog area of Mandi district is believed to be particularly rich in amino acids.
- **Pangi ki Thangi:** It is a type of hazelnut which grows in Pangi valley located in the north-western edge of Himachal. It is known for its unique flavour and sweetness.
- **Chamba metal crafts:** These include items such as metal idols and brass utensils which were made by skilled artisans in the courts of kings of Chamba.
- **Chamba Chukh:** It's a chutney made from green and red chillies grown in Chamba, and prepared in traditional and unique ways.
- **Bharmouri Rajmah:** It's more specifically called the Kugtalu Rajmah, since it grows in the area around Kugti Pass in the Bharmour region of Chamba district. It is rich in proteins and has a unique flavour.

Himachal Pradesh currently has GI tags in four handicrafts (Kullu Shawl, Chamba Rumal, Kinnauri Shawl and Kangra Paintings), three agricultural products (Kangra Tea, Basmati and Himachali Kala Zeera) and one manufactured product (Himachali Chulli Oil).

Integrated Drug Prevention Policy

Why in News?

The Himachal Pradesh Government has recently announced that Integrated Drug Prevention, Treatment, Management and Rehabilitation Programme is to be framed soon.

Integrated Drug Prevention Policy

Key Features:

- The policy will be named as “**State Policy of Drug Prevention, Treatment, Management and Rehabilitation Programme**”.
- **The policy aims to increase cooperation between police, media and the Nasha Nivaran Board** to curb the menace of drug abuse in the state.
- **Six Drug de-addiction centres** are to be opened in Himachal Pradesh.
- Standard of Operating Procedure is to be framed to control and regulate already functioning integrated rehabilitation centres for addicts and de-addiction centres.
- Official surveys will be conducted to learn about the pattern of drug production, diversion of psychotropic substances. This will include precursors and magnitude of drug production in the state.
- **State-wise drug awareness campaigns** will be started where the elected representatives of Urban Local bodies and Panchayati Raj institutions, NSS volunteers and NCC cadets will be involved.
- The State Narcotics Control Cell is to be strengthened.
- The new strategy of the State Government will **mainly focus on drugs derived from plant sources such as opium and cannabis**. The State Government has taken immense measures against the cultivation of drug generating plants. The State Government had also **deployed Sahastra Seema Bal** to address the issues in the high-altitude regions. The State Government also provided modern equipment of cannabis or opium destruction to these forces.
- The Himachal Pradesh Government is to introduce a chapter on **ill-effects of drug abuse in the school syllabus of government schools**.
- A large number of drug peddlers are from the neighbouring states of Himachal Pradesh such as Haryana, Punjab and Uttarakhand. Therefore, the joint initiatives are to be launched under the policy. The Northern States had earlier agreed to share information regarding drug trafficking.

7th Rabindranath Tagore Memorial Lecture

In News:

Presided over by the Governor

Theme: “Ethical Foundation of Nationalism”

Organized by: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla, today.

Event registration portal

In news:

Key Points:

- It aims to facilitate the people of the State to obtain permission for organising event, the event registration portal has been started.

- Those wanting to organise any kind of social, cultural, political or any other kind of event in the state, can register on <https://covid.hp.gov.in>.
- The event registration portal has been started to **avoid large gatherings** in public offices.

Giriraj Weekly Calendar

In News:

Chief Minister Jai Ram Thakur released Calendar-2021 of Giriraj Weekly newspaper of the State Government depicting the panoramic picture of the **Atal Tunnel Rohtang**.

About Giriraj Weekly newspaper

Giriraj Weekly newspaper has its **grass root level reach** which provides the people of the State a **glimpse of policies and programmes of the State Government** besides providing **knowledge regarding traditions and customs of the State**.

H.P registers highest full immunisation coverage in country

Why in News?

The Government of India recently released the report of **NFHS -5** which was conducted in the year 2019-20.

- **Himachal Pradesh has rounded the highest full immunisation coverage ie. 89.3 percent** amongst the states in National Family Health Survey (NFHS) and **has registered an enormous improvement of 20 percent from last survey**.

About NFHS:

- NFHS is a large-scale, **multi-round survey conducted in a representative sample of households throughout India**.
- All NFHSs have been conducted under the stewardship of the **Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Government of India, with the International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS) Mumbai**, serving as the nodal agency.
- **Established in 1956** under the joint sponsorship of Sir Dorabji Tata Trust, the Government of India and the United Nations (UN), IIPS has established itself as the premier institute for training and research in population studies for developing countries in the Asia and Pacific region.
- **Phase 2 of the survey** (covering remaining states) was delayed due to the Covid-19 pandemic and its results are expected to be made available in May 2021.

About the Survey:

- The NFHS-5 captured data during **2014-19** and its content is similar to NFHS-4 (2015-16) to allow comparisons over time and also marks a shift from it.
- It provides an indicator for tracking **30 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)** that the country aims to achieve by 2030.
- However, **NFHS-5 includes some new topics**, such as preschool education, disability, access to a toilet facility, death registration, bathing practices during menstruation, and methods and reasons for abortion.

- In 2019, for the first time, the NFHS-5 sought details on the percentage of women and men who have ever used the Internet.

Data Analysis:

- Several states across the country have reversed course and recorded **worsening levels of child malnutrition despite improvements in sanitation and better access to fuel and drinking water.**
 - The latest data captures the state of health in the states before the pandemic.
- Several states have either **witnessed meagre improvements or sustained reversals on four key metrics of child (under 5 years of age) malnutrition parameters.**
- These **four key metrics** are **child stunting, child wasting, share of children underweight and child mortality rate.**
- The **data from these metrics** is also **used in several global indices such as the Global Hunger Index.**

Child Stunting:

- The most surprising reversals have happened in child stunting, which reflects **chronic undernutrition**, and refers to the percentage of children who have low height for their age.
- Stunting, more than any other factor, is likely to have **long-lasting adverse effects on the cognitive and physical development of a child.**
- **Telangana, Gujarat, Kerala, Maharashtra, and West Bengal saw increased** levels of child stunting.
- The reversals in child stunting are **“hugely troubling”** as normally, stunting levels do not increase because all the things that affect child growth tend to improve as stable democracies and economies move ahead.

Child Wasting:

- It reflects **acute undernutrition** and refers to children having low weight for their height.
- India has always had a high level of child wasting.
 - Instead of reducing it, **Telangana, Kerala, Bihar, Assam and Jammu-Kashmir witnessed an increase** and Maharashtra and West Bengal have been stagnant.

Share of Children Underweight:

- In the **proportion of underweight children**, big states like Gujarat, Maharashtra, West Bengal, Telangana, Assam and Kerala have seen an increase.

Child Mortality Rate:

- Infant Mortality Rate **(the number of deaths per 1000 live births for children under the age of 1)** and Under 5 Mortality Rate data is mostly stagnant.
- Between NFHS-3 (2005-05) and NFHS-4, there was progress on mortality reduction but NFHS-5 and NFHS-4 are about five years apart still there is very little progress in many states.
- In Maharashtra, the under-5 mortality rate is basically the same in NFHS-4 and in Bihar, it reduced by just 3% over five years.
- **Over 60% of child mortality is explained by child malnutrition**, which is the central problem and needs to be addressed.

Urban-rural Gender Gaps in Internet Use:

- There is an **urban-rural gap as well as gender divide** with respect to the use of the Internet in several states and union territories.
- On average, **less than 3 out of 10 women in rural India and 4 out of 10 women in urban India ever used the Internet.**
- **General Data:** An average 42.6% of women ever used the Internet as against an average of 62.16% among the men.
- **In Urban India:** An average of 56.81% of women ever used the Internet compared to an average of 73.76% among the men.
- **In Rural India:** A dismal 33.94% women in rural India ever used the Internet as against 55.6% among men.
 - The percentage of women, who ever used the Internet, significantly dropped in rural India.

MoU signed between HP Kaushal Vikas Nigam and Tourism department for skill development**Why in News?**

Himachal Pradesh Kaushal Vikas Nigam signed an agreement with Himachal Pradesh Tourism department for skill training of the youth of the state in the **fields of hotel management, tourist guides, adventure sports, trekking guides and paragliding.**

- The agreement was signed by Managing Director, Himachal Pradesh Kaushal Vikas Nigam Rohan Chand Thakur, and Director Tourism department Yunus.

Key Points:

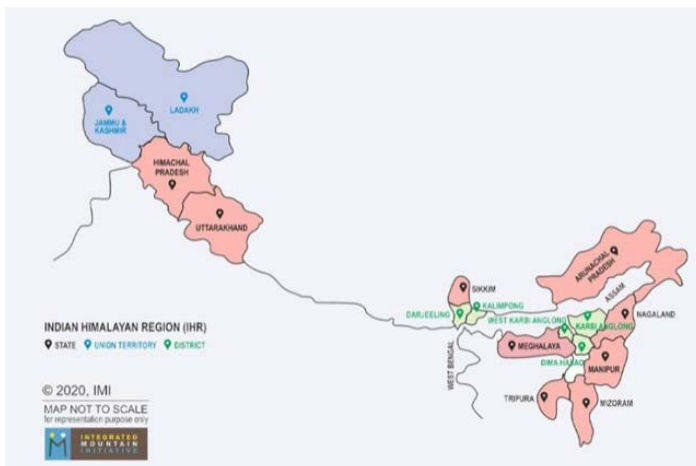
- This **skill training will be started in compliance with the announcement made by Chief Minister Jai Ram Thakur in the budget speech 2020-21**
- As Himachal Pradesh has immense employment opportunities in tourism, hospitality and adventure tourism and this skill training will prove to be helpful in exploiting this potential.
- Under this programme, **640 youth of the state will be provided free skill training** through Hotel Management Institute, Kufri and Atal Bihari Vajpayee Institute of Mountaineering and Allied Sports, Manali.
- **Financial assistance and technical support** for these training programmes will be provided by **Himachal Pradesh Skill Development Corporation** while **Tourism department** will **implement and coordinate the training programme.**
- The duration of the training programme will be **two to three weeks.**
- In hotel management sector, the youth will be trained in the field of tourist guide, hotel kitchen operation, food and beverage management, hotel accommodation management etc. **through Hotel Management Institute (IHM) Kufri.** whereas through **Atal Bihari Vajpayee Mountaineering and Allied Sports Institute, Adventure Sports Manali;** skill training will be provided on **Trekking guides, adventure sports and paragliding.**

Sustainable Mountain Development Summit (SMDS) begins**Why in News?**

The 9th edition of the Sustainable Mountain Development Summit (SMDS) in **Dehradun** has begun.

Key Highlights:

- **Organised by:** Indian Mountain Initiative (IMI)
- The summit seeks to deliberate on issues such as migration, water security, climate resilience and innovative solutions for the farm sector, and disaster risk reduction in the Indian Himalayas.
- **Every year 3-5 salient themes** engaging the immediate attention of and relevant to the mountains and hills are taken up for threadbare discussion and debate.
- Conclusions and recommendations emerging from this exercise are pursued by IMI subsequently for actionable output.
- **The theme for 2020:** Emerging Pathways for Building a Resilient Post COVID-19 Mountain Economy, Adaptation, Innovation and Acceleration.
- **The first edition was organized in 2011 in Nainital.**



Integrated Mountain Initiative (IMI)

- It is a **civil society** led network platform.
- **Mission:** To mainstream concerns of the Indian Himalayan Region (IHR) and its people in the development dialogue of India.
- It functions as a platform to integrate the knowledge and experiences of multiple stakeholders working across the IHR, and uses this to inform and influence policy at the national and state level.

Defence

- Indian Army Successfully Testfires Anti-Ship version of BrahMos supersonic cruise missile from Andaman and Nicobar Islands
- The Indian Navy (IN) is undertaking a Passage Exercise (PASSEX) with Russian Federation Navy (RuFN) in the Eastern Indian Ocean Region (IOR) from 4 to 5 December 2020.
- Pixxel, a private satellite-imaging company, will launch its first remote-sensing satellite on the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) workhorse rocket Polar Satellite Launch Vehicle (PSLV) in early 2021.
- DRDO designed 5.56x30 mm Protective Carbine has successfully undergone the final phase of User trials on 7th December 2020 meeting all the GSQR parameters.
- The Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) will launch communication satellite CMS-01 aboard Polar Satellite Launch Vehicle (PSLV-C50) on December 17, 2020.
- Himgiri, which is the first of the three Project 17A ships being built at Garden Reach Shipbuilders and Engineers Limited (GRSE), Kolkata was launched on December 14.
- An indigenously-built interceptor boat joined the Indian Coast Guard on December 15 at a function in Hazira in Surat district in Gujarat.
- Indian-American US Air Force Colonel Raja Chari has been selected as the Commander of the SpaceX Crew-3 mission to the International Space Station (ISS) by NASA and the European Space Agency.
- Indian Coast Guard (ICG) ship Sujeet, the second in the series of five Offshore Patrol Vessel (OPV) built by Goa Shipyard Limited, will be commissioned at Goa on December 15.

- The 35th edition of India-Indonesia Coordinated Patrol (IND-INDO CORPAT) between the Indian Navy and the Indonesian Navy will be conducted between December 17 and 18.
- Defence Minister Rajnath Singh handed over three indigenously developed systems to Army, Navy and Air Force at a function held in Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) Bhawan.
- Indian Navy's Indigenous Aircraft Carrier (IAC) will be commissioned by the end of 2021 or by early 2022.
- Indian and Vietnamese Navy concluded the two-day naval passage exercise PASSEX in the South China Sea from December 26 & 27, 2020.

Sports

- Lewis Hamilton (Mercedes-Great Britain) has won the 2020 Bahrain Grand Prix, held on 29 November 2020.
- Senegal's professional footballer, Papa Bouba Diop, who helped the country win FIFA World Cup match in 2002, has passed away following a long illness. He was of the age of 42.
- Left-handed batsman Dawid Malan of England has attained the highest-ever rating points for batsmen in the MRF Tyres ICC Men's T20I Player Rankings, released on 2nd December 2020.
- New Zealand all-rounder Corey Anderson retires from international cricket, signs up with MLC in the USA.
- Sri Lanka to host Asia Cup in 2021, Pakistan in 2022 Stated PCB CEO Wasim Khan
- Jehan Daruvala creates history, becomes first Indian to win F2 race at Sakhir
- Sports Minister Kiren Rijiju has launched the second edition of Fit India Cyclothon via social media. The mega cycling event which started from 7th Dec to till 31st December 2020 for 25 days.
- Former India wicketkeeper-batsman Parthiv Patel announced his retirement from all forms of cricket after an 18-years-long cricket career.
- World record-breakers Mondo Duplantis of Sweden and Yulimar Rojas of Venezuela have been named the male and female World Athletes of the Year respectively at the World Athletics Awards 2020.
- The International Olympic Committee has registered Breakdancing as the newest entry into Olympics, with the aim to attract a new and younger audience.
- Zena Wooldridge has been elected as the new World Squash Federation (WSF) President following the WSF's 2020 Annual General Meeting.
- Annika Sorenstam was elected president of the International Golf Federation replacing the outgoing Peter Dawson.
- Madagascar has replaced the Maldives as the host of the 2023 Indian Ocean Island Games due to concerns over the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Wrestler Bajrang Punia has won the 2020 Male Sportsperson of the Year award.
- Shooter Elavenil Valarivan has bagged the 2020 Female Sportsperson of the Year award.
- Max Verstappen won Abu Dhabi Grand Prix 2020, held on 13 December 2020 in Abu Dhabi, UAE.
- Top Indian tennis player Ankita Raina won her third doubles title of the pandemic-hit 2020 season, clinching the Al Habtoor challenge with Ekaterine Gorgodze.
- The FIH, International Hockey Federation had announced that the 2023 FIH Men's Hockey World Cup Will be hosted in Odisha for a second Consecutive Time.
- The International Cricket Council (ICC) announced the schedule for the 2022 Women's World Cup in New Zealand with 31 matches to be played across 31 days from March 4 to April 3, 2022.
- Doha will host the 2030 Asian Games and rival Riyadh will stage the event in 2034 following a vote by the Olympic Council of Asia (OCA) General Assembly in Muscat.
- The Best FIFA Football Awards 2020 was announced on 17th December 2020, during a virtual event held at Zurich.
- The Ministry of AYUSH and Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports announced the formal recognition of Yogasana as a Competitive Sport.

- The All India Football Federation (AIFF) has formally announced its candidature to host the AFC Asian Cup 2027 and deliver a brighter future together for football in India and across Asia.
- Russia was banned from using its name, flag and anthem at the next two Olympics or any world championships for the next two years by the Court of Arbitration for Sport.
- The 28-year-old Pakistani fast bowler Mohammad Amir has announced his retirement from international cricket.
- Novak Djokovic, Roger Federer, Rafael Nadal and Frances Tiafoe were among the winners of the ATP's top awards for 2020.
- FIFA has canceled the Under-17 and Under-20 World Cups scheduled for next year due to the pandemic. The next editions are now due to be staged in 2023, with Indonesia still hosting the U20s and Peru the U17s.
- The Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) confirmed that 10 teams will take part in the Indian Premier League from 2022. The decision was taken in the BCCI AGM meeting in Ahmedabad.
- The International Cricket Council (ICC) announced the Men's T20I and ODI teams of the decade and named former India captain MS Dhoni as the leader of both sides.
- Anshu Malik has become the first wrestler of the country to finish on the podium position at the Individual Wrestling World Cup in Belgrade, Serbia.

Summits & Conferences

- The Minister of Science and Technology and Vice President of Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR), Dr Harsh Vardhan virtually inaugurated the 2nd TCGA 2020 conference in New Delhi.
- The Ministry of External Affairs informed that the 7th India-Suriname Joint Commission Meeting was held virtually by both the nations on December 2, 2020
- Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Telangana Participated in a 3 day virtual 7 th edition of Water, Sanitation and Hygiene conclave 2020 started in Hyderabad from Dec 2 to Dec 4. With the Theme - of Hygiene Matters
- Prime Minister Narendra Modi will deliver the inaugural address at the virtual India Mobile Congress (IMC) 2020. The title theme for IMC 2020 is Inclusive Innovation - Smart, Secure, Sustainable.
- HAL-IISc Skill Development Centre in Challakere of Chitradurga district in Karnataka launched its first training programme offering five courses in virtual mode.
- Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev held a virtual summit
- The 5th India Water Impact Summit (IWIS) began on 10th December 2020 virtually. The five day programme will conclude on 15 December 2020 and the theme is Arth Ganga - river conservation synchronised development.
- Prime Minister Narendra Modi will deliver the inaugural address at FICCI's 93rd Annual General Meeting and Annual Convention via video conferencing and also inaugurate the virtual FICCI Annual Expo 2020.
- Raksha mantri Shri Rajnath Singh, attended the 14th ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus organized online at Hanoi, Vietnam on 10 December 2020 that marked the 10th anniversary of ADMM Plus.
- Narendra Modi will address the International Bharati Festival, 2020 on Dec 11. Organised by Vanavil Cultural Centre to celebrate the 138th birth anniversary of Mahakavi Subramanya Bharati.
- Narendra Modi will lay the foundation stone of the New Parliament Building at Sansad Marg in Parliament Complex with the vision of Atmanirbhar Bharat.
- The 5th India-Myanmar Bilateral Meeting on Drug Control Cooperation was held virtually on December 10, 2020. The Indian delegation was led by Shri Rakesh Asthana, Director General of Narcotics Control Bureau.
- Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President of the Republic of Uzbekistan H.E. Mr. Shavkat Mirziyoyev co-chaired a Virtual Summit between India and Uzbekistan on 11 December, 2020.
- The ninth edition of the Sustainable Mountain Development Summit (SMDS) in Dehradun has begun from December 11 to 14.

- The State of the Education Report for India 2020: Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET), was launched virtually by UNESCO New Delhi.
- 9th SMDS Theme is Emerging Pathways for Building a Resilient Post COVID-19 Mountain Economy, Adaptation, Innovation and Acceleration
- Prime Minister Narendra Modi address the Climate Ambition Summit 2020, United Nations, United Kingdom and France Virtually Co-hosted.
- The first Trilateral Working Group Meeting between India, Iran and Uzbekistan on the joint use of Chabahar Port was held virtually On Dec 14.
- Housing and Urban Affairs Secretary Durga Shanker Mishra launched a programme of Socio -Economic Profiling of PM SVANidhi Scheme.
- British Prime Minister Boris Johnson has invited India to attend the G7 Summit next year.
- India and Bangladesh signed seven MoUs and agreements during the virtual summit between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.
- External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar launched a dedicated economic diplomacy website. Aim: To provide critical and relevant information on major economic indicators, central and state government policy updates as well as the latest business news and trade data.
- Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman chaired the 23rd Meeting of the Financial Stability and Development Council, FSDC through video conference.
- Union Minister of Petroleum & Natural Gas, Dharmendra Pradhan represented India at the Virtual Ministerial Roundtable of 7th IEF-IGU (International Energy Forum-International Gas Union) Ministerial Gas Forum held from Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.
- On December 3, 2020 the 7th meeting of the India-Mongolia Joint Committee on Cooperation 2020 was held virtually.
- World's largest virtual entrepreneurial summit, The IndUS Entrepreneurs (TiE) Global Summit-2020 (TGS 2020) was held virtually from December 8-10, 2020. It was hosted by TiE Hyderabad. Vice President Venkaiah Naidu virtually inaugurated the TGS 2020. Theme of TGS 2020 - 'Entrepreneurship 360'.
- 6th Meeting of Joint Working Group under the India-Japan ICT (Information & Communications Technology) was held virtually. Cooperation in 5G technologies, medical applications of Artificial Intelligence (AI) were some of the key issues discussed during the meeting.
- The 17th International Inter-Ministerial Conference on South-South Cooperation in Population and Development titled "Nairobi Commitments and the 2030 Agenda: Taking stock and looking ahead to post COVID-19 Crisis" was held virtually.
- On December 11, 2020, the 8th meeting of India and Nepal Joint Steering Committee (JSC) on Cooperation in the Power sector was held virtually. The meeting was chaired by Sanjiv Nandan Sahai, Power Secretary, Government of India & Dinesh Kumar Ghimire, Secretary (Energy) of Nepal.
- On December 10, 2020 Dr Harsh Vardhan, Union Minister for Health and Family Welfare virtually addressed the World Bank Inter Ministerial Meeting on Vaccination of South Asia against COVID-19.
- External Affairs Minister (EAM), Jaishankar virtually addressed the 2020 Global Technology Summit (GTS) – 5th Edition, it was jointly organized by the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), Carnegie India (CI) from December 14-18, 2020. The Theme of 2020 GTS is "Geopolitics of Technology".
- On 17th December, 2020 The 4th Bilateral Joint Working Group (JWG) between the Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB), India and the National Narcotics Board (BNN), Indonesia was held virtually.
- On December 17, 2020, the 3rd meeting of Joint Working Group (JWG) on shipping between India and Denmark was held virtually to identify areas of co-operation between the two countries.
- Union Minister for S&T, ES and MoHFW, Dr Harsh Vardhan inaugurated the Global Indian Scientists & Technocrats (GIST) meet which is being organized as a part of the Indian International Science Festival (IISF) 2020.

- Prime Minister Narendra Modi will inaugurate the New Bhaupur-New Khurja section of Eastern Dedicated Freight Corridor, EDFC through video conferencing.
- Prime Minister Narendra Modi launched the Ayushman Bharat Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (AB-PMJAY) SEHAT scheme via video-conferencing to extend health insurance coverage to all residents of Jammu and Kashmir.
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- On December 29, 2020, Union Earth Sciences Minister Dr Harsh Vardhan, will virtually inaugurate the newly established Indian Meteorological Department for Ladakh.
- President Ram Nath Kovind will virtually confer the Digital India Awards 2020 through video conference. The Digital India Awards 2020 have been announced under six categories including 'Innovation in Pandemic'.

Agreements and MoUs

- The Government of India recently signed 133 million USD loan Agreement with the Asian Development Bank.
- The Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the Government of India have inked \$50 million policy-based loan agreement on 2nd December 2020 to improve financial management procedures and operational efficiencies in West Bengal.
- The Government of India and United States of America (USA) have signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in the field of Intellectual Property Cooperation on 2nd December 2020.
- NTPC inks MoU with IIFM-Bhopal for Narmada Landscape Restoration Project. Narmada Landscape Restoration project is a 4 year Project.
- State-run power producer SJVNL has inked a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with Indian Renewable Energy Development Agency (IREDA) for green energy projects.
- Global machine connectivity solutions company Skylotech India has partnered with BSNL to launch a satellite-based narrowband IoT network in India. This is the World's first satellite based NB-IoT network.
- The Ministry of Road Transport and Highways has inked a pact with Austria for technical cooperation in road infrastructure space.
- Norwegian Institute of Bioeconomy Research has signed an MoU with cGanga, a think-tank of National Mission for Clean Ganga (NMCG) for development of sludge management framework in India.
- The Government of India and the World Bank have signed a 400 million dollar project to protect India's poor and vulnerable from the impact of COVID-19.
- The Government of India and United States of America (USA) have signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in the field of Intellectual Property Cooperation.
- Equity financing firm Sequoia India partnered with NITI Aayog's Women Entrepreneurship Platform (WEP), to promote women entrepreneurship in India.
- The Directorate General of Training (DGT) joined hands with Microsoft and NASSCOM Foundation to provide digital content for ITI students.
- AU Small Finance Bank announced a strategic partnership with ICICI Prudential Life Insurance to offer life insurance solutions.

Ranks & Indices

- Lahore, the cultural capital Pakistan, has been ranked as the world's most polluted city, according to air pollution data released by the US Air Quality Index (AQI) on 30 November 2020.
- The World Malaria Report, 2020 was recently released by the World Health Organisation.
- In the Global Terrorism Index (GTI) 2020, India has been ranked at 8th spot globally in the list of countries most affected by terrorism in 2019.
- The Ministry of Home Affairs recently released the annual ranking of police Stations in India.
- Roshni Nadar Malhotra, Chairperson of HCL Technologies topped the list of wealthiest women in India, according to the second edition of 'Kotak Wealth Hurun–Leading Wealthy Women' report
- Oil-to-telecom conglomerate Reliance Industries Ltd (RIL) has topped the 2020 Fortune 500 list of Indian companies, released on 2nd December 2020.
- India has been ranked 131 among 189 countries in the 2020 human development index, according to a report released by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).
- Coming out with corrected Doing Business rankings following review of data irregularities, the World Bank has announced that China's ranking would have been lower by seven notches in the index for 2018.
- The 63rd Founding Day of the Directorate of Revenue Intelligence (DRI) was observed virtually which was attended by Union Minister Nirmala Sitharaman, Ministry of Corporate Affairs (MCA) and Ministry of Finance
- In accordance with the 10th edition of the report titled "Global Corruption Barometer (GCB)-Asia 2020" by corruption watchdog Transparency International, India has the highest bribery rate of 39% in Asia and the highest rate of people (46%) who use personal connections to access public services.
- The global higher education think-tank, Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) has released the QS Asia University Rankings 2021 in association with King Abdulaziz University (KAU) , Jeddah (Saudi Arabia) for the Asia's best higher education institutions in 2021.
- According to The International Farm Comparison Network (IFCN) Dairy Processors Report 2020 (Biennial), Amul (Anand Milk Union Limited) a brand of dairy cooperative major Gujarat Cooperative Milk Marketing Federation (GCMMF) emerged as the 8th Largest Milk Processor globally in the list of Top 20.
- The Tax Justice Network (TJN) has released the first-of-its-kind report titled "The State of Tax Justice 2020- Tax Justice in the time of COVID-19" in accordance to which the international corporate tax abuse and private tax evasion is incurring a global loss of over \$427 billion in tax each year.
- In accordance with the report titled "The Production Gap, 2020" produced by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) the world is planning to produce more than double the amount of Coal, Oil and gas by 2030.
- According to a First-of-its-kind survey conducted by Zoological Survey of India (ZSI) under the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC), Malayan Giant Squirrel or Black Giant Squirrel (Ratufa bicolor) could fall by 90% in India by 2050 due to shrinking of its original habitat zone.
- According to the 4th Edition of Global Insights Report for 2020 released by Truecaller, a Swedish Caller ID and Spam Blocking app, India ranked 9th in the list of countries affected by spam calls in 2020.
- According to Climatescope Survey 'Emerging Markets Outlook 2020: Energy Transition in the World's Fastest Growing economies' released by Bloomberg New Energy Finance Limited (BNEF) India dropped to the 2nd position in the 2020 survey due to decline in Clean Energy Investment.
- According to the 'Human Freedom Index 2020: A Global Measurement of Personal, Civil, and Economic Freedom' – 6th Annual Report released by Cato Institute of United States & Fraser Institute in Canada, India ranked 111 in the list of 162 countries. New Zealand (score – 8.87) topped the index followed by Switzerland & Hong Kong.
- HDFC Bank is the top ranked company among the 100 BFSI companies in the country, as per the BFSI Movers and Shakers 2020 report by Wizikey.

- Science and Technology Minister Dr Harsh Vardhan releases report - Action Agenda for an Atma Nirbhar Bharat prepared by Technology Information, Forecasting and Assessment Council, TIFAC in New Delhi.

Committees

- The Central Government has set up an Apex Committee for the Implementation of the Paris Agreement (AIPA) for achieving its goals under the global deal.
- The Apex Committee for the Implementation of the Paris Agreement (AIPA) was recently constituted by the Indian government.
- The Union Environment Ministry has constituted a high-level inter-ministerial apex committee for Implementation of Paris Agreement (AIPA) under the chairmanship of Secretary, MoEFCC. to ensure that India is "on track" towards meeting its obligations under the Paris Agreement.

Books & Authors

- The Asian Development Bank (ADB) has released a new book titled 'Future of Regional Cooperation in Asia and the Pacific'.
- A booklet titled 'PM Modi and his Government's special relationship with Sikhs' was released on the occasion of birth anniversary of Shri Guru Nanak Dev Ji.
- Vice President Venkaiah Naidu has released The Book Titled 40 Years with Abdul Kalam - Untold Stories by scientist A. Sivathanu Pillai,
- 40 Years with Abdul Kalam book is published by Pentagon Press LLP and Book foreword was written by Pranab Mukherjee, former president of India.
- Amish Tripathi, has announced his second non-fiction book titled Dharma: Decoding the Epics for A Meaningful Life. The book will be released on December 28, 2020.
- As farmers intensified their protest seeking repeal of three farm laws, the government issued an e-booklet highlighting the success stories of farmers who have benefited from contract farming after enactment of these legislations.
- The New India Foundation announces the shortlist for the third edition of the 'Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay NIF Book Prize', recognising and celebrating excellence in non-fiction writings on modern/ contemporary India.
- Union Minister of state (I/C) for AYUSH and Minister of State for Defence Shripad Naik released a Konkani book Sutranivednachi sutra- ek anav, by Dr Roopa Chari, which is published by Sanjana Publications

Appointments

Name	Appointed as	Other Info
Utpal Kumar Singh	Secretary General of the Lok Sabha and Lok Sabha Secretariat	He will succeed incumbent Snehlata Shrivastava.
Varsha Joshi	Interim Chairperson of National Dairy Development Board (NDDB)	She replaces incumbent Dilip Rath
Rajeev Chaudhary	27th Director General of Border Roads	Lt Gen Chaudhary succeeds Lt Gen

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	Organisation (BRO).	Harpal Singh
Debendranath Sarangi	one of the three vice presidents of the World Squash Federation	
Vivek Murthy	Surgeon General	
Anil Soni	CEO for WHO Foundation	
Sheikh Sabah Al-Khalid Al-Sabah	prime minister of Kuwait	
Nicolae Ciuca	Interim prime minister of Romania	After Ludovic Orban resigned
AR Rahman	Ambassador of the BAFTA Breakthrough initiative	
Shashi Shekhar Vempati	VP of Asia Pacific Broadcasting Union	
Sukhbir Singh Sandhu	second extension of six months as NHAI chairman	
Vineet Agarwal	New President of The Associated Chambers of Commerce and Industry of India (Assocham).	
Satyendra Garg	Andaman and Nicobar DGP charge	
Prasanth Prabhakaran	Managing director and chief executive officer of YES Securities	
Uday Shankar	President of FICCI	Succeeds Sangita Reddy
Nana Akufo-Addo	President of Ghana	

Awards& Honours

Name	Award
Gitanjali Rao	'Kid of the Year' by the iconic TIME magazine.
Adar Poonawalla	One of the "Asians of the Year"
Anita Anand's 'The Patient Assassin'	PEN Hessel-Tiltman history prize
Raj Kamal Jha	Rabindranath Tagore Literary Prize 2020
Brazil's Carolina Araujo	Ramanujan Prize For Young Mathematicians
Bajrang Punia, Elavenil Valarivan	FICCI India Sports Awards

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Ashraf Patel	Social Entrepreneur of the Year
Paul Sein Twa	Goldman Environmental Prize 2020 for Asia
Steel Authority of India Limited (SAIL)	Golden Peacock Environment Management Award for the year 2020
Ratan Tata	Global Visionary of Sustainable Business and Peace award
Lewis Hamilton	BBC Sports Personality of the Year 2020
Prime Minister Narendra Modi	Legion of Merit
NGO HelpAge India	UN Population Award for 2020
Amar Singh College, in Srinagar	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Asia-Pacific in 2020.
NTPC Limited	CII-ITC Sustainability Awards 2020 in corporate social responsibility (CSR).
K.Veeramani	Dr. Narendra Dabholkar Memorial Award
Quarantine	Word of the Year 2020- Cambridge University
Pandemic	Word of the Year 2020- Merriam Webster
Ranjitsinh Disale	Global Teacher Prize 2020

Important Days & Themes

Day	Celebrated as	Aim / Theme
December 1	Border Security Force (BSF), is observing its 56th Raising Day	
December 1	World AIDS Day	The theme for the World Aids Day 2020 is 'Ending the HIV/AIDS epidemic: Resilience and Impact.'.
December 2	World Computer Literacy Day	to create awareness and drive digital literacy in underserved communities worldwide
December 2	National Pollution Control Day	To commemorate the life of people lost in the unfortunate incident of Bhopal Gas Tragedy that occurred in the year 1984 on the night of 2-3 December.

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December 2	International Day for the Abolition of Slavery	Eradicating contemporary forms of slavery, such as trafficking in persons, sexual exploitation, the worst forms of child labour, forced marriage, and the forced recruitment of children for use in armed conflict.
December 3	International Day of Persons with Disabilities	2020 theme: 'Not all Disabilities are Visible'
December 4	Indian Navy Day	The Theme of 2020 Navy Day is "Indian Navy Combat Ready, Credible & Cohesive".
December 4	International Day of Banks	
December 5	World Soil Day	Theme: "Keep soil alive, protect soil biodiversity".
December 5	International Volunteer Day	
December 7	International Civil Aviation Day	The day is commemorated to help generate and reinforce worldwide awareness of the importance of international civil aviation to the social and economic development of countries.
December 7	Armed Forces Flag Day	To celebrate the day, all three branches of the Indian armed forces - the Indian Army, the Indian Air Force (IAF) and the Indian Navy arrange a variety of shows, carnivals, dramas and other entertainment programmes to showcase to the general public the efforts of their personnel to ensure national security.
December 9	International Anti-Corruption Day	The theme focuses on corruption as one of the biggest obstacles to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
December 9	International Day of Commemoration and Dignity of the Victims of the Crime of Genocide and of the Prevention of this Crime	The purpose of the day is to raise awareness of the Genocide Convention and its role in combating and preventing the crime of genocide, as defined in the Convention, and to commemorate and honour its victims.
December 10	World Human Rights Day	Human Rights Day 2020 theme - Recover Better - Stand Up for Human Rights.
December 11	International Mountain Day	Theme of 2020 - Mountain biodiversity
December 11	UNICEF Day	It was started in order to provide assistance supplies and improve health, education,

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		nutrition of children after World War II
December 12	International Universal Health Coverage Day	2020 Theme - Health For All: PROTECT EVERYONE
December 12	International Day of Neutrality	To raise public awareness of the value of neutrality in international relations.
December 14	National Energy Conservation Day	The day focuses on making people aware of global warming and climate change and promotes efforts towards saving energy resources
December 15	International Tea Day	Theme: Harnessing Benefits for all From Field to Cup
December 16	Vijay Diwas also called Victory Day	Victory Day is celebrated to commemorate the victory of the Indian armed forces over Pakistan in the 1971 Indo-Pak War, also known as the Bangladesh Liberation War.
December 17	Minorities Rights Day	The aim of the day is to advance and protect the privileges of the individuals to have a place with linguistic, religion, castes and color minorities
December 18	International Migrants Day	The theme of International Migrants Day 2020 : 'Reimagining Human Mobility'.
December 18	World Arabic Language Day	World Arabic Language Day 2020 will provide an opportunity to reflect on and discuss how Language Academies can help revive and enhance the use of classical Arabic.
December 19	Goa Liberation Day	
December 22	National Mathematics Day	2020 ensures 133rd birth anniversary of Ramanujan.
December 23	Kisan Diwas or National Farmers Day	To promote awareness to help and reward farmers for their contribution to society Farmers day is celebrated every year.
December 24	National Consumer Rights Day	The theme of the National Consumer Day is The Sustainable Consumer

December 25	Good Governance Day	
December 27	International Day of Epidemic Preparedness	The International Day of Epidemic Preparedness aims to promote international awareness and action on the prevention of, preparedness for and partnership against epidemics

Obituary

Name	Field	Place
Abhay Bhardwaj	Rajya Sabha MP	Gujarat
Frank Carney	Pizza Hut co-founder	United States
Valery Giscard d'Estaing	former President of France	FRance
Mahashay Dharampal Gulati	owner of spices company 'Mahashian Di Hatti'	Pakistan
Rafer Johnson	American decathlete and film actor	US
Dineshwar Sharma	administrator of Lakshadweep	Bihar
Manu Mukherjee	Actor	West Bengal
Ravi Patwardhan	Actor	Maharashtra
Narinder Singh Kapany	Father of fiber optics & Sikh activist	Punjab
Madhukar Gangadhar	Hindi writer	Bihar
Divya Bhatnagar	TV Actress	Delhi
Narendra Bhide	Music Composer	
Paolo Rossi	goalscoring hero- Football	Italy
Vidyavachaspati Bannanje Govindacharya	Sanskrit scholar	Karnataka
Chuck Yeager	first person to travel at a speed faster than the speed of sound	US
Radhika Ranjan Pramanik	Politician	West Bengal

Ambrose Dlamini	Prime Minister of Eswatini	Eswatini
Roddam Narasimha	Eminent aerospace scientist and Padma Vibhushan awardee	Bengaluru, Karnataka
Mahbubullah Muhibbi	deputy governor of Kabul	Afghanistan
Shripati Khanchanale	wrestler and first Hind Kesari	Karnataka
Vice Admiral Srikant	senior most submariner of the Indian Navy	
Eric Freeman	Australia Test all-rounder	Australia
Satya Dev Singh	Politician	Kolkatta, West Bengal
Motilal Vora	Politician	Chattisgarh
Sugathakumari	Malayalam Poet	Kerala
Madan Lal Sharma	Veteran Congress leader and former minister	Punjab
Shamsur Rahman Faruqi	Urdu poet	Uttar Pradesh
John Edrich	Batsman	England
Robin Jackman	Cricketer	England
Jon Huber	Wrestler	US
Sunil Kothari	Dance Scholar	Gujarat
M. R. Janardhanan	Politician	TamilNadu

State Miscellaneous

- The Union Minister of Railways, Piyush Goyal has inaugurated newly electrified Dhigawara-Bandikui section of North Western Railway (NWR) in the state of Rajasthan.
- Nagaland celebrates its 58th Statehood day on 1st December.
- Karnataka Chief Minister B S Yediyurappa launched a Learning Management System based on Digital technology for Government colleges.
- The Gujarat forest department has transferred 12 leopards to a private rescue and Rehabilitation centre in Jamnagar.
- Uttarakhand Chief Minister Trivendra Singh Rawat inaugurated the Suryadhar lake at Doiwala in Dehradun
- The Union Minister for Tribal Affairs, Shri Arjun Munda, launched the first-ever virtual edition of Aadi Mahotsav – Madhya Pradesh on 01 December 2020.
- Footwear major Bata Shoe Organization has appointed Sandeep Kataria as the new global Chief Executive Officer (CEO) with immediate effect.

- The Union Minister of State for Communication Sanjay Dhotre launched five-star village postal scheme to ensure the universal coverage of flagship postal schemes in Dehradun for rural areas of Uttarakhand.
- Madhya Pradesh did not see a significant increase in the number of HIV patients in the last two years.
- In Karnataka, Chief Minister B S Yediyurappa laid the foundation stone for a 11.5 megawatt power plant based on municipal waste in Bidadi, a town in Bengaluru.
- Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath rang the bell at the Bombay Stock Exchange (BSE), on 2nd December 2020, to mark the listing of bonds of Lucknow Municipal Corporation on the exchange.
- An Assam reserve forest, ravaged by militancy, is set to become the state's sixth national park.
- The Government of India and the Asian Development Bank have recently signed an agreement under which the bank will provide 50 million USD of loan.
- The Andhra Pradesh Legislative Assembly on December 1, 2020 passed the AP Gaming (Amendment) Bill 2020 through voice vote, banning online gaming in the state.
- The 9th edition of the International Sand Art Festival and the 31st edition of the Konark Festival, has kicked-off in Odisha.
- Reliance Industries Ltd will build what it claims to be the world's largest zoo in Gujarat's Jamnagar.
- Swasthya Sathi scheme is a health insurance scheme of the West Bengal government.
- Karnataka government is in process of bringing bills against "love jihad and cow slaughter."
- Anil Vij had volunteered to participate in the Covaxin vaccine's human phase trials, in which over 25,000 persons were administered trial doses.
- Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan said Dharma Swatantrya (Religious Freedom) Bill 2020 (the bill against love jihad) is the state's Beti Bachao Abhiyan.
- Every year, India celebrates December 4 as Navy Day to commemorate Operation Trident – a key offensive during the 1971 India-Pakistan War, when the Indian Navy inflicted heavy damage on Pakistani vessels in Karachi harbour. The same day also marks the end of Navy Week, which, too, is celebrated annually.
- Jharkhand has become the latest state to go for Option-1 to meet the revenue shortfall arising out of the GST implementation.
- Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Telangana Participated in a 3 day virtual 7th edition of Water, Sanitation and Hygiene conclave 2020 started in Hyderabad from Dec 2 to Dec 4. With the Theme - of Hygiene Matters
- The Agra metro project comprises two corridors with a total length of 29.4 km and The estimated cost of the construction of the project is Rs 8,379.62 crore
- The historical fort cities of Gwalior and Orchha in Madhya Pradesh have been named in the list of World Heritage Cities by UNESCO
- Varinderpal Singh, an agricultural scientist with the Punjab Agricultural University declines an award presented by a Union Minister to express his solidarity with the farmers agitating against the Centre's farm laws.
- The Ramnagar Forest Division in Nainital District, of Uttarakhand has constructed the state's first eco-bridge across Kaladhungi Nainital Highway.
- Uttar Pradesh government has recently launched a scheme to take the unique culture of the Tharu tribes across the world.
- The Karnataka Legislative Assembly passed the Karnataka Prevention of Slaughter and Preservation of Cattle Bill-2020.
- Ladakh Lieutenant Governor R K Mathur virtually inaugurated the second edition of Ladakh Literature Festival, 2020, in Leh on Dec 10.
- Aurobindo Pharma has received final approval from the US health regulator for the generic of Precedex injection, used for sedation of patients.
- The government of Maharashtra's Unified Development Control and Promotion Regulations (UDCPR) are expected to bolster real estate development.

- The Nehru Zoological Park in Hyderabad has become the first zoo in the country to receive the ISO 9001:2015 Quality Management Standards Certification from the Accreditation Services for Certification Bodies (ASCB), UK.
- Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik launched 'Pareshram' Portal along with 22 online services of Labour and Employees State Insurance Department.
- Road Transport and Highways Minister Nitin Gadkari will inaugurate and lay the foundation stone for 33 highway projects in Karnataka.
- The Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the Government of India signed a \$50 million policy-based loan to improve financial management procedures and operational efficiencies aimed at achieving more fiscal savings, promote informed decision making, and improve service delivery in the state of West Bengal.
- The Manila-based Asian Development Bank (ADB) has approved a loan of \$190 million (approx Rs 1,400 crore) to modernize and upgrade the power distribution system in Bengaluru, Karnataka.
- The Forest department of the Rajasthan government sounded a 'Red Alert' at all reserves, sanctuaries and parks in the state as incidents of hunting, poaching and animal traps have come to the fore.
- Odisha has topped all Indian states in urban governance, according to an annual index prepared by a non-partisan body that called for greater reforms and empowerment of city governments.
- Odisha Tourism launched its flagship Eco-Retreat program at 5 locations in the State.
- Maharashtra Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray announced that 25 crore rupees will be provided in the first phase for the development of Dajipur Sanctuary, which is part of the Radhanagari Wildlife Sanctuary in Kolhapur district.
- Maharashtra's Department of Social Justice is all set to launch an ambitious scheme for distribution of assistive devices to lakhs of persons with disabilities through MahaSharad Digital Platform.
- In a bid to curb crimes against women and children in Maharashtra, the state cabinet has approved a draft bill called the Shakti act.
- People in Ladakh region are celebrating Ladakhi New Year, Losar.
- The Maharashtra forest department is set to be the first state in India to have a dedicated action plan for conservation of pangolins.
- Uttar Pradesh government will launch a special program to double the income of farmers.
- The world's tallest rail bridge on the Chenab in Reasi district of Jammu and Kashmir Union Territory is expected to be completed by next year.
- The Yogi Adityanath-led Uttar Pradesh government is set to establish India's first mega leather park in Kanpur.
- In line with Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Vocal for Local mantra, Madhya Pradesh government has decided to introduce a new brand named Raag-Bhopali to give a new international identity to Bhopal's handicrafts.
- Nagaland Government has totally banned the use of flex banners, boards and posters by departments, institutions and agencies during functions or programmes in government offices with immediate effect.
- In Uttar Pradesh, the government has launched a special campaign 'Varasat' to curb property & land-related disputes in rural areas.
- Fifty first DG level talks between Border Security Force India and Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) began in Guwahati.
- The Tamil Nadu government has granted permission to hold jallikattu, the popular bull taming sport, next year with certain restrictions.
- The Kerala government and UN Women have collaborated to establish India's first Gender Data Hub.
- East Delhi BJP MP Gautam Gambhir inaugurated a 'Jan Rasoi' canteen at Gandhi Nagar market in his constituency to feed the needy at Rs 1 per plate.

- In Madhya Pradesh the Music Festival Tansen Samaroh commenced with restrictions of COVID-19 protocols in Gwalior.
- In Tamil Nadu, the 16th Tsunami anniversary was observed on 26 December
- The Madhya Pradesh cabinet approved the Dharma Swatantrya (Religious Freedom) Bill 2020.
- Rajasthan has become the 6th State in the country to successfully undertake "Ease of Doing Business" reform stipulated by the Finance Ministry.
- The Uttar Pradesh government has decided to include the history of Sikh gurus in the school curriculum in the state.
- In Maharashtra, the predominantly tribal areas of Jawhar and Mokhada are known for issues such as malnutrition among children, unemployment and illiteracy, among others.
- The Government of India consented to change the name of Dandupur railway station located between Pratapgarh and Badshahpur on the Varanasi railway section, Uttar Pradesh (UP) as "Maa Barahi Devi Dham".
- The International Gita Mahotsav 2020(17 to 25 December) commenced in Kurukshetra, Haryana. Jai Ram Thakur, Himachal Pradesh Chief Minister, Haryana Tourism and Education Minister Kanwar Pal, Kurukshetra MP Nayab Singh Saini among the others inaugurated the festival.
- Odisha Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik announced that India's biggest hockey stadium will come up at Rourkela and the 20,000-capacity facility will host matches of FIH men's World Cup in 2023.
- The Himachal Pradesh government has decided to frame an integrated Drug Prevention Policy including Drug Prevention, Treatment, Management and Rehabilitation Programme.
- The Department of School and Mass Education, Government of Odisha in collaboration with UNICEF has launched a career portal for Secondary and Higher Secondary students to help them with expert advice on their future careers
- Punjab, Chief Minister Captain Amarinder Singh launched Mobile Application and web portal 'PR Insight' to monitor the feedback and subsequently improve the delivery of citizen centric services to ensure responsive and transparent administration in the State.
- India's first Lithium refinery which will process Lithium ore to produce battery-grade material will be set up in Gujarat.
- India's first hot air balloon wildlife safari in a tiger reserve was launched in the world famous Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserve by Madhya Pradesh forest minister Vijay Shah.
- Himachal Pradesh Chief Minister Jai Ram Thakur unveiled an 18 feet statue of former prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee at the historic Ridge Maidan here on his 96th birth anniversary.
- The first batch of training at the Tata-Indian Institute of Skills, Mumbai was launched to provide an impetus to Skill India programme through private sector participation.
- Union Home Minister Amit Shah laid the foundation stone of a medical college and nine law institutes, besides launching two other projects in Assam.
- Delhi airport's Terminal 3 has installed a new passenger tracking system that would help manage the flow of people, reduce waiting time and ensure social distancing.
- The Gujarat government announced a new solar power policy comprising provisions to encourage small and medium scale solar projects on residential, commercial and industrial premises.
- Prime Minister Narendra Modi will lay the foundation stone of AIIMS at Rajkot, Gujarat through video conferencing on Dec 31.
- Students who studied in government schools in Odisha will now get the quota in admission into MBBS and BTECH in colleges of the state. A decision to this effect was taken by the state cabinet.
- Karnataka Chief Minister B S Yediyurappa inaugurated the new building of Atal Bihari Vajpayee Institute of Medical Sciences and Research Centre in Bengaluru.

- The Madhya Pradesh cabinet approved the Dharma Swatantrya (Religious Freedom) Bill 2020. Under the provisions of the bill, forced conversion of a woman will be punishable for a term up to 10 years and minimum fine of Rs 50,000.
- Andhra Pradesh chief minister YS Jagan Mohan Reddy launch of his government's much-publicised programme, Navaratnalu-Pedalandariki Illu (Nine jewels - housing for all the poor), of providing house sites to 30.90 lakh poor people at Komarigiri village of U-Kothapalli block of East Godavari district..

